

Consultation Response to

HARMONISED EUROPEAN NUMBERS FOR SERVICES OF SOCIAL VALUE Proposed allocation and charging arrangements for 116 numbers in the UK

8th December 2008

The Cabinet Office Contact Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to Ofcom's consultation on the proposed allocation and charging arrangements for 116 numbers in the UK.

In recognizing the importance of citizen contact, the government published the Varney review *Service transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer*.

Publicly funded telephone contact was identified as a key area where service improvement to the citizen could occur. With over 50,000 telephone numbers available for the public to telephone and a wide range of number ranges used from 08 to 03 there is an opportunity for the 116 number range to provide a vehicle for coordinating services of social value.

The Varney review recommended that that more contact centre services should be joined up where this would provide a better service for citizens and businesses. The help and support services provided by more than 1,000 helplines in the UK were identified as high value, vital contact services for many of the most in-need citizens. Demand for these services continues to outstrip supply. The review recommends that more collaborative ways of providing these services should be looked at to ensure more effective outcomes for citizens and business.

For the citizen, helplines play a crucial role in getting vital support to the most vulnerable. For government, helplines are an important tool for delivering Public Service Agreements and policy outcomes. However, despite the large number of helplines in the UK, of which more than half are government funded and this type of contact being highly valuable to citizens, business and government, performance of help and support services often falls well below expectations.

The review found several cases of helplines that only answered less than 50 per cent of their call volumes. Some reported only 20–30 per cent. Analysis of calls to one central government helpline found that one caller had phoned 125 times before getting through. Another caller rang 53 times and never succeeded.

The Varney report recommended that Government should explore the scope for better co-ordination of helpline services. As a first step, we intend to establish a number of pilot helpline clusters, the first of which will deal with issues concerning money, tax and benefits and young people. These clusters will examine how the helplines landscape can be simplified by reconfiguration of existing services (for example by creating gateway helplines) to make it easier for citizens and business to get the help they need.

In addition the report suggested that it may be possible to converge current helpline mechanisms into one high capacity multi-channel first point of contact service for several

key helpline issues. We are also examining whether and how this proposal could be implemented. The 116 number range may contribute to improved co-ordination of helplines leading to more effective services for citizens and business. This is now a Contact Council sponsored project

In responding to the consultation the working definition of the 116 services as stated in the Ofcom consultation document has been used:

“a service meeting a common description to be accessed by individuals via a freephone number, which is potentially of value to visitors from other countries and which answers a specific social need, in particular which contributes to the well-being or safety of citizens, or particular groups of citizens, or helps citizens in difficulty”.

The 116 consultation document identifies 4 questions which the Contact Council have considered and their comments are as follows:-

Question 1: Do you agree that communications provider / single or multiple service provider partnerships are the most appropriate parties to apply for allocation of 116 numbers?

We agree with the recommendation that there is a process for selecting a communications provider / single or multiple service provider partnership following application to Ofcom rather than making the number generally available for use without application.

We agree that it is important for the provider/s of the service to be considered as part of the allocation decision process and to be named as the provider/s who will offer the service. In order for the greatest opportunity to be given to all service providers to use the 116 number applicable to their service, and to promote the best possible service for consumers, we support flexibility in service provision and the ability for multiple service providers to work together to provide a comprehensive service where this would benefit consumers.

In addition we would wish to support Ofcom working with mobile service providers to ensure that the new 116 number ranges are free to call for mobile users, both on contract and pay as you go price plans. Even for essential services, cost considerations can act as a barrier to access for mobile phone users, many of who can be on low incomes.

Question 2: Do you agree that a comparative selection process is the most appropriate way of determining applications for 116 numbers?

We strongly agree that the comparative selection process would allow evaluation of the merits of each service against the Service Eligibility Criteria and make an informed decision on the allocation.

Question 3: Do you have any comments on the proposal for a ‘call for interest’ period? Do you think that six weeks allows sufficient time to make a submission of interest?

The Contact Council would recommend that the 'call for interest period' be extended to 8 weeks in order to allow the option for the complexities related to multiple service providers working together to be explored sufficiently prior to submission. The process of application will need to include the service standards that will be delivered and reported on through the Cabinet Office Performance Management Framework.

Question 4: Do you have any comments on the proposal for Government coordinated advisory committees to assist Ofcom with the 116 number allocation process? Do you have any views on the possible membership of the advisory committees?

We recommend that Ofcom should be supported by an Advisory Committee with consistent membership reporting to the Contact Council, this will enable strategic coherence with the Contact Councils strategy across publicly funded contact centers.

The Contact Council has already established the numbering sub committee with relevant expertise across central and local government; the subcommittee would be supplemented by specific skills including the voluntary sector and depending on the nature of the application. This approach will enable strategic consistency to occur between the numbering strategy provided through alternative number ranges such as 0300 as well as 101 and the selection of the 116 services.

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