

visitBrighton

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VisitBrighton

Contact Centre Review

November 2009

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Introduction

VisitBrighton's Visitor Services team produced a strategy document in 2006 which looked at recommendations for the future of their service. At that time there were several recommendations made, and in the last two years we have relocated the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) to the Royal Pavilion, opened an official Visitor Information Point at Brighton Toy & Model Museum, and worked with colleagues in the Sustainable Transport team to introduce the new pedestrian wayfinding scheme in the city centre. It is now timely that we look at the options for the service's Contact Centre.

Background

The VisitBrighton contact centre service has been operating via a premium rate telephone number since 2000. The Premium Rate Line (PRL) was introduced following an audit of telephone answer times throughout the council; at that time the service was receiving around 500,000 calls per year, but the staff were only able to answer around 51,000 calls, ie just over 10% - all other callers received the busy tone, which sent a negative message to both visitors and stakeholders.

In order to answer more calls, a contact centre operation was set up using an "Interactive Voice Response" (IVR) platform which gives callers options to hear some recorded information, as well as the facility to speak to an assistant. A PRL was chosen to offset the costs of the new system and the extra staffing required to ensure the service was a success. The system currently in place ensures that 100% of calls are answered.

All calls to the PRL are charged at 50p per minute. VisitBrighton earns an "out payment" of 33p in each 50p, ie 66%. The remainder is paid to the line provider, Opal Telecom. VisitBrighton holds a current licence from PhonePayPlus to operate a live premium rate service.

When the service launched in 2000 there were nearly 75,000 calls to the system, and we earned £40,000. However, the number of calls, and therefore the income, has dropped by up to one third year on year. It is difficult to say whether this is because it is a PRL, or because it coincided with the huge growth in use of the internet and email as a source of information – certainly the number of email enquiries received by the

VisitBrighton team rose rapidly for the first few years; the drop in telephone enquiries also followed a national trend within other Tourist Information Centres around the country. By 08/09, the number of calls had dropped to 12,707, and the income earned was just £9,475. The current income target in this financial year is £16,970. Trends so far this year show that income will drop again, and we are forecasting less than £8,000 in income in 09/10. VisitBrighton will need to absorb this under-achievement through other income generation or by cutting expenditure.

The following table shows the number of calls and revenue from 2000 to 2009.

Year	No of calls	£s revenue
00/01 (partial year)	74,359	39,934
01/02	94,838	49,900
02/03	65,427	34,564
03/04	46,724	30,115
04/05	36,577	20,103
05/06	33,185	17,726
06/07	23,422	13,684
07/08	17,282	11,805
08/09	12,707	9,475

Telephone calls represent only a percentage of the total enquiries we receive to our service. In total, the Visitor Services team welcome nearly 300,000 visitors to the Visitor Information Centre, and respond to more than 55,000 personal enquiries, 10,500 emails and 1,200 postal enquiries each year. In addition, the service also receives around one million unique visitors to the website each year.

One of the drawbacks of operating a premium rate line is that queuing is not allowed on live premium rate services – if all the operators are busy, the caller can listen to the options again, or pre-recorded information, but if they don't choose one of these options, then they are invited to try again later, and the call has to be terminated.

Advantages and Disadvantages of a PRL service

Advantages	Disadvantages
100% of calls to the service are now answered.	A PRL can put off some callers, particularly older people.
The service now only receives genuine Visitor Information enquiries	We are unable to use the PRL number on any overseas

<p>– previously many of the calls were from customers using the service as a cheaper option than Directory Enquiries, which was already charging for its calls, or eg calls about train times outside our area, because the National Rail line was often engaged.</p>	<p>campaigns or promotions as it is not accessible to callers outside the UK.</p>
<p>When the service was launched it had the backing of the Brighton & Hove Hotels Association who were pleased that they were no longer losing possible recommendations, referrals and bookings due to missed calls.</p>	<p>Staff find it challenging to keep customers on the line long enough to take their details, so are less able to convert enquiries into bookings or ticket sales, or to capture consumer data for marketing purposes.</p>

Options

There are a number of options available, which are identified as follows:

Option 1: Keep Premium Rate Line @ 50p per minute:

We could continue operating the PRL as at present. However, with the volume of calls dropping year on year, it would become unsustainable within a few more years, as can be seen from the following table:

Year	No of calls	£s revenue
00/01 (partial year)	74,359	39,934
01/02	94,838	49,900
02/03	65,427	34,564
03/04	46,724	30,115
04/05	36,577	20,103
05/06	33,185	17,726
06/07	23,422	13,684
07/08	17,282	11,805
08/09	12,707	9,475
<i>Forecast for future years</i>		
09/10	10,165	7,580
10/11	8,132	6,064
11/12	6,505	4,851
12/13	5,204	3,880
13/14	4,163	3,104

Option 2: Keep Premium Rate Line but change to 50p whole call costs

"Drop charge" tariffs may increase the length of the call, but VisitBrighton's revenue would decrease dramatically. Although the cost of the whole call would only ever be 50p to the customer, we would only receive the current out payment from the first minute of the call. For every minute thereafter we would be charged 0.02p per minute which would be deducted from our monthly outpayment. Based on the 12,707 calls received in 2008/09, and an estimate provided by Opal Telecom, this would mean revenues of only £2,951, rather than the £9,475 achieved. Changing to 50p whole call would be unlikely to halt the decline in the number of calls, as it would still be giving a negative message to visitors, and so the downward projection would be similar to that of 50p per minute, and the resulting income would be much lower than at present.

Option 3: Keep Premium Rate Line but increase cost of call to 75p or £1 per minute:

Based on 2008/09's call volumes, revenue could increase to £14,212 (@ 75p per minute) or £18,500 (@ £1.00 per minute). However these figures should be treated with caution – the number of calls would be likely to decrease at a much faster rate if the cost increases, especially as email is now so accessible as a medium, and we would risk losing the good will of both visitors and local stakeholders.

Option 4: Change to National Rate Number (0871)

National rate numbers are not viewed with as much suspicion by visitors, and so it would be likely to at least halt the decline in the number of calls, if not actually increase them. However, based on the 12,707 calls in 08/09, we would be likely to earn only £947.50 – which, though a substantial drop from the revenue based on 50p per minute calls could encourage and enable the staff to convert more enquiries into bookings/sales, thereby earning revenue for our service, and increasing business for the city's accommodation providers, attractions and venues. If we changed to a National Rate number we could retain the existing IVR platform, telephony equipment and office space, and it would be a positive message to both our visitors and our stakeholders.

The following table compares the projected revenue from a national rate number and the revenue received in 2008/09, based on the 12,707 calls received.

No of calls	£s @ 50p per min	£s @ national rate	Gap	Number of bookings needed to plug gap *
12,707	£9,475	£947.50	£8,527.50	570

* based on an average booking value of £150.00. This is the number of extra bookings that the staff would need to make each year just to fund the gap in the current income received, not allowing for further decline in the number of calls, and not allowing for the shortfall against the current

income target. It has to be recognised that converting this number of bookings is not necessarily achievable – many of our enquiries are for one night stays at the weekend, which the staff are not able to book, due to the industry's requirement of a minimum two night stay at weekends throughout most of the year.

Option 5: Relocate VisitBrighton's Contact Centre to the Royal Pavilion and work together with the new Royal Pavilion Contact Centre team

The Royal Pavilion launched their new contact centre operation in July 2009. It is designed to maximise revenue through increased sales of admission tickets, educational tours etc. The Pavilion have invested in new ticketing software and telephony equipment and their staff have been trained to understand the full breadth of the Royal Pavilion & Museum's offer. They are able to handle all calls to their service, with "champions" in each area of activity.

The Pavilion use a range of local rate lines, with different numbers for each of their services. If VisitBrighton opted for a local rate line, there would be no income due to us (but as shown above, the income from a national rate number would be considerably less than at 50p per minute anyway). By working in partnership with the Royal Pavilion team, it could offer the possibility of sharing accommodation, and the opportunity to cross train each team in handling simple enquiries, which would benefit both teams. The Visitor Information staff would remain as "champions" of their own visitor enquiries, and would be responsible for fulfilling all transactional sales (eg accommodation bookings, non-Pavilion ticket sales etc), but could, for example, quite easily sell admission tickets to the Royal Pavilion alongside, with the revenue going to the Pavilion team. Likewise the Pavilion team could be trained how to use VisitBrighton's database to enable them to answer simple enquiries about attractions and events in the city.

There would be benefits to both teams, who would also be able to cover for each other during lunch breaks, sickness, or annual leave, thereby ensuring a quality service to all customers. It would be beneficial to have two separate lines, one for the more complex accommodation enquiries, and one for non accommodation – each line could have a different system of handling overflow calls, ie the more general, non accommodation enquiries could be passed to the Royal Pavilion team if necessary, while the accommodation calls stayed with the VIC team, who have the product knowledge required to advise visitors on where to stay, and the software to capture customer data and make bookings.

This option would have the greatest potential to grow the number of accommodation bookings made by the contact centre staff, as it would be very easy for the team to keep the customer on the phone long enough to take their details, and even to make the booking for them while they are still on the line.

Another major benefit would be that local rate numbers are accessible to overseas callers, who cannot contact us via the premium rate service as 0906 numbers are not accessible outside the UK. In addition the Pavilion's system allows calls to queue and a reporting module shows staff how many calls are waiting. Overflow calls could still be routed to back-up staff in Brighton Town Hall where the rest of the VisitBrighton team are based.

There is a slight danger that the number of calls might actually grow and the number of VIC staff would not be adequate to support the level of enquiries.

With this option there are some start-up costs involved as we would need to purchase new telephone handsets and licences to link in to the Pavilion's call handling software. An indication of these costs is given in the following table:

Start up costs		Ongoing costs	
1x IP handsets @ £145 each	£145	Handset maintenance @ £67 pa x 2	£67
1 x Supervisor CMS software	£370	Maintenance @ £74	£74
2 x Agent licence @ £281 each	£562	Line rental costs per line @ £10 per month per line	£240
Programme writing by ntl/Dimension Data	£2,000 (estimated cost)		
Connection charge for two easily memorable 0300 numbers	£400		
Total	£3,477		£381

Option 6: Cease all call handling enquiries as per VisitLondon.

This would give a very negative message to prospective visitors, who are still at the decision making stage of their visitor journey. As Brighton & Hove no longer have an annual brochure, and not all our customers have access to online information, we would be unable to help anyone who was not able to email us their enquiry. The negative perceptions of Brighton & Hove as a destination could be very harmful to the city's £400m+ annual visitor spend.

Budget Implications

The following chart shows the budget implications for each option based on the 09/10 budget. The 3rd and 4th column use a traffic light system to indicate the level of impact. Please also read the notes * following this table.

Option	Budget implication (current income target (£16,970), less any anticipated income, plus any start up costs).	Impact on visitor satisfaction	Impact on ability to support accommodation booking revenue
1	£9,390	Red	Red
2	£14,019	Red	Red
3	£2,758 (@ 75p pm) £1,530 @ £1 pm *	Red Red	Red Red
4	£16,023	Amber	Amber
5	£20,828 **	Green	Green
6	£16,970	Red	Red

* but nb, as explained in this document, this is neither necessarily achievable nor sustainable.

** includes annual costs of £381 in year one for software, licences etc. plus there would be start up costs in year 1 of approx £3,500.

Consultation & Feedback

This document has been sent to a range of interested groups including local VisitBrighton Partners, and staff, in order to get feedback on the options given above.

Please complete the form at the end of this document and return by **Friday 25 September 2009** via fax, post or email to:

Suzanne Mantell

Visitor Services Manager

VisitBrighton

1st Floor

Brighton Town Hall

Brighton

BN1 1JA

Tel 01273 292613

Fax 01273 292617

Email suzanne.mantell@visitbrighton.com



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Contact Centre Review Feedback Form

There are six options given in the consultation document:

- 1 Keep PRL @ 50p per minute
- 2 Keep PRL but change to 50p whole call costs
- 3 Keep PRL but increase cost of call to 75p or £1
- 4 Change to National Rate number
- 5 Change to local rate number and work with the Royal Pavilion
- 6 Cease all call handling enquiries.

Which of these options do you prefer and why?

Please fill in the form overleaf and return it, by **Friday 25 September 2009** via fax, post or email to Suzanne Mantell, Visitor Services Manager, VisitBrighton, 1st Floor, Brighton Town Hall, Brighton, BN1 1JA, Tel 01273 292613, Fax 01273 292617, Email suzanne.mantell@visitbrighton.com

You do not have to provide your details unless you want to – however it would be very useful to know which sector you belong to, so I would be grateful if you could indicate this in the table overleaf.

Thank you for your help.

Suzanne Mantell
Visitor Services Manager
VisitBrighton

Recommendations

The contact centre review document was sent out to both VisitBrighton staff, and a wide range of stakeholders, including VisitBrighton Partners, Tourism South East, South Downs National Park.

Feedback from stakeholders was low, although evenly spread amongst different sectors.

From responses received, stakeholders overwhelmingly chose Option 5, with only one stakeholder opting to close the service, and one wanting to look more closely at options 5 & 6 again.

Staff were more divided, but still, overall, choosing Option 5, although the VIC team itself were more inclined towards Option 4.

Option No	Stakeholders (11)	Staff (17)	Overall (28)
1	0%	0%	0%
2	0%	5.88% (1)	3.57% (1)
3	0%	0%	0%
4	0%	29.41% (5)	17.86% (5)
5	81.82 % (9)	58.82% (10)	67.86% (19)
6	9.09% (1)	5.88% (1)	7.14% (2)
No decision	9.09% (1)	0%	3.57% (1)

The clear recommendation is to relocate the Contact Centre operation to the Royal Pavilion and introduce a new, local rate enquiry number. However, choosing Option 5 does not preclude considering Option 6 at some point in the future.