



# LOCAL GOVERNMENT AFTER HOURS CONTACT CENTRE

NEW ZEALAND POST  
MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE AWARDS



## Executive Summary

This entry into the NZ Post Technology Innovation Awards is submitted jointly by Palmerston North City Council and Horizons Regional Council.

On the 26 April 2005 after a year of detailed planning and testing New Zealand's first shared service Local Government After Hours Contact Centre was launched. The Centre is run by Local Government staff using Local Government expertise supported by Local Government software and state of the art Call Centre technology. Operating 365 days a year the "After Hours" service has earned praise from surveyed customers and from the staff of the participating Councils. Customers can now contact their Local Council at any time and receive a comprehensive level of service with some 92% of all calls answered by the Customer Service Agents (CSAs) without the need to escalate. This feedback has now generated interest from other Councils disillusioned by the private sector providers and now interested in this concept.

The Centre is a shared service between all participating Councils who are represented on an "After Hours Shared Services Forum" providing a governance role to the ongoing development and operation of the Local Government service.

Seven Councils are currently using the service and include Regional, City and District Councils. An innovative "After Hours Toolkit" was developed to gather information on individual Councils.

Innovative software (Knowledgebase from Hindins) enabled CSAs to set up two views of Council information; a) for a Regional Council, and b) for a City or District Council. CSAs discovered that they could set up sophisticated Request for Service forms in minutes and developed a technique to create multi-Council forms whereby at the selection of the Council the form would auto change the business rules and escalations to reflect that Council's requirements.

The Zeacom Call Centre software suite enabled the quick establishment of 40 queues with detailed reporting, wrap up codes, priority emergency lines, contingency processes. skills based routing and new channels such as email queuing, web chat and text queuing. A truly multi-channel Contact Centre backed up by UPS's, Diesel generators, duplicated PBX processors and ISDN lines from both Telecom and Telstra Clear. The Centre can be scaled up to 60 seats to cope with emergencies such as the 100 year flood that devastated the Manawatu and surrounding Districts in 2004.

Today Customers can contact their local Council and have their queries answered, library books renewed, crematorium bookings taken, rates enquiries addressed, noise complaints, dog complaints and environmental issues escalated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**MIKE MANSON**  
Palmerston North City Council  
Representative

**CRAIG GRANT**  
Horizons Regional Council  
Representative

# AFTER HOURS CONTACT CENTRE REPORT

## BACKGROUND

It could be said that service delivery through effective communication continues to be a never-ending challenge for local Government organisations. The pace of change in technological advances and community expectations has challenged traditional business practices. The Local Government Act 2002 recognises these changes and has placed greater emphasis on working with communities.

In late 2003 Horizons Regional Council (Horizons) recognised the gap that existed in its after hours service delivery to its customers. At 5.00 pm the organisation went home and switched the phones to a tape recorder. A very small number of key staff held cell phones to answer emergency calls. The tape recorder occasionally had messages and when it did they were often abusive. The duty staff frequently received nuisance calls that were unrelated to the roll of their job, which created frustration for both the customer and the staff member alike.

A project was commenced within Horizons and a Project Manager was assigned to rectify this gap in its after-hours customer service. Discussions with Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) soon followed to explore opportunities for a collaborative approach. It was very quickly recognised that the concerns raised by Horizons, in terms of after-hours customer service, were an issue for PNCC and indeed for all Councils within the region. PNCC already had an after-hours service provider but had been unhappy with the level of service primarily due to their lack of understanding of the local Government market. This had led to incorrect staff being called out for an emergency and even calling out the wrong Council. Furthermore, the service provider, through their lack of Council knowledge, was not able to satisfy the customers' need for information.

Two months later (16 February 2004) the Manawatu - Wanganui Region was struck by floods at a magnitude in excess of a 100-year flood. The response phase lasted for a relentless ten days; twenty four bridges were impacted, 50% of the regions roads were closed, stock losses were high, 400 houses were either flooded or destroyed, 25,000 people were evacuated and there was 120 million dollars worth of damage to local Government infrastructure.

Our communities turned to their respective Councils for help and guidance. One Council's phone system failed and another received calls on a tape recorder. Horizons had

to set up a rudimentary phone answering service manned with its own untrained staff to receive the high volume of customer inquiries. The public need for Council cooperation and information was further highlighted by the high use of web site services. The Horizons web site received one million hits in the first ten days. PNCC, whose own city was relatively free from damage, took an additional 21,000 calls during the event.

It was the communication difficulties of this flood event that escalated the priority to resolve the issues faced by the Regions local Government after hours service.

## WHAT IS A CONTACT CENTRE

Typically a Call Centre receives phone calls and records details or redirects calls to be resolved, whereas a Contact Centre makes every effort to resolve the call at the first point of contact. A Contact Centre uses multi media and multiple channels from its customers like phone calls, email, web chat text messages and front of house enquiries.

## VISION

The concept of shared services within local Government had been discussed in different forums for some considerable time. The February floods highlighted the need for a collaborative, generic and consistent approach to providing information to customers across the region.

*Our vision was to, 'Create a Local Government Contact Centre that increased the hours of availability of our key business activities, improved our after hours customer focus, provided an after hours service that continually met customer expectations and standardised the level of Local Government after hours service'.*

This vision would be delivered through New Zealand's first shared service local Government Contact Centre. PNCC and Horizons formed a Project Team and progressed the project to completion. On 26 April 2005 the Contact Centre officially commenced with seven participating Councils. In the first month of operation, the Contact Centre was not publicly advertised as part of our 'ramp up' risk reduction strategy, yet it took over 6,000 calls (see Appendix 1).

## THE NEED FOR AND THE EXPECTED BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

The deliverables of this project had to align themselves with the project vision while being mindful of market expectations and global trends including the need to be flexible enough to accommodate any changes in future demands.

The specific needs of the project were as follows;

1. **Receive All After-Hours Calls.** The benefits would include allowing customers to interact with their Council at a time that is convenient for them. Every call processed will proportionally reduce the number of calls handled by the day staff. All calls are filtered to ensure that only urgent issues are escalated and transferred to duty staff or contractors.
2. **Improve Customer Focus.** The benefits include the elimination of interactive pre-recorded voice messages, every call is received by a person. The CSA is 'Council Trained' and must have a minimum experience level within local Government.
3. **Improved Hours of Availability.** The most significant benefit is that the Contact Centre is manned at all times outside normal work hours, 365 days a year. Customers can now call participating Councils at any time 24 hours a day. Horizons was previously not available outside normal work hours except for emergency call out staff.
4. **Process all General Enquiry Calls.** The benefit of this facility is that calls (currently 92% of all calls) are resolved by the CSA. The supporting Contact Centre software allows quick access to frequently answered questions, databases, GIS mapping systems, service request forms, rating information, web services and staff details to ensure callers have their enquiries resolved.
5. **A Central Emergencies Help Line.** All emergency related calls are directed to the Contact Centre in the first instance. The CSA is in direct contact with any council Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) allowing continual event updates. The Contact Centre will only pass on calls to the EOC that are in need of being transferred. The resulting number of calls to the EOC is significantly reduced. This system was effectively tested on the day the Contact Centre went live as the region was experiencing a localised flood event at that time. The positive effect of having the Contact Centre in operation was very quickly realised.

6. **Knowledge of Sector.** All CSAs are experienced local government staff. They are also trained to be familiar with the other participating councils and their communities. This level of training benefits the effectiveness of the service delivery to customers.

## EFFECTIVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

The complexity of the project coupled with a need to effectively manage resources from two separate Councils demanded a well thought out and articulated plan. A project-based methodology was used throughout the life of the project. The project life cycle in terms of project parameters were grouped into four discrete phases:

A Concept phase (Define it !), Development Phase (Detail it !), Implementation Phase (Do it !) and Termination Phase (Done it !).

The overall management of the project took into account the specific requirements of the following sub-categories:

Time Management, Quality Management, Cost Management, Scope Management, Communication Management, Procurement Management, Risk Management, Human Resource Management and Integration Management.

A steering group comprising key members from both Councils was formed. The steering group provided direction and guidance to several smaller sub-groups. Initial planning included an analysis of all management sub-categories including customer needs and key deliverables.

A Master Project Brief (see appendix 2) was developed along with a detailed project plan. Once approved, the project brief, along with the project plan, were used as the principle drivers for the project. Any deviations from the agreed plan required endorsement from key project participants. The project team met on a regular basis to track progress and set revised targets. In order to ensure a high level of credibility of the proposed service, an extended trial phase was included in the plan. The Contact Centre operated for approximately six months on a reduced after-hours service (5.00 pm to 11.00 pm) with PNCC and Horizons. This trial period ensured all processes were robust enough to handle the full service with all participating Councils. It was ultimately this trial that allowed the Contact Centre to successfully cope with a flood event and the 'go live' of seven Councils on the first night of operation.

## **A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH LOOKING AT BUY IN FROM STAKEHOLDERS**

The key stakeholders for this project were identified as being; Internal staff, Hindin Communications (software developers), Contact Centre staff, Participating Council staff, Public, Council contractors and Regional Emergency Management Groups

### **INTERNAL STAFF**

The importance of having staff participation was never underestimated. Their participation include them taking ownership of their information that was stored at the Contact Centre. They identified the frequently answered questions for their business activities and were responsible for the formulation of business practices in support of the Contact Centre. The primary tools used with staff were frequent reinforcement of the positive aspects of the service, power point presentations, 'one on one' sessions and their development of the frequently asked questions (staff ultimately determined what the CSA would say and how they would process customer enquiries).

### **HINDIN COMMUNICATIONS LTD**

Hindins remained an integral part of the wider project team and were able to modify/upgrade the supporting software package as demand dictated. They also played an integral part in the training of Contact Centre staff.

### **CONTACT CENTRE STAFF**

The contact centre staff already had a sense of pride in their day service and were proud of the level of service they had. The challenge for us was to continue this enthusiasm through to the night service where they would be taken outside their comfort zones. Dealing with other Council enquiries and maintaining their already high level of service was a challenge they harnessed. Team leaders and the Manager became advisors to the project team and helped in the setting up of the new service.

### **PARTICIPATING COUNCIL STAFF**

Each participating Council had a Project Representative that became the Council Spokesperson. These Council Representatives formed a Sub-Project Team and became involved at that level. Participating Councils received detailed and consistent presentations on all aspects of the project. These presentations proved to be helpful in alleviating perceived risk and concerns. Regular

communication between the Project Manager and the Council's spokesperson ensured effective participation and advancement of the sub-projects.

### **PUBLIC**

Both PNCC and Horizons had received a lot of negative feedback regarding the after-hours service that was being provided. The flood event of February 2004 further reinforced the level of customer dissatisfaction that existed. Accordingly, the deficiencies, in terms of the public view, at the start of the project were clear. It was therefore important to build a level of confidence in the public to ensure the project's success. The method of reporting to the public included: newspaper articles, newspaper flyers, radio advertising regional presentations and advertising in Council mail (e.g. notice on rates demands). Once the Contact Centre was operational we instigated monthly customer satisfaction checks. Users of the Contact Centre are randomly contacted to seek customer feedback. This information is recorded and used to measure and enhance performance (see Appendix 1).

### **COUNCIL CONTRACTORS**

The Contact Centre has the ability to dispatch a 'request for service' form to preferred customers out of hours. This function speeds up the resolution process and prevents duplication of effort with the Council day staff. A standardised approach was adopted with regards to request for service forms. Therefore, Council staff, Contractors and Contact Centre staff all had to be satisfied with the processes and generic forms. A common sense approach to service request has been adopted and is unanimously supported.

### **REGIONAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT GROUPS**

The flood event of February 2004 clearly identified a number of gaps that could be filled with a collaborative approach to emergency management. The project team worked closely with emergency management staff to develop a process that allows the Contact Centre to support a district or regional event. The Contact Centre has processes in place to 'up scale' the facility to 60 seats at short notice to cater for increased call numbers associated with an event.

## INNOVATION AND ORIGINALITY

This model is the first and only (full) after-hours, shared service, Local Government Contact Centre in New Zealand. It was designed and developed entirely by local Government staff using local Government systems for local Government use. Participating Councils now have Contact Centre coverage 24 hours a day and 365 days a year (8.00 am-5.00 pm Monday to Friday is provided by respective Councils).

There are currently seven participating Councils using this shared service:

Horizons, Rangitikei District Council, Manawatu District Council, Horowhenua District Council, PNCC, and Tararua District Council.

While Horizons and PNCC jointly lead the project, the overall support and input from the participating Councils resulted in a service that has fully met all expectations. Another key success of the project is that participating Councils have a shared service arrangement with the service provider and not a contracted service arrangement. Specifically, this arrangement means that all participating Councils share the operating costs, the business risk, and have a say in the future shape and strategic direction of the service delivery of the Contact Centre. A shared service forum has been established that meets regularly on a rotational chair basis to discuss strategic and non-strategic issues.

A key innovation was the development of a Local Government after-hours Toolkit. Once the councils had signed up to the initiative, it became obvious that each council was at a different level of maturity in terms of analysing their customer information. In order to bring all councils on at the same time and launch the full after-hours service, innovation was required. The team got together and used their experiences to build a comprehensive toolkit, which would enable Councils to simply review the information presented and adjust where necessary. The toolkit was over 200 pages and included templates for contact information, frequently asked questions for a local authority, answers to those questions and model requests for service forms. The toolkit also provided sample induction programmes and Call Centre queue set-ups, which included messaging and voicemail options. The toolkit was an outstanding success and enabled an excellent response from participating Councils. This toolkit concept significantly reduced the set-up costs and leveraged knowledge for each of the participating Councils.

Councils submitted their information electronically as the

toolkit had been provided in both hard copy and electronic format. From the development of the toolkit we could see the need to be innovative in the use of over 100 requests-for-service forms for any Council. The Knowledgebase product from Hindin Communications enabled us to think outside the square where we discovered that by altering the Urgency field to now hold the names of each Council we could, in fact, have the perfect Multi-Council form. The form, upon selection of the correct Council, would change the escalations and business rules for that particular Council. This means that after hours contractors, or Council staff, would be emailed or notified as required and any follow up escalations for that council would be met by the system. Therefore, a form for such activities as a noise complaint would be generated once, having the agreement of all other Councils as to the content to be recorded, and the system then allowing it to be used for a multi-Council environment. (See sample request for Service in Appendix 3).

The innovative use of the Knowledgebase software was a key factor in the success of the project. PNCC staff were given 2 days training in the system and developed during that time 2 views of Local Government information, a) a Regional Council structure and, b) a City and District Council structure. Within 5 days of training all the FAQs were uploaded from Word files into the system and CSAs developed the online Request for Service forms without requiring assistance from IT staff. New multi-Council online forms were created in minutes compared to hours in earlier versions of the software. In addition all customer interactions can be tracked and reported events can be linked to each other e.g. residents in the same street notifying Council of the same issue. The status of any request is available online as to whether closed, responded to or yet to be completed.

The PNCC operates a multi-channel Contact Centre using an innovative Call Centre software suite from Zeacom. To date there are some 40 queues operating and cover 12 Regional Council Offices for Horizons, Emergency lines and general queues for participating Councils. The system enables email queueing, web-chat and even the ability to queue Text messages. Contingency plans have been drawn up which outline procedures and scenarios. The system's NEC PBX processors are completely duplicated, there is 16 hours of battery backup in addition to a Rolls Royce diesel generator and Primary Rate ISDN lines from both major Telcos feed the system. A backup agreement is in place

with another Council to use their Call Centre should a total system failure occur as well as an agreement to second the 3 other Call Centres running off the PNCC system should a large number of seats be needed in response to an emergency from any Council.

## **SUCCESSFUL RESULTS, FINANCIAL AND NON-FINANCIAL**

When considering financial benefits of this project, it is difficult to draw comparisons between the previous service being offered to the public and the service now being offered. The new service is a Contact Centre and not a Call Centre or tape message service. Furthermore, the service now ensures people interface, with Council staff, around the clock, 365 days a year. It is therefore, important to focus on the cost an individual Council would have to pay for an equivalent level of service to that being offered by the shared service arrangement. In the case of this project, the operating costs of the service have been distributed across the participating Councils on a population-based ratio. The infrastructure was already in place at PNCC so participating Councils have been able to lever off the high tech investment already in place. The initial set up cost normally associated with data gathering to populate the software database and initialisation of processes etc were significantly reduced through the innovative use of the toolkit concept. The shared service arrangement means that all participating Councils receive a reduction in operating costs every time a new Council joins the service. It is extremely unlikely that any Council could have “gone it alone” and funded this level of service.

In terms of non-financial benefits, the list includes;

1. Horizons, for example, went from receiving a hand full (literally) of calls per month, to 2124 after-hours calls in the month of May 2005. For every call received after-hours there is likely to be a corresponding reduction in work-hours calls.
2. Customers can now deal with Council matters in the evening or weekend when the time is convenient to them. Farmers, for example, can now stay out on the farm in the day and work with their Council after the evening meal.
3. Approximately 92% of all calls received by the CSA are now processed without being transferred to another staff member. While difficult to measure, there is a cost saving every time a specialist employee is removed from

the phone processing cycle (i.e. they don't have to answer phone enquiries).

4. Participating Councils have a direct input into the strategic direction of the service.
5. Public feedback (obtained on a monthly basis) is used to improve service delivery).
6. The CSA has the information available for all participating Councils at their fingertips. Therefore, customers calling a district Council with a neighbouring Council issue or a regional council issue can still have their enquiry answered seamlessly.
7. The Contact Centre can cope with disaster and upsize in capacity at short notice.
8. The Contact Centre can receive Council calls during the day should a participating Council face an emergency (e.g. evacuation, power failure etc).
9. There are currently seven additional North Island Councils that have expressed an interest in joining this shared service arrangement.

## **THE PROJECT WAS A GOOD THING TO DO**

National industry trends have demonstrated a shift towards increased customer focus outside traditional working hours. Banks, insurance companies and power companies, for example, now have electronic or call centre services for increased service 'out of hours'. Public expectations of service delivery have aligned with this shift so there is greater pressure on organisations across the community to accommodate these expectations. This Contact Centre goes beyond current expectation levels (as demonstrated by the customer surveys – see Appendix 1) and delivers a service that is arguably not currently matched within local Government across our country.

All seven participating Councils have chosen to share our vision of increasing the hours of availability of key business activities, improve the after hours customer focus, provide an after hours service that continually meets customer expectations and standardises the level of Local Government after-hours service across the region. This vision has been delivered and our customers are reaping the benefits of having an enhanced customer service. The shared service arrangement has brought councils together through a 'spirit of participation' to deliver a service that would have been extremely difficult to deliver alone.