After Hours Call Services for Local Government

Feasibility Study

Western Adelaide Consultative Committee

in collaboration with

Metropolitan Local Government Group

and

Local Government Research and Development Scheme

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March 2002
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1. Executive Summary

In November 2001 the Local Government Research & Development Scheme approved a grant to the Western Adelaide Consultative Committee (WACC) to conduct a collaborative after hours pilot and a feasibility study into a local government after hours call centre.

The study obtained information from 18 organisations and involved input from over 20 councils. The WACC pilot project, which occurred concurrently with the other parts of the project, tested the practical issues relating to a collaborative project, while the other activities obtained important information concerning service opportunities.

The key issues identified in the report are:

- Metropolitan Councils receive approximately 1,000 after hour’s calls a week. Most of these calls are received on the weekend between 9 am and 5 pm, while 80% of calls received on weekdays are received before 10:00 p.m. Metropolitan Councils pay approximately $250,000 for the provision of after hours call services each year.

- 75% of Metropolitan Councils outsource their after hours call services and one supplier who provides services from interstate, supplies a large proportion of the services.

- There is a wide variability of approaches, standards and costs of after hours call services amongst councils. Costs are known to vary between $6.45 and $2.48 per call (i.e. cost of answering the call only, based upon estimated average call numbers).

- Councils have very little information that summarises the service they provide. The best reports councils have are a simple list of call details.

- The cost of the provision of after hours services can potentially be reduced if call centre operators are well trained in local government issues.

- A large number of councils are currently dissatisfied with their after hour call service, primarily due to; lack of local knowledge, service provider unable to provide services required, inconsistent service and cost.

- Many councils are generally content with the type of call service they offer after hours, a limited information service with a referral mechanism to deal with urgent matters.

- There was widespread agreement that a single after hours number for all metropolitan councils would benefit customers.

- The call centre industry in Adelaide does not have a large number of outsource providers.

- Establishment of a local government call centre solely as an after hours call would be uneconomic.

- A single after hours number for metropolitan councils could be established using a 1300 or a 13 number. Callers would be transferred to the nearest council based upon the postcode of where the call originated. Councils would not have to change service providers, but the cost to the councils would be in the vicinity of $94,000, in addition to current call centre costs.

Metropolitan councils have a special opportunity to enter into a collaborative call centre arrangement, not simply for the direct advantages of doing so, but particularly for the benefits it will provide to local government customers in the future.

The proposal will result in reduced costs for councils but it would result in a range of significant advantages for local government, including:

- Improved, consistent service for local government customers.
Ability to better manage after hours call services through improved reporting
Access to additional services, such as redundancy services, outbound and call overflow services
Ability for councils to more easily collaborate on after hours service provision
Initiate a path for local government to progress towards a single after hours number
Provide a base on which to develop additional collaborative customer service initiatives.
After Hours Call Centre Feasibility Study

2. Issue Description and Background

2.1 Western Adelaide Consultative Committee

In early 2001 a series of collaborative projects was commenced which involved
- City of West Torrens
- City of Adelaide
- City of Charles Sturt
- City of Marion
- City of Holdfast Bay
- West Beach Trust
- Adelaide Airport Limited

The first of these projects was to pilot an after hours collaborative call centre. This project was seen as being pivotal to the ability to collaborate on the delivery of after hours services. If all calls could come into the same centre then it would be easier to manage the service delivery on a regional basis.

The Western Adelaide Consultative Committee (WACC) submitted a proposal for funding to the Local Government Research & Development Scheme to assist in the funding of the 4 proposed pilot schemes, the first of which was the after hours call centre. The submission of this proposal coincided with the Metropolitan Local Government Group proposal to conduct a feasibility study of an after hours call centre.

2.2 Metropolitan Local Government Group survey

In June 2001 the Metropolitan Local Government Group (MLGG) commissioned Dakima Consulting to conduct a survey of member councils to “establish data on the current after hours services provided by metropolitan councils and to ascertain the level of support for a study into the feasibility of establishing a collaborative after hours service for Local Government”

16 councils responded to the survey. The study revealed a diversity of practice in the handling of after hours calls and also the “commonality in councils needs and aspirations for the delivery of after hours services.”

The study recommended that there was support for a study into the feasibility of establishing a collaborative after hours service, and to consider a way to means of integrate the MLGG feasibility study with the WACC pilot study.

2.3 Research & Development Scheme

The LGA on behalf of the MLGG prepared and submitted an application to the LGR&D Scheme to conduct a feasibility study into the establishment of a collaborative after hours arrangement for Local Government.

Concurrently another submission was made to the LGR&D Scheme by the WACC for funding towards four collaborative projects.

In considering both projects the LGR&D Scheme Advisory Committee found that there were elements of both projects that overlapped and, accordingly, both were declined. Following a number of meetings a joint proposal was developed, which incorporated the essential elements of both projects. This was submitted to the LGR&D and the application was approved and forms the basis of funding for this project.
3. Current Situation

3.1 Current Service Delivery methods

The Dakima Consulting survey identified that 75% of metropolitan councils use a contracted answering service to deal with after hours calls. From discussions with council officers it is apparent that the majority of these councils use one interstate provider, being Orange Hutchinson Telecoms who operate a large call centre from Brisbane. Other current contracted providers appear to have only a small number of local government clients. These providers include; Link Communications, Chubb Security, Adelaide Business Communications, Answer Adelaide and Link Communications.

A number of councils, particularly in the country, have council staff take after hours calls. Usually calls are transferred to a particular fixed line or mobile telephone number of a staff person on call to take these customer calls. The staff are sometimes provided with significant resources (eg. laptop computer and procedure manuals) but mostly they appear to rely on a list of contacts and their own professional knowledge.

A number of councils use answering machines to take messages and direct callers to “emergency telephone numbers.”

3.2 Country Survey Results

The results of the country survey are shown in detail in Appendix 1 – Results of Survey of Country Councils.

This survey revealed, that

- The most common method of taking after hour’s calls was by staff. Bureau services where not used.
- The range of calls received after hours reflected the additional responsibilities country councils have, and include issues relating to airports, effluent and saleyards.
- Very often the person taking the after hours call was also the person who will respond to the call
- Councils thought their performance in receiving calls was average to good and their response was generally perceived to be good.
- Support for a feasibility study, but with significant concern about the knowledge of local issues that a call centre would have.

The survey showed that country councils do not use external providers and are generally satisfied with the service they provide.

3.3 Perceptions of Service Quality

The metropolitan survey of councils showed that 80% to 85% of councils rated the provision of their after hours service as good, while the country figure was much lower at 54%.

This high percentage in the metropolitan area is contrasted by the widespread and consistent expression of dissatisfaction with the current service provision. Councils who utilise contracted services often believe that the services they currently provide are not adequate due to; inconsistent handling of calls, lack of reporting information, poor local knowledge and a lack of basic industry knowledge.

1 Unless otherwise stated the term “service delivery” refers to the delivery of after hours call services. It does not refer to the physical performance of services which may result from a customer call to an after hours call services
A common concern raised is that the provision of services from interstate is inappropriate, as interstate call centre operators have a very limited knowledge of Adelaide suburbs and streets. This has been identified as a significant shortcoming in customer service. If nothing else, a local government service must have basic knowledge of the local area, especially as the majority of after hours calls are location specific.

The feasibility study had direct contact with 14 metropolitan councils. Key issues that consistently arose were dissatisfaction with the current service and a strong desire to have the service provided locally. The dissatisfaction arose from a number of reasons, including; lack of local knowledge, service provider unable to provide services required, inconsistent service and cost. There was also widespread agreement that a single after hours number for all councils would benefit customers.

3.4 Service Management

After hours call services are, as a rule, managed by exception. If there are no complaints the service is assumed to be operating well. Some councils receive regular reports on calls received. A few councils test the service on an ad hoc basis. It appears that no council receives or prepares regular summary reports on after hours calls. One of the biggest challenges for the feasibility study was the lack of information councils had concerning their after hours call services. For instance, few councils knew how many calls they received after hours. Many did not know how much they were being charged for the service and it appeared that no council using a contracted service had an up to date contract with their service provider.

Clearly, for a number of years the provision of after hours call services has received scant attention. In one respect after hours call services are not particularly important if assessed by the number of customer contacts that occur. After hours services generally receive few complaints. However it is a direct customer contact area.

While many councils would maintain key performance indicators for their business hours inbound call centre operations, there was no evidence that any council regularly maintains even basic performance measures for after hours services. This is despite the study identifying some atrocious performance (eg. call abandonment rate of over 20%) that would be unacceptable to any organisation wanting to provide good customer service. Councils do not know, except by exception, how long customers wait before their calls are answered and what percentage of calls are dealt with by the call centre. Because there is no reporting on after hours call services these performance issues go unnoticed.

3.5 After Hours Call Analysis

Call details from two western suburb councils were analysed for a total combined period of 5 weeks during October and November 2001. During this time the external call centre received 157 calls. Calls logged by the call centre to test pagers or to follow up staff have been excluded from the analysis.

This analysis was prepared to gain an understanding of the pattern of after hour’s calls. Every council will have it’s own pattern of calls depending on; the promotion of the service, the service delivered, the type of service offered and issues relevant to each council. Also there are times when established patterns change due to particular events (eg. storms) and seasons.
Reason for Call

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking / Traffic</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road hazard</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (note)</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park / Reserve issue</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council Building</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bees / Wasps</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly calls reporting dogs are the most common reason for after hours calls. The subject of after hours calls are affected by seasonal factors. For instance wasp and rodent calls are more common in the warmer months.

Call Centre Response

The response of the Call Centre should be in accordance with the instructions provided by the council.

Almost all calls to the After Hours Call Centre result in an officer being called to follow up the issue. Bees / Wasps are an exception where half the callers are informed that they need to call an apiarist. 30% of Parking / Traffic issues are advised to call the Council during office hours.

Significantly, the percentage of calls passed on to an officer has been recorded to be as low as 48% for a council which rosters council call centre staff to take after hours calls. Most organisations try to minimise the percentage of calls that require handling by multiple staff to provide better service to customers and to reduce unnecessary labour costs.

Assuming that a council does not have a staff member on duty, the reduction of the percentage of calls being passed on to another officer could save council as much as the after hours call service costs. This represents a significant potential cost saving for councils.

Also, some call centres are able to provide some services that council officers deal with, or are not dealt with at all until business hours, such as matching lost and found dogs.

Time Calls Received

On weekdays 91% of calls are received before 9:00 pm and after 8:00 am. The calls after 8:00 am are probably made on the expectation that the normal council call centre is open.
**Weekend calls**

Calls on Saturday and Sunday account for 66% of all calls to the after hours number.

Weekend calls are predominantly received between 7:00 am and 3:00 pm. Similar to weekdays, calls are not often received after 10:00 pm in the evening.

![Time Calls Received](chart.png)

When comparing the difference between weekends and weekdays, there is very little difference in the type of calls that are received. The most significant increase are calls concerning council buildings on the weekend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Weekday</th>
<th>Weekend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking / Traffic</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road hazard</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (note)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park / Reserve issue</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council Building</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bees / Wasps</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Call volume**

To estimate the number of after hours calls for the metropolitan area, the results from the metropolitan after hours survey were used and call numbers for councils who did not respond to the survey were estimated. This indicated that the number of calls received in the metropolitan area is approximately 1,000 calls a week. This figure should only be taken as a broad guide to the volume of calls, as generally councils have not maintained good records of their call numbers.

This is not a large number, especially in terms of the volume of calls that commercial call centres would handle. To put it in perspective, if the entire metropolitan after hours calls where answered by one provider, they would only expect to receive nine calls between 10:00 pm and 8:00 am on any weekday.

The number of calls is a major limiting factor in possible service delivery options. Because the number of calls is so low, only a service provider who has other after hours customers would be able to economically deliver services to local government after 10:00 pm.
Call Costs

As part of the WACC pilot project call costs were closely examined. In addition the call centre costs were obtained from a number of other councils who had different service delivery methods, including the provision of after hours call services by council staff. The costs quoted below are the average cost for the average number of calls for the particular council (ie. if a council calculates they have an average of 100 calls of month and the total cost is $400 a month the average call cost would be $4.00).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average cost of after hours calls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$6.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that councils are paying a wide range of average call costs.

The graph below compares the average call cost with the number of calls. There is not a strong relationship between call costs and call volume.

When considering these figures the following issues need to be considered. Firstly it is a small sample. Secondly, councils after hours call volumes may have large variability. Thirdly, the costs are only the direct service fees and direct council costs. It does not include communication costs, reporting costs or the cost of providing the service. As discussed previously the way in which calls are handled impact on the total cost of providing after hours services. Finally, using average costs as a financial measure may not be the most meaningful way to measure after hours call costs. A large part of the value of an after hours service is the availability of the service. Councils pay for the service being available as well as for the answering of telephone calls.

Some councils have assumed that because their after hours call centre contract has been in place for a long period of time, that they are paying a low price and are reluctant to consider changing suppliers. This is not necessarily true.
3.6 Service Requirements

The pilot program was able to identify the key components of an after hours service. One of the issues that the WACC councils became aware of was the diversity of call centre requirements amongst councils. As a result a layered approach to a service is required, where there are some basic service requirements, which are common to all councils in addition to some additional services, which only some councils would require.

**Basic Requirements**
- Answer call in the name of council
- Local service provision (i.e. service is provided from Adelaide)
- Urgent situation referral / messaging service
- Basic resource allocation capabilities (usually through a defined escalation procedure)
- Follow defined operating procedures
- Record details of all calls
- Collect and disperse basic council information as defined in operating procedures
- Report individual calls and summarise information
- Provision of reports through electronic mediums
- Personal service (i.e. no “push button 1 to …”)
- Multiple communication methods (e.g. telephone, pager, fax, e-mail, sms)
- Meet basic service standards (e.g. call waiting time, abandonment rate)

**Extended Requirements**
- Safety call back
- Call matching
- Service improvement advice
- Host council computer systems (e.g. customer request system or council information system)
- Overload assistance (i.e. answer business hour calls when council call centre is experiencing delays)
- Redundancy (i.e. answer council business hours call when council call centre inoperable)
- Outbound calls (e.g. customer surveys, sales)
- Full after hours information service
- Availability of recordings to check call centre response

A strong response was received from officers with direct responsibility for the management of after hours call centres that they did not envisage an after hours call service being any more than an “emergency” service to screen and pass on information to council’s response staff. This is interesting in that this is one area councils indicated that they didn’t perform well in the Dakima survey.

3.7 Call Centre Providers

One aim of the feasibility study was to identify what service provision options are available.

Interviews were conducted with 5 call centre providers, less detailed information was obtained about another 4 call centre providers and a number of industry representatives were interviewed. The review of options was limited to call centres located in Adelaide.

The review of the call centre market in South Australia found that while there have been a lot of new organisations enticed to Adelaide in recent years, most of these firms do not provide outsource services. Also many of the firms that do provide outsource services do not provide them after hours. A recent tender for 24x7
call centre services by a state government organisation only received 5 responses. This, along with the low call volumes means that there are only a small number of potential suppliers in Adelaide.

However, amongst those organisations that do provide outsource call centre services there was a large variation in the types of services that they provide.

Many councils use the services of specialised messaging provider. They provide a well defined service supported by good systems and technology. They have a limited ability to tailor services to the needs of specific customers.

A number of councils use the service of providers who use basic customer contact services. They can provide consistent service with limited capabilities. These organisations are able to differentiate their service in terms of price, friendliness or professionalism. They tend to be process focused.

At least one metropolitan council uses a provider who is able to provide a full range of customer contact services. They tend to utilise contemporary technology and emphasis their ability to become partners with their clients and improve their clients customer relationships and reduce the net cost of the service. They tend to be outcome focussed.
4. Western Adelaide Consultative Committee Pilot Project

4.1 Process

The WACC project commenced with the councils involved gaining an understanding of how each council provides after hours call services. In a parallel process they approached an after hours call provider and developed a set of standard operating procedures.

The standard operating procedures resulted from a review of all the procedures used by each of the councils. The best features of the procedures were then integrated into the new procedure to come up with a standard document which could be used and adopted by all councils. It provided a list of likely events and issues that a call centre would need to respond to, in a format which the call centre could easily use.

The call centre chosen for the pilot had an excellent reference from one of the participating councils and it was possible to enter into a short-term arrangement at a reasonable fee.

The pilot commenced on 10th December 2001 and was for a three-month period.

4.2 Outcomes

The pilot program was able to demonstrate, from a council and providers perspective, that it is possible to provide a collaborative service. Councils have more in common in the way they respond to after hour’s issues than they differ.

Through the experience a list of issues that need to be incorporated into a tender for after hours service has been developed.

During the pilot there was extensive analysis of calls, particularly by one participating council. That analysis identified that the rate of abandoned calls at some stages exceeded 30%. One of the contributors to this was message that was played to callers when their call was put in a queue. However the most interesting fact was that despite the high number of callers hanging up before they were answered, there was no increase in the level of complaints about the service. Without the call analysis we would not have been aware of the level of difficulty customers were having getting through to the service.

An important outcome of the pilot was the knowledge gained by the participants about the after hours call services. By meeting every two weeks for nearly six months the participating staff were able to share and learn about after hours call services. Much of this learning has been incorporated into this report.

As the pilot progressed it became clear that there would be significant advantages in using a provider that utilised good technology to perform their tasks. The way in which calls are recorded, how call details are transmitted to councils and the ease at which call statistics can be obtained can all be made easier with readily available technology.

The pilot also identified the need to ensure the provider has the capacity to provide for increased call volumes. The provider for the pilot had difficulty managing the increase in call volumes resulting from the pilot and this probably affected their ability to provide as good a service as they would have liked.
4.3 Project Conclusions

The pilot provided an invaluable method for testing a collaborative call centre. The lessons learnt were as much from the problems encountered as from the successes achieved.

The key outcome was that a collaborative approach to an after hours call centre can work. It can provide a consistent and professional after hours service.

The other key lessons learnt from the pilot are,
- there needs to be clear service provision guidelines
- test the that provider has the call capacity before committing to a provider
- importance of councils having their own telephone number to enable a change of providers if required

Finally, throughout the pilot, and this study, reliable data has remained the largest hurdle to accurate analysis. To be able to measure performance, basic call measurement systems need to be in place.
5. Future Options

5.1 Benefits, Costs & Opportunities of a Regional Approach

As with any regional activity it is often possible through increasing the size of the project to gain benefits including economies of scale and increased expertise that can be applied to the project. This is usually accompanied by costs that include the difficulty obtaining of agreement on a common service level.

A regional call centre service has the ability to provide significant benefits, both in the short and medium term. Most of the potential benefits are due to the nature of local government customers. Generally local government customers will be customers for a number of different local government authorities in any one day and these customers generally have very poor knowledge of local government boundaries. If local government as an industry can make it irrelevant to know which council a customer is in, they can call the same number (or look at a common web site) to get the assistance they need. This will provide a significant improvement in local government service to the community.

More specifically, the benefits of a collaborative approach to after hours call service would include

Benefits
- An improved level of after hours service
- Improved consistency of services
- An ability to better manager after hours call services
- Potential cost savings
- More comprehensive services
- Increased awareness of other councils procedures and opportunity to improve processes
- Potential access to operators skilled at improving customer service outcomes

Opportunities
- Able move, in time, to one after hours telephone number for all of metropolitan local government
- To provide services on a collaborative basis
- Integrate future information services with the LGA Regional Dynamics Website project

Costs
- Risk of increased cost for some councils
- Possible change in some procedures for some councils
- Risk associated with changing a supplier

5.2 Service Delivery Options

It is possible to immediately institute a single after hours number metropolitan councils using a 1300 or a 13 number. This would operate similar to “dial a pizza” numbers and would transfer the caller to the nearest councils based upon the postcode of where the call originated. Councils would not have to change service providers, but the cost to the councils would be in the vicinity of $94,000, which would be in addition to call centre costs. While the cost makes this option prohibitive for after hours calls it may be a more economical, and provide exciting opportunities, if it was introduced for business hours calls.

One issue considered was the feasibility of local government establishing it’s own after hours call centre. This concept, as a stand-alone facility, has been discounted principally on the basis of economics. Excluding the
large capital investment that would be required the annual staff costs have been estimated to be in the range of $200,000 alone. The required capital investment that would not be utilised during business hours would make such a call centre uneconomic. There would be more opportunities if the service provided business hours call services or had other clients, or could use existing equipment. Finally, one of the conclusions from the pilot was that there are many advantages to be gained by developing a partnership with an organisation whose core business was the provision of call centre services.

Currently there are at least seven councils who are actively reviewing the provision of their after hours service. If this number of council participated this would provide a strong nucleus of councils to commence a joint after hour’s service. If the service was successful other councils could join at a later a date once there are about 13 metropolitan councils participating it would become a practical proposition to introduce a single after hours number for metropolitan councils.

If one call centre provider was given the opportunity to provide services to seven councils, and perhaps more, you would expect that provider to be able to build significant skills and knowledge about local government. This would translate to improved service for customers and also enable local government to use the knowledge of the operators to identify methods of improved service provision. In addition with these numbers a provider would be more have more incentive to invest in the development of new services for local government.

A few metropolitan, and the majority of country councils, do not outsource the answering of their after hours call service. These councils provide this service away from the council offices by answering calls switched through to a landline or a to a mobile. While this option works well for some councils, it is not a recommended option for the provision collaborative services. In a collaborative service the volume of calls in the early evening would be too great for one person. The level of service that can be provided immediately after a person is woken up is questionable and issues such as unexpected capacity increases and redundancy are not easily managed when the service is provided from a private residence.

At least one council has expressed interest in providing an after hours service for other councils. This provides a logical way for one council to earn income and for other councils to have the advantage of skilled staff taking their calls.

5.3 Possible Structures

This report recommends that the after hours call services be provided by a professional provider of call centre services.

A coordinated approach could occur in two possible ways.

A Local Government Intermediary

A body like eCouncils.com could develop a tender in conjunction with interested parties and tender on behalf of local government. An initial group of councils would have to be committed to participating in the initial tender and share the tender administration costs. There would be a head contract between the intermediary and the successful supplier, with separate contracts between the intermediary and individual councils.

The intermediary would be responsible for administering the head contract and promoting the service amongst councils. The intermediary would receive a fee, possibly based upon a percentage of the contract value.

This structure would ensure a central body has responsibility, and is provided with resources, to administer the contract and to promote the service. It would also ensure that the value created by the joint tendering of services remains within local government. Also having a central administrative body will assist in the future if councils
wish to explore other service delivery options such as a single local government number, a council operated call centre and a joint business hours call centre.

**Joint Tender**

Using a G6 model participating councils prepare a joint tender with the resulting contract between the councils and supplier. Each council would then relate directly to the supplier. This arrangement would focus more on the benefit to individual councils than on the benefit to the whole of local government.

In this scenario it could be more difficult for additional councils to join the service at a later date. It would be simple to arrange and could occur very quickly. Also it could be easily performed on a regional basis, which would make the coordination of regional services easier.

To obtain the greatest benefit to local government the first option, of using a local government intermediary is recommended. The concept has been briefly discussed with eCouncils.com staff and could merge well with their other business interests including their involvement in the Dynamic Councils Website project.

**5.4 Funding Options**

A tender in which a significant number of councils participate could be expected to provide a service at a good rate for the participating councils. Given the large variation in current prices it is unlikely that all participants would receive a reduction in price, especially if the general standard of service increases. However it is likely that an intermediary’s involvement could be partly or wholly funded by the “volume discount” achieved through the joint tender. Indicative pricing received to date suggests this is margin is likely to be in the order of 7.5%.

If a call centre “business” was established it may be possible to obtain some minor support from the state government. In the future more substantial state government assistance could be obtained if a call centre was established that provided services to interstate councils and could demonstrate a positive employment outcome for the state.

Further funding may be available through the LGR&DS for research into different aspects of a call centre. For instance a grant could possibly be obtained to research how we could use the Dynamic Council Website functionality to provide information for a call centre.

Fundamentally the call centre service, and its improvement will need to be funded by councils. In total councils should not expect to pay significantly more than they currently pay. However, as has been pointed out previously, councils could expect to receive cost savings in the cost of delivering after hours services from an effective call centre operation. Given the relatively small value of the cost of after hours call service for councils (mostly less than $10,000 per year) the risk of a small increase in cost can easily be justified in terms of the possible future benefits to councils and councils customers. The opportunity for cost savings though improved management of after hours service delivery and the opportunities that a collaborative after hours service provides for the collaborative delivery of after hours services councils could reasonably result in a net reduction in the average cost of delivering after hours services.
6. Recommendations

Presently, there is a unique opportunity for councils to develop a collaborative call centre service. Many councils are currently reviewing their current service and a number of councils are ready to go to the market to identify what services are available. It is unlikely that there will ever be such a large number of councils that are both free of contractual obligations and looking for other service delivery options than there are at the present time.

By developing a collaborative call centre contract councils will enable local government to develop a simple, yet effective way of overcoming significant barriers that customers face in accessing important council services. This will not occur initially, but without a commitment to a collaborative call centre now this is unlikely to occur in the future.

The key opportunity identified in the study is for a joint tender for after hours call services.

The tender would have the following basic conditions

- Service provided from Adelaide
- Call Centre operators would be well trained in local government issues
- Minimum reporting requirements and a commitment to achieve agreed performance indicators
- Beyond an agreed basic level of service there would be different levels of service available to councils.

To implement this the following step need to occur:

1. Councils need to confirm their interest in a joint tender and confirm an appropriate structure for the service
2. If an intermediary is required then negotiations need to commence immediately with to determine their interest
3. Concurrently the interested councils can develop a tender document
Appendix 1 – Results of Survey of Country Councils

All country councils where invited to participate in a survey about after hours call services though a Local Government Circular.

13 responses where received.

Question 1
How does your council currently deal with after hour’s calls from the public?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Council staff take call</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureau answering service takes the call</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The call is not answered</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded message</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automated telephone response</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 2
Over what span of hours does the after hours call service operate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Span</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After normal business hours</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 4
Quantify calls received each week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wasps / bees</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs / Animals</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallen Trees</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic Issues</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other issues include
- Airport
- Effluent
- Saleyards
- Cemetery

Question 5
What methods does your Council use to inform the public about its after hours services?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Council newsletter or publication</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web site</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community / Library notice board</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other methods identified include
- White Pages (8)

Question 6
How does council respond to its after hours calls?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff member or bureau answering service</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
takes details and relays to response unit.  
Staff member or bureau answering service tells caller to ring after hours response unit.  
Recorded message provides details of after hours response unit.  
Caller leaves message and this is dealt with in the next working day.  
No service response is provided.  

Other responses include
- Person who answers call is after hours response unit
- Relevant staff member generally contacted direct if available

Question 7
This question dealt with how is action generally taken.
With very few exceptions council staff dealt with after hours issues.

Question 8
What industrial arrangements doe Council have in place to accommodate staff working after hours and/or on call?

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EBA / LAWA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination EBA / Award</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 9
Please indicate the average weekly cost of your Council’s current after hours call service.
Average cost of answering calls was $167 per week.

Generally councils were not able to estimate cost of responding to calls.

Question 13
Please rate your performance in the provision of the following

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Councils after hours reception</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council’s general information on after hours</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council’s after hours response action</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 14
Describe any areas where Council’s after hours service could be improved and how this could be achieved.
- Contacts should be listed on our web page
- The service cannot be improved, however, being a rural council we are confronted with the local community culture of knowing the council officers socially (i.e. outside of normal business hours) and therefore expecting those officers to deal with local government issues 24 hours a day
- Better advertising of service
- Funds permitting, the creation of a regional emergency response unit would assist in dealing with a range of after-hours problems
- Recorded telephone message on main council line directing people to use the after hours numbers for emergency situations or to leave a message, or call back later.
- Better technology or better use of existing technology to ensure that a person making a call can speak directly to the person who can deal with the problem.
- Better technology or better use of existing technology to ensure that a person making a call can speak directly to the person who can deal with the problem.
- Central call Centre has merit to receive call, answer queries. Very fragmented. Most people realise that any after hours calls would be someone’s home. Dog issues are the predominate issue that people expect an immediate response.
- Recorded Message on Office phone directing caller to ring residence of appropriate Officer
- None - response time and action is quick and effective for appropriate requests

Question 15
Would your Council support an investigation into the feasibility of a collaborative approach to after hours services provision?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified support</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 16
What issues do you think should the feasibility study address?

- Compatibility of Council Services
- SWOT analysis should be done - is the current after hours service an issue at the industry level (hence the need for a collaborative approach), or should it simply be a local consideration if that council believes it to be an issue? Another issue is the pressure then placed (as is currently occurring) on elected members to deal with after hours service which, as an operational matter, should not be imposed on the elected members because of problems that would emanate (eg inconsistent service; misinformation to the enquirer etc)
- Reliability of service delivery. Response time is appropriate and cost is reasonable
- We don't appear to have any major problems with out of hours emergencies
- Ensuring that differences between Council is addressed in a customer service & cost effective manner
- Cost v Benefits, advantages of call centre provision, what the real or true cost is for Councils (such as ours) who presently get the service for nothing if they had to pay the Officers for it
- It is important that the Council staff person who will deal with a call talks directly to the person reporting the situation. This is the only way that we can get an understanding of the urgency of the situation to ensure that appropriate action is taken to ensure public safety without undue expense. In a large rural area this is also important in order to get clear directions to where the problem is. A third party in this equation could well result in a disaster.
- Practicality, as in being suitable for metro and large regional councils but maybe not be suitable for the smaller rural councils. Could be considered another nail in the "Local-closest to people government."
- Opportunities available; grants available
- Costs of sharing call-centre, benefits to all parties, practicality of call-centre sharing

Question 17
If an appropriate model was proposed which made it easier for Councils to adopt a collaborative approach to after hours services would your Council be likely to support being involved?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2 - Organisations consulted during Study

Councils
Adelaide
Alexandrina
Burnside
Campbelltown
Charles Sturt
Holdfast
Marion
Onkaparinga
Playford
Port Adelaide Enfield
Prospect
Salisbury
Tea Tree Gully
Unley
West Torrens

Other Organisations
Australian National Audit Office
Australian Teleservices Association
callcentres.com.au
Department of Trade & Industry
Dept of Education Training Employment
Ecouncils.com
Environmental Protection Agency
Local Government Association
ozcallentres.com
Telstra

Call Centre Providers
Answer Adelaide
Chubb
Community Link
CRMI
Link Communications
Orange
RAA
Stellar
APPENDIX 3 – Project publicity

LGA Circular 49.4 After Hours Call Centre: Survey – December 2001
Circular to Mayors & CEO’s from Trevor Starr, City Manager, City of West Torrens - December 2001
Article in LGA News – February 2002
Invitation to staff who have shown interest in the project and members of the Local Government Customer Services Network, SA Chapter – February 2002
Email to CEO's by John Comrie, Executive Director Local Government Association of SA – March 2002