

Call a government service and you will wait and wait

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Have you had the frustrating experience of calling Services Australia and having to wait and wait before you talk to a staff member?

If you think the problem is getting worse, you're not imagining it.

For somebody calling the Disability, Sickness and Carers line in the nine months to 31 March 2023, the 'average speed of answer' was 28 minutes and 32 seconds.

That's more than a third longer than you typically had to wait in the 12 months to June 30 2022.

What's changed in that period? Labor is now in government and Bill Shorten is now in charge of Services Australia.

For people calling the Older Australians line, the wait time was 28 minutes and 11 seconds: a 31 per cent increase in the wait time compared to when the Coalition was in charge of Services Australia.

If you called the Employment Services line, the average wait time was 29 minutes 29 seconds and callers to the Families and Parenting Line waited on average 31 minutes 24 seconds — both sharply up from wait times when the Coalition was in

government. This is a big problem and Mr Shorten needs to fix it.

There should be a root and branch review of Service Australia's operations, to determine the reasons for this worrying pattern.

Would the use of a specialist external call centre provider deliver better results? It did for the National Disability Insurance Agency when I was Social Services Minister in 2018.

But Mr Shorten is going in the opposite direction, recently deciding not to renew a contract with external provider Serco, leading to more than 600 staff being let go.

The answer may or may not be greater use of external providers.

But it is one of many questions which should be asked in a review.

Are the rosters in the call centres right, so enough people are there at peak times?

Are particular letters and emails to customers driving large numbers of calls, which could reduce if this correspondence was better worded and less confusing? Are we making the best use of modern technologies, such as interactive voice responses, to eliminate the need entirely for people to speak with someone when they only have a simple transaction to complete?

And critically, are we making sure that more people aren't having to phone up because key platforms like MyGov are confusing to navigate?

When Australians are facing a cost of living crisis and looking for help

quickly, to have call waiting times increasing by so much is the opposite of what is needed. Service NSW has shown what is possible. Renewing your driver's licence or registering your car used to be slow, painful, bureaucratic processes.

But with a customer service focus under the NSW Coalition Government, Service NSW has delivered a dramatically better experience for citizens in recent years.

In his first year in the job Mr Shorten has spent most of his time playing political games. He needs to focus on what he is there to do — improving the way the government provides services to citizens.

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