

# A passport to success

Every year around 350,000 UK citizens living outside of the UK apply for new or replacement passports. The information and application forms they need are available to them online to download at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) web site. However, when they need help to complete those forms, have questions about the process, or simply want an update on how their application is progressing, they call Careline. From its Selkirk contact centre the company provides a twenty four hour help line that makes sure travel hungry citizens in more than 50 countries get the passports they need – when they need them.

Managing applications from non-resident citizens is only one aspect of the FCO's work, but it is a highly complex and sensitive one, as Caroline Cross, the FCO's Head of Passport Policy and Procedures, explains. "Though the requirements for obtaining a UK passport are broadly the same the world over, there are local variations depending on the applicant's country of residence. These differences have become exaggerated by the fact that our consulates around the world, which have been responsible for the local administration of applications, have evolved slightly different ways of doing things due to local circumstances and conditions."

So, in Caroline's mind, when the FCO engaged with Careline, they were looking for two things. "First, we needed a customer management company that could cope with the complexity of our local processes and help passport applicants navigate their way through them. Second, we needed a partner flexible enough to work with us as we strove to replace those variations, where we could, with a single, consistent, set of global passport application processes. They needed to understand the need for change, embrace its challenges and help us win support for it across our global network."

The drive to refine the application process is one that the FCO takes very seriously. A rationalisation of the passport office's work, initiated in 2008, aims to save the British tax payer around £10 million in two years by streamlining passport administration. But the FCO isn't prepared to cut costs at the applicant's expense. "When a citizen applies for a passport – wherever they reside – they have every right to expect a straightforward process and a high quality service," says Caroline. "While we're engaged in redefining those processes we rely upon Careline to deliver exceptional service and, at the same time, to gather intelligence that will help us to understand the impact of our processes on the applicant and whether the changes we're bringing about are truly making things better for them, perhaps not in terms of speed of service, but in terms of clarity and consistency."



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### **Building knowledge – supporting change**

Careline grasped quickly that its primary challenge would be to provide timely, accurate information to every applicant and to reduce the number of enquiries that needed to be referred to the consulates for clarification. “Callers expect – and rightly so – that we will have the answers to their questions, however bizarre or esoteric, at our finger tips,” explains Richard Glanville, Careline’s Account Director for the FCO programme. “However, that’s harder to achieve than it sounds, given the number of local variations, the complex nature of the enquiries and the high degree of change. We realised quickly that we needed to build a knowledge base that would be a constantly updated repository for all the information we’d need to answer callers’ questions. And we knew we’d need to build strong, close relationships with the consulate offices – as well as Caroline’s team – to keep that knowledge base up-to-date.”

According to Caroline this has been one of the great successes of the programme, since the existence of the knowledge base has, in itself, helped to foster the drive towards consistency.

“Because we work closely with the consulates,” explains Richard, “we’ve been able to help the FCO foster consensus and agreement around common processes and procedures, which are then recorded in the knowledge base and become the de facto standard.”

Within its team Careline has appointed named individuals who are responsible for liaising regularly with designated representatives within the consulates to update information and share knowledge base changes. “By acting as the primary interface between the FCO and the consulates, Careline is easing the pressure on my team and keeping clear lines of communication open,” affirms Caroline.

### **Acting on intelligence**

For the FCO, streamlining the operation goes hand in glove with improving the applicant experience. “By building consistency we’re able to audit the service more effectively, identify problems easier and overcome them at speed,” says Caroline. “We can see what aspects of the process applicants find most challenging and work constructively to make the process simpler and more information rich. Careline’s help in this regard is invaluable. Not only do they accurately capture data about each call - the issues that have given rise to the call and how they’ve been resolved - but their agents are actively encouraged to engage with callers to understand their deeper anxieties and concerns.” All of this information – both data driven and anecdotal – is fed back to Caroline’s team where it is used to inform the business improvement process.

There are few organisations that would not agree that providing an excellent service to the caller is the primary concern of their contact centre operation. However, it is all the more imperative here because, in this instance, the cost of the contact centre service is met, not by Careline’s client, the FCO, but by callers themselves. “Because non-UK resident citizens don’t, by and large, pay the same rate of UK taxes that they would if they were living here, it seems reasonable that, if they require supplementary advice when making their application, they should pay for it,” explains Caroline. At present around 25% of applicants do, in fact, call the help line for advice or information, paying to do so either through premium telephone lines or by credit cards. “That means it’s all the more critical that the service we provide is fast, efficient and accurate,” says Richard.

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Head of Passport Policy and Procedures,  
FCO

### Guaranteeing security

Customers' credit card transactions are protected by a unique technology, developed by Careline's subsidiary company, Semafone. Callers are able to make credit card payments without their card details being visible to the agent or captured in the company's call recording system. Semafone guarantees 100% compliance with the Payment Card Industry's (PCI) standard, which has been introduced to protect consumers from card fraud and identity theft.

[www.semafone.com](http://www.semafone.com)

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### Delivering more for less in an innovating contracting model

The good news is that, since taking over the contract in June 2009, Careline has been able to reduce the price passport applicants pay for the information service by more than 50%. "There's no magic to how this has been achieved," says Richard. "We've simply used Careline's very efficient call handling processes, trained our agents to a very high standard and supported them with a knowledge tool that means any agent can handle any question from any caller in any country. This means we can operate a tight and efficient team, even on a demanding 24 hour schedule."

Finding a partner with an appetite for such a deal - where the 'user' rather than the 'client' meets the cost - was a challenge for the FCO, confirms Caroline. "It is a challenging structure to work within – Careline answers to us for the quality of the service they provide, but receive their remuneration from the caller. It's important not to underestimate the degree of risk they were ready to embrace. After all, at the outset all they had to work with to estimate their potential revenue stream were our call volume estimates – which were likely to vary given the changes we were introducing. The fact that they have been able to deliver a cheaper service while working with us through the challenges of our change agenda demonstrates very clearly that they have efficient and effective processes plus an honest and constructive business approach."

"The most productive working relationships are those where client and provider are prepared to take a mature approach to risk," explains Richard. "Based on our analysis of the work involved we were confident that our processes could not only improve the service but deliver it more efficiently. On that basis we were more than happy to make a commitment to the FCO that we would reduce the end user cost."

From the outset Careline's service has given Caroline and her team a high degree of confidence. "We were impressed from the outset at how quickly Careline's team hit its service performance targets and started to deliver results," says Caroline. The FCO worked closely with Careline to build and deliver a three week agent training course prior to the service going live but, even so, expected teething problems in the early days. "In fact there were very few. From day one complaints from callers about any aspect of Careline's service were very rare and complaints generally – which typically relate to the passport application process or the need to pay for the service – are gradually declining. We will shortly undertake a fresh wave of customer satisfaction research – the first to be undertaken since Careline was appointed – and I'm confident we'll see significant improvements."

The FCO's positive view of Careline's performance has already been reflected in successful mystery shopping exercises. "It is another sign of Careline's mature approach that they respond so well both to general feedback from us and particular insights from mystery shopping," comments Caroline. "We are able to be completely open and honest, which is important to us, given our absolute commitment to continuous improvement. It is clearly a commitment that Careline shares."

### High value service

- Vital support for up to 350,000 passport applicants every year
- Underpinned by a comprehensive knowledge base that drives process consistency and transparency
- An innovative, trust based contract model based on a 'user pays' business model
- Operational efficiency driving a 50% cost reduction for the end user and rising service levels
- An uncompromising focus on improving the applicant experience
- Extremely low level of complaints about help line service quality which should reduce to zero
- 24-hour, five days a week operation handling an average 46,000 calls per month
- Contributing to a programme of change that will streamline passport administration and help save the British tax payer up to £10 million.

**The Foreign and Commonwealth Office** – 'the FCO' or 'the Foreign Office' for short – is the government department responsible for promoting British interests overseas and supporting our citizens and businesses around the globe.

The FCO employs almost 15,000 in over 170 countries and is responsible for issuing all British passports to its citizens, both those resident in the United Kingdom and overseas.

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Head of Passport Policy and Procedures,  
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Find out what engaging with Careline could do for your customer relationships and your business results.

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