

STAMMA



2025 REPORT ON PHONE ACCESSIBILITY

This report is based on a survey of people who stammer conducted during Sept 2025.

Our findings point to a sector-wide institutional failure to anticipate and make provision for the needs of people who stammer when making or receiving phone calls.

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This report was put together by volunteers and staff at STAMMA, the British Stammering Association, registered charity no 1089967/SC038866. Please direct any questions to training@stamma.org.

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PHONES IN BUSINESS: A FAILURE IN ACCESSIBILITY

INTRODUCTION

If your business has stairs to the main entrance, you provide a ramp for customers who are wheelchair users. In the same way, if your business has a phone line, you should expect that some of your callers stammer and think about their needs too.

This is a fundamental issue about accessibility.

Over half a million adults in the UK stammer. Many are likely to struggle with telephony systems if their needs aren't taken into account.

Working with Contact Babel, the leading analyst for the contact centre industry, we estimate that there are around 43 million calls made by people who stammer to and between businesses every year. We surveyed those people about their last phone call experience. 65% of those calls were mishandled. They were talked over, interrupted, trapped in voice recognition loops and hung up on.

Just 1 in 6 were given the opportunity to let the business or call agent know that they stammer prior to or at the beginning of the call. 24% found that the voice recognition processes didn't understand their speech. 14% were hung up on when they stammered.

This report shows how overwhelmingly challenging calls can be for people who stammer, and that this is the treatment they have experienced and come to expect. This is unnecessary. It points to a lack of consideration for people with speech disabilities when designing systems and procedures, and a lack of training for those taking the calls.

Little thought is given to accommodating people with speech differences, such as stammering.

This is backed up by our 2024 YouGov research, which showed that 61% of people who work in the call centre industry don't know that it's normal for someone who stammers to struggle to say their name. Only 36% said that silence on a call could be due to a caller getting stuck on words. Yet, these are basic indicators of someone who stammers.

This isn't trivial. It's about being able to sort out basic needs: call a bank, make a GP appointment, renew insurance, book a hotel or track a parcel.



THE SIZE OF THE PROBLEM

Our findings point to sector-wide institutional failure to anticipate and make provision for the needs of people who stammer when making or receiving phone calls.

Millions more adults experience speech disabilities such as dysarthria, aphasia, dyspraxia, ataxia or voice difficulties at some point in their lives, and are likely to face very similar challenges with telephone systems.

A LEGAL DUTY

The Equality Act and the Disability Discrimination Act (NI) place a legal duty on businesses to anticipate that some customers and service users will have disabilities and work in ways that accommodate this.

Simple changes to training and procedures are needed, which will benefit both customers and businesses.

ABOUT THE CALLS

"I was put through to a voice activated automated menu immediately, so no opportunity to say I stammered. This resulted in me repeating a 14-digit tracking number literally about 10 times as the automated service could not understand it due to my stammer. The more times I had to repeat, the more frustrated and anxious I became. I ended up in tears with the frustration I felt."

WHO WE SURVEYED

We surveyed 356 individuals, firstly reaching out to our members and then to our wider online community. Only those who stammer could complete the survey.

Participants were asked about the *most recent call* they made to a business and how that went; and about the ease or difficulty they have in making calls generally.

Timing of the most recent call

Of those who'd called a business recently, almost two thirds had done so within the last 1-4 weeks.

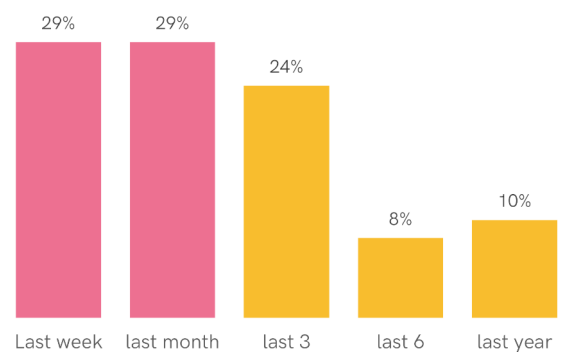
1 in 10 people had NOT called a business within the last year. This is a common response for people who find talking hard work: *"I find alternative options, but if the only option I have is to make the call then I would force myself to speak"*.

Who they called

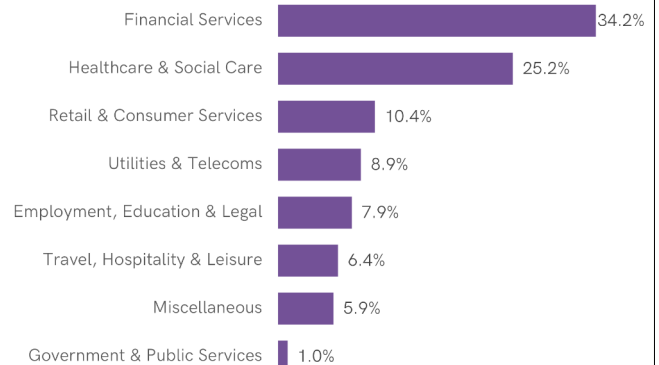
From the data, we see the full spectrum of peoples' daily lives; they rang HMRC, the NHS, insurance companies, banks and utility companies. They rang to book or change hotel or holiday bookings, or regarding job interviews. They also made business to business calls as part of their daily tasks at work.

Some told us that the *only way* they could contact the business concerned is by phone. In other instances, it was *important to the caller* to conduct their business by phone.

MOST PEOPLE CALLED A BUSINESS WITHIN THE LAST MONTH



WHO THEY RANG



ISSUES FACED BY CALLERS

Had their words guessed or assumed, 32%

Talked over, 31%

Hit IVR* issues, 24%

Hung up on, 14%

Laughed at, 5%

Misinterpreted as a bad line, 4%

*IVR : Interactive Voice Response system

WHAT THE NUMBERS TELL US



The survey was based upon 356 respondents who stammer. See Appendix for full details and further responses

Just 35% of the calls described were positive, with no issues around stammering; 65% reported one or more barriers; such as being interrupted, hung up on, getting stuck on IVR etc.

1 Has having a stammer ever made calling a business difficult?

- Yes 97%
- No 2%

Almost everyone said their stammer makes phone calls to business challenging.

2 What happened on your last call to a business?

- 32% Had their words guessed or assumed
- 31% were talked over
- 24% experienced IVR issues
- 14% were hung up on
- 5% were laughed at
- 4% were misinterpreted as a 'bad line'.

3 Were you given an opportunity to disclose your stammer before the call?

- No 85%
- Yes 15%

Fewer than one in six were given a chance to indicate that they stammer.

4 Did you get what you needed from the call?

- Yes 80%
- No 20%

One in five did not accomplish what they set

out to do; they either gave up or had to ring back.

5 Did your most recent experience affect your willingness to use phone services again?

- 14% It put me off phoning
- 25% It stressed me out
- 5% Not sure
- 37% No difference
- 20% I feel more confident

A positive experience can make someone more willing to call that company again.

6 How easy or difficult is it to phone a business?

- 15% Impossible/I'd never call
- 66% Difficult
- 10% So-so
- 9% Easy-good

Calls were difficult for 66% of respondents. Due to negative experiences, a further 15% told us they'd do anything to avoid having to make a call.

7 Do you ever find it hard to start talking at the beginning of a call?

- 27% Always
- 27% Often
- 44% Sometimes
- 3% Never

Starting the phone conversation is particularly difficult for 97% of respondents, who struggled to get their first word out, like 'Hello'.

8 Are there words used in identification routines that you find hard to say, eg name, date of birth?

- 79% Yes, always
- 15% Sometimes
- 6% No

94% of respondents said that they found giving information difficult.

WHERE & HOW IT GOES WRONG

Very little around stammering is straightforward.

Every stammer is different. And it fluctuates from day to day, or even hour to hour, meaning someone might speak without much stammering in one conversation and then stammer much more in the next.

But there are commonalities, including the fact that people don't stammer because they're nervous. They stammer because that's the way they're built. Stammering is simply the way some of us talk.

There are also common barriers. IVR systems, identification processes and agent responses create particular challenges for people who stammer.

What also stands out is how easy and simple it is to tackle these barriers; there are easy solutions which don't require significant financial outlays. These failed and mishandled calls are unnecessary.

WHAT THE STORIES TELL US

INTERACTIVE VOICE RESPONSE SYSTEMS

24% of respondents identified Interactive Voice Response systems as a significant barrier.

Callers often have insufficient time to respond before the system interrupts them and asks them to repeat it. Systems often fail to understand stammered speech and trap callers in prolonged loops of "I didn't quite catch that. Could you say it again?". A lack of early escape routes can leave callers who stammer doomed to endure the frustrating cycle and distress of an unworkable IVR system that wasn't designed with them in mind.

AGENT RESPONSES

97% of people who stammer find speaking at the start of a call hard, and need a little bit of space. It isn't a silent call. They then may block, finding it hard to get a word out. These pauses and blocks are a natural part of stammering.

Too often these can end up being interrupted with "Hello, are you still there?" followed by disconnection. Heavy breathing could be someone trying to get a word out.

94% of respondents found saying their name challenging; they may block or need to run up to it instead. Some agents laughed or talked down to callers, or kept interrupting so the caller needed to start again.

IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES

ID processes are a common component of customer interactions. Yet, 94% of people who stammer find words which can't be changed or swapped, such as your name, address and date of birth, particularly hard to say.

"IVR calls asking for numbers or codes are a nightmare."

"Had to repeat myself to an automated response line."

"The voice recognition system was a terrible experience."

"It was an automated system that, because I couldn't say what I wanted quickly enough, they pushed me around their system, time and again."

"...it was a completely voice-based system to report an emergency."

"Trying to guess what I am saying, talking over me, talking slowly as if it is my understanding that is the problem."

"They started saying in a loud voice 'you are breaking up'. When I said 'no I stammer please just listen', she kept saying in a very very firm voice 'how can I help you' multiple times."

"[They] laughed and asked if I was ill."

"I couldn't say the right word so had to use an alternative, which they questioned."

"I block when I stammer so people I call think I'm at the end of my sentence when I'm struggling to get my next word out."

"On some points they completely misunderstood and just assumed that I was going to say something else."

"I was blocking on my name and the agent laughed and said 'have you forgotten your own name...'"

"I struggle with my name as I cannot navigate around it... I felt she thought I was stupid."

"...it's more how it makes me feel having to relay things such as my name, address, date of birth (key information, and having to say it on demand rather than natural flow of a conversation)."

THE CONSEQUENCES

Most people who stammer start calls feeling vulnerable and stressed. This baseline level of apprehension - based on prior experience - sets the emotional stakes for the call, shaping how the experience is perceived and felt. The caller anticipates being hung up on, rushed or treated disrespectfully because it's happened so often before. The consequences can be negative for both the caller *and* the business. For the caller, common feelings are frustration, anger, anxiety and shame.

GETTING IT WRONG

Failure to resolve issues

This can have significant consequences. *"Things were definitely left hanging,"* one respondent noted. Another: *"I was unable to speak fluently and [they] didn't understand and weren't prepared to make adjustments".*

Giving up

This frustration can lead to people abandoning calls entirely. One person, trying to book a ferry, struggled to give their name and said simply, *"I gave up"*. Another gave up trying to book a second viewing on a house.

Requiring assistance

The inability to complete a call independently forces a reliance on others. One caller explained, *"I had to get a family member to advocate for me and take the phone on my behalf"*.

Repeated call attempts

Unsuccessful interactions often necessitate follow-up calls, compounding the initial stress and effort. Some people called back repeatedly. Others gave up. A few were called back by the company.

Emotional impact

Difficult calls consistently produce strong negative emotions, including frustration, shame, anxiety, anger, and feeling "stupid" or "demeaned".

Being interrupted & talked over

"They talked over me and finished my sentences."
"Sighing and repeating their question over and over during the pauses with an annoyed tone."
This can make the call much harder, making someone start again when explaining their issues.



GETTING IT RIGHT

When a call goes well, and the caller has the opportunity to let the organisation know they stammer prior to the call, and is treated with dignity, the difference can be dramatic. One person, responding to 'how did you feel?' after a good call, wrote *"Triumphant"*.

Respondents who experienced a good call went out of their way to thank the agent and explain why the call went well.

"They were very good and understanding. They also asked my permission if they could update my file with a note explaining I sometimes got stuck."

"I stammered a lot and he said to take my time as there was no rush. I think he thought I was upset but I wasn't!"

"It took me several attempts to say my name. The agent did not react or rush me."

RECOMMENDATIONS

SIMPLE CHANGES

One of the stand-out findings of our research is that when a call goes *well* for someone who stammers, it can have a profoundly positive impact on them. They'll often go out of their way to thank the agent, note what happened and feed back. Easy, simple changes can dramatically change the outcome of a call.

1. TRAINING

A basic understanding of what is normal for people who stammer could transform the experience of calls for our community.

Understanding basic aspects of stammering is key to taking calls well. Knowing how to respond to silences, what's helpful and what isn't can easily be picked up in basic training around stammering. STAMMA has scripts which you can use and adapt for your calls.

2. ID PROCEDURES

As people who stammer can find giving their name, date of birth, etc, hard, this needs to be accounted for in ID procedures and agent training. Allow more time and let people use keypads to type in information. Train agents to expect problems.

3. TECHNICAL SYSTEMS

There are three key technical areas to consider: customer record flagging, IVR and fraud detection.

Customer record flagging

Offer *all* of your customers the option to flag key information on their record. Ensure this information is available to call agents as early as possible in the call.



IVR systems

If you have IVR in place, review the following:

- What are the talk-time limits for callers to speak? Is this long enough for callers who stammer to complete responses?
- What is your IVR system's word error rate for stammered speech versus fluent speech? Is it compatible?
- Is there an early escape route in the IVR system that allows callers with speech disabilities to speak to a human agent?

Fraud detection

If you have fraud procedures that put red flags by speech hesitations, you risk wrongly accusing people who stammer of deception.

HERE TO HELP

STAMMA recognises that every business is different. If you need assistance, do reach out to us at training@stamma.org and we'd be delighted to help.

We provide regular workshops and bespoke support for talking with customers who stammer and working with employees who stammer.

APPENDIX: THE NUMBERS

Percentages are based on responses to the individual questions. Blanks or incomplete responses have been excluded.

65% FACED BARRIERS

Out of the 249 responses where a call had been fully detailed, 35% (86) described their most recent call positively, with no issues resulting from their stammer. 65% (163) reported issues arising from their stammer and how the agent responded, which made the call difficult or where the caller was hung up on.

1 Has having a stammer ever made calling a business difficult?

- Yes 97% (345)
- No 2% (8)

2 What happened on your most recent call to a business?

- 31% (87) Were talked over
- 24% (68) Experienced IVR issues
- 14% (40) Were hung up on
- 5% (13) Were laughed at
- 4% (10) Had their stammering misinterpreted as 'a bad line'

3 Were you given an opportunity to disclose your stammer before the call?

- No 85% (214)
- Yes 15% (37)

4 Did you get what you needed from the call?

- Yes 80% (201)
- No 20% (50)

5 Did this experience affect your willingness to use phone services again?

- 14% (31) It put me off phoning
- 25% (54) It stressed me out
- 5% (10) Not sure
- 37% (82) No difference
- 20% (43) I feel more confident



APPENDIX: CONT.

6 How easy or difficult is it to phone a business?

- 15% (40) Impossible/I'd never call
- 66% (174) Difficult
- 10% (26) So-so
- 3% (9) Easy - good

7 Do you ever find it hard to start talking at the beginning of a call?

- 27% (70) Always
- 27% (71) Often
- 44% (114) Sometimes
- 3% (7) Never

8 Are there words used in identification routines that you find hard to say, eg name, date of birth?

- 79% (207) Always (207)
- 15% (38) Sometimes (38)
- 6% (16) No

9 When did you last make a call?

- 29% (76) Last week
- 29% (76) Last month
- 24% (64) Last 3 months
- 8% (22) Last 6 months
- 10% (27) Last year

10 Who did you ring?

- 34% (69) Financial Services
- 25% (51) Healthcare & Social Care
- 10% (21) Retail & Consumer Services
- 9% (18) Utilities & Telecoms
- 8% (16) Employment, Education & Legal
- 6% (13) Travel, Hospitality & Leisure
- 6% (12) Miscellaneous
- 1% (2) Government & Public Services

11 What are your concerns, if any, about making a call to a business or organisation?

- 27% (70) Being rushed
- 17% (44) Being interrupted
- 16% (43) Being hung up on
- 11% (28) Being laughed at
- 8% (22) No major concerns



2024 YouGov Polling

STAMMA commissioned a YouGov poll, conducted 24th Oct - 1st Nov 2024. This found that only Net 35% of people working in the call centre industry were aware that silence on calls could be the result of a caller struggling to speak.

Estimation of the numbers of people who stammer calling businesses

At least 550,000 adults in the UK stammer, which, according to ContactBabel, the leading analyst for the call centre industry, equates to at least 43 million calls made by adults who stammer every year. This is accounting for the fact that people who stammer try and avoid making phone calls. Using a 32% to 68% voice to digital figure (which reflects usage by callers to STAMMA) against UK overall of 68% voice, 32% digital, this gives 43.5m voice calls per year.

Estimation of the numbers of adults who stammer

At least 1% of all adults stammer. Current ONS data would indicate that there are 550,223 adults who stammer in the UK (MYE1: Population estimates: Summary for United Kingdom, mid-2024; plus population estimates - local authority based by single year of age) based on a total population of 55,022,253 adults aged 18 and over.

STAMMA

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