

HMRC phone lines and escalating systems issues

General Features

01 September 2019

We recently raised with HMRC the deterioration of the service offered on their phone lines, and the difficulties in escalating 'working together' type issues within HMRC. These were discussed at the Joint Initiatives Steering Group meeting mid-July.

As I act as the CIOT Technical Officer on our Working Together sub-committee (alongside Helen Thornley for the ATT), and sit on the [Issues Overview Group \(IOG\)](#), I am acutely aware of difficulties and frustrations faced by agents when HMRC's systems do not work as they should.

During spring 2019, we were receiving increasing reports from members of delays in getting through to HMRC's helplines (particularly the VAT helplines) – or simply being cut off. Further, for some time the IOG has been concerned over its inability to effectively escalate practical problems within HMRC, to try and get them resolved or at least identify work-arounds. We felt these were matters which should be discussed at the Joint Initiatives Steering Group (JISG), which is the overarching forum through which professional bodies and HMRC engage on matters of the highest priority. We wrote to Jim Harra, HMRC's Tax Assurance Commissioner and Deputy Chief Executive and Second Permanent Secretary, expressing our concerns about these two issues, and a JISG meeting which had previously been cancelled was reinstated with those issues included on the agenda.

There was a good, open discussion around HMRC's phone lines performance. It was clear that late 2018 and early 2019 had been a challenging time for HMRC, but June 2019 had shown an improving picture, and it was hoped that this would continue. Resourcing for a day one no deal Brexit had impacted on 'business as usual' services, but HMRC has made significant progress on recruitment and training. We were reassured that HMRC are committed to improving customer service, and they

are currently working on more meaningful measures. For example, a 'once and done' measure (i.e. did the taxpayer/agent do what they wanted to do within a single interaction with HMRC), the effectiveness of GOV.UK prompts, etc. HMRC will share more details of those as the information becomes accurate enough to publish.

Progress has also been made in relation to the escalation of other practical concerns. The CIOT and ATT have met with HMRC personnel on a number of occasions and we are hopeful that an effective escalation process can be put in place. The new Agent Forum is expected to be launched this month (security issues had held up an earlier launch), and if agents, professional bodies and HMRC can get this to work effectively, then we should see some positive results. We have invited Angela MacDonald, Director General for Customer Services, to spend a day working with an agent in a small practice. This is due to take place on 30 August and we will hopefully feedback from that next month.

We will publicise developments in relation to the Agent Forum within these pages and on our websites, but if you have any issues please do raise them on the current Agent Forum, or email wt@ciot.org.uk or wt@att.org.uk.