

Working Together – the future?

Technical

Management of taxes

01 May 2015

After HMRC's briefing note, *Digital support for agents*, issued in summer 2014, I attended, on behalf of CIOT, together with other members of the professional bodies and HMRC, a number of tele-conference calls and meetings. This resulted in an invitation to agents involved in Working Together locally and agents generally to a series of workshops earlier this year. I attended two in Croydon, two in London and one in Lincoln, and fellow members of our Working Together sub-committee also attended many of these workshops around the country.

These workshops also enabled me to say a few words on behalf of the CIOT to encourage the attendees to air their views freely and honestly on the basis that they would be taken into account.

After an overview, background and objectives introduction by HMRC in the guise of their digital team of Toni Clark and Colin Ford and a few words from representatives of the professional bodies, agents were invited to discuss the following:

- challenges and barriers to digital engagement;
- face-to-face engagement;
- opportunities and benefits for digital engagement (our wish list); and
- a presentation by HMRC of the digital engagement they have already rolled out to small and medium sized enterprises and business partners such as universities, local authorities and chambers of commerce to obtain feedback from agents to see whether agents would benefit from similar digital engagement.

At this stage I must emphasise that, in my view, HMRC have no hidden agenda; they seem genuinely keen to hear all the views and will be feeding back to the professional bodies with conclusions sometime in May 2015. Obviously, we await this feedback from the meeting and look forward to future meetings to discuss the conclusions with HMRC on the way forward.

The only the feedback that I do have is that received from my Working Together colleagues and from my own experiences from the workshops that I attended. First, the importance of continued face-to-face meetings seems to be a common theme from all the workshops, together with the need to have comprehensive back-up from fully trained HMRC staff in all areas where engagement with the Revenue and agents is involved, especially digitally.

As you are all probably aware, HMRC have reduced in size since Working Together was introduced in 1999 when there were local offices around the country. That landscape has changed since and there will be a need to consider a leaner, more focused regional network of groups. We look forward to engaging with the other professional bodies and HMRC to ensure that we all have the chance to meet HMRC to resolve the issues arising from a more digital world.

My colleagues have expressed many views on the effectiveness of the workshops – much has been positive, but some has been negative and this is only to be expected. I believe that the workshops I attended in which HMRC Working Together Co-ordinators were present seemed to be more useful than those where HMRC representatives had little or limited knowledge of the Working Together process. I believe this is important: that we have not only agents who have wide experience of the problems within the system, but also HMRC staff that not only are sympathetic but also have that wide knowledge of the processes involved.

Finally, as I mentioned at all of the workshops that I attended, if you have views after the meetings, or generally, please let us have these as soon as possible so that we can feed them into the process. In a couple of months I hope to be able to report further on the progress and on some of the initial conclusions on the way forward for Working Together. Most importantly, remember to continue to feed us with the issues that you have so we can take these up with HMRC on your behalf at: wt@tax.org.uk