HMRC call connection services

General Features

01 November 2018

LITRG agree with Ofcom’s assessment of harm and proposals for reform

Call connection services (or ‘Information, Connection and Signposting Services’) are offered by companies that operate premium rate phone numbers that connect people to popular customer helplines – including those at HMRC.

While there are already strict rules in place around call connection services operating on 09 or 087 numbers, thus far, call connection services operating on 084 numbers have escaped such regulation. For some time, LITRG have been concerned that vulnerable people are being caught out by 084 call connection charges when trying to get through to HMRC.

This looks set to change under proposals put out to consultation recently by Ofcom. These would require companies offering 084 numbers to clearly label them as third party services and to make it clear how much they will cost. Companies that fall short of these standards could then be investigated and acted against by Phone-paid Services Authority (PSA), who have the power to issue substantial fines.

In our response to the consultation we welcome the proposals and highlight the fact that a web search of ‘contact HMRC’ still returns multiple organic entries for 084 ICSS providers on the first page – demonstrating the need for intervention. We stress to Ofcom that we can see no reason why anyone would knowingly use such a service to make a call to HMRC rather than use the cheap or free direct dial number – it is therefore our view that these services are often designed to mislead people.

While we appreciate that sometimes additional services are offered as part of a call connection service, for example the ability to record your call (which the providers say justifies any higher costs) we still think it is arguable whether most people would derive a benefit from these additional services in the context of a call to HMRC.

For example, with regards to paid recording services, if there is a dispute over what was said in a call with HMRC or indeed, whether there was ever a call at all, HMRC should already record all calls made to their main helpline numbers. Usually, by providing details of the conversation (date, time, name of adviser etc.), HMRC will be able to trace and retrieve the recording. Where necessary, it is also possible to apply for recordings of telephone calls by lodging a ‘Subject Access Request’ (SAR) under the data protection rules. A SAR can be made by the online form on the HMRC website.

The changes to 084 number regulation are expected to go through but may take some time to have the desired effect. In the meantime, advisers should explain to their clients (should they ever need to phone HMRC themselves) – particularly the vulnerable and less tech-savvy – that numbers advertised on the internet, beginning with 08 and 09 are not ‘real’ HMRC helpline numbers. The main HMRC helpline numbers are 03 numbers. Calling the 08 or 09 numbers will get them through to HMRC – but probably at an inflated price in comparison with a direct call to HMRC.