Welcome to the October Technical Newsdesk

Welcomes

30 September 2021

Regular readers of my introductions will know we have been focusing some of our recent efforts on HMRC's service levels. You may have seen that we have historically tracked HMRC's performance against their customer service targets on the CIOT website (see tinyurl.com/5af98ryw).

Until recently, the latest published performance data was for March 2021. HMRC's performance update for the first quarter of 2021/22 was published on 26 August (see tinyurl.com/3wmp238j).

Monthly figures were also published on that date, and shortly after that the performance update for July 2021 was released (see tinyurl.com/38znaeap). I had been expecting to do a like-for-like comparison with earlier years and update our tracker accordingly, but that's not immediately possible. This is because some of the previous performance metrics (phone answer times, i-form and post turnaround, etc.) have been combined or replaced with new ones.

Let me explain.

A fact that had escaped me (and no doubt many others) was that in July HMRC published their 'Outcome Delivery Plan' for 2021/22 (see tinyurl.com/hba9ftjp).

This sets out HMRC's five strategic objectives as follows:

1. Collect the right tax and pay out the right financial support.
2. Make it easy to get tax right and hard to bend or break the rules.
3. Maintain taxpayers' consent through fair treatment and protect society from harm.
4. Make HMRC a great place to work.
5. Support wider government economic aims through a resilient, agile tax

administration system.

The first three objectives are HMRC's priority outcomes, and the delivery plan sets out how HMRC will achieve them. I might return to other aspects of these in subsequent introductions, but for present purposes let me retain the focus on customer service measures, which mainly apply to the second and third objectives. HMRC's performance metrics for these two objectives are:

- Net Easy – phone, webchat and digital – is a new measure which asks: 'How easy was it to deal with us today?' The score represents the total of positive responses minus the total of negative responses, so can range from 100 (entirely positive) to -100 (entirely negative).
- Telephony adviser attempts handled (%): The percentage of callers that got through to an adviser after hearing the automated messages and chose the option to speak to an adviser.
- Webchat adviser attempts handled (%): The percentage of customers taking up a webchat offer that successfully got through to a webchat adviser.
- Customer correspondence responded to within 15 working days of receipt (%): The percentage of 'targeted' post (i.e. that which has a financial impact to benefits or repayments, requires a customer change of circumstance or is a data request) cleared within 15 working days. This measure now includes i-forms.
- Customer satisfaction (%) – phone, webchat and digital: This measures the percentage of HMRC customers that responded that they were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service (which for 2021/ 22 now includes phone services).

Performance against these metrics can be found in the quarterly update referenced above in the spreadsheet tab 'Outcome Delivery Plan progress'. For example, in Q1 2021/22, 35.5% of correspondence was dealt with within 15 working days of receipt, and a satisfaction rate of 83.3% was achieved in relation to phone, webchat and digital services.

If you make your way through the other tabs on the spreadsheet, you will find much more granular data. 'A Journey through HMRC' reports some familiar statistics (for example, average speed of answering a call), as well as figures around tax collection, debts, compliance activity, etc. 'Customer service data 2021-22' provides a detailed breakdown of telephone and correspondence activity.

But it struck me that these performance metrics lack any targets. I gather from HMRC that the reason for this is the uncertainty around the operating environment due to COVID. But how can observers gauge how well HMRC is operating if there is no benchmark or aspiration, particularly if the performance metrics are new? I do worry that not publishing performance targets – especially for an organisation which is central to the delivery of COVID support, working hard to build trust in the tax system, and keen to embed the HMRC Charter into its DNA – risks giving the wrong perception.

HMRC has done some excellent work in the delivery of COVID support schemes, and in some areas is operating extremely well. But that’s certainly not the case across the board, including in some of its mainstream operations. I believe that HMRC works hard to improve its customer service, but I worry that its current approach gives a different impression.