CIOT branches conference, Warwick, 7–8 March 2016

General Features

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A report from the branches conference at Warwick (7-8 March)

The recent branches conference was well attended, with representation from around three quarters of the UK branches. In the technical sessions, we were delighted that Toni Clark, head of digital agent engagement at HMRC, spoke about Working Together and Talking Points. We were equally delighted that Nigel Clarke, chair of the Working Together sub-committee, hosted a follow-up discussion.

Talking Points

Many members will have joined the Talking Points webinars, which so far have included subjects such as Complaints, Your Tax Account and VAT Mini One Stop Shop. Since their launch in September 2015, 21 webinars have been held, with more than 1,900 participants. Future topics will include a Construction Industry Scheme update, Cyber Security, and Budget Consultations. Talking Points webinars are held weekly on average, allowing agents to choose which they would like to participate in. HMRC is also trialling the recording of Talking Points webinars so these can be watched later by those unable to watch live.

Further details about Talking Points sessions can be found on HMRC’s blog at www.taxagents.blog.gov.uk/ and notice of these sessions is also usually included on the Technical Newsdesk pages of the CIOT and ATT websites.

Working Together

Toni explained that, after consulting tax agents, the Working Together Strategic Group decided last year to move Working Together on to a digital platform. A

regional framework was established, comprising Scotland, Northern Ireland, North East, North West, East, Wales, Midlands, South West, South East, and Central London. Each professional body that participates in Working Together should allocate an ‘agent lead’ for each region, and similarly HMRC will have a ‘specialist agent manager’ for each region. These agent leads will, alongside the specialist agent managers, take turns to host digital Working Together meetings broadly in a webinar during which comments and questions can be submitted.

So far, four digital meetings have been held, with more than 300 participants. Toni recognised that there had been some technical issues with the early meetings, but it was hoped these were being ironed out. It is anticipated that soon all agents will be able to participate in the Working Together digital meetings, and the Agent Update publications provide further information about the issues being discussed. More information on Working Together can also be found on the GOV.UK website.

Nigel then stimulated debate among the audience. He said the CIOT and ATT had been able to identify agent leads for only three regions. There was a mixed reaction to the digital meetings. Some attendees favoured the face-to-face meetings because they allowed relationships to be built and better discussion of issues; others preferred the digital approach for its convenience and reduction in the time commitment in participating in Working Together. Many of the audience did not remember the invitation from Nigel to participate in Working Together as an agent lead, and we would be delighted to hear from anyone who would be interested in representing their region. Contact wt@ciot.org.uk if you would like to get involved.

Technical Update

The session ended with me providing an update on some topical technical matters, including Making Tax Digital, client notification obligations, the 3% SDLT/LBTT supplement, expected 6 April 2016 changes, and consultations. These are areas where we have typically already made submissions to HMRC and which can be found at www.tax.org.uk/policy-technical/submissions.