HMRC to pilot Enquiry Centre closures and trial new support for those who need help

Technical

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From June until the end of October 2013, HMRC are to run a pilot in the North East of England to test a new, more flexible service for the 1.5 million people whom they estimate need extra support with their tax affairs or other dealings with HMRC (such as on tax credits matters). HMRC announced this on 14 March 2013 in a press release (**www.tinyurl.com/HMRC-PR-EC**).

The new service would replace the current Enquiry Centre facility and be modelled mostly around HMRC's existing telephone service, but with a dedicated and fully trained 'tier 2' specialist escalation resource through which to direct support for those who HMRC judge are in need of it. They also plan to have mobile advisers on hand to continue some form of face to face service.

LITRG and the CIOT offer a cautious welcome to plans which aim to improve services for the vulnerable, given that the existing Enquiry Centre facilities have been so constrained in their resources and opening hours in recent years as to no longer meet most people's needs. It is welcome that the new service is being trialled and consulted on closely by HMRC with voluntary sector organisations, although we do feel that the pilot period – ending on 31 October 2013 – is too short.

The Enquiry Centres to be closed during the pilot, based in the North East of England, are Alnwick, Bishop Auckland, Bridlington, Hexham, Darlington, Durham, Middlesbrough, Morpeth, Newcastle, Scarborough, Stockton, Sunderland and York. LITRG and CIOT's initial reactions to the announcement can be read on the respective websites: **www.litrg.org.uk/PR_HMRC_EC** and **www.tax.org.uk/PR_HMRC_EC**.

LITRG will continue to urge HMRC to engage in full consultation and to listen to any concerns or suggestions that voluntary sector organisations put forward based upon their experiences during the pilot. There must be a thorough evaluation, showing that the new service is working well before any long-term decisions for full Enquiry Centre closures are made. We acknowledge that the current Enquiry Centre offering has flaws and that it can be improved, but we must make sure that any replacement service has the needs of the customer at its core and not be purely a cost saving exercise.

A pilot running over 12 months would have been our ideal, as this would have ensured full coverage of a tax year and the various peaks and troughs in demand throughout. The help and advice that Enquiry Centre staff currently offer is varied across personal tax – employed and self-employed – and tax credits. In addition, there is some engagement with the agent community on behalf of their clients, although the unrepresented customer is the most common visitor. We did have some success in pressing HMRC to extend their original pilot plans to cover the Self Assessment paper deadline of 31 October and are assured that there will be a continual evaluation beyond this to inform longer term decisions and service models; LITRG will be working hard to ensure this happens.

LITRG acknowledges that the demand at Enquiry Centres has fallen over recent years, but in that time, the demand for the tax charities' services has correspondingly increased. The fall is not, therefore, due to lack of need, so the new model must address fully how those needs are to be met.

We are particularly concerned that the closures could, for example, impinge upon:

- those who are digitally excluded and therefore cannot self-serve for advice;
- those suffering hardship who find the cost of lengthy telephone calls to a helpdesk too much to bear; and
- those who have complex affairs that need specialist and technical input that only an expert can offer.

Steps need to be taken to address the above – for example, a fully formulated 'assistance to digital' strategy, which does more than to refer people to friends and family for help. And while LITRG welcome the announcement to move from 0845 numbers to 0345 from this summer, vulnerable people will still be making chargeable calls to HMRC helplines.

HMRC’s consultation on the proposals closes on 24 May. CIOT has launched a member’s survey to help formulate a response to the consultation (**www.tax.org.uk/HMRC-enquiry-survey**). We would encourage you to join in the survey and offer
your experiences.