March 2023: Technical newsdesk

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20 February 2023

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This week I joined colleagues from CIOT, ATT and LITRG, along with lots of other professional colleagues, at HMRC's Annual Stakeholder Conference. It is always good to meet contacts, particularly from HMRC, in person. Not only does it help build relationships, but it reminds us all that they are people too, and it means that otherwise challenging or critical conversations can be held in a more collegiate manner.

I was flattered to be asked to facilitate one of the break-out sessions, 'Short term solutions to customer challenges in the tax system', alongside Richard Hawthorn (Director of HMRC's Operational Excellence Support Services). We have been concerned about HMRC's performance for some time and continue to raise this with them both publicly and privately – so this was a good opportunity to discuss the types of thing that create 'grit' in the system and make processes more difficult, as well as what might be done to smooth things. You would be correct in thinking that we have been doing this for years; originally through the 'working together' initiative, and more recently via the agent forum and the Issues Overview Group (tinyurl.com/wdfxhvmv). You might, therefore, wonder what good it has done, as the difficulties with navigating the tax system seem to have increased rather than reduced.

But perhaps the pressures on HMRC's resources, their telephone and postal challenges, and their systems issues provide a greater impetus for us to work together to resolve problems. Fixing these things will save HMRC resources, whilst also making that part of the tax system work better.

An example of this – which it is fair to say is still being refined – is the HMRC service dashboard (tinyurl.com/3e9sdvae). A large proportion of calls to HMRC (including the agent dedicated lines) are to chase progress. Putting aside for a moment how quickly something should actually be done, a realistic processing date on the dashboard or the 'Check when you can expect a reply from HMRC' service (tinyurl.com/fza4ms88) can reduce chaser calls to HMRC, freeing up their resources to deal with other matters (including the thing you are chasing about) and saving you the time on hold. A 'win win', you might say.

Perhaps more challenging to deal with is where the tax measure itself causes problems. An example of this is the marriage allowance. This was introduced in 2015, with over 4 million married couples standing to gain from it. But take-up has been well below expectations, and there are many problems with its operation. Would a policy ever get reversed? Perhaps that leads into tax simplification, which is a topic for another day, but at least identifying the problems and any necessary workarounds would be progress.

Perhaps this is all a bit naive, and we might simply resolve one issue to find that five more are created. But as I mentioned to a member this morning, I am feeling ‘glass-half-full’, so perhaps we can make a difference after all.