# Helpline closure a sign HMRC ‘can’t cope’, MPs told

Briefings



23 June 2023

Tax minister Victoria Atkins in discussion with current CIOT President Gary Ashford, Immediate Past President Susan Ball and the Institute’s Head of External Relations, George Crozier

CIOT President Gary Ashford lamented HMRC’s decision to temporarily close its self assessment helpline in remarks to the CIOT’s Annual Parliamentary Reception at the Houses of Parliament on 12 June.

Overcast skies and rumbling thunder earlier in the day might have been a metaphor for the troubles that have beset the tax authority in recent months, but it was a sunny evening by the time more than 80 guests, including MPs, journalists and tax professionals, gathered at Parliament’s Terrace Pavilion for the annual event which seeks to strengthen links between parliamentarians and the tax profession.

Ashford said that the decision to shut down the helpline was ‘another flashing indicator that HMRC can’t cope with everything it is being tasked with’. He continued: ‘Surely the first rule of tax compliance has to be that you make it as easy as possible for those trying to comply?’

The Institute’s unhappiness at the helpline closure was also emphasised to Financial Secretary to the Treasury Victoria Atkins at the event. The minister joined us for the earlier part of the evening but had to leave before speeches. Nevertheless she thanked CIOT for its engagement with the tax policy process and looked forward to future meetings to discuss areas of interest to the profession, building on a previous discussion on simplification.

In his remarks, Gary Ashford said he regretted the decision to axe the Office of Tax Simplification, telling parliamentarians that in the following week, there was a final chance for Parliament to reprieve the OTS. ‘But if, as I fear is likelier, its abolition goes through, then the government must deliver on their commitment to “embed tax simplification into the institutions of government” … We will be keeping up the pressure. I hope others – including parliamentarians – will too.’

The simplification agenda and current HMRC travails were also on the mind of the event’s parliamentary sponsor, Craig Mackinlay MP CTA, who said the authority ‘needs to up its game’. He was critical of past decisions to close local tax offices and said the tax system could do more to solve social problems like housing, suggesting that reform of capital gains tax could help to free up large numbers of properties and bring the housing market to life.

Lord Leigh of Hurley, who is also a CTA, shared his experience of tax scrutiny in Parliament and encouraged the Institute and its members to contribute to the work of the House of Lords Finance Bill Sub-Committee, which he chaired this year.

Guests also heard from the Shadow Financial Secretary to the Treasury James Murray, who praised the ‘absolutely invaluable’ support given by CIOT, ATT and LITRG to the parliamentary scrutiny of tax policy. Murray remarked that the job of opposition required MPs to be across any and all issues. Because of this, he said, the support of outside experts such as CIOT helped MPs focus on holding government to account while supporting efforts to deliver a simpler and fairer tax system.

Image



Left to right: Craig Mackinlay MP, Gary Ashford, James Murray MP

Image



Left to right: Lord Davies of Brixton, Gary Ashford, Lord Leigh of Hurley,/p>