HMRC helplines climbdown welcomed

Briefings



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CIOT and ATT welcomed the announcement by HMRC that they will be putting planned helpline closures on hold while they consider how best to help taxpayers harness online services.

HMRC announced on 19 March that they would implement a series of cuts to telephone helplines, including closing the Self Assessment line from early April to September, with taxpayers being directed to online services instead. However, amid a storm of criticism, including from ATT and CIOT, as well as politicians across the parties, it was announced the following day that the plans would be halted.

CIOT President Gary Ashford commented: ‘This is welcome news. The government are right to be putting these big, permanent cuts to HMRC’s telephone helplines on hold for the time being.

‘This pause is a good opportunity for HMRC to press a reset button on their attempts to force people into digital services by withdrawing phone help, rather than taking people with them by making the online option the attractive choice.’

Senga Prior, chair of ATT’s Technical Steering Group, also welcomed the announcement, saying: ‘The message we continue to receive from members is that HMRC’s digital provision is not yet good enough.

‘We continue to support HMRC’s ambition to push more taxpayers towards digital platforms, but until these services are up to scratch, we believe helplines should remain open.’

Victoria Todd, Head of LITRG, said she hoped HMRC would use the pause to consult widely on their customer service provision. ‘HMRC’s strategy is based on diverting most enquiries to their online guidance or automated digital assistant – that is an algorithm rather than an actual person at the other end of the chat,’ she explained. However, ‘HMRC’s own research shows that taxpayers want reassurance that they are getting things right and at present they can’t get that sufficiently from these automated digital services.’

She said that evaluations of trial helpline closures published by HMRC alongside the original announcement left many questions unanswered, including around the quality of tax returns submitted. ‘Additionally, we still haven’t seen any evidence to back up HMRC’s claim that around two-thirds of callers to the self assessment helpline can deal with their enquiry online,’ she added.