Gary Ashford: A year of achievement and celebration

Briefings



21 June 2024

Outgoing CIOT President Gary Ashford reflected on his 12 months in the role in his valedictory speech at the Institute's AGM on 30 May.

In my year as President, CIOT has brought together economists, tax advisers, academics, politicians, civil servants and many others to debate some of the most contentious issues in tax: non-doms, VAT on school fees, the future of income tax and, with Pascal Saint-Amans, international tax reform.

At party conferences in Manchester and Liverpool, we joined the IFS and politicians to explore the tax challenges for the next Parliament. I joined the Tax Institute of Hong Kong at their annual conference to talk global tax collaboration, and the City of London to talk tax and sustainable finance at a joint roundtable.

We've celebrated the contribution of our volunteers with a reception at the fabulous Design Museum. And we've notched up notable technical successes on issues from

low income trusts to off-payroll working.

It’s been a year of achievement and celebration:

- The 25th anniversary of CIOT’s LITRG, which continues to go from strength to strength. (Congratulations to them for winning ‘Outstanding Contribution to Taxation in 2023-24 by a Not-for-profit Organisation’ at the Tolley’s Taxation Awards.)
- The fabulous first full year of our Diploma in Tax Technology.
- Reaching – and passing – the milestone of 20,000 members.

Our members

A particularly rewarding experience was when I had the pleasure of welcoming Rachael Brown as the 20,000th member of our CTA family earlier this year. I was delighted and honoured to meet so many of our other newly qualified CTAs at our Admissions Ceremonies at that same event in March. I hope our new members see their membership as a springboard for their future success.

I have really enjoyed meeting so many members and friends of the Institute at branch and national events around the country during the past year, including a return to my amazing home nation for our Edinburgh lunch earlier this month.

On these travels, I always try to talk to members about what’s bothering them professionally, and what they want the Institute to be doing more of.

HMRC service levels

One issue that has come up more than any other over the last 12 months is HMRC service levels.

At the AGM a year ago, I spoke about how poor service levels aren’t just a pain for taxpayers and their advisers. They harm tax compliance, hinder business activity and erode trust in the tax system. Over the past year, I’ve made that argument in

the press, to politicians and toHMRC themselves.

The announcement in March of big, permanent cuts to phone helplines brought matters to a head. Our response was clear and immediate. I said the cuts were misguided, that I was deeply dismayed and that, if last year's temporary closure was – as I said at the time – a 'flashing indicator' that HMRC could not cope, the new announcement was a blinding light.

Our reaction – and that of other bodies – seems to have had an impact. HMRC's chief executive Jim Harra told the Treasury Committee that ministers had expressed their concern about the 'strength of the reaction and about the fact that the reaction was not just political reaction'. Itwas – and these are his actual words – 'a genuine concern about how this was all going to work'.

As a result, they 'quickly agreed that the right thing to do was not to proceed with it and to listen to the concerns … to take them on board and replan'. I welcome this approach, and we have already begun to discuss with HMRC how we might help and offer ideas as they seek to move forward.

Technology: digitalisation and AI

What do attractive digital services look like? I encourage you to take a look at the seven 'principles of digitalisation' that we and ATT published in April.

We have continued to engage with HMR Con MTD through the year. But we continue to have concerns about how the programme is being implemented and whether it will achieve its objectives.

We've also been doing some thinking around AI. The Institute has set up a group to look at the implications and impact on us and our members. And we held a useful roundtable discussion in Edinburgh recently. I've also continued to take a keen interest in crypto, as chair of the CIOT's crypto assets working group and lead on this for CFE Tax Advisers Europe.

What is clear is that we need to continue to be adaptive, and this will be an ongoing process for the rest of our working lives. Again, I want to sing the praises of our Diploma in Tax Technology – only 18months old but already going strong with more than 130 graduates.

Gary also reported back on CIOT's work on simplification, pointing to efforts to hold ministers to their promises, and on regulation. He thanked members for taking part in the survey which informed the Institute's response to the raising standards consultation (see 'Backing for mandatory membership – but many unanswered questions' on page 53).

Gary closed the speech with thanks to CIOT members for the honour of being Institute President, to his colleagues and family, and to CIOT Council and staff for their support. He wished incoming President Charlotte Barbour well.

This speech has been abridged. The full speech can be read at: tinyurl.com/CIOT-Gary