ATT President’s inaugural speech: MTD must deliver for taxpayers, says Senga Prior

Briefings



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In her presidential inaugural speech at the ATT’s AGM on 11 July, Senga Prior said that Making Tax Digital for income tax is closer than ever, but HMRC must ensure the project does not deliver ‘excessive costs for minimal benefit’. She also said the Association would continue to raise concerns over HMRC service levels and called for clarity on what the government is trying to achieve with its proposals for the regulation of agents.

Thank you for the introduction Simon, and thank you for all your hard work over the last year.

I’m Senga Prior. In my day job, I work in practice as a senior tax manager for Johnston Carmichael in Dundee, specialising in personal tax. I am very grateful to them for supporting me in taking up this opportunity. I’ve been a member of the

Association since 2002 and a Fellow since 2017. I have a particular interest in Scottish taxes and represent the ATT at the Scottish Government's Devolved Taxes Collaborative.

And I am honoured to be the 28th president of our amazing association.

My story

It's been quite a journey. I grew up on a council estate in Perth in a single parent family. Money was pretty tight, so I had a Saturday job from the age of 14 to help out with the family finances. I was a butcher's shop assistant so the bonus was that we always got a good discount!

I left school and secured a place at Edinburgh University to study maths. But unfortunately, after my first year had to drop out as it was too much of a financial struggle.

However I managed to get a job as a bookkeeper and, in my spare time, studied for my accounting qualifications from home. This led to me becoming an accounts manager. After several years, I decided it was time for a career change and plunged myself into the world of tax.

I joined a small firm in 2000 and sat my ATT exams in a single sitting. By this time, I was married with two children, and my husband worked shifts, so fitting in time to study was a challenge! I met quite a few mothers with very young children at our recent Admissions Ceremony and I must say I am in awe. At least mine were old enough to look after themselves if I needed study time!

I started volunteering for the ATT around 2012. I was at one of the Scottish Spring Conferences when a technical officer spoke about joining the band of volunteers who contribute towards the ATT responses to HMRC consultations. I decided to give it a go and soon became involved in responding to consultations on everything from the extension of the averaging period for farmers to the identification of Scottish taxpayers.

It is very satisfying to feel that you are, in a small part, helping to shape tax legislation – even though it doesn't always go in the direction you would wish!

Three big challenges

My first Technical Steering Group meeting covered Making Tax Digital, which is apt, as that brings me neatly on to what I think are the three big challenges we are facing this year. MTD is certainly one of them.

The ATT has been involved with this project since it was first announced in 2015, and it's fair to say it has been a rocky road! Despite numerous delays and changes, we look to be closer than ever before to MTD becoming a reality. However, HMRC cannot afford to be complacent, and must ensure that the project does not deliver excessive costs for minimal benefit.

We will be keeping a close eye on progress in the run up to 2026, engaging with HMRC to ensure our members' voices are heard and will be looking at how we can support members through what will no doubt prove to be a tricky transition. We will also be monitoring the situation regarding the pilot and the delay in some software houses providing suitable software, which I know is a concern for many.

The second challenge on the list is HMRC service levels. We continue to raise concerns over whether HMRC are sufficiently resourced to deliver for taxpayers. HMRC clearly wants to shift more customers to digital platforms. That's a reasonable aspiration, but are those platforms fit for purpose? My experience using HMRC's digital assistant tells me that most of the time it's not. If you can get through to a human adviser on webchat it's better, but HMRC don't make that easy to do! Often an advisor is not available or the query turns out to be too complex and cannot be handled by webchat – and we then have to go through the whole process again by telephone.

The final challenge is the regulation of agents. In May, we responded to an HMRC consultation on whether there should be a mandatory requirement for tax practitioners to be subject to registration.

We believe that requiring all tax practitioners to be registered is a good first step towards a strengthened regulatory framework, but we also raised concerns about how some of the changes this consultation envisages could profoundly impact the ability of some tax practitioners to legitimately remain within the tax advice market. For example, those currently unaffiliated with a recognised professional body will probably have to take up membership of one, possibly at extra financial and time costs to themselves.

We’re urging the new government and HMRC to be clear as to what the current problems in the tax market are, understand which type of agents are causing the issues and how the proposals will seek to address these.

Areas of focus

These aren’t the only areas ATT will be focusing on over the coming year.

Education is, of course, at the centre of our work, and we are constantly looking for ways to improve what we do, to update our approach and improve our offering to members and students.

For students, we’re looking at the impact of artificial intelligence and whether we should rewrite parts of our exam papers to reflect this. ATT exams have always been practical, and we want to make sure they continue to be relevant and give our students the skills they require to do their job.

For our members, we are looking at providing more CPD opportunities. In addition to our Annual Conferences and our joint Sharpen Your Tax Skills conferences with AAT, we will be providing four free webinars per year to our members. The first one will cover MTD in October, so please look out for your invitation and join us for this session.

Tax affairs north of the border will continue to be of interest to me. Recent Scottish Budgets have increased divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK, including the creation of a sixth income tax band. This remains an area to watch and see if any behavioural changes occur, especially since corporation tax and tax on dividends are not devolved.

I would also like to focus on empowering women in the world of tax. The tax profession has made great strides when it comes to greater equality, and I’m proud of the strong tradition of women leaders we have here at the ATT. Building on that and encouraging women in their careers will be a priority for me.

Conclusion

And that takes me to today, where that young butcher’s shop assistant from Perth is now about to start her year as president of the ATT.

I would like to think that my history shows that, regardless of your background, you can strive to be anything you want to be with hard work.

In the past, to progress in the worlds of accountancy and tax, it often seemed you had to be part of the ‘Old Boy Network’, speak with the correct accent, know the correct people and certainly not be a female.

Thankfully, times have changed. Becoming president of the ATT is the pinnacle of my career and I hope will inspire others to follow their dreams and not let life’s hurdles hold you back.

Thank you.

This speech has been abridged for space reasons. The full speech by Senga Prior can be viewed at:
tinyurl.com/ATT-AGM24 (password DGH534NVX; speech starts 19:55)