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HMRC: 'Calls taking too long? Stop taking the calls'

HMRC responds to criticism from MPs regarding the time taken to answer calls by closing helplines in Self-Assessment, Pay as You Earn and VAT.

At the end of February, the House of Commons Select Committee for Public Accounts (the Public Accounts Committee) [published a damning report](#) that highlighted that HMRC's customer service levels had deteriorated to an all-time low, with 62.7% of calls now waiting in excess of 10 minutes to speak to an advisor; marking a 5-year decline.

The report laid bare the unprecedented number of written submissions that MPs had received regarding HMRC's performance; reflecting taxpayers' frustration with the quality of service and its impact on businesses. The committee also noted that taxpayers are trying to comply with tax obligations but HMRC's systems and its decision to close customer support channels, have exacerbated the challenges that taxpayers face.

The report went on to make it clear that it's not just the conscious decisions made by HMRC that are to blame for the current dire state of affairs, but MPs also namechecked The Treasury for restricting HMRC's resources; something which has hindered the department's ability to meet the increasing demand in operational areas such as Customer Service Group (CSG).

HMRC announce astounding service cuts

Given how scathing the Public Accounts Committee report was, we're astounded to hear HMRC's announcement that, rather than looking for ways to improve their ability to support taxpayers by providing additional resources; the department's solution is to restrict customer access to services even further. Their plans involve closing-down some telephony helplines completely, and restricting access to others for all or part of the year, creating what they are calling a 'seasonal service'; and compelling taxpayers to 'help themselves' via the department's digital platforms.

HMRC's announcement includes the news that from 8 April:

- The PAYE helpline will no longer take calls from customers chasing the status of repayments, directing them instead to check online.
- The VAT helplines will only be available for 5 days per month, immediately prior to the monthly filing deadline. At all other times customers will be directed to online services.
- Between April and September, the Self-Assessment (SA) helpline will be closed. Furthermore, although it will operate between October and March, it will only take 'priority calls'; and all queries that HMRC believe can be dealt with online will be directed to the online services.

Cuts aren't the answer

PCS wasn't consulted on this announcement. If we had been, we'd have reiterated that the only real solution to the department's current failure to deliver a decent public service is to make significant investment in HMRC.

HMRC needs more funding, more staff and better rates of pay. The high attrition rates and the department's inability to retain adequate numbers of staff, is purely down to the abysmal poverty pay situation, created by years of pay freezes and pay restraint. It's not that long since the Chief Executive appeared before the Treasury Select Committee, declaring that the department's pay system was in crisis.

Additionally, restrictions to flexibility such as the Cabinet Office edict that comes into effect on 2 April, demanding that staff spend at least 60% of their time in an office, will only lead to worsening attrition, as vital staff look elsewhere for both better rates of pay and a more favourable approach to working.

HMRC's customer service crisis is not a result of staff working at home; it's a result of HMRC being a chronically underfunded department, that isn't either willing or able to listen to the recommendations of either PCS or the Public Accounts Committee.

The government mantra of 'doing more with less' remains nothing more than a fantasy; and one that continues to deliver nothing other than catastrophic results. The combination of low-pay and micro-management, rife across the whole of CSG, continues to produce the staff-retention equivalent of 'pouring water into a paper bag with a hole in it'.

We're already aware that error and fraud cases are on the rise, with 2021 estimates showing the value of these cases now stands at £1.1billion - three times higher than previously believed. That's an awful lot of money that isn't being collected and recovered; money that could pay for improving schools, hospitals and other essential public services. Instead, Treasury Ministers carry on preaching austerity and cuts.

PCS remains committed to fighting for the rights of our members; and we'll persist in arguing for enough resources to properly run a department whose vital work affects every person in the land; both as taxpayers and users of all our essential public services.

Join PCS

As your trade union, PCS continues to negotiate with HMRC to stand-up for your interests. If you've read this briefing and you aren't yet a member of PCS, then you should [join today](#).