



HM Revenue  
& Customs

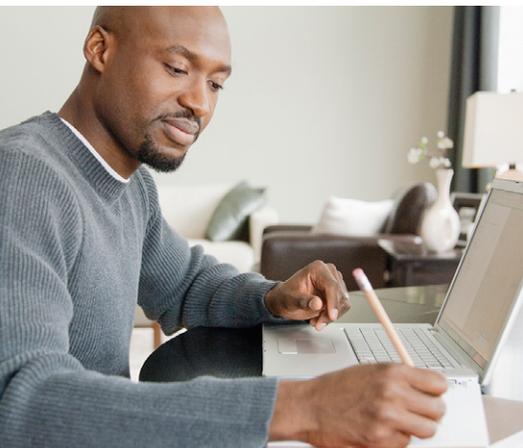
July 2013

# Supporting customers who need extra help – a new approach

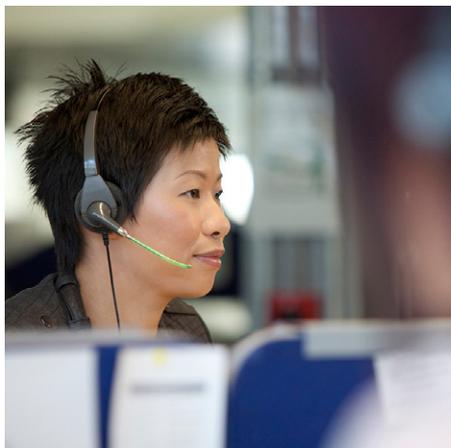
## Summary of consultation responses



Online guidance



Mobile support



Contact centres



# Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Responses	4
3	Next steps	15
Annex A	List of organisations who responded to the consultation	16

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For alternative formats, please contact us at: [consultation.feedback@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:consultation.feedback@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk)

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

HMRC is proposing to introduce a new service for customers who need extra help to get their taxes and entitlements right. This would see the existing Enquiry Centre network replaced with a new service of specialist help over the phone, supported by a mobile team of face-to-face advisers for those who need the most support.

The proposals are informed by detailed HMRC research which shows that our Enquiry Centre network does not meet the needs of the people it was designed to serve. In addition to consulting widely on these proposals, we are also running a five-month pilot to test the new service in the north-east of England, from 3 June 2013 to 31 October 2013.

The consultation document and details of the pilot are available at: [hmrc.gov.uk/extrahelp](http://hmrc.gov.uk/extrahelp)

## 1.2 The consultation

The consultation was made available on the HMRC website and was publicised among customers, voluntary bodies, charities, stakeholders, agents and professional bodies. It was open to any group, organisation or individual with an interest in the issues.

The consultation focused on the proposed new service model, and not on whether the current Enquiry Centre network should be retained. It asked 12 questions, which are shown on the next page.

### 1.3 Consultation questions

**Q1** Have we missed any particular groups in our definition of customers who need extra help?

**Q2** What do you think are the main benefits and disadvantages of the proposed new approach?

**Q3** Could any particular groups of customers find it difficult to contact HMRC using the new service?

**Q4** How do you suggest we can overcome any difficulties?

**Q5** How else could we improve the proposed new service?

**Q6** What else could we do to improve:

- a our new extra support telephone adviser service?
- b direction of certain customers to the voluntary sector and vice versa?
- c the flexibility of our approach to providing support for those customers who need it?

**Q7** Are there any other factors we need to take into account when trying to identify people who need extra help?

**Q8** Is there anything more we need to do to make sure that customers who currently use our Enquiry Centres, but don't need extra help to resolve their query, can access our services?

**Q9** Are there any impacts on particular groups of customers (such as disabled people; people of different ethnic groups, age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, religion; or people with or without dependents) that we have not identified and that need to be addressed?

**Q10** How do you suggest we can overcome these?

**Q11** Are there any other groups of customers that we have not included in our considerations? If so, please specify who they are and let us know what we need to take into account in respect of these groups.

**Q12** What other methods of communicating the consultation responses should we be considering?

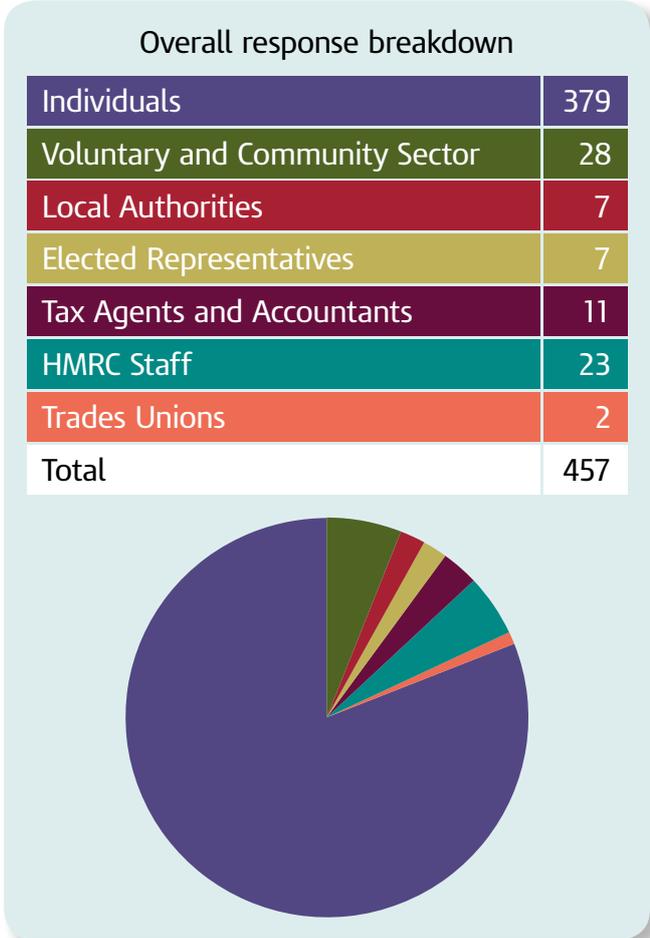
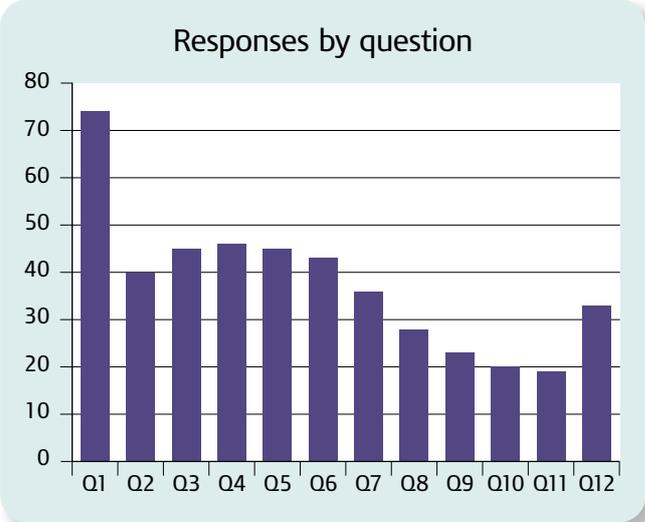
# 2 Responses

## 2.1 Overview

In total, there were 457 responses to the consultation.

A list of public and professional bodies and voluntary and community sector organisations who responded to the consultation is at **Annex A**.

A number of respondents sent us comments which were not specifically linked to the questions raised in the consultation document. These are summarised at the end of this chapter. While 23 individual members of HMRC staff commented on the proposals, these submissions, and those from trades unions, will have incorporated the views of many others.



## 2.2 Overall responses

The responses included a combination of direct answers to the questions set out in the consultation document and a variety of comments, questions and recommendations. A significant number of these praised the service that HMRC provides through the current Enquiry Centre network and expressed concerns about the prospect of change. However, many organisational respondents recognised the benefits of the new model.

Some respondents were positive about a number of aspects, particularly that it provides a tailored approach to customer needs with greater flexibility for those who need face-to-face help. Plans for mobile adviser teams were welcomed as was making it easier for intermediaries to act on behalf of a customer.

Respondents expressed concerns about the loss of the Enquiry Centre network and the impact this would have on those people who may struggle to access HMRC services by phone or online. There were also a number of general comments on HMRC performance and what this would mean for the new service model.

The project team are now considering a number of issues raised by the consultation, including:

- Which customer groups should be included in the HMRC definition of who needs extra help
- Whether the new model meets the needs of customers who could struggle to use a phone or computer – including deaf or hearing-impaired customers or those with health problems or physical or mental difficulties
- Whether HMRC has the appropriate communication channels and arrangements to enable all customers to contact us
- How we work with the voluntary and community sector to support customers who need extra help
- How the proposed model will operate in all areas of the UK, including operational considerations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- How we train and support our contact centre advisers and operate our processes.

## 2.3 Responses by question

74 Responses

### Q1

Have we missed any particular groups in our definition of customers who need extra help?

#### Summary of comments

While most respondents agreed with the HMRC definition of customers who need extra help, some felt there should be a greater emphasis on the challenges faced by particular groups of individuals. Specific comments focused on whether we had taken into account the needs of:

- Customers with hearing difficulties and British Sign Language speakers, who may find using the telephone or internet to gain information or contact HMRC difficult
- Customers with a low proficiency in English and foreign migrant workers, who would face significant problems accessing the support by phone
- Older customers, who may not be able to access services online or by telephone or have the skills, confidence or patience to use HMRC services in this way
- Customers with health problems, such as Alzheimer's, autism, Asperger syndrome, mental health issues or combined physical difficulties, which make it difficult to handle a telephone or computer
- Digitally-excluded customers in specific areas of the country, where the availability of broadband is limited and those on a low income in general
- Customers with lower literacy levels and dyslexic customers who have difficulty with reading and writing
- Customers who lack confidence in dealing with their tax affairs or need support to resolve tricky issues, particularly penalty payments
- Newly self-employed and sole trader customers seeking advice on their tax responsibilities
- Homeless customers.

40 Responses

## Q2

What do you think are the main benefits and disadvantages of the proposed new approach?

### Summary of comments

A number of respondents told us that the implementation of a new service would have advantages and they singled out:

- The tailored approach it offers with greater flexibility for customers who need face-to-face help
- Plans for mobile advice teams to meet customers at convenient times and locations
- Making it easier for intermediaries (including friends, family and representatives of the voluntary and community sector) to act on behalf of a customer
- Planned improvements to the HMRC telephone helpline service, including the recent reduction in call charges which would benefit all customers.

In considering the disadvantages comments focused on:

- Loss of the HMRC Enquiry Centre network and how this will make it more difficult for customers to sort their tax affairs in future
- A concern that the proposals were primarily about saving money and delivering efficiencies within HMRC

- Whether HMRC telephone helplines can cope with increased demand or handle complicated queries
- Placing an increased load on voluntary organisations and advice charities when they are already under pressure
- Potential health and safety risks for customers and HMRC staff
- Loss of a simple route for customers to verify their identity
- Potential impact of our new model on jobs and the economy.

45 Responses

### Q3

Could any particular groups of customers find it difficult to contact HMRC using the new service?

#### Summary of comments

We received responses about the potential difficulties faced by some customers in using our telephone contact centres:

- Customers who do not speak English as a first language will experience difficulty in using automated telephone systems
- Welsh-speaking customers will find it difficult to access services, unless dedicated telephone and mobile advisers are available
- Many customers, including migrant workers and those on a low income, will not have access to landline telephones and may not be able to afford to call HMRC on mobile phones
- Deaf customers do not always have access to telephone for voice, text phone and text relay access, or a third party who can act on their behalf.

46 Responses

### Q4

How do you suggest we can overcome any difficulties?

#### Summary of comments

A high proportion of respondents said that HMRC should look to retain its Enquiry Centre network, but strengthen it with elements of the new service, through increased working with voluntary bodies and bringing in teams of mobile advisers. Other suggestions included:

- Retaining Enquiry Centres, but reducing costs by sharing offices with Jobcentre Plus and setting up a new appointment system
- Operating the pilot for a 12-month period to better understand the level of demand over the yearly spikes for Tax Credits and Self Assessment
- Providing customers with a variety of fast, flexible options to communicate with HMRC, including by phone, text talk, email, web chat, SMS, fax and letter
- Improving disability awareness among contact centre staff, training them to use text talk and to be alert to the needs of customers who may have trouble using the phone
- Involving external stakeholders in the design and implementation of the new model and asking them to play a role in monitoring and reviewing progress
- Communicating with customers before and during the transition process.

45 Responses

## Q5

How else could we improve the proposed new service?

### Summary of comments

Suggestions for improving the service included:

- HMRC and voluntary sector organisations to share skills and training
- Offering HMRC telephone services as freephone numbers, or clearly showing call charges in publicity materials
- Clearly advertising and promoting the HMRC services available for people who need extra help
- Maintaining a dialogue with stakeholders and community and customer representatives and use their feedback to improve the service.

43 Responses

## Q6

What else could we do to improve:

- a our new extra support telephone adviser service?
- b direction of certain customers to the voluntary sector and vice versa?
- c the flexibility of our approach to providing support for those customers who need it?

### Summary of comments

On improving our extra support telephone advice service, the focus of comments was about making sure our advisers were given the right tools and training – both in technical tax matters and in softer skills, such as listening and problem identification. Other improvements proposed included:

- Allowing adequate call time for advisers to help customers
- Giving advisers training on their telephone style
- Providing text phone access for customers with hearing impairments
- Developing a ‘ring back’ service
- Introducing low-cost numbers which would be valid within mobile standard call allowances.

On the direction and signposting of customers between HMRC and the voluntary sector suggestions included:

- Making sure staff in HMRC and voluntary organisations are appropriately trained to operate the referral process effectively
- Training voluntary organisation staff in HMRC processes

- Being clear about the nature and independence of the advice that HMRC and the voluntary sector can provide.

On the flexibility of our approach, respondents told us that:

- The development of the new service model should be informed by an analysis of feedback, both from individual customers and from management data
- We should look to improve and update our customer communication channels, as well as developing additional routes for customers to talk to us.

36 Responses

## Q7

Are there any other factors we need to take into account when trying to identify people who need extra help?

### Summary of comments

A number of additional factors were identified by respondents. However, some questioned whether it is right for HMRC to determine who needs extra help. They suggested that customers should be able to access support according to their own assessment of their needs. Respondents also identified:

- The need for all HMRC contact centre staff to have adequate training and advice to help recognise where a customer needs extra support
- That customers may be reluctant to acknowledge that they need extra help and HMRC will need to be alert and sensitive in the way that it supports them
- That use of intermediaries should be seen as a signifier that extra help is required
- The potential need to set up a referral service for friends and family so they could nominate a customer they felt needed extra help
- That the new model needs to address the fact that some customers will only need a face-to-face meeting to identify themselves and for no other reason.

28 Responses

## Q8

Is there anything more we need to do to make sure that customers who currently use our Enquiry Centres, but don't need extra help to resolve their query, can access our services?

### Summary of comments

Responses to this question were primarily related to customer contact channels, including the HMRC website. Comments included suggestions to:

- Improve our automated helpline menus to make the options more concise and speed up the time it takes to navigate the menu system
- Answering customer calls more quickly to reduce the amount of time spent waiting
- Set-up HMRC post boxes for customers to send documents to us
- Allow contact and correspondence by email
- Improve the HMRC website and its search facility
- Consider using citizen juries and other feedback mechanisms to improve our service.

23 Responses

### Q9

Are there any impacts on particular groups of customers (such as disabled people; people of different ethnic groups, age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, religion; or people with or without dependents) that we have not identified and that need to be addressed?

#### Summary of comments

Respondents raised concerns about:

- Whether customers without the internet or a phone will be able to use the new service
- The accessibility and location of venues for meetings with mobile advisers
- The impact on customers with hearing difficulties who need to contact us, but do not have friends or family who can act on their behalf
- Whether the pilot in north-east England would be significantly robust enough to identify all equality impacts
- Customers with mental health problems who may not be able to deal easily with HMRC over the phone.

20 Responses

### Q10

How do you suggest we can overcome these?

#### Summary of comments

Respondents suggested:

- That HMRC look into providing additional contact services, alongside post and phone. For example, by email, secure web systems, VOIP, SMS, web chat, and teleconferencing
- That where there was a need, face-to-face appointments should be arranged quickly, with HMRC providing appropriate support (including qualified sign language interpreters, translators etc).

19 Responses

## Q11

Are there any other groups of customers that we have not included in our considerations? If so, please specify who they are and let us know what we need to take into account in respect of these groups.

### Summary of comments

Respondents tended to put forward groups already suggested in question one, including the digitally excluded, customers with hearing and speech difficulties, older customers and those who lack confidence in dealing with HMRC. Other groups highlighted as needing consideration were:

- Customers with a low proficiency in English
- Customers who may need help from the voluntary sector, or for friends and family to represent them, but who don't feel comfortable with these intermediaries knowing about their financial affairs
- Tax credits customers who miss the annual deadline and urgently need to gain face-to-face advice.

33 Responses

## Q12

What other methods of communicating the consultation responses should we be considering?

### Summary of comments

It was suggested we communicate the responses through:

- Notices and leaflets at Enquiry Centres
- External media channels (television, radio and newspapers)
- The HMRC website
- Publicity at local libraries
- Engagement with voluntary and community bodies
- Workshops and forums with customers
- Letters to the organisations that participated in the consultation
- Accessible formats (if requested by customers).

## 2.4 Other comments

HMRC received a large number of general comments on wider performance and what this would mean for the new service model. Respondents commented on:

- The costs of calling HMRC (particularly from a mobile phone)
- Call waiting times
- The quality of advice provided by contact centre staff
- Specific problems or difficulties they have experienced with HMRC.

A number of respondents said that they had bad experiences using our contact centres in the past and some told us that they had only managed to have their issues resolved by using an Enquiry Centre. There was a view that if HMRC went ahead with the new service model, any resulting cost savings should be reinvested into our telephone contact centres.

We also received specific comments on the impact of the proposed model within the UK nations:

### Northern Ireland

- Mobile advisers could find it difficult to operate in some areas where the community may lack trust in official bodies
- Some customers will work or trade across the border in the Republic of Ireland and have complex tax affairs. The current Enquiry Centre network in Northern Ireland has considerable expertise in these issues which could be lost under the new model.

### Scotland

- Rural areas have a poor transport infrastructure, which will make face-to-face meetings difficult and expensive for both customers and HMRC
- A mobile adviser service must cover the whole country, including the Highlands and Islands.

### Wales

- Telephone contact centres, the mobile adviser service and voluntary and community sector delivery partners must provide Welsh language speakers
- Organising and attending mobile adviser meetings within rural areas will be time consuming and expensive for customers and HMRC.

## 3 Next steps

### 3.1 Acting on the results

HMRC is now considering the issues raised by this consultation in more detail. We are holding a series of meetings with voluntary and community sector organisations and representative bodies to discuss specific concerns and work on developing possible solutions to improve the design of the proposed service. HMRC already has a range of support in place for customers who need extra help and this will continue in the future.

We are already acting on the points raised in this consultation. For example, we received a significant number of comments about the needs of deaf and hearing-impaired customers. Since the consultation closed, we have held meetings with several organisations representing this customer group. We have reassured them that:

- HMRC will continue to offer text relay and text phone services on our helplines
- Customers will be able to request portable equipment or the services of a British Sign Language interpreter, or lip speaker, through the mobile adviser service, just as they always have at Enquiry Centres
- We are looking at the feasibility of providing alternative access to the new service for deaf or speech-impaired customers who are unable to use the phone, for example by email or SMS.

### 3.2 Additional targeted consultation

While we know 379 individuals responded to this consultation, we are unable to tell how many of these fall into the category of customers who need extra help. People in this group may not have been inclined or able to respond to the formal consultation, so we are arranging a series of workshops and events across the UK to meet them and discuss our plans in detail.

Workshops will be facilitated independently and evaluation will be used to help HMRC make a final decision in early 2014 on whether to proceed with a national roll-out of a new service.

### 3.3 Pilot

To enable us fully to understand the impact of our proposals, HMRC is running a five-month pilot to test the new service in the north-east of England. As part of this, 13 Enquiry Centres in the pilot area have been closed and customers who are in need of extra support are being transferred to the new service by our contact centre advisers, through our normal phone lines. The pilot is running between 3 June and 31 October 2013.

### 3.4 Decision

A final decision on the new service will take place in early 2014, when the results of the pilot and wider public consultation exercises have been fully analysed and assessed.

## Annex A: List of organisations who responded to the consultation

- Action Disability Kensington and Chelsea
- Action on Hearing Loss
- Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT)
- British Deaf Association (BDA) – Scotland
- Care and Repair
- Chartered Institute of Taxation (CIOT)
- Coleraine Borough Council
- Citizens Advice Scotland
- Diverse Cymru
- Gingerbread
- Institute for Chartered Accountants for England and Wales (ICAEW)
- Lancaster City Council
- Low Income Tax Reform Group (LITRG)
- Merthyr Valley Homes
- Milton Keynes Council
- National Autistic Society
- North Ayrshire Council
- Northumberland County Council
- Powys County Council
- Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)
- Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) – Wales
- Redditch Borough Council
- Renate Campbell Trust (RCT) Deaf Club
- Royal Association for Deaf People
- Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB)
- Scottish Council on Deafness
- Signature
- StepChange
- TaxAid

