



Helping those who need it most

Some HMRC customers need extra help to get their taxes and entitlements right. We want to provide this support in a way that suits them. It needs to be easy to access and affordable, both for customers and for the taxpayers who fund our services. We know the current system does not meet the needs of the people it was designed to serve, so we plan to introduce a new service that is more accessible and tailored for customers who need it. This briefing explains how we will do this.

Why change is needed

Most customers with straightforward queries choose to visit our website for help, and our Contact Centres handle around 60 million customer phone calls each year. But not all customer enquiries can be handled over the web or by our contact centre advisors. HMRC currently provides support for customers who need extra help through our network of 281 Enquiry Centres across the UK.

We know that many of the estimated 1.5 million customers who need extra help do not live near an Enquiry Centre, which means they incur extra costs to get there, or are unable to access the help they need. Even for customers living close-by, the use of Enquiry Centres has fallen sharply in recent years: visitor numbers have halved from more than five million in 2005-06 to 2.5 million in

2011-12, and some of our Enquiry Centres are now open just one day a week, because local demand is so low.

Our figures also show that 84 per cent of customers who visited an Enquiry Centre in 2012 did not need an appointment to resolve their query. The average cost of an appointment across our network has risen to £152 from £106 in 2009-10. In our Hexham office, which received just 601 visits last year, the average cost of an appointment is £185. Even at our busiest office, in Birmingham, which serves an area of 3.6 million people, we had 43,438 visits last year, at an average cost per appointment of £123. By way of comparison, it costs an average of £3 per phone call handled. As we look to deliver better services with less money, we need to ensure they are delivering best value to customers and the taxpayer.

We have concluded that our Enquiry Centre network does not always reach the small minority of customers who need extra help. Equally, the resources involved in running them can be invested to better effect. For these reasons, we intend to replace our Enquiry Centres with a more accessible, effective and efficient service, while at the same time investing in the phone service we offer all our customers.

A more targeted, tailored service

HMRC commissioned in-depth research into the estimated 1.5 million of our customers who need extra help each year. Many just need help for a specific event in their lives; for instance, approaching retirement, following the death of a family member or declaring new income for the first time. Others may have low literacy or numeracy skills, or have difficulties coping with their affairs as a result of a mental health condition. We have used this research to design a service that will be accessible to far more people than our Enquiry Centre network. This new service will include:

- people trained to identify when a customer needs extra help
- specialist expert help over the telephone for those who need it, by a new team that will do whatever is needed to resolve the enquiry, arranging call-backs or face-to-face meetings if necessary
- face-to-face support, delivered by a new team of mobile advisors at convenient locations for customers who need it
- closer working with voluntary and community sector organisations, and extra funding so they can support more of their customers. Together, we will make it easier for them to direct customers needing extra help to us, and vice-versa where customers need independent advice or someone to act on their behalf
- simpler systems for authorising third parties to deal with us on a customer's behalf, such as friends and family members.

We expect the new service to save customers needing extra help a total of almost £12 million a year, as a result of sorting out their affairs more quickly and reducing their travel costs. Customers needing extra help who can't afford the phone call will be offered a call-back, and we are working with Jobcentre Plus so our customers can use freephones in their local offices. Face-to-face support will be provided to suit the customers who need it – no longer constrained by the fixed location and limited opening times of Enquiry Centres.

A better phone service for all

Customers more able to deal with their own affairs will continue to be supported online, and over the phone by our Contact Centres. We are investing £34 million in our Contact Centres to answer customer calls more quickly – and we are making it much cheaper for people to make those calls, by replacing all our 0845 telephone numbers with 03 numbers.

Getting the new service right

We plan to implement the new service across the UK between February and May 2014. We are currently consulting on how the service will run and its impact on customers, staff and local communities. The consultation process will run from 14 March to 24 May 2013, so those interested in our work have the opportunity to comment on our plans, helping us make the new service as good as it can be. Information on how to take part can be found at the end of this briefing. We will publish a summary of the responses to the consultation by the end of July 2013.

We will also test the various elements of the new service by running a five-month pilot in the north-east of England, closing 13 Enquiry Centres and running the new service from 3 June 2013 to 31 October 2013. The pilot offices are in Alnwick, Bishop Auckland, Bridlington, Hexham, Darlington, Durham, Middlesbrough, Morpeth, Newcastle, Scarborough, Stockton, Sunderland and York. These locations have been chosen because they include a mix of rural and urban communities, sit within a clearly defined geographical area and have a broad range of visitor numbers. More detailed information on how the pilot will run can be found on our web pages at the link below.

To find out more

Read more about these changes and take part in the consultation at www.hmrc.gov.uk/supportingcustomers