



***Research report***

# **Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experience of HMRC contact**

**Central Customer and Strategy**

**April 2012**

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**Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experience of HMRC contact*****About Central Customer & Strategy (CC&S)***

Central Customer & Strategy Directorate owns HMRC's customer-centric business strategy through customer insight and customer tools and leads all strategy formation across the Department.

The role of CC&S is to put customer understanding at the heart of all the Department's activities and plans so that business decisions are designed to maximise influence on customer behaviour to achieve HMRC's principal objectives: maximising tax revenues, reducing administrative costs, and improving customers' experience.

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**Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experience of HMRC contact*****Research requirement (background to the project)***

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) customer research shows the vast majority of contact with HMRC is by telephone with a small minority of customers visiting enquiry centres. HMRC is keen to ensure that people who are deaf or hard of hearing are served well when they make enquiries.

The core options for communicating with HMRC for deaf customers include:-

- Textphones
- Text Relay through a dedicated BT call centre
- On an ordinary phone line with an intermediary
- Face-to-face through enquiry centres with the option for a pre-booked Sign Language interpreter

Research was carried out among deaf and hard of hearing customers to explore experiences of contacting HMRC and other large organisations. The core objectives were to examine deaf and hard of hearing customer views of HMRC including:-

- their experiences when contacting HMRC
- their preferred ways of contacting HMRC
- their preferred technology when contacting HMRC
- the customer journey and barriers to contacting
- how HMRC can improve its service for deaf and hard of hearing customers

The research was designed to gain a snapshot of current experiences and preferences among deaf and hard of hearing customers. The respondent sample is therefore small and consequently results are indicative only.

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**Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experience of HMRC contact*****Main Findings******Telephone Contact*****Getting through to HMRC**

Most deaf and hard of hearing customers contacting HMRC by telephone have an enquiry regarding Income Tax or Tax Credits. Text Relay was the most common method of contacting HMRC by telephone for those who did not have good enough hearing to use ordinary telephone lines.

Most deaf and hard of hearing survey respondents did not get through to HMRC first time when using a textphone or standard telephone; however some of these respondents may have been unwilling to wait for a for a long period for their call to be answered.

The mystery shopping exercise included a number of unsuccessful attempts to textphone helplines including Child Benefit, Child Trust Fund, Tax Credits, Income Tax and Newly Self Employed.

Half of survey respondents using Text Relay said they made contact with BT at the first attempt. Most claimed it was easy to contact BT to arrange a Text Relay with HMRC.

Most deaf and hard of hearing survey respondents using textphone and standard helplines stated there was a delay of at least one minute before connecting to an advisor, if they did get through<sup>1</sup>. Text Relay users also experienced delays, with some on hold for over 10 minutes while BT tried to connect with a HMRC advisor.

**Rating the call**

Calls are generally rated about the right length across the different telephone channels and customers in the survey think HMRC understand enquiries well for users of Text Relay and textphone helplines. Deaf and hard of hearing customers using standard telephone helplines are more varied in their perceptions of HMRC advisors understanding their enquiries.

Most Text Relay users said BT operators used a textphone well to answer their queries or were at least average, while experience was a mix of positive and negative for users of textphone helplines. This was reinforced during the mystery shopping with BT operators considered very efficient and experiences of HMRC advisors ranging from prompt and accurate to a little slow but adequate for the purpose of the call.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey, and mystery shopping exercises in particular, were not designed to provide robust measures of how easily the deaf or hard of hearing get through to HMRC on a standard phone. HMRC completes detailed measures of speed of answering its helplines and deaf and hard of hearing customers should not find any difference to speed of call answering a standard helpline than other callers.

## Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experience of HMRC contact

Text Relay services also appear better performing in terms of speed of response to enquiries. Most said enquiries were dealt with quickly compared with textphone and standard helplines where experiences were divided between receiving responses quickly and slowly.

On balance, customers said their experience of HMRC calls using textphone helplines or Text Relay are about the same as experiences of other large organisations.

### Face-to-Face Contact

Most deaf and hard of hearing customers visited HMRC enquiry centres regarding Income Tax or Tax Credits and turned up to an enquiry centre rather than make an appointment. Mystery shopping attempts to make an appointment were prevented by difficulties in making contact via the HMRC helplines.

The majority of respondents chose to visit enquiry centres as they believed it would be easier face-to-face.

Experience of a pre-booked British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter is limited; with some who requested this service having to arrange it themselves.

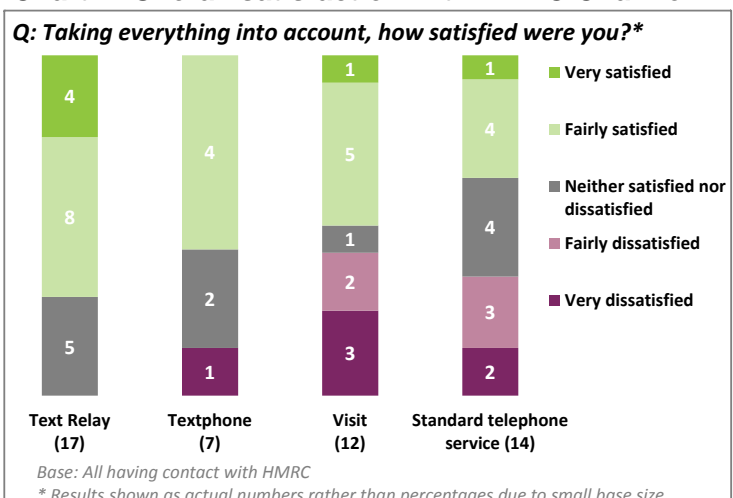
Mystery shopping of enquiry centres found that advisors were lacking training in deaf awareness or having knowledge of how to offer the most appropriate service to deaf and hard of hearing customers; preferring to direct customers to HMRC telephone points, website links or the use of accountants.

### Satisfaction with HMRC contact

Text Relay experience is rated highest by deaf and hard of hearing customers, with most saying they were satisfied with the service and none saying they were dissatisfied.

When comparing satisfaction levels with HMRC contact channels against experience of contacting other large organisations, Text Relay also performs well. Textphone helplines are average and contact via standard telephone helplines or enquiry centres are relatively poor.

**Chart 1: Overall satisfaction with HMRC Channel**



Around a third of those using a HMRC enquiry centre and visiting at least one other large organisation in the past two years say HMRC was the most difficult to deal with as a deaf or hard of hearing customer.

## Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experience of HMRC contact

The most commonly cited aspects of contact which make it easier to deal with organisations refer to face-to-face contact. Provision of hearing aid loops, maintaining direct contact, offering private rooms and ensuring no glass partitions are particularly important for this form of contact. Across all communication channels, speaking slowly and clearly, being patient, helpful and deaf aware are considered valuable attributes.

### *Preferred contact methods*

Communication with HMRC via email or online was the preferred method of contact for the majority as well as the most likely form of contact given the choice. Deaf customers lean more towards technical services such as Text Relay, textphone and textchat (from a pc or smartphone) than those who are hard of hearing who are correspondingly more likely to favour a standard telephone service with or without assistance.

### *Conclusions and recommendations*

- Both the customer research and the mystery shopping suggested that Text Relay works well for customers contacting HMRC by telephone; and customers who choose this option receive a satisfactory service similar to that experienced by a hearing customer
- Getting through to a HMRC helpline on a textphone can take a number of attempts and considerable determination, although it is largely acceptable when it is accessed
- Visits to HMRC enquiry centres can be difficult to arrange (due to issues getting through on the phone). The service for visitors without pre-arranged appointments does not appear well suited for people who are hard of hearing, with staff not always deaf aware
- The emerging picture is that improvements to deaf and hard of hearing customer services could include:-
  - making textphone helplines more accessible or encouraging deaf and hard of hearing customers to use Text Relay instead
  - ensuring telephone services are suitable for textphones. The call steering options for example, are challenging to read from a textphone monitor when typed in by a BT Text Relay operator
  - offering a dedicated email service to deaf and hard of hearing customers
  - advisors in HMRC enquiry centres to receive deaf awareness training

### *When the research took place*

- Customer Research online survey was completed between 8 and 21 March 2012
- Mystery Shopping was completed between 15 and 30 March 2012

### *Who did the work (research agency)*

SPA Future Thinking: Stephen Link and Rachel McGrail

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**Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experience of HMRC contact*****Method, Data and Tools used, Sample***

The research programme comprised two elements:-

**Customer Research online survey**

- 139 surveys completed with deaf and hard of hearing respondents who had contacted at least one large organisation in past two years
  - 18 had attempted use of Text Relay to contact HMRC
  - 7 had attempted use of textphone helpline to contact HMRC
  - 9 had attempted use of standard helpline (without assistance) to contact HMRC
  - 8 had attempted use of standard helpline (with assistance) to contact HMRC
  - 12 had visited a HMRC enquiry centre
- Sample targeted through a specialist panel provider (Cint)
- Online survey methodology using questionnaire developed by SPA Future Thinking in consultation with HMRC
- Due to small base sizes, caution should be exercised when interpreting the data. Results provide an indication of current experiences

**Mystery Shopping**

- Mystery shopping scenarios were developed by SPA Future Thinking in consultation with HMRC and included:-
  - taking on a second job and implications of Tax (Income Tax Helpline)
  - approaching retirement age – any difference in Tax paid on income when retired (Income Tax Helpline)
  - thinking of becoming self-employed (Newly Self-employed Helpline)
  - what are Tax Credits, – might I be eligible (Tax Credit Helpline)
  - Child Trust Fund changes (Child Trust Fund Helpline)
- 10 exercises were completed using a scenario guide developed with HMRC:-
  - 3 calls to textphone helplines (including one where the shopper was unable to complete a call despite making over 10 attempts to the textphone helpline)
  - 3 calls using Text Relay
  - 2 calls made on behalf of a third party
  - 2 visits to a HMRC enquiry centre (both unscheduled although efforts to make an appointment were made)