



HM Revenue
& Customs

Customer experience of the acceptability of the time taken to reach an end result

HMRC Research Report: 447

KANTAR PUBLIC[®]

Dan Clay

Anna Cordes

Ali Digby

October 2016

Disclaimer

The views in this report are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of HM Revenue and Customs

© Crown Copyright 2018

Copyright in the typographical arrangement and design rests with the Crown. This publication may be reported free of charge in any format or medium provided that is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright with the title and source of the publication specified.

Published by HM Revenue and Customs, April 2018

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs/about/research>

Contents

Glossary of Terms	4
1. Executive Summary	5
2. Introduction and Background	8
3. Methodology and Sample	9
4. Customers' reasons and drivers for contacting HMRC	10
5. Customers' expectations of time taken	12
6. Factors influencing acceptability of time taken	16
7. Customers' suggestions for improving the acceptability of time taken	22
8. Conclusions	25
Appendix A – Topic Guides	27
Appendix B – Achieved Sample	58

Glossary of Terms

CIS - Under the Construction Industry Scheme (CIS), contractors deduct money from a subcontractor's payments and pass it to HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). The deductions count as advance payments towards the subcontractor's tax and National Insurance. Contractors must register for the scheme. Subcontractors don't have to register, but deductions are taken from their payments at a higher rate if they're not registered.

PAYE – The Pay-As-You-Earn (PAYE) system is a method of paying income tax and national insurance contributions. Your employer deducts tax and national insurance contributions from your wages or occupational pension before paying you your wages or pension.

RTI - The introduction of PAYE Real time information (RTI) in April 2013 fundamentally reformed PAYE tax reporting, requiring all UK employers to notify HMRC of their liability to PAYE at the time or before they make payment to their employees.

SA – Self Assessment (SA) is a system HMRC uses to collect Income Tax. Tax is usually deducted automatically from wages, pensions and savings. People and businesses with other income must report it in a tax return.

VAT - A value-added tax (VAT) is a type of consumption tax that is levied on a product or service whenever value is added at a stage of production and at final sale.

1. Executive Summary

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is actively seeking ways to improve customer experience. Having identified in the 2015 Individuals, Small Business and Agents Customer Survey that a proportion¹ of customers were dissatisfied with the time taken by HMRC to resolve queries, HMRC commissioned Kantar Public to undertake research to a) better understand customers' experiences and b) find ways to improve the acceptability of HMRC's service in this area.

The 50 Individuals, Small Businesses and Agent customers interviewed in this qualitative research were specifically selected because they were dissatisfied with the service provided by HMRC in regards to time taken. As such, the attitudes and experiences reported are not representative of the views and experiences of all HMRC's customers.

Customers who participated in this research had contacted HMRC with a range of queries. They sought to have a common set of practical needs met, accompanied by a need for reassurance and empathy. Expectations around how much time it would take HMRC to resolve their queries were mixed and varied by customer type, with three key factors shaping expectations:

1. **Knowledge, perceptions and experience of tax:** Those with the greatest knowledge of the UK tax system and the most accurate understanding of the complexity of their query often had the clearest expectations of how long it should take HMRC to reach a resolution.
2. **Experience with commercial and private sector organisations and social norms:** Experiences of engaging with private and public sector organisations influenced some customers' expectations of the systems and processes which HMRC would have in place for query resolution. While customers did not necessarily expect HMRC to meet the same standards as private organisations, their wider experience informed understanding of what was possible.
3. **Channels:** Contact channel used (online, phone or post) influenced expectations. Customers, of all types, expected to be able to self-serve and resolve queries online.² However, contacting HMRC by telephone was a default approach, if they were unable to find the information they needed online, or if they needed tailored advice or reassurance that their query was being progressed expeditiously.

As customers were selected for the research on the basis that they were dissatisfied with the time it took to resolve their query, it was clear their experiences engaging with HMRC did not meet their expectations. Service failure was a common experience among those interviewed. As a result the service they received was not representative of the normal service offered by HMRC. Customers became dissatisfied with the journey length as the query progressed, encountering challenges in reaching a resolution, which ultimately extended the length of the transaction beyond what had been expected.

1 Percentages indicating dissatisfaction with time taken by customer group: Individuals 23% (1516), Small Businesses 16% (2438), Agents 46% (2581):

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/544417/413__Individuals__small_business_and_agents_customer_survey_2015.pdf

2 Expectations here varied in line with points one and two above.

Five factors influenced customers' views on the acceptability of the time taken. These were experienced to varying extents by different customers and customer groups, and covered:

- **Errors** made by systems and advisers. These were frustrating in and of themselves and often extended customers' journey length by making customers need to contact HMRC repeatedly to have errors corrected.
- Customers' ability to **navigate HMRC systems and processes**. This was influenced by information provided by HMRC on what a 'normal' customer journey should be, what timelines to expect, or what information would be required and when. Lack of guidance by HMRC prompted customers to re-contact HMRC for additional information which extended transaction length and increased the number of contact points.
- The quality of **customer service provided by HMRC advisers**, including the content and manner in which advice was offered. This was considered variable because customers encountered advisers who were unable to answer questions, who gave contradictory advice, or whose tone was perceived to be hostile or patronising. Inconsistencies between advice received from different advisers prompted a cycle of contacting HMRC to progress their query. In some cases, frustration was increased if a query was quickly resolved when the 'right' adviser was reached.
- The **perceived parity/fairness** of the standards to which customers and HMRC are held. For instance, some customers were frustrated that they were held to strict timelines and were penalised by HMRC if they did not meet them, while HMRC was not similarly accountable.
- Whether failing to resolve their query had a **material impact on the customer or if the wider context made the perceived need for resolution more urgent**. Customers' finances, mental well-being and reputations were negatively impacted by having an unresolved query with HMRC. Similarly, events occurring outside of a specific query with HMRC sometimes increased pressure on customers, which made them perceive the resolution of their query to be urgent.

Ultimately, the time taken was unacceptable in situations where a) having an unresolved query negatively impacted the customer, or b) the amount of time it took to reach a resolution was unexpected. Both instances made it more difficult for customers to plan and to manage their time, personal relationships and finances.

Customers made a number of suggestions for how HMRC could improve the acceptability of time taken in light of their expectations and experiences. These focused on three main areas:

- **Keeping customers informed about their transaction/query:** Customers felt HMRC should communicate timelines, steps being taken and expectations of all parties. They felt HMRC should also provide acknowledgement of actions and confirmation of resolution.
- **Improving the quality of customer service:** Customers felt that the tone and manner of HMRC's advisers should be improved to make them feel more valued as customers. The quality and consistency of advice or information provided should also be improved and apologies offered where appropriate.
- **Empowering customers to self-serve and progress their query themselves:** Customers often wanted greater control over the pace at which their query was progressed and felt options to self-serve and greater information should be provided online. Individuals would like to see greater clarity on HMRC contact details and channels as well as the appeal process. Small Businesses required more detailed guidance in relation to submitting forms online as well as more information around Real Time Information (RTI) software. Agents wanted to see

clearer guidance on the query process, more communication of timeframes, evidence of correspondence and more information on VAT regulations on the HMRC website.

2. Introduction and Background

HM Revenue and Custom's (HMRC) vision is to be impartial and increasingly effective and efficient in their administration. HMRC puts the customer at the heart of its service and seeks to improve the experience of its customers. To provide the customer understanding to support the Department's vision and to chart its progression in this area over time, HMRC commissioned the Individuals, Small Business and Agents Customer Survey in 2015³.

The Customer Survey provides robust evidence on customer perceptions of HMRC's administration of the tax system and delivery of a good customer experience. In making this assessment the survey uses measures identified as important to customers in providing a quality service in previous research conducted by Kantar Public (formerly TNS BMRB) and developed with HMRC.⁴ Critical factors identified as influencing quality customer service and included within the Customer Survey were getting transactions right, providing high quality information, making the process easy to navigate, staff manner and approach, proactivity, taking ownership and resolving queries in a timely manner.

One area for improvement identified by HMRC from the 2015 Customer Survey results was its performance on the measure around the acceptability of the time taken to reach the end result of a transaction. In order to better understand customers' responses to this measure, HMRC commissioned Kantar Public to provide insight into what drives customers' responses (as captured in the survey) on the acceptability of the time taken to resolve a specific query. To improve customer experience of time taken, HMRC sought to understand drivers in relation to:

- **Customer expectations of time taken:** Understand how expectations are formed, their influence on customers' experience of time taken and how expectations can be managed.
- **Customer transactional journeys:** Determine the types of channels used by customers to contact HMRC (including channel preference) and customers' experience of time taken at each stage of their journey.
- **Acceptability of time taken:** Understand the acceptability of time taken for overall journeys and individual stages of journeys and investigate the relative influence of other factors (e.g. getting things right, being kept informed, and the outcome of the transaction) on acceptability.
- **Improving customer experience of time taken:** Determine the ways in which HMRC can best manage customers' expectations (and/or help customers to manage their own expectations) of time taken.

³ The survey covers the views and experiences of three separate customer groups: Individuals, Small Businesses and Agents. Following a process of development, the first wave of this telephone survey was conducted between September and November 2015. Interviews were carried out with 2,580 Individuals, 2,935 Small Businesses and 2,630 Agents. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/544417/413__Individuals__small_business_and_agents_customer_survey_2015.pdf

⁴ Kantar Public, 'Quality of service', (HMRC), 2013. In 2013, Kantar Public conducted a qualitative study exploring customers' view of what constitutes a quality service. A range of HMRC customers were interviewed as a part of this research, including personal taxpayers, Benefits and Credits recipients, Small and Medium Enterprises and Agents. It explored the service features that have the greatest effect on perceived quality of service and how customers define adequate and high quality service for those features.

3. Methodology and Sample

HMRC commissioned Kantar Public to conduct a series of interviews with customers who were dissatisfied with the time taken to reach a resolution to their specific query. Kantar Public conducted 50 telephone depth interviews between 18th July and 9th August 2016 with HMRC customers who had participated in the Customer Survey between September and November 2015 (and who had agreed to be re-contacted) and reported dissatisfaction with the time taken to resolve their specific query. These interviews were split between the customer groups: 20 with Individuals, 15 with Small Businesses and 15 with Agents. A summary of customer groups and a breakdown of the achieved sample are available in Appendix B.

Qualitative interviews focused on customer expectations and experiences of engaging with HMRC. In the interview customers took part in a journey mapping activity where the processes, steps and channels they used were discussed, alongside with their expectations, experiences and overall satisfaction. Customers also took part in a 'spectrum of satisfaction' activity in which they were asked to compare their experiences of engaging with HMRC and other public and private sector organisations in terms of time taken to address a specific query (see Appendix A. Topic Guides).

Please note:

The customers engaged in this research formed a purposive sample and were specifically selected because they were dissatisfied with the time taken to resolve their query. Consequently, the attitudes and experiences reported should be viewed as reflective of the experiences of a specific subset of customers and not reflective of the views and experiences of all HMRC's customers.

Similarly, customers' experiences of interacting with HMRC had often taken place between one and two years prior to the qualitative interview. While fieldwork for the Customer Survey took place in autumn 2015, customers' transactions would have occurred up to 12 months prior to their participation in the survey. This presented a number of challenges for the research and has implications for how results should be understood and used.

Firstly, the time lapse between customers' initial contact with HMRC and their participation in this research project presented challenges for customer recruitment and recall. Kantar Public sought to overcome these challenges through a rigorous recruitment and screening process (i.e. if customers could not remember the transaction, they were not recruited) and the use of cognitive interviewing techniques during fieldwork.

Secondly, the time lapse may mean that findings are not reflective of the current quality of service, systems and processes delivered by HMRC. Customers' experiences reflect elements of HMRC's customer service provision prior to taking part in the survey in autumn 2015, and changes in service delivery may have subsequently been made.

Finally, the small sample and nature of qualitative research means that customers are communicating their personal experiences and views of HMRC. Qualitative research provides insights into the perceptions, feelings and behaviours of people rather than quantifiable conclusions from a statistically representative sample. Findings cannot be considered to be representative of the views of HMRC's overall customer base.

4. Customers' reasons and drivers for contacting HMRC

This section provides the context for customers' expectations and experiences of time taken by outlining the specific queries which customers were seeking to address. Queries raised by different customer groups were diverse and, in the course of the research, it emerged that service failure was a common experience among those interviewed. As a result, participants' experiences are not reflective of the 'normal' service offered by HMRC.

Queries raised by customer groups are outlined below:

4.1 Individuals

Individuals' transactions most commonly focused on tax credits, tax codes, tax demand and other queries:

- Queries relating to tax credits were perceived to have been the result of an HMRC error – e.g. tax credits notification errors, request for repayment of tax credits.
- Tax code queries ranged from errors to incorrect receipt of multiple tax codes.
- Queries relating to HMRC tax demands included what were perceived to be incorrect fines on behalf of relatives and incorrect notifications of underpayment of tax.
- A few Individuals made contact with HMRC to register a change of circumstance: one customer requested a supplementary tax return form and another had a query relating to a VAT dispute.

4.2 Small Businesses

Small Businesses' queries ranged from SA, PAYE, RTI and VAT⁵ related queries to corporation tax and tax demand queries:

- Queries relating to SA included chasing a paper return and an SA tax bill query.
- PAYE queries were generally perceived to be the result of an error (e.g. disagreement over underpaid PAYE, wrong reference number given for PAYE).
- Queries relating to RTI were perceived to be the result of software failure (e.g. querying info shown on RTI account, incorrect RTI late submission notification).
- Some Small Businesses contacted HMRC in relation to VAT queries, including querying a rate, deregistration and requesting a VAT status document.

⁵ See Glossary of Terms, p.4, for definitions.

- In addition, one Small Business contacted HMRC to renew tax credits as a sole trader and single parent, another mentioned being unable to submit a CT600 form online and one Small Business had a tax demand query.

4.3 Agents

Agents' queries covered the most diverse range of topics of all the customer groups engaged as a part of this research. Queries ranged from VAT, RTI and CIS related queries to tax codes and SA queries:

- VAT queries included registering to become an Agent, registering a client, VAT recovery and a request on behalf of a client to delay payment.
- Tax queries included multiple attempts to query a client's tax code, receiving incorrect credit notices and a request to terminate tax demands on a deceased person. Queries relating to CIS included chasing CIS refund claims and a request to offset CIS owed to client by HMRC against VAT owed to HMRC.
- In addition, one Agent contacted HMRC requesting to rollback their client's RTI and another Agent made a tax return refund claim.

In summary, customers had a diverse range of queries; but underpinning these was a common need for resolution, the urgency of which was influenced by practical concerns or needs for reassurance and empathy. The extent to which these concerns and needs were addressed through the way HMRC progressed queries directly influenced customers' expectations of time taken.

5. Customers' expectations of time taken

This section outlines the main influences on customers' expectations of the time taken to reach an end result. Customers with previous experience of dealing with HMRC, particularly Agents and some Small Businesses, were likely to have specific expectations for time taken in relation to query type (e.g. VAT, CIS, RTI) but those who lacked this experience did not have specific time frames in mind prior to/at the point of engaging with HMRC.

Following initial contact with HMRC, expectations for time taken were generally shaped in-journey by three key factors:

- **Knowledge, perceptions and experiences of tax:** Customers' experience of the UK tax system and overall financial literacy. This in turn informed perceptions of queries' simplicity or complexity and urgency. Knowledge and perceptions of tax were informed by prior experiences of engaging with HMRC.
- **Experience with commercial and public organisations and social norms:** Customers' experience of time taken when dealing with other organisations to resolve a query.
- **Channels:** Customers' expectations of different communication channels.

5.1 Knowledge, perceptions and experiences of tax

Knowledge and perceptions of tax

Customers' level of knowledge of the UK tax and benefits and credits system influenced their expectations of time taken.

Firstly, customers' levels of knowledge influenced their perceptions of the complexity/simplicity of queries. This in turn impacted their expectations of time and the standard of service provided. Where customers perceived their query to be simple they typically expected a swifter resolution than when they believed their query to be complex.

Individuals typically had the least knowledge of the tax system and perceived their queries to be simpler than they were according to HMRC. Customers became frustrated when HMRC could not address what they perceived to be 'simple' queries (e.g. rectifying small errors on VAT forms) quickly (e.g. immediately on the phone), or offer definitive solutions to 'simple' faults such as incorrect tax codes. When this difference in perception was not addressed by HMRC (i.e. when HMRC did not explain the complexity of a query), customers' expectations were not met which negatively impacted perceptions of the acceptability of time taken. They also expected HMRC to guide them through the process, demonstrate empathy, provide reassurance that their query was being dealt with and proactively progress the query.

Small Businesses had some knowledge of tax, but this was often inconsistent. Although specific knowledge varied from customer to customer, a particular Small Business may be more familiar with VAT than RTI software for example, or vice versa. They felt that they were too busy running their businesses to self-serve or to fill their knowledge gap and expected HMRC to take ownership

of their query whilst keeping them informed of any progress. Where quick resolution was not possible, Small Businesses expected to be told time frames for resolution as well as being given a level of reassurance that their query was being progressed.

Agents were most knowledgeable about the tax system. They expected simple tax queries to be resolved quickly. More complex queries may take longer to resolve but Agents expected clear timelines to be communicated around these. They expected advisers to have a commensurate level of knowledge and wanted clarity of information and a professional service from HMRC.

Secondly, customers' knowledge of tax also influenced how urgent they viewed their query to be and how they expected to be treated by HMRC. Customers, particularly Individuals and Small Businesses, were anxious about reaching a resolution due to concern around non-compliance and financial repercussions. As a result, they perceived their question/query to be urgent and expected it would be treated as such by HMRC. Some customers inferred a lack of urgency on the part of HMRC from 'poor' staff manner and approach (e.g. rushed phone calls) and from the actual time taken by staff to respond. Moreover, some Small Businesses mentioned that the pressures of cash flow and running a business necessitated speedy resolution of queries. In this case, a lack of alignment between HMRC and Small Businesses as to the urgency of their query negatively impacted perceptions of time taken.

Experience of tax

Customers' knowledge and perceptions of tax were generally informed by prior experience of engaging with HMRC, experience which exposed them to and informed them about the realities of the UK tax system and the types of systems and processes HMRC has in place (e.g. record keeping systems) to resolve queries. The extent of customers' experience was closely aligned to customer type – with Agents having the most experience and knowledge, followed by Small Businesses, followed by Individuals.

Prior experiences and early contact within a specific transaction (i.e. advice or information given at the start of a journey) set expectations around timelines. This was both explicit (i.e. a representative telling a customer that resolution would take a certain amount of time) and implicit (i.e. 'last time I made this query it took four weeks and therefore I expect this transaction to take four weeks'). Individuals who had minimal prior dealings with HMRC, tended not to have query-specific timelines in mind. However, when these were set by HMRC they expected HMRC to meet them.

In contrast, Small Businesses and, in particular, Agents dealt with HMRC more frequently. As a result, their expectations of time taken were largely driven by previous experience of dealing with HMRC. However, as with Individuals, the timelines which HMRC communicated shaped expectations for time taken.

"[HMRC] said you can go through the written response... and we will respond, I think it was within 4 weeks." – Agent

5.2 Experience with commercial and public sector organisations and social norms

Customers' expectations of HMRC, particularly in the case of Individuals (and less so for Agents who interacted more frequently with HMRC), were shaped by their experience of dealing with other organisations – both private and public sector. In the main all customer groups had lower expectations of public than private organisations both in terms of general customer service and in terms of speed of resolution. Customers believed that the reason private sector organisations generally offered better customer service than public sector organisations was that they must

compete for customers. Some identified the need for private companies to forge relationships with customers to protect market share. In contrast public sector organisations were often seen as monopolies. However, customers identified aspects of private sector systems that they believed HMRC could emulate. Customers' interactions with the private sector also shaped expectations in a number of customer service areas, such as use of first names, treatment of customers on the phone, and effective infrastructure.

When asked to comment on the service provided by private sector organisations, all customer groups commented that private companies such as banks, insurance firms and financial services companies managed time taken effectively. Customers perceived that they did this by maintaining a centralised database where all transactions were visible to advisers, by handling 'small' queries 'there and then', by taking ownership of errors, by being proactive and by forging relationships with customers.

"If on the odd occasion I make a mistake with the bank I get in contact and they resolve it there and then." – Small Business

Customers also noted that their experience of dealing with private sector organisations influenced their perceptions of expected customer service requirements in relation to time taken and, as a result, expected certain actions to be undertaken as a matter of course. Organisations were expected to manage time taken by acknowledging receipt of a letter, treating customers politely on the phone and handling transactions immediately on a call. Customers acknowledged that these actions helped to mitigate any negative experience of time taken and ultimately contributed to shaping their expectations of HMRC.

"If [HMRC] send [my client] a letter saying they're going to receive the payment, if [my client] then isn't going to receive the payment they should follow it up with another letter." – Agent

Meanwhile, other public sector organisations, such as Local Authorities, were seen to have managed expectations of time taken better than HMRC, primarily by keeping customers informed about timelines and by effective communication. Customers across all groups acknowledged that Local Authorities could be slow to progress queries and that their processes were lengthy (e.g. council tax forms), but that they were slightly better at managing customers' expectations of time taken by keeping customers informed of delays through communication of query progression.

5.3 Channels

Customers expressed different expectations of time taken for different communication channels. Across all customer groups, there was an instinctive expectation that certain channels would result in a quicker query progression than others. Broadly speaking, it was expected that queries taken up by telephone would be resolved more quickly, whilst 'simple' queries were expected to be resolved quickly online and post was expected to be a drawn-out, 'one-way' process.

- **Online:** Tended to be the default channel through which Agents and more knowledgeable/experienced Individuals or Small Businesses expected to engage with HMRC. These customers expected to be able to resolve 'simple' queries by self-serving online in a timely manner.
- **Telephone:** Was used as the default form of communication for all customer groups in following up queries, particularly where queries were perceived to be urgent and where timescales were not met by HMRC. Individuals with queries relating to payment of tax or receipt of credits, and who were seeking reassurance and empathy, tended to contact HMRC

by phone in the first instance. Agents tended to call the Agent Helpline if they could not self-serve online and expected either a quick resolution or clear timelines for resolution to be communicated so that they could inform their clients of delays. Customers across all groups expected this channel to generate a speedier response (and resolution).

- **Post:** Was rarely used by customer groups except to support or evidence telephone communications. The expectation was that post was used as a one-way rather than a two-way communication channel. It was expected to be a drawn out process based on social norms and previous experience of dealing with postal exchange

In summary, the influence of the three factors outlined above varied by customer group:

- Individual customers, who generally lacked knowledge and experience of engaging with HMRC, were the most likely to have their expectations influenced by their experience with commercial and public sector organisations and by social norms.
- Small Businesses similarly referenced social norms and their experiences with commercial organisations. However, they also referenced their experiences of engaging with HMRC on other areas of the tax system related to their businesses.
- Agents were the most likely to use their prior experience of engaging with HMRC and their knowledge of the UK tax system to inform how long they expected it would take for a query to be resolved.

Expectations around channel were similar across different customer types.

6. Factors influencing acceptability of time taken

This section outlines the factors which influenced customers' perceptions of the acceptability of time taken and the relative significance of these factors across different customer groups. Five key factors influenced views on the acceptability of time taken. These were:

- **Errors:** Whether or not mistakes were made during transactions and who/what was responsible for them (i.e. systems or individuals (HMRC advisers or customers)).
- **Navigation of systems and processes:** Whether or not a customer could quickly and easily identify who should respond to their query, likely timelines and what they would need to do or provide in order to support a timely resolution.
- **Customer service:** How HMRC representatives engaged with customers, particularly whether or not they were able to answer or resolve a query and demonstrate empathy while doing so.
- **Customer perceptions of fairness/parity:** Whether or not the customer felt they were treated fairly by HMRC and HMRC systems.
- **The impact of the query on the customer and wider contextual factors:** Whether or not the time it was taking to resolve a query was having a negative impact on the customer and the extent to which this impact was exacerbated or influenced by customers' wider life circumstances.

These factors cut across customer groups, were co-occurring (e.g. a customer may have encountered both poor customer service and had queries regarding navigation) and were heavily aligned to those factors influencing customers' expectations prior to entering the process. In particular, those with the least knowledge and experience of engaging with HMRC (typically Individuals) were the most likely to encounter errors or experience challenges in navigating HMRC systems. This was commonly due to such customers lacking an understanding of the UK tax system and comprehension of the terminology and processes involved, which in turn led to issues/challenges not being addressed or resolved and, in some instances, not being triggered.

As noted earlier customers were selected for this research on the basis that they were dissatisfied with their experience and service failure was a common experience among those interviewed. As a result, participants' experiences are not necessarily reflective of the 'normal' service offered by HMRC (please see note in section 3. Methodology and Sample).

6.1 Errors

Commonly customers had encountered numerous errors during the course of their query with HMRC.⁶ Some of these were customer generated (e.g. completing forms incorrectly) others were

⁶ Again, this may be reflective of the particular subset of customers we spoke to, the majority of whom had experienced service delivery failure.

triggered by HMRC. While customers' responses to errors did vary by error type, overall, errors negatively impacted the perception of the acceptability of time taken. They made customers' overall journey with HMRC longer (the customer/HMRC had to spend time correcting an error prior to resolving the overall query) and exacerbated the impact of the query on customers (see section 6.5.) as a result. In turn, this fed into perceptions that there is a lack of parity in the relationship between HMRC and customers; in that when HMRC makes an error it does not experience negative repercussions that are visible to the customer but the customer does (e.g. a longer journey may mean more costs, additional interest or an increased likelihood of fines).

Error type

HMRC errors occurred for a variety of reasons but can broadly be grouped into two types:

- **Adviser driven errors included:** HMRC providing incorrect information; advice given to customers regarding timelines that were unrealistic/not met; confirmation that steps or activities had been taken when they had not.
- **Errors stemming from HMRC systems:** Customers' perceptions were that system errors were more process related, though sometimes triggered by human error or inefficiencies created by team structures or IT infrastructure. Customers communicated being sent multiple copies of the same letter, automated letters being delivered, being directed to the wrong department and then having to hang up and start again because the system would not allow automatic transfer and changes made in the system not being saved or recorded.

Error type and expectations

Whether an error was perceived to be due to adviser behaviour or the result of HMRC systems framed customers' views on acceptability of time taken and their expectations of what they or HMRC would do next. When an error was the result of adviser behaviour customers generally expected the error to be corrected quickly/immediately and for HMRC to proactively take ownership of reaching a resolution.

In contrast, errors perceived to be due to HMRC systems were more easily rationalised and, in some instances, dismissed – particularly when it was explained to customers that letters/acknowledgements are auto-generated, or that timelines between a change being made by an adviser and that having an effect in the system itself did not align. While system errors did contribute to frustration and in some instances prompted customers to contact HMRC repeatedly, they had less of an impact on customers' perceptions of time taken as they were seen as sitting largely outside of human control. The exception to this was system inefficiencies (e.g. advisers only being able to see a certain number of recent calls, or advisers not being able to transfer calls between departments). These were attributed as being due to adviser behaviour (e.g. an adviser choosing not to transfer) rather than being due to limitations of the processes/system in place within HMRC which may in some instance limit the actions individual advisers are able to take. In such instances, customers struggled to understand why someone within HMRC could not resolve the query and prevent automated letters, for example, from being delivered.

"They just said they were sorry and it's just an automated thing that comes out....I did say can't you send me a letter and she just said no. 'We don't send out letters'... They say they can see it on your notes that you've paid but I didn't understand, if it's on my notes and they can see it's on my notes I've paid, I don't understand why it's so difficult to not then harass me for the money." – Individual

"They're very polite and nice and usually apologise and say it's an automated letter but I can't seem to get through to them it's happening, it's happening every year." – Individual

6.2 Navigation of systems and processes

Customers found navigating HMRC's systems and processes challenging due to a lack of signposting, guidance and expectation setting by HMRC. Where customers lacked certainty over their journey and associated timelines, chasing behaviour ensued. Ultimately, this extended customers' journey length, the number of contact points between customers and HMRC, and drove down the acceptability of time taken.

The type of navigation queries that customers had varied by customer group:

- **Individuals and Small Businesses** encountered the most challenges, due largely to their lack of experience of engaging with HMRC and their limited knowledge of the UK tax system. Often knowing which department(s) within HMRC should or would be involved in resolving their query, the process for resolution, what would be required of them during their transaction or what the likely timelines of their transaction would be were key challenges. This, when combined with a lack of understanding of the complexity/simplicity of their query and misconceptions around the resolution process, exacerbated matters. Customers expected HMRC to resolve queries they perceived to be 'simple' in either a few steps or immediately, or for advisers to take actions that were potentially not possible due to the way HMRC systems are structured.
- **Agents** had a broad understanding of HMRC systems and processes based on their prior experiences. However, sometimes they lacked an up-to-date view on how far their particular customers' query had progressed or the reasons for missed deadlines, etc. This similarly created frustration and resulted in chasing behaviour.

"There didn't seem to be any sort of block or any sort of note on the Corporation Tax account, to say that there was something in progress whereby they were looking at moving funds across and therefore to hold off on any recovery action in the meantime, or at least for a set period of time, to give the other guys a chance to look into the situation on this payment." – Agent

HMRC signposting and expectation setting

Customers' confusion around navigation and HMRC processes stemmed from a lack of tailored signposting and expectation setting by HMRC:

- **Timelines were not communicated** and, where they were communicated, sometimes were not met, without explanation.
- **The transaction processes**, for instance what would happen once a query had been logged, were **not communicated**.
- **Receipt of communications was not acknowledged**, feeding customer uncertainty as to whether steps had been taken, calls logged or letters received, etc.
- **Customers were not provided with or given access to a contact log** or document confirming a query had been resolved/actions taken towards a resolution.

Crucially, where these details were not communicated – or communicated inaccurately – chasing behaviour ensued. Customers then had to make several attempts to contact the most appropriate person within HMRC to handle their query or to provide HMRC with all the information it required.

6.3 Customer service

Customers viewed the quality of service provided by HMRC as variable and, in some instances, substandard relative to expectations, past experience with HMRC or services received from other organisations. Variability in the manner of adviser, level of knowledge demonstrated and/or quality of advice given prompted a cycle of repeated contact and general dissatisfaction with HMRC's treatment of tax payers. This negatively influenced perceptions of time taken.

The quality of HMRC's customer service was criticised by customers in three broad ways:

- 1) Customers believed the **guidance that advisers provided** was **inconsistent and, at times, inaccurate**. While one adviser may be able to answer a query or perform an action, another may say it is not possible. Likewise, a few customers commented that they were provided inaccurate advice or erroneously told a query had been resolved. This led to some customers incurring fines or penalties. HMRC often did not explain the context of their advice (i.e. why it was necessary for a customer to wait, or provide information by a certain date, etc.) which caused frustration and prompted some to contact HMRC again.

"I would expect people to know the answers to questions and to offer alternatives if they can't help and so this chap was 'there's nothing I can do, you'll have to ring back', which is really unhelpful, and he didn't explain why I couldn't let them know at the beginning of the month, why I had to ring right on the deadline of the tax being due in. It made no sense to me at all." – Small Business

"People couldn't answer your question and didn't understand it themselves, as if they hadn't been trained up on the matter, and they didn't understand how that side of it worked..." – Individual

- 2) Customers described instances where they had **been upset by how HMRC representatives engaged or spoke with them**. Individual customers and Small Businesses described times when HMRC representatives were 'rude' or where they believed they were treated with suspicion or in a manner that implied they were deliberately trying to be non-compliant/avoidant. In addition, some conversations felt rushed, with some feeling that they were treated as 'anonymous numbers' due to first names not being used. Agents similarly described feeling they were 'patronised' and 'spoken down to' by representatives, which they felt inappropriate given their professional knowledge and experience.⁷

"I knew that... [HMRC] were capable of providing a very good service: effective, efficient, comprehensive and conclusive but I was quite taken aback by the fact that they were not able to do that [identify what had gone wrong in online RTI submission]." – Small Business

- 3) The systems in place that supported HMRC advisers' interactions with customers made the **experience of engaging with HMRC feel disjointed**. Customers generally did not have a single point of contact in their interaction and did not feel they had a way of contacting the same HMRC representative who had initiated their call. Similarly, HMRC representatives were not believed by customers to have access to a single view of a customer's whole transaction or status. This created a sense of frustration; led to customers having to repeatedly provide the same information and a perception that no one person was handling their query.

"You should only have to ring HMRC about something once. I don't think you should have to keep ringing them because they don't resolve the issue. And again that comes down to

⁷ Please note, customers did not universally describe the quality of HMRC services as poor. Some were surprised by the tone of communications from HMRC because it contrasted with the generally high standard of service they had been offered.

good customer service, it comes down to the person you're talking to actually doing something about the issue you've got.” – Individual

The variability in HMRC's customer service across these three areas negatively impacted the acceptability of time taken. Customers, at times, had to make multiple attempts to reach 'someone' within HMRC who could resolve or progress their query. This repeated contact extended the length of the transaction and increased customers' exposure to the variability in HMRC's representatives' knowledge and perceived disparities in access to HMRC systems and contact logs. In some cases, the ultimate quick resolution of their query resulted in a re-evaluation of their journey to date. Rather than being happy that their journey had reached a resolution, customers became frustrated that they had not been directed to the correct person or department at an earlier point.

Likewise, the tone taken by some HMRC advisers negatively impacted on customers' views as some customers lost confidence that advisers would take ownership of their query and, as a result, adopted chasing behaviour. This fed into perceptions of a lack of parity in customers' relationship with HMRC (see section 6.4) and negative comparisons, when prompted, between HMRC and private sector organisations (see section 5.2).

Crucially, HMRC representatives were seen as not tailoring their approach to service to customers' knowledge of the UK tax system and experience of engaging with HMRC and act accordingly. While Individuals and Small Businesses were typically less experienced in engaging directly with HMRC and expected empathy and support, Agents expected a 'conversation of equals' and to have their expertise and knowledge recognised and trusted.

6.4 Customer perceptions of fairness / parity

All customer groups could recognise a power imbalance in their relationship with HMRC. HMRC is able to set the terms of the relationship, establish deadlines and repercussions for non-compliance, while customers have little power to influence these terms or to hold HMRC to account for errors. This contrasted with their understanding of the private sector which they expected to be more responsive to the needs of customers due to competition.

Customers, particularly those with more experience of engaging with HMRC – typically Agents and Small Businesses – noted a lack of fairness in the expectations placed on them as customers, compared to those placed on HMRC as a government department. For instance, whereas customers are expected to reply to HMRC within fixed timelines (e.g. 30 days), HMRC is not subject to similar time constraints; whereas customers are subject to fines or may incur other financial costs as a result of ongoing queries, and HMRC is not subject to similar financial penalties. As a result, some customers did not feel HMRC was motivated to accelerate query resolution.

Customers' views of this power imbalance and the lack of fairness/parity in their relationship compounded frustrations with time taken. This was particularly the case where the query came from a service failure or resulted in a financial, emotional or reputational impact on customers (see section 6.5).

6.5 The impact of the query on the customer and wider contextual factors

Customers' transactions with HMRC did not occur in a vacuum. Events taking place in customers' wider lives, in some instances, influenced their views on the urgency and/or the significance of their queries. Similarly, having an unresolved query with HMRC, in many instances, impacted the

customers involved in a variety of tangible ways, for some exacerbating existing issues, which were themselves unrelated to HMRC.

Key areas of impact on customers included:

- **Financial impact:** Some customers incurred costs due to unresolved queries, with a few entering into financial difficulties as a result. Agents and Small Businesses generally spoke about the financial impact in terms of their time. Agents, for instance, did not feel able to charge clients for all of the time they had spent seeking to resolve a query as (for the queries discussed at interview) they deemed the amount of time taken to be excessive. They feared they would lose clients were they to pass on these costs in full. Individual customers were particularly likely to comment that they had entered financial difficulties as a result of an unresolved query with HMRC. For instance, one customer whose tax credits had been stopped due to an administrative error was unable to pay her rent. The financial impact of a lack of resolution sometimes exacerbated existing hardship and made reaching a speedy resolution more urgent. Similarly, Small Businesses spoke of cash flow issues which made reaching resolution more urgent.
- **Emotional impact:** The lack of certainty over when a query would be resolved was often described as having taken a negative emotional toll. Customers described their experience as 'frustrating' or 'frightening'. One Small Business, for example, was uncertain if they would need to cease trading if a VAT decision was not made in their favour. Agents described being chased by clients making it more pressing that they reach a resolution and creating additional stress. Customers of all types also discussed significant changes in personal circumstances (e.g. divorce, death of a family member) driving a need for ownership of a resolution by HMRC, flexibility and empathy on the part of HMRC representatives, and for a fast response.
- **Reputational damage:** Small Businesses and Agents believed their personal and professional reputations were damaged due to unresolved queries or uncertainty over next steps. For instance, one Small Business described how their business partner had lost confidence in them as a result of an unresolved VAT query they were dealing with. Similarly, several Agents reported concerns they would lose clients as a result of unresolved queries. Such Agents reported that clients often blamed them for queries not being resolved and questioned their competence and professionalism as a result.

In general, the impact of an unresolved query on a customer was greater and the acceptability of time taken lower when a) the overall journey length was longer or b) the amount of time it took to reach a resolution was unexpected. In both instances, customers were unable to plan accordingly, advise business partners, clients or other stakeholders, and mitigate any impact. Crucially, the acceptability of time taken on the same query can differ for the same customer dependent on the wider circumstances of their personal lives or business situation.

7. Customers' suggestions for improving the acceptability of time taken

This section outlines customers' suggestions for improving the acceptability of time taken. Suggestions aligned to the following areas:

- **Keeping customers' informed:** Expectation setting through communication of timelines and confirming receipt of requests.
- **Customer service:** Improving the acceptability of time taken through professional, customer-focused service.
- **Empowering customers:** More readily accessible information online to enable self-service and increase customers' sense of ownership.

7.1 Keeping customers' informed

All customer groups mentioned that satisfaction with time taken could be improved by clearer communication of the steps to be taken by HMRC as well as associated timescales, acknowledgement of actions and confirmation of query resolution.

Individuals unfamiliar with transacting with HMRC and especially those experiencing financial pressures due to delays, required reassurance and clear communication of timelines for resolution. They suggested that greater clarity on the steps being taken to address a query and expected timescales for resolution would improve their experience. Proactive and more personalised communications, for example calling Individuals by their names, were felt to help increase Individuals' sense of control, provide reassurance and enable them to plan more effectively.

"It was terrible; it was, at the time, quite frightening. I didn't know if I was going to get any money. It was awful to have to wait that long and not know." – Individual

For some Small Businesses, transactions with HMRC were unfamiliar and delays may have had a direct impact on their business. They required burden minimisation, clarity regarding HMRC processes, communication of timescales and proactive communications. Small Businesses identified that these actions would have increased their sense of control, reduced their contact with HMRC and enabled them to plan more effectively.

Agents who dealt with HMRC frequently expressed the need for confirmation of query progress and timescales. They also required evidence, either in a letter or email, of contact with HMRC including timescales to share with clients. This would have enabled them to manage the expectations of their clients more effectively and would therefore have improved the acceptability of time taken for both Agent and client. Detailing the steps involved in query progression, the responsibilities of HMRC and of the customer and the associated time involved in managing this may have helped to set expectations. Ultimately this would have improved perceptions of the acceptability of time taken across all customer groups.

"I don't necessarily expect them to have an answer to my question straight away... Somehow you need to know 'have I actually spoken to someone and lodged a question and secondly when can I expect an answer?'" – Agent

7.2 Customer Service

All customer groups communicated that customer service, including polite, helpful and empathetic staff would have made them feel more valued as customers. They identified that negative customer service experiences resulted in negative perceptions of time taken, even when the actual amount of time taken was deemed to be acceptable. Customers claimed that by improving customer service, HMRC could ultimately improve their perceptions of the acceptability of time taken. They mentioned the importance of advisers not rushing calls, using customers' names and having effective centralised record keeping that would detail the number of contact points, method of contact and query type.

For those that experienced service failure, recognition by HMRC of errors and 'genuine' apologies were seen as ways to improve the acceptability of time taken. Service failure itself was felt to place an extra burden on customers who had to spend time engaging with HMRC to rectify the error. The time spent doing this was seen to be more acceptable to customers when they felt HMRC was 'on their side' – that HMRC recognised an error had been made and was taking steps to avoid errors in the future. In addition, Individuals who had suffered financially as a result communicated the need for empathy from advisers.

"Be a bit more compassionate, be more human... It would have made me feel a bit better in myself that someone actually cared." – Individual

Moreover, variable customer service quality prompted customers across all groups to contact HMRC multiple times to find someone who could progress their query. The perceived level of effort involved in this drove down the acceptability of time taken. Taking the steps outlined above may alter the nature of the relationship between advisers and customers and help to improve acceptability of time taken as a result.

7.3 Empowering customers

In general, customers communicated that they preferred to 'self-serve' and address their own queries. This gave customers greater control over their transactions, providing that the information was readily available. Some customers commented that more detailed information online would enable them to more effectively self-serve.

- Individuals communicated that they would like to see tax return forms sent automatically along with tax return advice, greater clarity on the number to call to request SA forms, as well as appeal advice on the website.
- Small Businesses required more detailed guidance on submitting CT600 forms online as well as greater detail on how calculations are made and how RTI software works via their RTI accounts.
- Agents wanted clearer guidance on the query process, more communication of timeframes, evidence of correspondence and more information on VAT regulations on the HMRC website.

Customers across all groups communicated the need to be kept up to date and to feel in control. With more readily and accessible information, customers communicated being less likely to contact

HMRC repeatedly, therefore reducing the burden on customers and improving the acceptability of time taken.

8. Conclusions

The specific reasons customers contacted HMRC were diverse. However, queries, contact triggers and experiences when engaging with HMRC were fundamentally shaped by the customers' own need for reassurance and empathy from HMRC when responding to the customers' practical needs. Customers variously sought answers, actions, reassurance and control, which they expected to be met through contact with HMRC.

Individuals

- Individuals lacked knowledge of tax and had little prior experience of engaging with HMRC. They rarely began their journey with specific time frames in mind and instead had their expectations set by their perceptions of the complexity and urgency of their query and their experience of other public and private sector organisations' standards of customer service (e.g. functionality of systems and processes, phone manner, etc.). For Individuals, transactions with HMRC were unfamiliar and, in some cases, resulted in unexpected financial pressures.
- Individual's primary need from contact was reassurance that a) they had taken appropriate steps to resolve their query and that HMRC was aware of this, and b) that their query was being progressed. In effect, they required reassurance and expected empathy and ownership from HMRC. To increase the acceptability of time taken, Individuals required communication that provided greater clarity on the steps being taken to address a query and timescales, as well as more proactive and personalised communications.

Small Businesses

- Small Businesses had mixed knowledge of and experience engaging with HMRC. While they were generally knowledgeable about elements of the tax system that related to their day-to-day operations, their knowledge of the tax system as a whole was mixed. Their primary focus was usually on the long-term future of their businesses. Unresolved queries with HMRC were an understandable cause of anxiety, particularly if they could lead to fines or penalties, or when the businesses were otherwise experiencing challenges (e.g. cash flow problems, tensions between business partners). Fears of being judged as non-compliant or of other negative impacts increased the perceived urgency of reaching a resolution.
- Small Businesses' primary requirements from HMRC were for clarity, reassurance and burden minimisation, so that they could focus on running their businesses. They communicated that burden minimisation and clarity regarding HMRC's processes and timescales would increase their satisfaction with time taken.

Agents

- Agents considered themselves to be experts in most aspects of the UK's tax system and to have a level of knowledge on par with the advisers at HMRC. They had clear expectations for how long HMRC would take to resolve queries based on their prior experiences. They were tolerant of the amount of time taken for more complex queries so long as timelines were

communicated in advance (and met), but were less tolerant when simple queries took longer to resolve than expected.

- Agents wanted to be able to advise their clients accurately about their tax position and about how long it would take for queries to be resolved. Given that Agents' queries typically related to their clients, timeliness, record keeping and communication of process for resolution were critical. Agents felt that clarity with regards to HMRC processes and timescales as well as improved self-serve options would increase their satisfaction with time taken. They also had clear expectations for how they should be treated: they should be recognised as professionals trying to do their jobs and not be patronised. Agents required control and expected a high level of clarity, professionalism and knowledge.

Appendix A – Topic Guides

HMRC Time Taken – Topic Guide

Individuals

Note to researcher

Background to this research:

Improving the experience of customers is one of HMRC's key strategic objectives and survey outputs are regularly reviewed by its Executive Committee and used in evidence to NAO and Parliament (Public Accounts Committee and Treasury Select Committee) to assess whether HMRC services, products and processes are delivering the intended good customer experience.

- The Mass Market Customer Survey (MMCS), delivered by Kantar Public, is one of the largest and most high profile research studies undertaken by HMRC, providing evidence on customer perceptions of HMRC's administration of the tax system and delivery of a good customer experience. The MMCS aims to (i) evaluate customers' overall perception of the tax administration system and experience of dealing with HMRC about their tax affairs, (ii) assess whether services, products and processes are working well and delivering the anticipated outcomes on customer experience and behaviour and (iii) help to drive further improvements.

- One key measure of customer experience is the view on the acceptability of time taken to reach an end result. HMRC has commissioned Kantar Public to conduct qualitative research to understand what drives customer perceptions, experiences and satisfaction with the time taken to reach the end result. Participants involved in this research will be recruited from the MMCS survey sample and fall into 3 broad categories – individuals, agents and small businesses.

Research aims:

The overarching aim of the research is to provide insight into what drives customers' responses (captured in the Mass Market Customer Survey) to the level of acceptability of time taken by HMRC to resolve a specific issue or query. The research will explore customers' journeys through their engagement with HMRC on a specific issue or query (for which they commented on time taken in the survey) to identify products, processes and services which customers' feel HMRC takes too long to deal with. In doing so, the research seeks to provide HMRC with insight to improve customer experience in this area.

Specifically, HMRC wants to understand the drivers of responses to the survey question on time taken in relation to the following:

- **Customer expectations** around time taken to reach an end result; what are their expectations and what influences these expectations; how these differ as compared to other services – both against services offered by HMRC and services offered by other organisations (i.e. HMRC and non-HMRC organisations, e.g. other government departments connected but external to HMRC, non-government organisations etc.); and how these expectations can best be managed
- **Customer transactional journeys**; channels used and routes through HMRC; drivers of channel preference; experience at each stage of the journey and contextual circumstances influencing experience
- **Acceptability of time taken** for overall transaction and individual stages of the journey; relative influence of other factors such as getting things right, being kept informed and the outcome of the transaction; whether particular

types of transaction/enquiry are more time sensitive than others; and influence of time taken on overall perception of HMRC

- **How customer experience of time taken can be improved;** and how HMRC can best manage customer expectations (including helping customers manage their own expectations).

1. Introduction to the interview (2 mins)

Explain:

- Introduce yourself and Kantar Public – an independent social research agency working on behalf of HMRC
- Participant took part in an HMRC survey between September and November last year and agreed to be re-contacted by Kantar Public. HMRC has asked us to do some further research into people’s experiences of dealing with HMRC on specific issues or queries to ensure that your views and experiences are taken into account in future strategy and service design.
- Recording equipment and confidentiality
- MRS guidelines
- Interview length – 1 hour
- There are no right or wrong answers. We’re here to learn from you and your own personal experiences of the system. Reassure participant that taking part won’t affect their current or future dealings with HMRC.

2. Warm up and introduction (10 minutes)

Section aim: to warm-up the participant, build a brief understanding of their personal circumstances and current behaviours and interactions with HMRC

2.1. Ask participant to introduce themselves - current situation at home/work

Remind participant that this research is being conducted on behalf of HMRC and to start off with, it would be good to get a sense of their interactions with HMRC – including their reasons for engaging with HMRC about a query (or conversely HMRC engaging with them) as well as the channel(s) through which they usually make contact (e.g. online, call centre etc.)

2.2. Ask participant to briefly describe perceptions of HMRC (the tax office) and give a general overview of their experience of dealing with tax and/or tax credits and child benefit issues.

2.3. Ask participants, in respect of HMRC, what factors are important to them in influencing their satisfaction with the service they receive

If unsure prompt on the following:

- a) Person - manner
- b) Outcome
- c) Length of time to resolve query
- d) Clarity of communications
- e) Signposting to other services – if so, where

2.4. Explain that we are interested in understanding their interactions with HMRC between September 2014 and October 2015. Explain that this was the period before they completed the HMRC survey and that we are interested in learning about their experiences leading up to taking the survey.

Ask participant about reason(s) for interacting with HMRC during this period.

Note to interviewer: please probe for all instances they got in touch with HMRC regarding a query (or conversely, HMRC got in touch with them) during the period.

If they are uncertain, prompt with information gathered in screener:

- a) Self-Assessment Tax Return
- b) Tax credits / Child Benefit
- c) PAYE
- d) National Insurance
- e) Income Tax
- f) VAT

Prompt further on the reason(s) for interaction:

- a) What exactly was it that they wanted to achieve by contacting HMRC / Why did HMRC contact them?
- b) How did they get in to contact with HMRC (i.e. what channel – online, call centre etc.) / How did HMRC get in contact with them? Are different channels better for different queries; why?
- c) Probe on digital services: How confident are they using online services? Do they use online services often?

- 2.5. Explain that we are interested in understanding what influences customer views on the time taken to resolve a query. Explain that in the HMRC customer survey they participated in last year, they indicated [INSERT satisfaction/dissatisfaction] with the amount of time taken. **If more than one query** clarify which query (or queries) had influenced their response to this question [reference the query type mentioned during screening if necessary]. Ask to explain briefly what drove their [INSERT – satisfaction/dissatisfaction].
- 2.6. Was there anything going on at the time outside participant’s interaction with HMRC that impacted their response to the service provided (e.g. any life events that made a quick resolution more pressing, financial reasons etc.). For all, and especially if there were financial reasons, ask them to expand on why this made the need for action more urgent.

3. Journey mapping (30-35 minutes)

Section aim: to create a customer journey map(s) of participants’ experiences of dealing with HMRC to resolve the specific query/queries which influenced views on time taken. Individuals are likely to interact less frequently than agents/businesses with HMRC, so may provide only one example. If there are multiple queries that influenced views please explore a maximum of two journeys.

I'd now like you to talk through in more detail your experience of dealing with HMRC on [SPECIFY QUERY]. I'd like you to think about your experience of the journey you took when dealing with HMRC - what you as a 'customer' of HMRC had to do and how you felt during the process.

Researcher note: we need to understand the full customer journey, from the first point of need to resolution of the query. First contact could have been made by HMRC e.g. sending a form / letter.

Using the blank customer journey stimulus – explore the following (and repeat if more than one issue):

3.1. Explore **context and expectations** in contacting HMRC to resolve specified query

- a) Why they needed to make contact (what was the nature of query/queries – and which were most pressing)
- b) Was this the first time they had contacted HMRC about this specific issue
- c) What was happening at the time in their life, e.g. financial need, life events etc.
- d) What channel(s) did they use to contact HMRC; why. Were they aware of other channels?
 - i. If used multiple channels, which was preferable; why? What was their reason for using multiple channels (e.g. were they let down by a channel?)
- e) Did they use any other formal/informal source of information before or during the journey
- f) Before they got into contact with HMRC, how did they expect the help/support to be delivered; probe the following, and explore the drivers of these expectations.

Probe for each on **why their expectations were what they were** – e.g. as a result of comparisons with other service providers (govt. and non-govt.), previous experiences, experiences of friends/family or from information provided by HMRC)

- i. Location / channel
- ii. Person - manner

iii. Length of time

1. Probe on where these expectations came from (e.g. experience with other organisations; experience with other government departments; information provided by HMRC; information provided by friends / family).
 2. Probe on any difference by channel
- iv. Follow up information – hard copy/email/telephone/other
- v. Signposting to other services – if so, where

Probe on whether their expectations changed during the journey – at which points and why? Do their expectations differ for different channels; why?

3.2. Explore **actual experience** and how their needs and expectations were met/unmet

- a) Starting at the point at which you first contacted HMRC in relation to this issue, explain how the query progressed. Researcher to plot contact points on map and explore:
- i. how, if at all, the issues developed/escalated
 - ii. what form of communication was had with HMRC at different points in their customer journey
 - iii. Did they have to contact HMRC more than once? What was the reason for this? From their perspective, was HMRC being reactive or proactive in resolving their query?
 - iv. Was a timeline for resolution of their query communicated to them by HMRC?
- b) What went well or less well at each point of their contact with HMRC; and how did this make them feel.

Note to interviewer: Use probes on each step in the customers' journey.

Probe in detail on:

- i. the quality/clarity/relevance of information provided or accessibility of information where on website (explore what impact this had on feelings about time taken)
- ii. clarity on steps being taken/to take in resolving query (explore what impact this had on feelings about time taken);

- iii. time taken in progressing query (explore the influence of being 'kept in the loop' on their perception of time taken)
 - 1. Clarify, if they are referring to waiting times on phone, waiting for things to be processed or the overall time taken from initial contact to reaching the end result.
 - iv. where relevant, HMRC staff approach and manner
 - v. what elements of the interaction were most important / valuable for them and why?
- c) What could have been handled differently at each point in their journey to improve their experience; why, how
- d) Overall, what are their views on the acceptability of time taken to resolve their query. Clarify, if they are referring to waiting times on phone, waiting for things to be processed or the overall time taken from initial contact to reaching the end result for their query.

Probe on the following to understand what is most important in determining their experience:

- i. impacts on them
 - ii. factors influencing length of time taken (e.g. customer/HMRC error)
 - iii. what could HMRC have done differently to reduce time taken; why, how (explore trade-off between processing time and query resolution). **Note to interviewer:** if participant focuses on HMRC 'answering the phone quicker' probe for other potential changes / actions.
 - iv. what could HMRC have done to best manage expectations over time taken at different stages of the transaction.
How did time taken impact on their overall attitude towards HMRC?
- e) Given everything that has been discussed about **their expectations** and **their actual experience** of engaging with HMRC, what could have been done to better manage their expectations?
- f) Since this experience of engaging with HMRC (i.e. within the September 2014 and October 2015 time period), have they had any further /

additional interactions with HMRC? If so, ask them to (briefly) describe the reason for their engagement and how their experience compared a) overall and b) specifically in terms of time taken.

Note to interviewer: depending on time available, conduct a journey map for this interaction.

4. Spectrum of satisfaction (10 mins)

Section aim: to understand how customers feel HMRC compares with other organisations in terms of resolving queries and transactions, what drives this, and what could be learnt from this comparison.

4.1. Are there any other formal interactions they feel are similar to having to seek help to resolve a query relating to tax or tax credits and child benefit – explore spontaneously; if necessary, prompt: e.g. banking, housing, utilities, pensions, benefits, passport renewal/application etc.

a) How do they typically deal with queries in these areas

b) How does the interaction with these organisations/sectors compare to HMRC

We would now like you to compare HMRC (as a whole – not just the last interaction) with the other organisations/sectors you have talked about. We want to understand how you feel HMRC compares to these other organisations particularly in terms of the time taken to resolve queries. Essentially, we will be asking you about how HMRC has performed, and whether you feel the other organisations you have talked about perform better or worse. We will also ask you why you feel this way..

4.2. Ask participants to describe how they would place relevant organisations/sectors on a spectrum (including HMRC) in terms of their level of satisfaction with time taken to resolve queries. Start with HMRC.

a) Add details of service experience/expectations with each organisation which position them within the spectrum / why are these important.

- b) Explore reasons and experiences behind decisions to place each organisation at each point along the arrow.
- c) Isolate aspects of service that are particularly meaningful to the respondent (e.g. quality of info, being kept informed, time taken etc.), why.
- d) Thinking about your interactions with organisations (other than HMRC), what do you think HMRC could have done to improve aspects of the service that are most meaningful to you? What could HMRC learn from these service providers that could improve your experience of time taken to resolve a query?

5. Final thoughts and close (5 mins)

- Given everything we've discussed so far,
 - Please can you sum up your overall experience of the time taken by HMRC to resolve a query
 - What do you think HMRC could have done to improve your experience of the time taken to resolve a query (if participant focuses on reducing the time taken, probe on other factors that influence their perceptions of time taken).
 - Any other comments?
-

HMRC Time Taken – Topic Guide

Small Businesses

Note to researcher

Background to this research:

- Improving the experience of customers is one of HMRC's key strategic objectives and survey outputs are regularly reviewed by its Executive Committee and used in evidence to NAO and Parliament (Public Accounts Committee and Treasury Select Committee) to assess whether HMRC services, products and processes are delivering the intended good customer experience.
- The Mass Market Customer Survey (MMCS), delivered by Kantar Public, is one of the largest and most high profile research studies undertaken by HMRC, providing evidence on customer perceptions of HMRC's administration of the tax system and delivery of a good customer experience. The MMCS aims to (i) evaluate customers' overall perception of the tax administration system and experience of dealing with HMRC about their tax affairs, (ii) assess whether services, products and processes are working well and delivering the anticipated outcomes on customer experience and behaviour and (iii) help to drive further improvements.
- One key measure of customer experience is the view on the acceptability of time taken to reach an end result. HMRC has commissioned Kantar Public to conduct qualitative research to understand what drives customer perceptions, experiences and satisfaction with the time taken to reach the end result. Participants involved in this research will be recruited from the MMCS survey sample and fall into 3 broad categories – individuals, agents and small businesses.

Research aims:

The overarching aim of the research is to provide insight into what drives customers' responses (captured in the Mass Market Customer Survey) to the level of acceptability of time taken by HMRC to resolve a specific issue or query. The research will explore customers' journeys through their engagement with HMRC on a specific issue or query (for which they commented on time taken in the survey) to identify products, processes and services which customers' feel HMRC takes too long to deal with. In doing so, the research seeks to provide HMRC with insight to improve customer experience in this area.

Specifically, HMRC wants to understand the drivers of responses to the survey question on time taken in relation to the following:

- **Customer expectations** around time taken to reach an end result; what are their expectations and what influences these expectations; how these differ as compared to other services – both against services offered by HMRC and services offered by other organisations (i.e. HMRC and non-HMRC organisations, e.g. other government departments connected but external to HMRC, non-government organisations etc.); and how these expectations can best be managed
- **Customer transactional journeys**; channels used and routes through HMRC; drivers of channel preference; experience at each stage of the journey and contextual circumstances influencing experience
- **Acceptability of time taken** for overall transaction and individual stages of the journey; relative influence of other factors such as getting things right, being kept informed and the outcome of the transaction; whether particular types of transaction/enquiry are more time sensitive than others; and influence of time taken on overall perception of HMRC
- **How customer experience of time taken can be improved**; and how HMRC can best manage customer expectations (including helping customers manage their own expectations).

Introduction to the interview (2 mins)

Explain:

- Introduce yourself and Kantar Public – an independent social research agency working on behalf of HMRC
- Participant took part in an HMRC survey between September and November last year and agreed to be re-contacted by Kantar Public. HMRC has asked us to do some further research into people’s experiences of dealing with HMRC on specific issues or queries to ensure that your views and experiences are taken into account by HMRC.
- Recording equipment and confidentiality
- MRS guidelines
- Interview length – 1 hour
- There are no right or wrong answers. We’re here to learn from you and your own personal experiences of the system. Reassure participant that taking part won’t affect their current or future dealings with HMRC.

Warm up and introduction (10 minutes)

Section aim: to warm-up the participant, build a brief understanding of their personal circumstances and current behaviours and interactions with HMRC

- 2.1 Ask participant to introduce themselves, including job title, length in role, and responsibilities.
- 2.2 About their company
 - a) Nature of business/sector
 - b) If business has changed over the past few years (e.g. growing or not)

- c) Nature of income flow – relatively stable, or fluctuating

2.3. Their role in the company

- a) Owner, director, manager, etc.
- b) Involvement in PAYE, payroll etc.
- c) Other responsibilities

*Remind participant that this research is being conducted on behalf of HMRC and to start off with, it would be good to get a sense of their interactions with HMRC in relation to their **businesses' tax affairs** – including their reasons for engaging with HMRC about a query as well as the channel(s) through which they made contact (e.g. online, call centre etc.). Clarify that we are not interested in their interactions with HMRC in a personal capacity).*

3.1. Ask participant to briefly describe perceptions of HMRC (the tax office) and give a general overview of their/their businesses' experience of dealing with tax issues.

3.2. Ask participants, in respect of HMRC, what factors are important to them in influencing their satisfaction with the service they receive

If unsure prompt on the following:

- f) Person - manner
- g) Outcome
- h) Length of time to resolve query
- i) Clarity of communications
- j) Signposting to other services – if so, where

3.3. Explain that we are interested in understanding their interactions with HMRC between September 2014 and October 2015. Explain that this was the period before they completed the HMRC survey and that we are interested in learning about their experiences leading up to taking the survey.

Ask participant about reason(s) for interacting with HMRC on behalf of their business during this period.

Note to interviewer: please probe for all instances they got in touch with HMRC regarding a query (or conversely, HMRC got in touch with them) during the period.

If they are uncertain, prompt on the following and ask them to explain in detail what elements within these areas they were specifically contacting/being contacted about:

- g) Self-Assessment Tax Return
- h) PAYE
- i) National Insurance
- j) Income Tax
- k) VAT

Prompt further on the reason(s) for contacting:

- a) What exactly was it that they wanted to achieve by contacting HMRC
- b) How did they get in to contact with HMRC (i.e. what channel – online, call centre etc.) Are different channels better for different queries; why?
- c) Probe on digital services: How confident are they using online services? Do they use online services often?

- 3.4. Explain that we are interested in understanding what influences customer views on the time taken to resolve a query. Explain that in the HMRC customer survey they participated in last year, they indicated [INSERT satisfaction/dissatisfaction] with the amount of time taken. **If more than one query**, clarify which query (or queries) had influenced their response to this question [reference the query type mentioned during screening if necessary]. Ask to explain briefly what drove their [INSERT – satisfaction/dissatisfaction] with the query(ies) during this time.
- 3.5. Was there anything going on at the time outside participant's interaction with HMRC that impacted their response to the service provided (e.g. any life events that made a quick resolution more pressing, financial reasons etc.) For all, and

especially if there were financial reasons, ask them to expand on why this made the need for action more urgent.

Let them know that we will be discussing some of these queries in detail in the next section.

Note to researcher: it is likely that the business will have multiple examples to draw upon. If this is the case, ask them to discuss the instance which is at the forefront of their mind and that they remember most clearly.

Journey mapping (30-35 minutes)

Section aim: to create a customer journey map(s) of participants' experiences of dealing with HMRC to resolve the specific query/queries which influenced views on time taken. If there are multiple queries that influenced views please explore a maximum of two journeys, focusing on the one which they remember most clearly in the first instance, followed by the next most clearly remembered.

I'd now like you to talk through in more detail your experience of dealing with HMRC on [SPECIFY QUERY]. I'd like you to think about your experience of the journey you took when dealing with HMRC - what you had to do, and the impact on your business

Researcher note: we need to understand the full customer journey from the first point of need to resolution of the query. First contact could have been made by HMRC e.g. sending a form / letter.

Using the blank customer journey stimulus – explore the following (and repeat if more than one issue):

- 5.1. Explore **context and expectations** in contacting HMRC to resolve specified query
 - g) Why they needed to make contact (what was the nature of query)
 - h) Was this the first time they had contacted HMRC about this specific issue
 - i) What was happening at the time in their business

- j) What channel(s) did they use to contact HMRC; why. Were they aware of other channels?
 - i. If used multiple channels, which was preferable; why? What was their reason for using multiple channels (e.g. were they let down by a channel?)

- k) Did they use any other formal/informal source of information before or during the journey

- l) Before they got into contact with HMRC, how did they expect the help/support to be delivered; probe the following, and explore the drivers of these expectations? (probe for each on why their expectations are what they are – e.g. as a result of comparisons with other service providers or from HMRC)
 - i. Location / channel
 - ii. Person - manner
 - iii. Length of time
 - 1. Probe on where these expectations came from (e.g. experience with other organisations; experience with other government departments; information provided by HMRC; information provided by friends / family).
 - 2. Probe on any difference by channel
 - iv. Follow up information – hard copy/email/telephone/other
 - v. Signposting to other services – if so, where

Probe on whether their expectations of the above changed during the journey – at which points and why? Do their expectations differ for different channels; why?

5.2. Explore **actual experience** and how their businesses' needs and expectations were met/unmet

- g) Starting at the point at which you first contacted HMRC in relation to this issue, explain how the query progressed. Researcher to plot contact points on map and explore:
 - i. How, if at all, the issues developed/escalated – explore interaction with client in the lead up to contacting HMRC

- ii. Did they have to contact HMRC more than once? What was the reason for this? From their perspective, was HMRC being reactive or proactive in resolving their query?
 - iii. Was a timeline for resolution of their query communicated to them by HMRC?
 - iv. What form of communication did they or their client have with HMRC at different points in their customer journey
- h) What went well or less well at each point of their contact with HMRC; how did this make them feel and how did this impact their business.

Note to interviewer: Use probes on each step in the customers' journey.

Probe in detail on:

- i. the quality/clarity/relevance of information provided or accessibility of information where on website (explore what impact this had on feelings about time taken)
 - ii. clarity on steps being taken/to take in resolving query (explore what impact this had on feelings about time taken)
 - iii. time taken in progressing query (explore the influence of being 'kept in the loop' on their perception of time taken)
 - 1. Clarify, if they are referring to waiting times on phone, waiting for things to be processed or the overall time taken from initial contact to reaching the end result.
 - iv. where relevant, HMRC staff approach and manner
 - v. What elements of the interaction were most important / valuable for them and why?
- i) What could have been handled differently at each point in their journey; why, how
- j) Overall, what are their views on the acceptability of time taken to resolve their query? Clarify, if they are referring to waiting times on phone, waiting for things to be processed or the overall time taken from initial contact to reaching the end result for their query.

Probe on the following and what is most important to them in determining their experience

- i. impacts on them personally

- ii. impacts on their business, including cost implications
 - iii. factors influencing length of time taken (e.g. the result of an HMRC error)
 - iv. what could HMRC have done differently to reduce time taken; why, how (explore trade-off between processing time and query resolution). **Note to interviewer:** if participant focuses on HMRC 'answering the phone quicker' probe for other potential changes / actions.
 - v. what could HMRC have done to best manage expectations over time taken at different stages of the transaction
 - vi. How did their experience of time taken impact on their overall attitude towards HMRC?
- k) Given everything that has been discussed about **their expectations** and **their actual experience** of engaging with HMRC, what could have been done to better manage their expectations?
- l) Since this experience of engaging with HMRC (i.e. within the September 2014 and October 2015 time period), have they had any further / additional interactions with HMRC? If so, ask them to (briefly) describe the reason for their engagement and how their experience compared a) overall and b) specifically in terms of time taken.
- Note to interviewer:** depending on time available, conduct a journey map for this interaction.

Spectrum of satisfaction (10 mins)

Section aim: to understand how small businesses feel HMRC compares with other organisations in terms of resolving queries and transactions, what drives this, and what could be learnt from this comparison.

- 5.3. Are there any other formal interactions they feel are similar to having to seek help to resolve tax query – explore spontaneously; if necessary, prompt: e.g. banking, utilities, etc.

- c) How do they typically deal with queries in these areas
- d) How does the interaction with these organisations/sectors compare to HMRC

We would now like you to compare HMRC (as a whole – not just the last interaction) with the other organisations/sectors you have talked about. in terms of time taken to resolve queries. We want to understand how you feel HMRC compares to these other organisations particularly in terms of the time taken to resolve queries. Essentially, we will be asking you about how HMRC has performed, and whether you feel the other organisations you have talked about perform better or worse. We will also ask you why you feel this way. We would now like you to compare HMRC (as a whole – not just the last interaction) with other organisations/sectors in terms of time taken to resolve queries resolving queries and transactions and where this sits within their overall 'spectrum' of help/support experience.

- 5.4. Ask participants to describe how they would place relevant organisations/sectors on a spectrum (including HMRC) in terms of their level of satisfaction with time taken to resolve queries. Start with HMRC.
- e) Add details of service experience/expectations with each organisation which position them within the spectrum / why are these important
 - f) Explore reasons and experiences behind decisions to place each organisation at each point along the arrow.
 - g) Isolate aspects of service that are particularly meaningful to the respondent (e.g. quality of info, being kept informed, time taken etc.), why
 - h) Thinking about your interactions with organisations (other than HMRC), what do you think HMRC could have done to improve aspects of the service that are most meaningful to you? What could HMRC learn from these service providers that could improve your experience of time taken to resolve a query?

Final thoughts and close (5 mins)

- Given everything we've discussed so far,

- Please can you sum up your overall experience of the time taken by HMRC to resolve a query
 - What do you think HMRC could have done to improve your experience of the time taken to resolve a query (if participant focuses on reducing the time taken, probe on other factors that influence their perceptions of time taken).
-
- Any other comments?

HMRC Time Taken – Topic Guide

Agents

Note to researcher

Background to this research:

- Improving the experience of customers is one of HMRC's key strategic objectives and survey outputs are regularly reviewed by its Executive Committee and used in evidence to NAO and Parliament (Public Accounts Committee and Treasury Select Committee) to assess whether HMRC services, products and processes are delivering the intended good customer experience.
- The Mass Market Customer Survey (MMCS), delivered by Kantar Public, is one of the largest and most high profile research studies undertaken by HMRC, providing evidence on customer perceptions of HMRC's administration of the tax system and delivery of a good customer experience. The MMCS aims to (i) evaluate customers' overall perception of the tax administration system and experience of dealing with HMRC about their tax affairs, (ii) assess whether services, products and processes are working well and delivering the anticipated outcomes on customer experience and behaviour and (iii) help to drive further improvements.
- One key measure of customer experience is the view on the acceptability of time taken to reach an end result. HMRC has commissioned Kantar Public to conduct qualitative research to understand what drives customer perceptions, experiences and satisfaction with the time taken to reach the end result. Participants involved in this research will be recruited from the MMCS survey sample and fall into 3 broad categories – individuals, agents and small businesses.

Research aims:

The overarching aim of the research is to provide insight into what drives customers' responses (captured in the Mass Market Customer Survey) to the level of acceptability of time taken by HMRC to resolve a specific issue or query. The research will explore customers' journeys through their engagement with HMRC on a specific issue or query (for which they commented on time taken in the survey) to identify products, processes and services which customers' feel HMRC takes too long to deal with. In doing so, the research seeks to provide HMRC with insight to improve customer experience in this area.

Specifically, HMRC wants to understand the drivers of responses to the survey question on time taken in relation to the following:

- **Customer expectations** around time taken to reach an end result; what are their expectations and what influences these expectations; how these differ as compared to other services – both against services offered by HMRC and services offered by other organisations (i.e. HMRC and non-HMRC organisations, e.g. other government departments connected but external to HMRC, non-government organisations etc.); and how these expectations can best be managed
- **Customer transactional journeys**; channels used and routes through HMRC; drivers of channel preference; experience at each stage of the journey and contextual circumstances influencing experience
- **Acceptability of time taken** for overall transaction and individual stages of the journey; relative influence of other factors such as getting things right, being kept informed and the outcome of the transaction; whether particular types of transaction/enquiry are more time sensitive than others; and influence of time taken on overall perception of HMRC
- **How customer experience of time taken can be improved**; and how HMRC can best manage customer expectations (including helping customers manage their own expectations).

1. Introduction to the interview (2 mins)

Introduce yourself and Kantar Public – an independent social research agency working on behalf of HMRC

- Participant took part in an HMRC survey between September and November last year and agreed to be re-contacted by Kantar Public. HMRC has asked us to do some further research into people's experiences of dealing with HMRC on specific issues or queries to ensure that your views and experiences are taken into account by HMRC.
- Recording equipment and confidentiality
- MRS guidelines
- Interview length – 1 hour
- There are no right or wrong answers. We're here to learn from you and your own personal experiences of the system. Reassure participant that taking part won't affect their current or future dealings with HMRC.

Note to interviewer: Agents can use both general HMRC helplines and also agent dedicated lines for some queries. When discussing the telephone calls, clarify which type of line used.

2. Warm up and introduction (10 minutes)

Section aim: to warm-up the participant, build a brief understanding of their personal circumstances and current behaviours and interactions with HMRC

- 2.1 Ask participant to introduce themselves – including job title, length in role, and responsibilities.

- 2.2 What services do they currently provide to clients
 - a) Do they specialise in any particular service or type of client
 - b) What does their client base look like
 - c) Explore relationship with client base

- 2.3 Sources of information, guidance and update in relation to tax issues
 - a) Contact with and attitudes towards HMRC

Remind participant that this research is being conducted on behalf of HMRC and to start off with, it would be good to get a sense of their interactions with HMRC on behalf of their clients – including their reasons for engaging with HMRC about a query / being engaged with by HMRC as well as the channel(s) through which they made contact (e.g. online, call centre etc.). Clarify that we are not interested in their experience of interacting with HMRC in a personal capacity.

- 3.6. Ask participant to briefly describe perceptions of HMRC (the tax office) and give a general overview of their experience of dealing with tax issues.
- 3.7. Ask participants, in respect of HMRC, what factors are important to them in influencing their satisfaction with the service they receive
If unsure prompt on the following:
 - k) Person - manner
 - l) Outcome
 - m) Length of time to resolve query
 - n) Clarity of communications
 - o) Signposting to other services – if so, where

- 3.8. Explain that we are interested in understanding their interactions with HMRC between September 2014 and October 2015. Explain that this was the period before they completed the HMRC survey and that we are interested in learning about their experiences leading up to taking the survey.

Ask participant about reason(s) for contacting HMRC during this period.

If they are uncertain, prompt on the following:

- l) Self-Assessment Tax Return
- m) PAYE
- n) National Insurance
- o) Income Tax
- p) VAT

Prompt further on the reason(s) for contacting:

- d) What exactly was it that they wanted to achieve by contacting HMRC
- e) How did they get in to contact with HMRC (i.e. what channel – online, call centre etc.)? Are different channels better for different queries; why?

Probe on digital services: How confident are they using online services? Do they use online services often? Did they use Agents Online Self-Serve (now called Agents Services)

- 3.9. Explain that we are interested in understanding what influences customer views on the time taken to resolve a query. Explain that in the HMRC customer survey they participated in last year, they indicated [INSERT satisfaction/dissatisfaction] with the amount of time taken. **If more than one query** clarify which query (or queries) had influenced their response to this question [reference the query type mentioned during screening if necessary]. Ask to explain briefly what drove their [INSERT – satisfaction/dissatisfaction] with the query(ies) during this time.

- 3.10. In relation to queries mentioned, ask participant to recall what was happening at this time – both in their work and, if relevant, in their personal lives (e.g. additional pressure from their client for a resolution or answer)?

Let them know that we will be discussing some of these queries in detail in the next section.

Note to researcher: it is likely that the agent will have multiple examples to draw upon. If this is the case, ask them to discuss the instance which is at the forefront of their mind and that they remember

most clearly in the first instance, followed by the second and (it time allows) third most clearly remembered incidence.

4. Journey mapping (30-35 minutes)

Section aim: to create a customer journey map(s) of participants' experiences of dealing with HMRC to resolve the specific query/queries which influenced views on time taken. Agents are likely to interact with HMRC frequently, so may provide a number of examples. If there are multiple queries that influenced views please explore at least two, cover three if time allows.

I'd now like you to talk through in more detail your experience of dealing with HMRC on [SPECIFY QUERY]. I'd like you to think about your experience of the journey you took when dealing with HMRC - what you had to do, the impact on yourself and your client

Researcher note: we need to understand the full customer journey – including interaction with their client - from the first point of need to resolution of the query.

Using the blank customer journey stimulus – explore the following (and repeat if more than one issue):

- 5.5. Explore **context and expectations** in contacting HMRC to resolve specified query
- m) Why they needed to make contact (what was the nature of query)
 - n) Was this the first time they had contacted HMRC about this specific issue
 - o) How did this issue effect their client, and their relationship with their client
 - p) What channel(s) did they use to contact HMRC; why. Were they aware of other channels?

- i. If used multiple channels, which was preferable; why? What was their reason for using multiple channels (e.g. were they let down by a channel?)
- q) Did they (or their client) use any other formal/informal source of information before or during the journey
- r) Before they got into contact with HMRC, how did they expect the help/support to be delivered; probe the following, and explore the drivers of these expectations (probe for each on why their expectations are what they are – e.g. as a result of comparisons with other service providers or from HMRC)
 - i. Location / channel
 - ii. Person - manner
 - iii. Length of time
 - 1. Probe on where these expectations came from (e.g. experience with other organisations; experience with other government departments; information provided by HMRC; information provided by friends / family).
 - 2. Probe on any difference by channel
 - iv. Follow up information – hard copy/email/telephone/other
 - v. Signposting to other services – if so, where

Probe on whether their expectations of the above changed during the journey – at which points and why? Do their expectations differ for different channels; why?

5.6. Explore **actual experience** and how their needs and expectations were met/unmet

- m) Starting at the point at which you first contacted HMRC in relation to this issue, explain how the query progressed. Researcher to plot contact points on map and explore:
 - i. How, if at all, the issues developed/escalated – explore interaction with client in the lead up to contacting HMRC
 - ii. Did they have to contact HMRC more than once? What was the reason for this? From their perspective, was HMRC being reactive or proactive in resolving their query?

- iii. Was a timeline for resolution of their query communicated to them by HMRC?
 - iv. What form of communication did they or their client have with HMRC at different points in their customer journey
- n) What went well or less well at each point of their contact with HMRC; how did this impact them and their relationship with their client.

Note to interviewer: Use probes on each step in the customers' journey.

Probe in detail on:

- i. the quality/clarity/relevance of information provided or accessibility of information where on website (explore what impact this had on feelings about time taken)
 - ii. clarity on steps being taken/to take in resolving query (explore what impact this had on feelings about time taken)
 - iii. time taken in progressing query (explore the influence of being 'kept in the loop' on their perception of time taken)
 - 1. Clarify, if they are referring to waiting times on phone, waiting for things to be processed or the overall time taken from initial contact to reaching the end result.
 - iv. where relevant, HMRC staff approach and manner
 - v. What elements of the interaction were most important / valuable for them and why?
- o) What could have been handled differently at each point in their journey to improve their experience; why, how
- p) Overall, what are their views on the acceptability of time taken to resolve their query? Clarify, if they are referring to waiting times on phone, waiting for things to be processed or the overall time taken from initial contact to reaching the end result for their query.
- q) Probe on the following and what is most important to them in determining their experience?
- i. impacts on them
 - ii. impact on their business, including cost implications
 - iii. impacts on their client

- iv. factors influencing length of time taken (e.g. the result of an HMRC error)
 - v. what could HMRC have done differently to reduce time taken; why, how (explore trade-off between processing time and query resolution). Note to interviewer: if participant focuses on HMRC 'answering the phone quicker' probe for other potential changes / actions.
 - vi. what could HMRC have done to best manage expectations over time taken at different stages of the transaction
 - vii. How did their experience of time taken impact on their overall attitude towards HMRC?
- r) Given everything that has been discussed about **their expectations** and **their actual experience** of engaging with HMRC, what could have been done to better manage their expectations?
- s) Since this experience of engaging with HMRC (i.e. within the September 2014 and October 2015 time period), have they had any further / additional interactions with HMRC? If so, ask them to (briefly) describe the reason for their engagement and how their experience compared a) overall and b) specifically in terms of time taken.
- Note to interviewer:** depending on time available, conduct a journey map for this interaction.

6. Spectrum of satisfaction (10 mins)

Section aim: to understand how agents feel HMRC compares with other organisations in terms of resolving queries and transactions, what drives this, and what could be learnt from this comparison.

- 6.1. Are there any other formal interactions they feel are similar to having to seek help to resolve a tax query – explore spontaneously; if necessary, prompt: e.g. banking, utilities etc.
- e) How do they typically deal with queries in these areas
 - f) How does the interaction with these organisations/sectors compare to HMRC

We would now like you to compare HMRC (as a whole – not just the last interaction) with the other organisations/sectors you have talked about. in terms of time taken to resolve queries. We want to understand how you feel HMRC compares to these other organisations particularly in terms of the time taken to resolve queries. Essentially, we will be asking you about how HMRC has performed, and whether you feel the other organisations you have talked about perform better or worse. We will also ask you why you feel this way.

- 6.2. Ask participants to describe how they would place relevant organisations/sectors on a spectrum (including HMRC) in terms of time taken to resolve queries. Start with HMRC.
- i) Add details of service experience/expectations with each organisation which position them within the spectrum / why are these important
 - j) Explore reasons and experiences behind decisions to place each organisation at each point along the arrow.
 - k) Isolate aspects of service that are particularly meaningful to the respondent (e.g. quality of info, being kept informed, time taken etc.), why
 - l) Thinking about your interactions with organisations (other than HMRC), what do you think HMRC could have done to improve aspects of the service that are most meaningful to you? What could HMRC learn from these service providers that could improve your experience of time taken to resolve a query?

7. Final thoughts and close (5 mins)

- Given everything we've discussed so far,
 - Please can you sum up your overall experience of the time taken by HMRC to resolve a query
 - What do you think HMRC could have done to improve your experience of the time taken to resolve a query (if participant focuses on reducing the time taken, probe on other factors that influence their perceptions of time taken).
- Any other comments?

Appendix B – Achieved Sample

- **20 telephone depth interviews with Individuals** with a mix of nature of query⁸, mix of employment status, mix of number of sources of income, mix of respondents in receipt of tax credits – working tax credits and child tax credits – and not in receipt of credits and a mix of methods of contact with HMRC (e.g. phone, online).
- **15 telephone depth interviews with Small Businesses** with a mix of those that use/don't use an agent, mix of income (PAYE, SA, etc.), mix of age of business, mix of number of employees (e.g. sole trader, 0–4 employees, etc.) and a mix of growth and non-growth businesses.
- **15 telephone depth interviews with Agents** with a mix of number of clients, mix of number of employees and a mix of methods of contact with HMRC.

⁸ e.g. procedural, clarity/disputes, complex queries.

Individuals		Recruited
Gender	Male	5
	female	15
Age	16 to 34	5
	35 to 54	9
	55+	6
Employment status	Working full time	10
	Working part time	3
	Self employed	2
	Not working – retired	3
	Not working – unemployed	2
Number of Income Sources	Single income	9
	Multiple incomes	11
Nature of query	Procedural Query	
	• Tax Credit (TC) applications and renewals	3
	• Changes in circumstance	
	• Self-Assessment (SA) completion	2
	• Online SA account activation	1
	• Repayment of tax/ benefits and fines	
		0
	Clarity / Disputes query	3
	• Querying cuts to Tax Credits	
	• Querying underpaid tax	
	• Querying tax rebates	
	• Querying tax code errors	3
	• Needing to sort out SA mistakes	5
• SA penalties		
• Disputing an overpayment	3	
Complex query	• Inheritance tax/life insurance queries	
	• Multiple SA queries	2
	• Entitlements during illness	
	• 'Combined' or 'parallel' queries	1
Tax Credit	Working tax credits	2
	Child tax credits	3
	Both	2
	None	11
Methods of contact with HMRC in last 21 months	Online	12
	Telephone	20
	Post	11
	Other	1
Total		20

Small Businesses		Recruited
Number of employees	0 Sole Trader	4
	1 to 4 employees	2
	5 to 9 employees	3
	10 to 19 employees	6
	20+ employees	
Agent use	Yes	11
	No	4
Taxes paid	PAYE	12
	SA	10
	VAT	8
	Company Tax	5
	Other	3
Age of business	0-2 years	0
	2-5 years	2
	5-10 years	1
	10 + years	12
Methods of contact with HMRC in last 21 months	Online	11
	Telephone	14
	Post	10
	Other	
Growth business	No - not a growth business	7
	Yes - growth business	8
Total		15

Agents		Recruited
Number of employees	0 Sole Trader	5
	1 to 4 employees	2
	5 to 9 employees	2
	10 to 19 employees	2
	20+ employees	4
Number of clients	0-9	4
	10 to 49	2
	50-249	1
	250-999	7
	1000+	1
Taxes paid	PAYE	
	SA	
	VAT	
	Company Tax	
	Other	
Methods of contact with HMRC in last 21 months	Online	10
	Telephone	13
	Post	9
	Other	
Total		15

Quality assurance:

This project was carried out in compliance with our certification to ISO 9001 and ISO 20252 (International Service Standard for Market, Opinion and Social Research)

