

Room 2/75
100 Parliament Street
London
SW1A 2BQ

By email only

7 December 2022

Dear Harriett,

I am sorry for the disruption that customers experienced between 08.00 on Thursday 1 December and 10.30 on Monday 5 December, owing to a problem with the performance of some of our web-based IT services.

On the morning of Thursday 1 December, the performance of some of our customer-facing and colleague-facing web-based services began to degrade as users started to access and use the services at volume at the start of the business day. Users experienced difficulty in accessing the services, lost connection or experienced slow running service.

The main customer-facing services affected were NCTS (used by traders when moving goods in and out of Great Britain under Customs Transit procedures) and PAYE Online (used by our employers). The Annex enclosed includes more detail on how the problem affected our digital and telephony services.

As NCTS was unable to process the volume of declarations it was receiving, we invoked our Customs Transit business continuity plan. This included issuing communications advising customers who had not started their journeys not to travel to ports or Inland Border Facilities and detailing steps to take for those who were already on their way. It also involved implementing workaround procedures to manually clear NCTS declaration queues.

In order to restore the performance of NCTS and keep freight flowing across the border, we decided to 'shutter' PAYE Online from users and to close all of our telephony helplines (with the exception of the National Clearance Hub helpline, which supports traders with Customs clearance). These steps reduced digital traffic on our IT infrastructure, and NCTS was fully restored by 16.00 on Thursday 1 December.

The IT performance problem resulted from a high level of digital traffic affecting a particular part of our IT infrastructure. We identified that a change we had introduced overnight on Wednesday 30 November had altered the digital traffic management profile on our IT infrastructure and was the likely cause of the service degradation. At 13.04 on Friday 2 December, we regressed this change and thereafter saw service performance improve and stabilise. We carried out further housekeeping on our IT infrastructure at 20.00 on Friday 2 December.

The services continued to perform well over the weekend, albeit with lower volumes of users and digital traffic than on weekdays, and with our telephony lines closed. On Monday 5 December, we re-opened our telephony helplines gradually between 08.00 and 10.30 and monitored service performance as user and traffic volumes increased to usual weekday levels. All services have continued to perform well and are operating normally.

PAYE Online services were closed at 16.45 on Thursday 1 December to protect the NCTS service and allow NCTS users to continue using the service. PAYE online was reopened to users at 09.00 on Friday 2 December. Telephony helplines were closed from 17.00 on Thursday 1 December due to poor call quality and the inability of advisers to access relevant information or records on our digital systems. Telephone lines remained closed for the whole of Friday 2 December.

Throughout the incident, most of our customer-facing online services, such as Self Assessment online filing, were unaffected and remained available to users.

We estimate that we would normally have expected to handle around 99,000 customer calls during the time when our telephony helplines were temporarily closed.

We will be carrying out a review of lessons from this incident.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Harra', written in a cursive style.

JIM HARRA
CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND FIRST PERMANENT SECRETARY

Annex – Services affected

Service	Times unavailable (Technical Cause)	Times unavailable (Shuttered)	Times when services were degraded	Time services were back available
Digital Services				
PAYE Browser	N/A	16:45 01/12 to 08:58 02/12	08:00 to 16:45 01/12/22 and 08:58 to 14:00 02/12/22	08:58 02/12 onwards
Help to Save	N/A	16:59 01/12 - 09:05 02/12 (Digital front end only)	09:00 01/12 to 14:00 02/12	10:00 01/12 onwards
Childcare Services	N/A	N/A	08:00 01/12 to 14:30 02/12	08:00 01/12 onwards
Capital Gains Tax				
Check your State Pension				
Student Loans Service	N/A	N/A	08:00 1/12 to 14:00 02/12	BAU
Employer Business Service/Taxpayer Business Service	N/A	N/A	08:00 1/12 to 14:00 02/12	BAU
National Computerised Transit System (NCTS)		12:09 01/12 – 15:30 01/12	08:00 01/12/22 to 12:09 01/12/22 and 15:30 01/12/22 to 14:00 02/12/22	14:00 02/12 onwards
Digital Services (Inc ETMP Digital Services and microservices)	10:54 01/12 – 9:11 02/12	16:57 01/12 – 9:47 02/12		15:54 12/01
Contact Centres - Note those lines that do open 24/7 and over the weekend were open at all times.				
Human Resources, Customer Service Group telephony lines, Adjudicators Office, Business Tax & Customs, Benefits and Credits, Debt Management, Personal Tax, Online Services Helpdesk, Self Assessment, National Insurance, Employer Helpline/Construction Industry Scheme, PAYE, Agent Dedicated Line.		17:00 01/12 to 05/12	Call quality was not of expected standards and the adviser's inability to access essential information/records to provide a good customer experience	Individual telephony lines were brought back in a stages from 08:00 on 05/12. All telephony lines were back online by 10:30 on 05/12.
Webchat		17:00 01/12 to 05/12	Advisers' inability to access essential information/records to provide a good customer experience.	10:25 05/12 onwards
Contact centre VOA lines		09:00 02/12 to 09:30 02/12	08:00 to 17:00 on 01/12 (AUI - calls being taken).	08:00 01/12 onwards