

HMRC announce the closure of all Enquiry Centres in Jun...

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HMRC announced to its staff this lunchtime that it is closing 281 Face to Face Enquiry Centres by June this year.

As PCS, the union for most PCS staff has said:

PCS is fundamentally opposed to this decision. We believe that our Enquiry Centres provide a vital public service, which allows taxpayers to access free, expert advice from highly skilled HMRC staff. We fundamentally disagree with HMRC's view that the new NES service provides a better service by diverting taxpayers from a free, face-to-face appointment to costly, under-staffed telephone lines. We are also extremely concerned about the implications of this decision on the 1,300 people currently working in Face to Face who are now faced with extremely difficult decisions about their future in HMRC.

HMRC has been running down the Enquiry Centre service for a number of years HMRC themselves acknowledge that footfall in our Enquiry Centres has reduced by more than 50% between 2005 and 2013, however they fail to acknowledge that this is entirely a result of their own cuts to this vital public service, which has included reducing Enquiry Centre opening hours and relocating Enquiry Centres from existing HMRC offices to other premises, where they are much more difficult for the taxpaying public to access.

Despite HMRC's protestations that no decision was taken until after the pilot concluded in December 2013, it has been clear to PCS negotiations, members and the general public that the exercise has been deeply flawed. To date the employer has refused to share the findings of the pilot with us and members will no doubt draw their own conclusions for the reasons for this. Throughout the pilot, HMRC repeatedly changed the pilot scope to deliver the appropriate findings which would justify this decision: they expanded the geographical scope from a defined pilot area in the North East and Yorkshire & Humber to all customers accessing our telephone lines anywhere in the UK, they abandoned the very "drivers of need" that they claimed defined NES customers and offered the new service to anyone who needed help, and they revised their projections when the number of taxpayers accessing the new service failed to reach the expected demand.

PCS is fundamentally opposed to job cuts in HMRC. We believe that office closures and job cuts on the scale currently planned will undermine HMRC's ability to deliver against its core objectives which are to collect taxes to close the Tax Gap and to provide a vital service to the taxpaying public.

Those are sentiments with which I agree, and not just because I work with the union on occasion. Many in the tax profession share this view. And many more besides believe that the presence of a tax office in a community is a crucial indication of the vital relationship between people and the government that asks for the tax that they pay. HMRC has a duty to be available to people to explain that tax, and for many a telephone call is not an appropriate way of achieving this aim.

I am also shocked to learn that HMRC have also announced that they intend to scrap another 500 admin grade posts today. I gather from other sources that these posts are amongst maybe 8,000 jobs HMRC hopes to dispense with between now and March 2015 when just 54,000 people will be left in its employment, with more posts planned to be axed after that date.

The point has been made many times here, and across the tax profession, that the service HMRC is providing is being compromised by these staff cuts. Worse, they are happening at a time when the tax gap is rising at considerable cost to the UK. They make no economic sense as a result. They can, therefore, only be driven by dogma with the aim of shrinking the size of the government.

I am pleased to note that both HMRC unions are planning to oppose these cuts, although job losses are inevitable as a result of them. That's why the campaign for tax justice is so important. It cannot be delivered without trained personal in community based offices who can collect the tax owing to fund public services. I hope work I do this year will support that goal.