

## PCS briefing on the close of HMRC Enquiry Centres

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There is a debate in Westminster today on the closure of HMRC's Enquiry Centres, all of which are due to close in the next three months with up to 1,300 compulsory redundancies arising as a result.

PCS is the union that represents many of these staff, and as many readers of this blog will know, I have worked with that union over a number of years. They have issued the following briefing in advance of this debate and I think it worth sharing it here:

*PCS welcome the Westminster Hall debate secured by Ian Lavery MP on the closure of HMRC enquiry centre closures.*

*Enquiry Centres provide a vital public service, which allows taxpayers to access free, expert advice from highly skilled HMRC staff.*

*On 12 February HMRC announced that a Needs Enhanced Support (NES) service model will be rolled out and will result in the closure of HMRC's entire Enquiry Centre network, consisting of 281 offices, would close by the end of June 2014, putting 1,300 HMRC jobs at risk of compulsory redundancy.*

*The most likely taxpayers who will be prevented from accessing the proposed new service due to cost are the unemployed, those on low incomes such as migrant workers, pensioners and child benefit and child tax credit claimants. These taxpayers rely heavily on the free service currently provided at enquiry centres.*

*During 2012, 2.5 million taxpayers visited HMRC enquiry centres and 340,885 made a face-to-face appointment with a member of staff in order to comply with their tax duties and receive advice on their benefit entitlement. Enquiry Centres also provide free telephone lines and internet access to taxpayers.*

*If the closures go ahead, taxpayers will no longer be able to walk into an enquiry centre to receive assistance. The current service will be replaced by a tailored telephony service and customers will be required to phone a contact centre that, after vetting them, may refer them to another advisor. Only if the 'tier two advisor' deems it*

*appropriate will a taxpayer who is classed as 'Needs Enhanced Support' be given the option of a 'tier three' face-to-face appointment.*

*HMRC commenced a pilot of the NES model in the North East of England in June last year.*

*The NES model consists of a triage function to identify customers that require extra support at the point of contact. However, all initial customer contact, with the exception of deaf customers or those with speech impairments (who have the option to use an online form to request a face to face appointment) will be by telephone to HMRC's Contact Centres.*

*By the end of September, with only 10 per cent of the anticipated call volumes for the enhanced support telephone advisors, HMRC extended the scope so that any caller could qualify for extra support, whether they needed it or not, even if they lived outside of the pilot area. The pilot, which was due to end in October, was extended the pilot until the end of 2013, leaving little time for a thorough evaluation to take place prior to the decision being made. PCS is concerned that HMRC changed the criteria to justify their predetermined conclusion of the pilot.*

*The enquiry centres in the pilot area have remained closed in 2014. However, some had to be reopened in late January to allow customers to use the free internet facilities because contact centres were struggling with caller demand ahead of the self assessment deadline.*

*HMRC's contact centres are significantly under staffed and not resourced to deal with additional calls. The Public Accounts Committee has been critical of call handling and set HMRC a performance target of 90% of calls for 2013-14. Performance for December 2013 was 76.2% with HMRC accepting that it is unable to meet their 2013-14 targets. Poor performance levels are likely to decrease significantly from April 2014 when HMRC decide whether to end the contracts of the 3,000 Fixed Term Appointment staff recruited in 2011. 89.84% of calls went unanswered on the tax credit renewal date on 31 July 2013.*

*It was identified early on during the pilot that significant numbers of customers will not be able to call contact centres or interact with the website due to cost and low or mobile/internet access in many parts of the UK. HMRC have agreed that alternative access solutions would need to be identified if the new model was to be successfully rolled out nationally without reducing the number of taxpayers who voluntarily engage with HMRC. PCS is concerned that such solutions have not been found.*

*The inability to access the service via broadband was highlighted in the public consultation exercise responses as a fault in the proposed new service model by stakeholders, particularly those in Wales - as detailed in the response submitted by Powys County Council.*

*PCS is concerned that unless a solution is found to address access it will increase the number of taxpayers prevented from engaging with HMRC. The department has done no work to estimate the amount of revenue that could be lost from uncollected tax due to this problem. Similar concerns were raised by a large number of stakeholders in their consultation responses, including the Association of Taxation Technicians, Citizen Advice Bureau, Diverse Cymru, Gingerbread, Institute of Chartered Accounts in England and Wales, Lancaster City Council, Milton Keynes Council, TaxAid, a number of individual tax payers.*

*PCS is concerned if a decision is taken to close its enquiry centre network HMRC have not provided evidence that they have complied with Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the PSED) and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which requires Government Departments and Ministers of the Crown to have 'due regard' to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations.*

*HMRC has refused to negotiate or consult with PCS over these plans. A detailed evaluation and options paper were presented to HMRC's Executive Board prior to their decision in January — neither document was shared with PCS before a decision was taken on the future of enquiry centres.*

*The first meeting scheduled with the Minister David Gauke MP over the closures, will not take place until the morning of this Westminster Hall debate. A meeting that was agreed to by his office after the debate was announced.*

*We urge MPs to use the opportunity of the Westminster Hall debate to raise concerns about the closures with the Minister.*