

A message to HMRC: make paying tax possible

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Having arrived back from Washington overnight I am now heading, a little bleary eyed, to Brighton to speak at the PCS Union conference. PCs does, of course, represent 80% of HMRC staff.

In the circumstances [this new report from the National Audit Office](#) this morning does seem relevant:

HMRC's digital strategy aims to improve the efficiency and quality of its customer services by moving more personal taxpayers online thereby reducing demand for more costly to handle telephone and postal contact. HMRC, through substantial staff reductions, decreased the cost of its personal tax operations between 2010-11 and 2014-15 by £257 million. Today's National Audit Office report finds that while HMRC maintained or improved customer service up to 2013-14 it then misjudged the cumulative impact of its complex transition and released too many customer service staff before completing service changes.

The NAO found that the quality of service provided by HMRC for personal taxpayers collapsed in 2014-15 and the first seven months of 2015-16 when average call waiting times tripled. Services have subsequently improved following the recruitment of additional staff but whether this performance is sustainable depends on HMRC achieving successful outcomes from its programme to make tax digital.

A few thoughts, inevitably, follow.

First, I cannot now recall for how many years PCS and I have predicted this.

Second, candidly thus confirms the incompetence at senior management level that we have long suggested exists at HMRC because of a dedication to cost cutting whatever the consequence.

Third, I do not share the view that the digitisation process will work at all. It assumes homogenous people. That's precisely what people are not.

Fourth, if this exercise failed just imagine the chaos in a few years when almost every HMRC office closes to relocate to a few regional hubs. A collapse in revenues is likely.

And last, this exercise did not save cost, it transferred cost and stress onto the taxpayer, which is unacceptable.

My message is unambiguous.

Stop the office closures.

Stop the redundancies.

Make digital services optional.

Provide the support people need.

Make paying tax possible.

Do it now.