

HM Revenue & Customs Consultation

Establishing the future relationship between the tax agent community and HMRC

Response from the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. LITRG's response to this consultation focuses on both the entirely unrepresented taxpayer and those agents or intermediaries, of various types, who try to help those who would be otherwise unrepresented and struggling to cope with HMRC-related matters alone.
- 1.2. In summary, we recommend that HMRC use the savings they generate through offering a 'self-serve' facility to the traditional '64-8', generally paid, agent community to offer the following:
 - 1.2.1. For taxpayers in general, HMRC should allow 'view-only' access to the same data offered under Agent self-service, together with a fast-track route to making adjustments, notifying changes or raising queries for example, via 'online chat', secure electronic form or telephone helpline.
 - 1.2.2. HMRC should also consult the voluntary sector on other improvements which could be made for the unrepresented to improve interaction with HMRC for example, warning people of common errors in tax returns and introducing further interactive forms and toolkits.
 - 1.2.3. If a self-serve facility is extended to tax professionals, it should be available equally to suitably qualified tax advisers acting pro bono and to advisers in the voluntary sector who can demonstrate a level of competence appropriate to the help they are giving.

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- 1.2.4. HMRC should also extend their funding of training programmes for voluntary sector advisers. These might include some form of assessment of competence of those who have taken the training helping to identify those suitable to self-serve.
- 1.2.5. For those non-specialist advisers who do not need or wish to have self-serve access, HMRC should provide a dedicated helpline to facilitate resolution of problems.
- 1.2.6. To engage better with friends, family and other informal helpers, HMRC should continue the welcome start made on work to review their policy, and introduce consistent processes which allow authority to be given easily either on a one-off or ongoing basis, depending on the needs in the case concerned.
- 1.2.7. HMRC should ensure they have robust systems to recognise formal appointments such as powers of attorney, as outlined in our response to the recent 'incapacitated persons' consultation. They should consider verifying relevant appointments directly with the Office of the Public Guardian, thereby obviating the need for costly and inefficient paper exchanges.
- 1.3. Implementation of the above should lead to improved accuracy of HMRC's data and, in turn, greater efficiency in the tax system. Further cost savings are inevitable. Allowing taxpayers view access to their data should encourage them to take a greater interest in their tax affairs, improving understanding. And where they are not able to deal with matters for themselves, it is far more efficient for HMRC to deal with someone who can help them communicate or who is tax-trained themselves and can therefore facilitate resolution of the matter.

2. Introduction

2.1. About us

- 2.1.1. The Low Incomes Tax Reform Group (LITRG) is an initiative of the Chartered Institute of Taxation (CIOT) to give a voice to the unrepresented. Since 1998 LITRG has been working to improve the policy and processes of the tax, tax credits and associated welfare systems for the benefit of those on low incomes.
- 2.1.2. The CIOT is a charity and the leading professional body in the United Kingdom concerned solely with taxation. The CIOT's primary purpose is to promote education and study of the administration and practice of taxation. One of the key aims is to achieve a better, more efficient, tax system for all affected by it taxpayers, advisers and the authorities.

2.2. Our response to this consultation - overview

2.2.1. We are pleased to be able to respond to HMRC's consultative document *Establishing the future relationship between the tax agent community and HM Revenue and Customs*.

- 2.2.2. In our response to HMRC's consultative document *Working with tax agents* (April 2009), we called for HMRC to give better support to volunteer advisers and to recognise the many types of agent and representative who help others, both formally and informally. We are pleased that the current consultation document appears to make a start, noting the increasing importance of the role of the voluntary sector (page 14).
- 2.2.3. In this response, we consider in turn:
 - the wholly unrepresented individual taxpayer, and the equality and data protection issues that will arise if paid agents, but not the taxpayer, are given access to a taxpayer's data held by HMRC (section 3);
 - the different types of voluntary sector representative (section 4);
 - those ordinary citizens who try to help elderly, disabled or otherwise vulnerable friends or family members with their tax affairs in various capacities. Some of those holders of lasting powers of attorney, Court of Protection deputies and so forth are within the scope of another HMRC consultation on *Incapacitated person a modern definition* to which we have responded² (section 5).

3. The unrepresented

- 3.1.1. We believe HMRC could be failing in their public duty under the Equality Act if they implement proposals to allow agents to gain access to and alter their clients' records held by HMRC without at the same time reinvesting savings so generated in improved customer service from which unrepresented taxpayers can benefit.
- 3.1.2. We therefore recommend there should be a facility for individuals to have 'view' access to their records and a fast-track route to contact HMRC if changes are required. Providing such a facility would create efficiencies for HMRC and counteract potential arguments that the unrepresented are being unfairly discriminated against.
- 3.2. Unrepresented taxpayers the statistics
- 3.2.1. Fundamentally, taxpayers with agents are in a minority. The majority, by HMRC's own reckoning, are unrepresented.
- 3.2.2. Page 12 of the consultation document says that agents act on behalf of: 3.9 million individuals within, and 5.8 million individuals outside of, Income Tax self-assessment; and3.2 million tax credits claimants. In addition, agents act for 1 million incorporated and 2.3

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¹ http://www.litrg.org.uk/Resources/LITRG/1_681_WorkingWithAgents-responsebyLITRG-TOPfinalAug09.pdf

² http://www.litrg.org.uk/submissions/2011/incapacitated-person

million unincorporated businesses. Many of those groups will overlap so the total number of represented individuals must fall some way short of a simple aggregation of the above figures. Although we understand that some 70% of small or medium-sized enterprises and 62% of individual self-assessment taxpayers have agents, this takes no account of the majority who pay tax solely through PAYE. And indeed the last 12 months' experience of underpayments notified to mainly unrepresented PAYE taxpayers highlights the need to provide better service to them.

3.2.3. However, the consultation document does not say how much HMRC currently spend on providing customer service to the general taxpayer body, nor how much would be saved if HMRC's customer service to the represented were largely superseded by the proposed self-serve facility. But although not specified, we assume that there will be such savings.

3.3. Reinvestment of savings to generate further efficiencies

- 3.3.1. The savings which we anticipate would be generated by introducing self-serve could be profitably re-invested not only in an expansion of second-tier advice and training, as we go on to recommend (para 4.4ff), but also in improved customer service for all, from which the wholly unrepresented will benefit. Below we set out our recommendations for improvement.
- 3.3.2. This would be a good opportunity to carry out the recommendations of the Treasury Committee on customer service in their report on the *Administration and Effectiveness of HMRC*¹.

3.4. Counteracting potential inequality – an online system for the unrepresented

- 3.4.1. We are concerned that HMRC could introduce self-serve for agents without equal thought to how this leaves the unrepresented. We do not believe it is right for agents of a taxpayer to have privileged access to their client's personal data, but for the taxpayer not to have such access to their own data.
- 3.4.2. While a represented taxpayer could then gain immediate access to their records through their agent, who may also alter those records, an unrepresented taxpayer would have no such immediate access. The latter would have to rely on the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998 with its associated formalities and delays if they wish to inspect (but not alter) their own records. In the sense of having access to their data, the represented would therefore be at a distinct advantage as against the unrepresented.
- 3.4.3. Indeed, we question whether this difference in treatment could constitute unlawful discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. To the extent that members of any group with protected characteristics under that Act are more likely than the general population to have a low income, and therefore less likely to be able to afford the fees of a professional agent, it could be argued that there is indirect discrimination in giving such advantages to people who

¹ 30 July 2011

can afford to pay professional agents' fees.

- 3.4.4. To argue that the unrepresented could have the same access, if they chose to instruct an agent to act on their behalf for no fee, is unrealistic. There are substantially fewer sources of pro bono tax advice than there are paid advisers (albeit we know that many professional advisers do offer some free advice, on occasion), and this is likely to remain the case so long as funds to support pro bono activity remain scarce.
- 3.4.5. Moreover, HMRC spend £200 million per annum in 'providing services for and supporting agents' (page 15), which could compound the arguments that the represented have advantages over the unrepresented unless equivalent support was available to individual taxpayers in general.
- 3.4.6. If however the savings generated by introducing the self-serve facility for agents were accompanied by a substantially improved service to all taxpayers for example by giving individuals view-only access to all data concerning them, via a secure online system the discrimination argument would be weaker.
- 3.4.7. A similar online system has already been contemplated by the DWP a Benefits Enquiry Service and a Benefits Update Service. Once logged into such a system, the individual could send a secure online request for incorrect data to be changed, or to 'chat online' to an HMRC official who could change it for them there and then. A number of companies in the private sector already offer such services for example service providers like British Telecom have a 'Live Chat' facility, as do many IT companies.
- 3.4.8. Provision would of course still have to be made for those who are 'digitally excluded' and therefore unable to take advantage of such facilities (or who would require assistance to do so), but this could generate efficiencies for HMRC and taxpayers saving telephone call costs, staff time and the risk of letters getting lost in the post etc.
- 3.4.9. Such view-only access for individuals is in our view not only possible, it entrenches the individual's constitutional right to see what information HMRC hold about them (except where to reveal such data would compromise the collection or assessment of tax) and obviates the need for the bureaucracy and delays within the paper-based procedures of the data protection laws. Furthermore, it encourages a taxpayer to become more involved in and take more responsibility for their tax affairs.

3.5. Other useful initiatives for the unrepresented

- 3.5.1. Other helpful services HMRC could make available might include:
 - information on common errors in completing returns or repayment claims,
 - more comprehensive information and calculators or tools to aid the checking of PAYE codings,
 - more intuitive and interactive versions of forms such as the R40, P53 and P161,

- toolkits similar to those in place for agents, which are designed to improve accuracy.
- 3.5.2. The voluntary sector should be consulted on which aspects of customer service should be targeted for improvements.

4. The voluntary sector

- 4.1.1. Apart from a brief section at page 14, the consultative document says very little about the voluntary sector, except to acknowledge its importance. Yet the role of volunteers in society generally is set to grow as central government funding for advice services declines. Likewise, the demand for tax advice from those who cannot afford professional fees has already been growing in response to the increasing complexity of the tax system and the decreasing capacity of HMRC to deal promptly or accurately with taxpayers' affairs by phone, letter or in person. This demand is evidenced by the emergence of, and increasing demands upon, sources of free professional advice on tax from the tax charities.
- 4.1.2. The consultation document mentions the grant funding programme that HMRC have operated in recent years. It also acknowledges the flaws in the current authorisation process for voluntary sector advisers, and we welcome the work HMRC is doing to improve that. However, the document is silent on how this important and diverse sector is actually made up, so in this response we offer our own analysis.
- 4.1.3. In our response to the 2009 consultative document, we saw the tax voluntary sector as divided into the following segments:
 - the tax professional acting pro bono within his or her firm but not in the course
 of business, an activity which is normally carried out under the auspices of the
 firm and governed by it as part of its normal client engagement and monitoring;
 - the tax professional doing work and giving advice (often on a one-off, but sometimes longer term, basis) pro bono under the auspices of a tax charity (such as TaxAid or TaxHelp for Older People) whether as volunteer or staff member;
 - the intermediary from an advice organisation such as Citizens Advice whose engagement with the client is usually of a temporary nature, and who may either be qualified in some profession (not necessarily in the tax field) or a trained generalist adviser working in a supervised setting.
- 4.1.4. The first two segments contain the tax specialists with a professional qualification normally in tax, accountancy or law or former Inland Revenue or HMRC officers of a certain grade who do pro bono work. In the third segment are those who are not usually tax specialists but who may occasionally advise on straightforward tax matters while assisting clients of an organisation such as a welfare rights advice charity.

4.2. Volunteer advisers who are tax professionals

- 4.2.1. The consultation document (page 20) envisages secure enrolment for all paid agents and for 'organisations in the voluntary sector which carry out a similar level of transactional engagement with HMRC'. This recognises that professional tax agents have the same qualifications and adhere to the same professional standards whether they are acting in a paid or voluntary capacity, the only difference being that those not acting in the course of a business are not subject to money laundering obligations.
- 4.2.2. We do not propose to consider the pros and cons of enrolment per se, and the necessary safeguards, which are dealt with comprehensively in the response by our CIOT colleagues which we support.
- 4.2.3. Secure enrolment for voluntary sector advisers will presumably be via the organisation under whose auspices they are carrying out their voluntary activity ie the tax charity while those acting pro bono on behalf of their firm will presumably use their firm's secure enrolment. For voluntary sector bodies an inhibiting factor to enrolment is likely to be the entry cost, if one is imposed, given the straitened resources of that sector.

4.3. Other voluntary sector advisers

- 4.3.1. The question of who should be trusted to become enrolled agents is less clear cut when considering advisers from non-tax charities who do not specialise in tax but who occasionally help their clients with everyday tax matters such as checking their PAYE codes, or giving basic advice.
- 4.3.2. It is important to preserve the integrity of individual taxpayers' data on HMRC's systems, and to protect it from error and abuse. Hence it is essential that any facility to alter, as opposed to merely viewing, taxpayer data held on HMRC's systems should be available only to those whom HMRC can trust to keep it safe and secure from theft or any improper use, and only make changes which will improve the accuracy of the data. Clearly this calls for high standards of integrity, training and professional competence from the trusted agent.
- 4.3.3. On the one hand, not all such advisers would want to be enrolled agents; they would not want to take on that level of responsibility. On the other hand, some might; one can envisage, for example, a retired tax professional or HMRC officer wanting to do voluntary work at his or her local CAB.
- 4.3.4. While there should be a route to self-serve for those in the voluntary sector whose professional standing and expertise make them suitable, there should be no compulsion on those who do not wish enrolment to acquire the necessary qualifications. There is a place for both types of adviser in the voluntary sector.
- 4.3.5. A person should not be discouraged from acting as an agent for an individual provided they can demonstrate the level of expertise appropriate to the nature of their engagement with their client, and a degree of competence in the area of tax in which they give advice. That level of expertise, or degree of competence, can range from parity with a fully qualified tax

professional adviser, to an ability to give limited advice on some basic aspects of taxation (for example an adviser may be competent to advise on PAYE codes or help a client complete a self-assessment return but not to give more specialist or business advice such as computing capital allowances claims or claiming entrepreneurs relief, etc).

4.3.6. It would be a matter for the organisation engaging the adviser, as with any firm in the private sector, to ensure that the adviser acted within his or her field of expertise, and only within that field, and that the organisation's secure enrolment facilities with HMRC were available to, and used only by, those advisers who could demonstrate the requisite competence in those matters covered by the terms of the enrolment.

4.4. Training

- 4.4.1. Given that HMRC wishes to facilitate its engagement with all types of agents (cf the Foreword to the consultative document), it should fund and encourage training programmes at all levels and to suit all degrees of expertise so that voluntary sector advisers are able to offer their clients an accurate and comprehensive service in the areas in which they are able to advise.
- 4.4.2. Thus, an adviser working for a debt advice charity would have access to training programmes enabling him or her to give good advice to individuals on tax debt the powers of HMRC to collect debt and impose interest and penalties or agree settlements, the Department's policies and practices on debt collection, court procedures, appeal mechanisms and other safeguards for the debtor, and so forth.
- 4.4.3. Equally there would be signposts or referral mechanisms so that advisers with a limited brief who find themselves being asked about areas outside their expertise can refer the client on to other 'second tier' advisers, whether in the same or a different organisation, who are able to give the advice sought.
- 4.4.4. Such training should not be delivered by HMRC itself, but HMRC should fund others with the appropriate expertise to train others.
- 4.4.5. As is noted in the consultation document (page 15, 7th bullet), HMRC currently provides £2 million per annum grant funding to voluntary sector organisations. Some of that is earmarked for training programmes whereby voluntary sector organisations with a particular expertise can provide training in that area to other organisations. This increases the number of advisers who can give accurate advice to individuals whose compliance is thereby improved, saving time and resource for HMRC. For a modest investment, the returns to HMRC can be considerable.
- 4.4.6. In our view, the greater the investment in second tier advice and training, the greater the overall saving to the general body of taxpayers. The current £2 million investment should be increased substantially in order to generate more accurate data and more timely compliance from the many who cannot afford to instruct paid advisers. After all, 100 times that amount is spent annually by HMRC in providing services for and supporting agents generally (page 15, 5th bullet). If the latter expenditure creates efficiencies for HMRC and those efficiencies

are increased by the self-service system, this argues for reinvestment of the savings in the former.

4.5. Falling short of the required standard

- 4.5.1. The consultation document also envisages a policing or regulatory role for HMRC where an enrolled agent's standards fall below par, with an ultimate sanction of having their enrolment withdrawn.
- 4.5.2. In our view, the risk to HMRC arising from poor performance by an enrolled agent working for the tax charities is small to miniscule, because the tax charities themselves are sufficiently well regulated not to recruit incompetent agents in the first place or, if an agent shows signs of incompetence, to take prompt action.
- 4.5.3. There may be a greater risk of poor performance or bad advice being given by a volunteer without professional qualifications who gives occasional tax advice under the auspices of a non-tax charity. But the charity will almost always require its volunteers to observe certain procedures and undergo certain training before they are permitted to advise the public. If HMRC wanted to monitor the kind of training given to volunteers, and their subsequent performance having undergone the training, they could agree procedures for doing so with the charity concerned. And few individuals who are motivated to offer pro bono advice in a structured way through a charity are likely to engage in misconduct, or to act other than in the best interests of their client.

4.6. A dedicated helpline for volunteer advisers

- 4.6.1. As outlined above, in many cases it would not be necessary or even desirable for voluntary sector advisers to access HMRC's systems via self-serve. Nevertheless, on some occasions (as we know, for example, that Age UK have outlined in their letter responding to this consultation) it would be helpful for them to have some recognised means of contacting HMRC to help someone deal with a tax matter.
- 4.6.2. We recommend that HMRC introduce a dedicated helpline for this purpose. We believe this would be cost effective for HMRC, cutting down on repeat phone calls or written correspondence.
- 4.6.3. Often, all that is needed is for the adviser to help the customer articulate his or her query or problem to HMRC in the same way for example that HMRC already have an established practice of speaking to friends or family of customers who need help because of a language barrier¹.

¹ See http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/contactus/particular-needs.htm#4

[&]quot;HMRC will allow a friend or family member to interpret for customers who don't speak English as a first language. When you contact one of HMRC's helplines they will ask you if you have a friend or family member who is willing to interpret for you and if you are happy for them to do so. This friend or family member needs to be over 16 years of age and should be with you when you call HMRC."

5. The informal agent: family and friends representatives

- 5.1.1. This segment of 'agents' is diverse. Within it are those helping members of their family who may be incapable through old age or infirmity of handling financial matters; carers for people with an impairment that renders them incapable of looking after their financial affairs (such as mental health issues or learning difficulties); holders of powers of attorney; 'appointed persons' who manage direct payments and individual budgets for disabled or elderly people; Court of Protection deputies or receivers; DWP and HMRC appointees who handle benefits or tax credits claims on behalf of their principals; and many others.
- 5.1.2. It matters not whether the agent holds a tax qualification or any appointment that might make them a suitable or obvious person to consult on a tax matter. The HMRC Charter (item 8) protects the status of the informal agent by requiring HMRC to accept that someone else can act for an individual, to respect the representative's right to act for that individual, and to deal with them appropriately.

5.2. Accessing HMRC's systems on behalf of another

5.2.1. About this group, the consultation document says (page 17):

'Improving accessibility for them will increase HMRC's capacity to support customers. HMRC has already started to test different approaches to authorising those groups, with the aim of making it easier for them to act on behalf of customers. The pilots are designed to provide the level of access they will need to transact with HMRC easily, whilst ensuring security of customer information.'

- 5.2.2. The document does not say whether that 'level of access' will extend to self-serve facilities, as for paid agents. It would depend on the extent to which HMRC could regard the particular agent as a trusted intermediary, and whether the agent would want that level of access.
- 5.2.3. Some donees of powers of attorney, for example, are unwilling to take on responsibility for their donor's tax affairs, or their power is restricted so that they cannot do so. On the other hand, a family or friend agent who happens to be a chartered tax adviser, or an HMRC officer, may be perfectly competent in handling their principal's tax affairs. But, as with individuals in general, it is likely to be difficult for HMRC to offer self-serve facilities to this group because of its diverse composition HMRC would have to gauge access appropriately on a case by case basis, which may not be workable.
- 5.2.4. The compromise could be the introduction of a 'view only' facility coupled with a fast-track service for amendments and notifications (as recommended in section 3 above), which the intermediary could then access on the taxpayer's behalf.

5.3. Having one's authority to act or help recognised by HMRC

- 5.3.1. The most important issue for this group is that it should be easy for an individual taxpayer to appoint an informal agent, such as a friend or member of their family, and for the informal representative to contact and deal with HMRC on behalf of their principal.
- 5.3.2. At present, the procedures for authorising agents are cumbersome and restrictive. There are authorisation procedures for professional agents with an ongoing client relationship (the form 64-8), and for the intermediary who assists tax credit claimants on an ad hoc basis (the form TC689), but little else. In practice, though, the tax charities have been able to establish contact relatively easily through the use of informal letters of authorisation signed by clients, or by quoting unique PINs when dealing with HMRC by telephone.
- 5.3.3. We welcome the work HMRC is now doing to improve the flexibility of these procedures and tailor them to different types of representative, while retaining taxpayer confidentiality.
- 5.3.4. We understand that HMRC are looking at the possibility of 'deemed consent', reflecting the DWP's implicit consent mechanisms, along with alternative forms of verbal and written consent, and are to conduct pilots in the autumn. All this is to be welcomed and will particularly assist those agents who are not eligible, or do not wish to enrol, for self-serve.
- 5.3.5. We in LITRG have found the Voluntary Sector Taxes Resolution email service¹ particularly useful when trying to help individual taxpayers in difficulties, particularly with PAYE and debt matters.
- 5.3.6. We would be pleased to assist in whatever way we can as this work develops.

5.4. Formal appointments: attorneys, deputies etc

- 5.4.1. In our response to HMRC's consultation *Incapacitated person: a modern definition*, we set out the various UK formal appointments for dealing with the affairs of such persons as follows:
 - In England and Wales, a holder of an enduring power of attorney, or of a registered lasting power of attorney, or a deputy (formerly receiver) appointed by the Office of Public Guardian;
 - In Scotland, a holder of a registered continuing attorney, or a guardian or intervener with financial powers authorised by the Office of the Public Guardian (Scotland);
 - In Northern Ireland, a holder of an enduring power of attorney which has been registered with the Office of Care and Protection, or a controller appointed by the court;

¹ https://online.hmrc.gov.uk/shortforms/form/PTPR?dept-name=&sub-dept-name=&location=43&origin=http://www.hmrc.gov.uk

- In all jurisdictions, appointees who have been authorised by the Department for Work and Pensions (or Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland) to claim benefits on someone else's behalf.
- 5.4.2. A general Power of Attorney may also be used to allow the appointed person to obtain information from HMRC about the donor's tax affairs¹, but the authority conferred by such a power ceases if the donor becomes mentally incapable of managing their affairs. Moreover, we understand it cannot be used to delegate full conduct of one persons tax affairs to another (eg, the signing of a tax return).
- 5.4.3. We said in our response to the *Incapacitated Person* consultative document that HMRC needed to recognise all formal appointments, making it easy for the holders to contact and deal with HMRC on behalf of their principals, and ensuring internal guidance is up to date. At present it is difficult for holders of powers of attorney to deal with HMRC, and internal guidance is out of date which may account for some of the practical difficulties.
- 5.4.4. Cases that have been drawn to our attention suggest that different tax offices have different policies on how they deal with attorneys. Some accept photocopies of powers of attorney, others only accept certified copies (which cost the attorney £15 to obtain and once sent to HMRC are rarely returned). Some correspond directly with the attorney, others continue to correspond with the donor of the power which causes confusion and results in costly inefficiency for all concerned.
- 5.4.5. HMRC should pay particular attention to easing their procedures surrounding powers of attorney, and ensure that they are consistently followed across the organisation. In particular HMRC should deal directly with the Office of the Public Guardian when verifying such appointments, which would obviate the need for the appointees to incur added expense in proving their entitlement to act as such.

LITRG 16 September 2011

¹ See for example HMRC's Information Disclosure Guidance: http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/manuals/idgmanual/IDG52250.htm