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Fighting for job security and public services

Colette Smith, your lead Customer Service Group negotiator, examines the Public Accounts Committee's critical report of HMRC.

On 28 February 2024, the Public Accounts Committee issued a highly critical report on HMRC. The report highlighted ongoing issues that members are already familiar with and expressed disappointment in the continued deterioration of services since the last report in January 2023. The report noted that 62.7% of all calls now wait over eight minutes to speak to an advisor, indicating a five-year decline trend. The committee emphasised the unprecedented number of written submissions reflecting taxpayers' frustration with service quality and its impact on business.

Effect of reduced staffing on public services

Additionally, the committee highlighted that taxpayers strive to comply with tax obligations, but HMRC's decisions to close customer support channels pose challenges. Limited resources in the form of reduced budgets from the treasury hinder HMRC's ability to meet increased demand, particularly in customer services, where attrition rates exceed 14% and recruitment is virtually non-existent. Members face pressure to do more with fewer resources, leading to the use of monitoring tools to oversee staff excessively in pursuit of challenging KPIs.

The shift towards digital solutions has raised concerns among PCS members, fearing barriers for individuals facing digital exclusion. Rising error and fraud rates, estimated at £1.1 billion in 2021, have also been attributed to challenges in public engagement with HMRC.

In operational areas like PT operations, HMRC has introduced alternative methods such as an annualised hours system where employees must complete a specific number of hours per year before participating in flexible working arrangements. While HMRC proposes a 1% pay increase to compensate for the removal of flexible working rights, PCS holds a different perspective.

Overall, the Public Accounts Committee's report reflects PCS's concerns over the past decade regarding HMRC's lack of planning. PCS acknowledges that this not only impacts on our members but also effects the tax paying public, potentially leading to individuals and businesses not getting the necessary assistance they require and thus impacting negatively on the economy.

The working conditions in some parts of HMRC, namely Customer Services Group (CSG), have resulted in many members leaving the department to find employment elsewhere, with HMRC relying on agency staff to pick up the shortfall, but this is only a sticking plaster to fix a far deeper issue.

Following the PAC report, HMRC CSG decided to close more of its telephony lines, a move that sparked a significant media and political backlash and was perceived to be short sighted. Following this, within 24 hours HMRC made an unprecedented U-turn, reversing this decision but only after intervention from senior politicians.

PCS believes those same politicians need to be allocating further investment to HMRC in order to uphold services to the public at the highest level. PCS remains committed to advocating for member rights and investment in the workforce and department serving the tax-paying public.

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