



**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Helpline hell as taxman admits service is not good enough

The self-assessment deadline is looming but HMRC's phone system is in chaos

Anna Mikhailova Published: 14 December 2014



Boiling point: many callers face lengthy waits or are even cut off (Marilyn Neaves)

PEOPLE who phone HM Revenue & Customs can be put on hold for more than 40 minutes, or simply cut off, according to damning research published today by the consumer group Which?.

It said the government department's chaotic phone system is "a lottery", while HMRC itself admitted that it "isn't good enough" that taxpayers struggle to get through at busy times.

Researchers at Which? made 100 calls to the tax department's self-assessment and general inquiries helplines, but nearly a third were cut off by the automated system "before we could speak to anyone". Callers were told the helpline was "very busy".

For the 71 calls that did get past the automated system, it took an average 18 minutes to speak to a "real person". One caller was left waiting for 41 minutes.

Richard Lloyd, executive director of Which?, said: "People could face lengthy waits or even be cut off when trying to get assistance from HMRC's helplines. With large numbers of people soon to be seeking help

with their self-assessment tax returns, we want to see HMRC doing more to monitor and improve their call waiting times."

Which? conducted the research in the run-up to the self-assessment tax return deadline on January 31 for online tax returns for the 2013-14 tax year, which ended on April 5, 2014.

The research found calls made later in the day took longer to answer and had a higher chance of being cut off.

HMRC's automated system also struggled with certain words and phrases. For example, it was fine to ask a query about "my tax code", but the question: "Do I need to pay tax on Premium Bond winnings?" caused confusion — the system asked if the caller wanted to change their name or was inquiring about a VAT surcharge notice.

David Hickson of the Fair Telecoms Campaign said: "An interactive conversation by phone will continue to be the most effective way of resolving queries and difficulties. We fear the helplines are both under-resourced and configured in ways that are not properly responsive to the uncertainty that must be part of every telephone inquiry."

In a separate survey by Which?, one in five people who had contacted HMRC in the past year said the process was difficult.

HMRC said: "Some of our customers can struggle to get through on our helplines at very busy times. This isn't good enough, and we are working hard to improve the range of services we provide.

"This year we are introducing new technology to help us answer more calls quicker at busy times, and we are improving the digital services we offer so more customers can find all they need online.

"There is more to do, and we are committed to improving the service we offer all our customers at all times to help them find advice and support when they need it."

People using the online self-assessment service for the first time must first register on the [gov.uk](http://gov.uk) website. It can take up to seven working days, or up to 21 days if you live abroad, to set up an online account because HMRC posts an "activation code" to you.

This delay is the cause of many a headache for those who leave filing to the last minute and then have to wait for the activation code.

