

VMD switchboard service unavailable: Update – now working

[unable to retrieve full-text content]The VMD switchboard is now up and running.

HMRC to stop automatically sending paper Self Assessment returns

Self Assessment customers will no longer receive automatic paper returns, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has today announced, as part of efforts to encourage customers to take advantage of the online service and cut unnecessary use of paper.

Increasing numbers of people expect to engage with HMRC digitally. Last year alone, 94% of HMRC's customers filed their return online and HMRC recently saw a 110% increase in customers registering to communicate digitally. Last year HMRC automatically sent out more than 500,000 returns.

Now, taxpayers will still be able to file a paper return if they choose but HMRC will encourage those who are able to file online to do so. The environmentally-friendly measure means that from April, instead of automatically receiving a paper return, taxpayers who have filed on paper in the past will now receive a short notice to file. If they still wish to file on paper they can download a blank version of the return or call HMRC to request one.

The notice to file will tell taxpayers we intend to communicate with them digitally and provide them with information about managing their tax affairs through their Personal Tax Accounts.

As customers visit their Personal Tax Account online we will request their agreement to communicate digitally by default and, if they consent, subsequent communication, including statutory notices, will be provided digitally.

Where HMRC can identify taxpayers whose personal circumstances mean they cannot file online, they will continue to receive a blank paper return.

Angela MacDonald, HMRC's Director General for Customer Services said:

Most customers manage their tax affairs online. It's easy, secure

and available 24 hours a day. Customers can also sign up for email alerts and online messaging. It doesn't even have to be done all in one go – they can stop, save what they've done, and pick up where they left off later.

We are working hard to stop the use of unnecessary resources which have an environmental impact; that's why we're reducing the use of paper as much as possible.

Digitisation remains an HMRC priority but we're still committed to giving taxpayers the ability to choose what's best for them, so those who want to file a paper return can still do so.

These efforts are part of a larger HMRC initiative to reduce unnecessary paper with Annual Tax Summaries now also moving to taxpayers' Personal Tax Accounts. The summaries of what PAYE taxpayers have paid were posted to 22 million people last year.

Paper will also be reduced when HMRC stops providing more than three million blank P45s and 11 million P60s in April. The vast majority of employers already use their existing HMRC, free or commercial software to produce P45s and P60s for their employees.

- This change does not prevent the tax payer filing a paper return if they choose to do so.
- There will be a small number of tax payers (between 1% and 3%) for whom the nature of their return or their personal circumstances means that filing digitally will not be an option in 2020 to 2021. Where we can identify them in advance, we will provide them with a paper return in April 2020.

[It's a national effort to win coronavirus fight, we all have crucial part to play](#)

A version of this article first appeared in [The Sun](#) on 15 March 2020.

As a country we are in the fortunate position of being home to an extraordinary wealth of experts – scientists, researchers and academics – all at the forefront of their chosen fields.

These are people who have dedicated their whole lives to studying, researching, and honing their knowledge in their chosen area of expertise, including in vaccines and pandemics; knowledge that is now being applied to

tackling COVID-19.

Now, as we collectively face down a global pandemic, we need these experts more than ever. And we need their voices, and their advice, to be full, frank and honest – our approach to this virus will always be guided by the scientific evidence.

Of course, every virus is different. But what we do know is that epidemics are like a pole vaulter taking flight: the outbreak starts slowly, takes off rapidly, reaches a peak and then comes back down to earth. Right now, we need to flatten that peak.

We have now entered the delay phase of this pandemic and we want to delay the spread and reduce its efforts. This is response to the current spread of the disease in the UK that reflects the fact that we are few weeks some countries in terms of the outbreak of the disease.

By taking steps to squash the peak, we will be better able to look after the NHS and put it in a stronger position to respond in the months to come – and make sure it is better equipped to offer better care to those people for whom this disease has more chance of being fatal.

We all have a crucial part to play. This is a mild disease in most people. But it is paramount that we do everything possible to protect ourselves, to protect others, and protect the NHS.

This means heeding the health advice and using common sense. If you have even mild symptoms of coronavirus infection – including a new continuous cough and or a high temperature – then you [stay at home](#) and don't leave your house for 7 days from when your symptoms started.

For people without symptoms we have 4 simple words of advice:

Keep. Washing. Your. Hands.

Wash them often, wash them even when wouldn't you normally wash them, and wash them with soap for 20 seconds at a time.

I've opted for Prince's, Raspberry Beret as my own personal handwash song. You can choose your own.

The situation that the Prime Minister, the Chief Medical Officer and I outlined last week is a sobering one.

I am certain many people will be understandably worried and anxious, because these are not normal times. COVID-19 is a new virus that we don't have immunity against, and we don't yet have a vaccine for.

Since the very first cases were reported in China in January, the science and medical community have been united in a common purpose: protecting lives by providing evidence-based advice to elected leaders on when we should act, how we should act and why we should act.

This is going to be a national effort. Together, we all need to be brave enough to stay calm, act rationally and follow the science. We will need to take care not to spread the disease and take care of each other.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency receives £1.4 billion budget boost for world-leading Weybridge Laboratory

The UK's world-leading scientific and veterinary capability will be enhanced after a £1.4 billion investment boost to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) to protect the country against the increasing threats of animal and plant diseases.

The new funding, announced by the Chancellor in the [Budget](#) on Wednesday 11 March, will be used to redevelop and future-proof the current Weybridge facility, a unique site with specialist research and laboratory facilities and capabilities for animal health science and disease control. The money will ensure the UK continues to be a world-leading science capability and safeguard the agency's role in fighting current and emerging animal and plant diseases.

The APHA is responsible for safeguarding animal and plant health for the benefit of the people, the environment and the economy. This has included providing scientific evidence and advice to government in controlling outbreaks of Foot and Mouth Disease in 2001, testing several thousand samples for Avian Influenza (bird flu) during outbreaks in the winter of 2016/17 and recent research that has paved the way for field trials of a cattle vaccine to combat bovine tuberculosis (bTB). APHA is currently supporting PHE in the government's response to the coronavirus outbreak.

This investment will help the UK economy by protecting against animal and human disease risks. The UK currently export £4.2bn of livestock, meat and meat products, dairy and animal by-products per year. These exports are safeguarded by the services that APHA provides and the investment will enhance the UK's international reputation as a safe trading partner in the food and farming sectors, supercharging the opportunities for global trade. This investment will also attract high-quality scientists and technical experts, making it an even more attractive place to work.

Christine Middlemiss, UK Chief Veterinary Officer said:

It is great to see that the UK's science capability is being recognised and invested in even further by the government.

The UK is already a global leader in animal health science and we have some of the best scientists in the world. This investment will safeguard and amplify our ability to collaborate and influence globally .

Lord Gardiner, Defra Biosecurity Minister said:

This new Government investment reflects APHA's world leading reputation and essential role at the heart of UK science, disease prevention, and rapid response to disease outbreaks. I am delighted as this funding will help ensure the UK continues to be a leading voice globally on science and biosecurity".

Chris Hadkiss, Chief Executive of APHA said:

This is fantastic news for everyone at APHA and the wider Defra group as this gives the financial investment to ensure we can continue to enhance our crucial and valuable role in animal health science and in providing our emergency response to disease outbreaks.

The financial commitment also highlights how the government recognises our international reputation as experts in animal and plant health science and the critical role we have in protecting the UK and the economy from animal disease risk.

APHA Weybridge provides expert advice to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the World Health Organisation, as the international reference laboratory for a large range of animal diseases.

Peter Lauener appointed Chair of the Student Loans Company

The Department for Education has today confirmed that Peter Lauener has been appointed as Chair of the Student Loans Company (SLC), taking over the role from Professor Andrew Wathey, who has held the position on an interim basis since 1 February 2020. Professor Wathey replaced Christian Brodie, who served as Chair for six years from January 2014.

Peter is currently Chair of the Construction Industry Training Board, Chair of Newcastle Colleague Group (NCG) and a Non-executive director at Sheffield

Children's NHS Foundation Trust. He has previously held the roles of Chief Executive Officer, Education and Skills Funding Agency (EFSA) and Chief Executive Officer, Institute for Apprenticeships (IFA). He was previously interim Chief Executive of the Student Loans Company between November 2017 and September 2018.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan said: "I am pleased to welcome Peter as the new Chair of the Student Loans Company. His knowledge and experience of the sector means he is well placed to lead the organisation as it continues to provide its important services for students and graduates."

Peter Lauener said: "I am delighted to once again support the Student Loans Company, this time as Chair of the organisation. SLC plays a vital role in enabling almost 2 million students each year to invest in their futures through higher and further education by providing trusted, transparent, and accessible student finance services.

"I am particularly looking forward to reacquainting myself with colleagues from across the organisation, whose dedication to their roles enables SLC to deliver finance services for students, graduates and higher and further education institutions.

Paula Sussex, SLC Chief Executive said: "I am thrilled to be welcoming Peter back to the organisation as we work to fulfil our vision to be widely recognised as enabling student opportunity and delivering an outstanding service to our customers".