



“Government Services (Telecommunication Charges)” proposed bill presented to parliament on Tuesday 20 Feb

At 12:30 pm on Tuesday 20 February 2017, under the “ten minute rule”, Chris Stephens MP will seek leave to introduce a bill to restrict the charges for calls to government advice services.

The **fair telecoms campaign** has been working closely with Mr Stephens on this and is anxious to stress the following points:

ft Government services are mostly provided using 03 numbers, all of which are charged on the same basis as all other “ordinary calls” (i.e. those to 01/02 numbers). We won our campaign to eliminate use of 0845 numbers – the “telephone tax” – a couple of years ago.

In seeking to reduce the costs to callers, focus must therefore be placed on the exceptional “Penalty Charges”, of up to 55p per minute, which are incurred by those who fail to select the most appropriate “Call Plan” to cover all of their ordinary calls.

ft Whenever it is essential that no caller pays for a call, 0800 numbers must be used, despite this providing additional revenue to the telephone companies at the expense of the taxpayer.

The expense of providing 0800 numbers for all government services would however not stop people being ripped-off through “Penalty Charges” on their other calls to ordinary numbers – e.g. to friends, business helplines or their MP’s parliamentary or constituency office.

ft We are wholly opposed to any charge, by the provider, for the genuine use of a telephone enquiry service. Telephone enquiries enable one-to-one human contact to smooth over problems that arise in the course of many transactions. The cost of providing such a service must be built into the price of the transaction, just as with any other “overhead”.

We therefore see the £1.37 per minute charge imposed by UK Visas and Immigration for its international contact centre service as wholly improper. This is not done using a “premium rate” number, as the charge is collected directly from a credit card after the call is in progress.

We strongly argue that the fee for visa applications should be set to cover the costs of providing an efficient and effective service; additional costs incurred when the process requires one-to-one human intervention should not be met by the victims of this failure.

(We also, more strongly, oppose use of premium rate numbers by UKVI to recover the cost of providing immigration status information to the NHS and local authorities – see [“NHS hotline to lunacy”](#). This related, but separate, issue is not covered by Chris Stephens’ bill.)

ft The key point which we wish to see emerge is the recognition that **callers should not incur call charges on calls to “ordinary” (01/02/03 and ordinary mobile) numbers.**

Apart from the failure of some landline providers to cover calls to all mobiles (which is another issue), all telephone services are provided with Call Plans or Call Bundles that will cover all such calls at a reasonable cost - never more than 7p per minute, generally very much less.

The “Penalty Charges” incurred when one goes outside the terms of the chosen arrangement are considerable, on both landlines and mobiles. It is therefore wholly misleading for the impression to be given that these are somehow the “standard” charge.

The appallingly inaccurate and misleading gov.uk web page [“Call charges and phone numbers”](#) however suggests the “approximate” per minute cost of calls to 01/02/03 numbers is “**up to 9p, or 10p or 13p**” (!!) for landlines and “**3p to 55p**” for mobiles. **This is unacceptable.**

