



On Tuesday 20 February 2017, after speaking under the “ten minute rule”, Chris Stephens MP was given leave to introduce a bill to restrict the charges for calls to government advice services.

The full text of his speech is found [here in Hansard](#).

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

The (former) ‘telephone tax’

Government services are now 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. The government no longer derives any income or subsidy from telephone calls.

Telephone company ‘Penalty Charges’

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.

Those who suffer these penalty charges, on ALL their calls to ordinary numbers, are often those who are disadvantaged in other ways. They may well have been misled into thinking that inclusive call plans and bundles are only for the wealthy, those with a good credit rating or those who make a large number of lengthy calls. **This is quite untrue.**

The cost of anything but exceptional use of the telephone is covered, for most callers, by having the right calling plan in place. This point is highlighted by the exceptionally high level of the Penalty Charges which are imposed on calls made outside the terms of a plan or bundle. Premium rates are applied on calls to ‘premium’ numbers, we must avoid this applying to ordinary calls.

We therefore see it as imperative that everybody comes to understand how the telephone call charging system works these days – **callers should not incur an individual call charge on any call to an “ordinary” (01/02/03 and ordinary mobile) number.** It is a disgrace that the gov.uk webpage [“Call charges and phone numbers”](#), and other similar sources present the Penalty Charges as if they represented the normal cost of calling 01, 02 and 03 numbers.

Use of ‘free-to caller’ 080 numbers

Whenever it is essential that no caller pays for a call, 0800 numbers must be used, despite the fact that this mostly provides additional revenue to the telephone companies at the expense of the taxpayer. Where it is imperative to ensure that no caller incurs a “Penalty Charge” or that access is provided to those who may not have a telephone, this public cost is justified.

This obviously applies where processes have to be followed by telephone, or where there is no other alternative to digital access for those who are unable to use the internet.

It is however important to understand that this is an “access” issue. Using 0800 numbers does not actually resolve the issue of Penalty Charges, because these will affect all calls that a victim makes.





Charging for ‘enquiries’

We are wholly opposed to the idea that any organisation may impose a charge, by whatever means, 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 “overhead”. This precludes both use of premium rate numbers and imposition of a direct charge.

The specific provision of legal or detailed technical advice, or the actual execution of a chargeable transaction by telephone, is a separate issue. There may be cases where a “helpline” agent has to restrict the scope of their response to an enquiry, so as avoid it becoming something more.

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. The additional costs incurred when the process requires one-to-one human intervention should not be recovered from the victims of this failure.

There may be some justification for a charge to be imposed in respect of any access to Home Office, as opposed to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, services from Visa applicants who are overseas. There is however no justification for charging UK citizens, and visitors who are in the UK, for enquiries about the visas of spouses who they are hoping to join them.

(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.)

‘Digital’ access to government services

We wholly support moves to enable the more effective conduct of interactions between citizens and the government through ‘digital’ services. The approach of “digital by default” is wholly commendable. There must however be proper consideration of the “default” position and how the minority situation is addressed.

By their nature, benefit services exist to serve exceptional cases. The “universality” of Universal Credit relates to its provisions, not to the population who receive it. The failure to provide a telephone claim line for this benefit seems to be based on an assumption about ready access to ‘digital’ channels that may not be reasonable in relation to those at whom the benefit is aimed.

The Bill proposes the provision of a “guaranteed free-to-caller” telephone service to fill the gap that is left when someone who is required to use a ‘digital’ channel is unable to do so. The specific provision outlined in the presentation of the Bill relates only to the availability of public computer equipment in the relevant local authority area. We would however propose that the principles covering the exceptional provision of 0800 numbers be extended to cover all situations where use of telecommunications for contact with a government office is compulsory.

With specific reference to DWP, this would cover a helpline in relation to initial claims for Universal Credit and lines for the reporting changes of circumstances.

