



NAO Report - Charges for customer telephone lines Comments #1

This report rightly criticises Government Departments for ripping off their customers, whilst pretending that it is not happening, or just not having a clue.

The following are some initial comments on the newly published report - referred to in an article published in time for [a comment to be added at 10:40 pm](#).

All 084 numbers include a Service Charge to the benefit of the person called and at the expense of the caller. The way in which the benefit is obtained and the cost applied may allow many opportunities for obfuscation, but this underlying truth remains.

Furthermore, because of the Service Charge, most telephone companies add an additional "Access Charge" to their own benefit. These two components have always been part of the "bundled" charge for calling these "higher rate" numbers - the forthcoming Ofcom measures will simply make them transparent.

We pay for public services through progressive taxation, it is simply wrong for an additional "Telephone Tax" to be levied on those who use the services.

The arguments about call costs and 03 vs. freephone are confused. All landline and mobile tariffs, even including some PAYG, cover normal calls to normal numbers without any call charge. It is only the few who make calls outside the terms of their arrangement who incur penalty charges, which can sometimes be perverse. It may be that 27% of landline users have a package where the penalty charge for daytime calls to geographic numbers is greater than the premium charge for calls to "higher rate numbers" - but these are people who have chosen a landline package for evening calls only, because they are out using their mobile during the day!

The Department for Work and Pensions clearly has a very low view of its customers because it thinks that they are all happy to pay out-of-plan penalty charges to call 01/02/03 numbers. It also suggests that they use the JobCentre for private telephone calls or make an expensive call to sit in a queue and then ask for a call back. It also seems to be content that it receives very few calls from mobiles, and uses this fact to justify its use of 0845 numbers, when one would suspect that many of its customers cannot afford a landline.

The report does not mention the list of [9 NHS Hospital Trsts](#) who remain in breach of the Direction to cease use of expensive numbers by 21 December 2010. One is surprised that the Department of Health has failed to be transparent about this issue.

Discussion of the offer of alternative numbers, especially in the context of GPs, needs to be handled with care. The GPs who offer geographic alternatives to their 0844 numbers are offering a "two-tier NHS". The cheaper number offers an inferior service, without the option of queuing and other "enhanced" features. The only justification for offering a "higher rate" alternative number is for those who are happy to pay for a better service. This is not permitted in the NHS and is probably questionable in most public services.

The report rightly refers to the former work of the "Contact Council" within the Cabinet Office. Having worked with this group, I was very disappointed that its efforts were suspended and then finally abandoned. I have already offered my assistance to the Cabinet Office in the event that it takes up the challenge presented by the report. I hope to hear quickly that it has indeed taken up the challenge, and perhaps my offer.

