



NAO report signals the end of the "Telephone Tax"

The **National Audit Office** has now published its report "[Charges for customer telephone lines](#)".

It gives many examples of how government departments and public bodies are subsidising their costs at the expense of their customers by applying the "**Telephone Tax**". It gets a little tied up in some of the complex detail of telephone tariffs and complex arrangements with telephone service providers, however the essential feature of the "**Service Charge**", which is applied to all 084 telephone numbers, is not lost.

When calling any 084 telephone number, a Service Charge of between 2p and 7p per minute is paid over to the benefit of the person called. In addition, the telephone company placing the call may add an "**Access Charge**" to its own benefit.

For most callers, calls to 01/02/03 numbers do not attract a call charge, because they are covered by the chosen Call Plan or Bundle - a feature of every tariff. They may be some who choose a plan for Evening-only calls and then incur a penalty charge for making a call during the Daytime, however they are now relatively few. **BT** (and other landline providers) confirm that their fully inclusive plans (e.g. Unlimited Anytime) are those with the most subscribers. Similarly mobile companies confirm that most customers choose a call bundle that meets their needs.

Increasingly, the only calls we actually pay for are those to "higher" and "premium" rate numbers.

We pay for government and public services through progressive taxation. The highly regressive "Telephone Tax", imposed on those who need to use public services, cannot be justified.

One is sickened to read it confirmed that the **Department for Work and Pensions**, whose "customers" are pensioners, the disabled or those on capped incomes, is the most enthusiastic advocate of the "**Telephone Tax**". It even has the nerve to suggest that a pensioner should go to JobCentre in order to enquire about their pension, or make an expensive telephone call and then wait on hold in order to ask an advisor to call them back.

The **Department of Health** did indeed issue Directions that NHS bodies should cease use of expensive numbers by 21 December 2010. A few days ago we published [a list of 9 NHS Hospital Trusts](#) that have failed to comply. We have not yet been thanked for this gesture of transparency.

We continue to work with **NHS England** in the hope of persuading NHS GPs to cease subsidising their telephone systems at the expense of their patients, now that it has been confirmed that there is no impediment to them changing their telephone number within the term of a telephone system contract. If necessary, the terms of their NHS contract, which demanded such a change by 1 April 2011, will have to be enforced.

The **NAO** report makes reference to the use of geographic alternatives to the 0844 numbers still used by some GPs. It is however important to understand the nature of the choice that is being offered to patients - it is the "**Two-tier NHS**". The cheaper number offers an inferior service, without the benefit of queuing to be answered in turn and other "enhanced" features.

We can see why a business may offer an expensive alternative number for those who wish to pay extra for a higher quality of service - we see no place for alternative numbers in public services!

