



Announcement of "The Unbundled Tariff" - effect on NHS providers using 084 telephone numbers

Many NHS service providers, both NHS bodies and contractors, subsidise the cost of their services at the expense of patients, by using 084 telephone numbers.

We see efforts to re-assert the principle that access to NHS services is available to all, without providers imposing charges, as falling into three phases.

1. In April 2004, there was a disastrous failed attempt to address the issue for England. This was explained by the [misleading statement](#) -

"The only special service numbers the NHS will be able to use in future are freephone numbers or those that offer patients a guaranteed low rate call, such as '0845' or '0844' numbers."

There never has been any guarantee that the rate for calls to 084 numbers is or was "low". Very few 0800 numbers are genuinely "freephone" for a universal service such as the NHS, which is available to those who have only mobile phones.

2. In December 2009 the Department of Health issued [Directions to NHS Bodies](#). These were followed by identical [revisions to the terms of GP contracts](#). Changes to the contracts held by NHS Dentists, Pharmacists and Ophthalmologists are awaited. These prohibited use of numbers to which calls are more expensive than equivalent calls to geographic numbers.

A simple review of telephone tariffs shows that there is no 084 number which met this requirement then, nor does so now. The Directions were however covered by [a letter](#) stating:

"Organisations remain free to use non-geographical number ranges such as 084, providing that patients are not charged more than the equivalent cost of calling a geographical number to do so."

Although there is no 084 number which meets this condition, many NHS providers have offered spurious claims which imply that their number is treated specially by all telephone service providers used by their patients. No action has been taken to address this.

3. **Announcement of the "Unbundled Tariff" resolves this issue.**

The revelation that every call to every 084 number is subject to a "Service Charge" of between 2p and 7p per minute, and currently "bundled" with an "Access Charge" of between -2p and 39p per minute, puts the record straight.

NHS Providers who wish to retain their 084 numbers must prepare to meet a regulatory requirement to declare their Service Charge whenever their telephone number is published.

Direct responsibility for the NHS in England is now placed with the [NHS Commissioning Board](#), known as [NHS England](#). Whereas individual Primary Care Trusts and hospital trusts did not have the necessary competence to dismiss spurious claims from contractors and suppliers, we must assume that, in the light of the clarification from [Ofcom](#), this nonsense will swiftly come to an end.

The NHS in Wales followed England with the first two of these steps, but has similarly taken no action to ensure compliance. Those responsible for the NHS in all four countries now have the benefit of the [Ofcom](#) clarification, and we expect them to respond.

See [Map of NHS GPs with 084 numbers](#) and [NHS Bodies using 084 numbers](#).

