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Councils blasted over rip-off phone charges

EXCLUSIVE

By Marc Meneaud

mmeneaud@sundaypost.com

MORE than a third of Scottish councils are charging rip-off phone rates for people trying to get help or pay bills.

A Sunday Post investigation revealed people in 13 of 32 council areas fork out up to 41p a minute to ring their local authority.

Hundreds of thousands of Scots still have to use 0845 numbers — despite them being ditched by Government departments and many private businesses.

Critics have described it as a "telephone tax" on hard-working ratepayers.

Robert Oxley, campaign director of the TaxPayers' Alliance, said: "Charging people via the back door to contact their council is an unacceptable rip-off."

"Whitehall is axing these charges and so should councils — we pay enough for bureaucracy already without a stealth telephone tax adding to that."

About 40% of the councils we surveyed were still using the higher rate numbers. Some say that this will be charged at local rate, but most don't.

Others offer a geographic rate number as well, leaving callers unclear about how much they will be charged and which number they should use.

Perth and Kinross council uses the higher rate code for adult care and mental health services and for people to report they need emergency housing repairs.

Dundee City Council uses 0845 for residents to pay for council tax, while Aberdeenshire uses it for general enquiries and enquiries about homelessness.

Aberdeen and South Lanarkshire councils use the 0845 code for general enquiries and East Ayrshire for the council's helpline.

UK government ministers have already begun a crackdown.

The cabinet office issued new guidelines in December after it was revealed the state was raking in £56 million a year by making people pay up to 41p a minute.



13 of 32 authorities make us pay to call

The guidance said: "It is inappropriate for callers to pay substantial charges for accessing core public services."

Many have now moved to numbers with the 03 prefix, which are charged at the geographic rate, like calls to 01 numbers.

Some councils, including Dumfries and Galloway, East Dunbartonshire and Fife, have also switched.

Fife council leader, Alex Rowley said: "The people in most need of help tend to contact us by phone, and often that's from a mobile which can make it more expensive to call 0845 numbers."

"It was also wrong that the council was making money out of people calling us."

The Government has said it is up to councils to decide whether to charge the higher rate.

Watchdog Ofcom has also said it has no powers to regulate which numbers local authorities use. However, a spokesman said: "We

do encourage public bodies to use 03 numbers."

Perth and Kinross council said premium rate numbers were "primarily used for emergencies."

A spokesman said people using mobile phones could use email or text messaging, which would be charged at standard network rate.

An Aberdeenshire council spokesman said the 0845 numbers were introduced

so residents had a standard number to call. He stressed the council makes no money by using these numbers.

He said: "We note all comments regarding both 0845 and 01 numbers, and continue to investigate all options."

South Lanarkshire said 0845 numbers would be phased out in favour of 03 codes next month.

An Aberdeen City Council spokesman said 0845 and local numbers "gives maximum flexibility in how people call."

A Dundee City Council spokesman said: "This 24 hour payment line is optional. People can also pay online or at offices."

It is wrong that councils make money out of people calling us



IN MY VIEW

DAVID HICKSON
FAIR TELECOMS CAMPAIGN

WE are delighted our campaigning efforts have been joined by others.

Regulations are in place and change is happening. But it is unacceptable to charge for access to council services — and this often has the most impact on those in greatest need.

Anyone calling a 084 or 087 number is making an indirect payment. That is because the costs include an "access charge" paid to their phone company and

a "service charge" paid to the organisation they're calling.

New regulations will mean these two charges will have to be declared from June 2015. We're pleased at this progress, but are still concerned that many are paying too much for their service.

This is often because they don't choose inclusive call plans, wrongly thinking these are only for those who make a lot of calls.

