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WRONG NUMBER

650,000,000 silent calls a year, and just ONE firm fined

The public has had to endure 2.6 BILLION nuisance silent phone calls in the last four years. But only one firm has been fined for breaching guidelines on harassing the public by phone. A spokesman for one pensioners group said *“Unwanted silent calls are driving older people to distraction. They cause genuine anxiety, fear and distress”*.

It's one of the most worrying types of nuisance call

TELECOMS watchdog Ofcom has fined just ONE firm for harassing the public with silent phone calls in the last four years.

That's despite complaints about the practice soaring and it welcoming a decision to raise the maximum fine for persistent offenders from £50,000 to £2 million.

Even then, insurance and home repair company HomeServe — who made almost 15,000 silent calls in just two months last year — was ordered to pay just £750,000 in April, less than half of the maximum punishment.

Silent calls are the sinister side to the flood of nuisance calls swamping the country. They usually result from firms using automated diallers that produce more calls than their staff can handle, or answerphone detection equipment mistaking a “live” voice for a machine and hanging up.

With just deathly silence greeting anyone picking up the receiver, such calls can feel menacing and upsetting.

Silent call complaints, which now account for more than two-thirds of all those made to Ofcom, trebled from 1,132 in January of this year to 3,390 in July.

Ofcom's own figures estimate that in any six-month period, a quarter of the UK's population receive silent calls on their landline, with each household receiving an average of 12.5 every month.

That works out at 660 million calls to our residential landlines every year — a mind-boggling 2.6 BILLION calls in the four year period.

They also admit older and disabled people are more likely to be pestered by them due to the amount of time they spend at home. .

The regulations allow for 3% of a company's calls in any 24 hours to be silent. and for a number to be called again 24 hours later.

Since 2006, Ofcom have had the power to fine companies that flout the rules but to date just 10 firms have been prosecuted, with only one, Homeserve, in the last four years.

Now campaigners and charities have called for tougher rules to end silent calls altogether.

David Hickson of the Fair Telecoms Campaign said:

"What Ofcom is doing is focusing on headline cases, hoping that will frighten the thousands of other companies doing the same thing but it doesn't work."

"Continuing to allow a percentage of silent calls is the killer."

"There's no valid reason for anybody making a silent call. If it's wrong. it's wrong."

"Ofcom have the teeth If they choose to use them and action must be taken to make this wretched business stop."

Lindsay Scott of pensioners charity Age Scotland, added

"Unwanted silent calls are driving many older people to distraction."

"For most, silent calls are an inconvenience but for many older people who spend a much larger part of their day at home they are not just an irritant or nuisance, they cause genuine anxiety, fear and distress."

"Current action isn't effective and until such time as the technology can ensure there is no long, silent wait for anyone, it would be a good idea to suspend the practice completely."

An Ofcom spokesperson said:

"We understand that silent and abandoned calls can cause anxiety and even be frightening for some people."

"Tackling this problem remains a priority for Ofcom and we have taken firm action against companies generating these type of nuisance calls."

"We most recently fined HomeServe £750,000 and are investigating npower and TalkTalk."

"This sends out a strong message to all companies making calls."

Genuine source of deep distress

FOR many people, silent calls are unnerving and even frightening but they are a genuine source of deep distress for May. May isn't her real name. She lives alone and began to experience panic attacks a few years ago.

Various explanations, ranging from a brain aneurysm to early-onset Alzheimer's, were offered before a diagnosis of severe depression was reached.

Just the telephone ringing can be enough to trigger an attack, so being harassed by nuisance calls as she is can have a profound impact.

Said May:

"Even the sound of the telephone ringing was too much for me at first."

"If it's a sales call I become very stressed."

"I want to hang up, but I know they're just doing their job so if I'm short with them or put the phone down, that causes me huge stress as well."

"But the worst calls are the silent ones. I find them very sinister and frightening."

"I'd rather not answer but I feel I have to, in case it's someone phoning to see if I'm home."

"But if I don't answer it might be someone who might try to break in."

Join the fight to stop nuisance calls

Last week, we told how to register your anger and frustration at the current system for dealing with nuisance calls.

With **Mike Crockart**, Liberal Democrat MP for Edinburgh West, we set up an online petition to pressurise the UK Government into action.

We're calling for the regulators' powers to be strengthened to tackle this plague. We also want more action against companies that break the rules.

You can add your voice to those demanding action by visiting www.no2nuisancecalls.net or by filling in the form on the right.

Already the response has been staggering.

The Sunday Post mailbag has been groaning all week with more than 300 forms received on the first day alone, and over 2,000 having arrived by last night.

Added to those of you who have signed up online, that's an incredible response to what is obviously a subject close to your hearts.

Mr Crockart said:

"The volume of people registering on the website has been over-whelming. Around 1,000 signed up online, and we've also had dozens of registrations coming into the constituency office."

"I met with the Assistant Information Commissioner for Scotland on Friday to discuss the various issues surrounding nuisance calls and impressed upon him the level of response we've seen already, and got a reasonable response."

"Together we can demand action."

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TPS Campaign,
The Sunday Post,
DC Thomson & Co Ltd,
10 Annandale Street,
Edinburgh
EH7 4AN

"We the undersigned are fed up with the plague of nuisance calls and call on the Government to take action."

WE the undersigned are fed up with the plague of nuisance calls and call on the Government to take action.	
Forename:	<input type="text"/>
Surname:	<input type="text"/>
Postcode:	<input type="text"/>
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The SUNDAY POST

EXCLUSIVE

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Blight on Britain

TODAY we exclusively reveal the extent to which windfarms are destroying the UK's natural beauty. Our map shows the location of every windfarm in the country, as well as those being built and others still at the planning stage.

And our survey reveals 72% of you are worried about the effect of windfarms on our countryside.

SPECIAL REPORT P47-49

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...just ONE firm fined

THE public has had to endure 2.6 BILLION nuisance silent phone calls in the last four years.

But only one firm has been fined in that time by industry watchdogs for breaching guidelines on harassing the public by phone.

EXCLUSIVE
By Alan Shaw

A spokesman for one pensioners' group said, "Unwanted silent calls are driving older people to distraction."

"They cause genuine anxiety, fear and distress."

Fight to end nuisance calls, page 7.

It's one of the most worrying types of nuisance call

THE SILENT TREATMENT

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By Alan Shaw

ashaw@sundaypost.com

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Forename:

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Postcode:

Email:

Mobile: