

**Universal Credit telephone helpline – 55p per minute**

This message seeks to clarify the issue of the “55p per minute – Universal Credit helpline” as raised on many occasions, including during Prime Minister’s Questions today.

Most **DWP** benefits have an initial claims line using a 0800 number. All 080 numbers are free to call from all telephones, as the full cost of the call is invariably carried by the called party. Because Universal Credit initial claims are made online, rather than by telephone, it has no 0800 number.

The **fair telecoms campaign**, in common with **Citizens Advice** and many other campaigners, believes that a 0800 number should be offered to deal with enquiries about initial claims, as is the case with all other **DWP** benefits.

DWP follows the Guidance issued by the **Cabinet Office**, initially published on Boxing Day 2013: [HMG Guidance - Customer Service Telephone Lines - Use of Number Prefixes](#).

In general, its enquiry lines use numbers beginning 01, 02 or 03. The vast majority of calls to these numbers are made at no cost, because they are covered by inclusive call plans - the way in which we now normally pay for our calls to ordinary numbers. They are also “cost neutral”, neither party meets the costs of the other – this transfer of costs happens with 080, 084 and 087 numbers.

A general switch from 01/02/03 to 0800 numbers would produce a bonanza for the telephone companies, delivering no benefit to the vast majority of callers, at considerable cost to the exchequer. Care must therefore be taken in choosing which services to offer on 0800 numbers.

The **Cabinet Office** Guidance states:

“Free to call’ numbers (080) can be considered in certain circumstances, for example where a department provides a service to callers who are likely to be part of a vulnerable or low income group, particularly when the typical call duration is long and could result in substantial charges.”

We believe that this may fairly be applied to enquiries in the course of claiming a benefit, or if experiencing problems with use of an online system at any stage of the claims process. It should also apply in all situations where a claimant is **required to make a telephone call**. Use of 01/02/03 numbers is however acceptable for non-urgent enquiries which could be made using other means.

The cost of 55p has nothing to do with use of premium rate numbers.

084 numbers, including a “Service Charge” to the benefit of the called party, were formerly used by **DWP**, and other central government departments, but following campaigning by the **fair telecoms campaign** and others this practice has now totally ceased.

It is now common practice for all telephone tariffs (for landlines, contract mobiles and PAYG mobiles) to cover the cost of “ordinary calls” through inclusive plans or bundles. Non-inclusive “ordinary calls” are however subject to a significant “**Penalty Charge**”. This is paid by those who exceed a monthly allowance or call outside the times covered by a plan. The importance of choosing the right plan is however not adequately explained and publicised.

55p per minute is the **Penalty Charge** imposed by **O2** and **Vodafone** for calls to all “ordinary” numbers, those beginning 01, 02 or 03 and those used for standard UK mobile phones. This is the maximum, from a list of severe **Penalty Charge** imposed by all telephone companies.

