

**Universal Credit Helpline – the issues in full,
including the 55p per minute**

This briefing is intended to address the issues surrounding our call for **DWP** to offer a free-to-caller (0800 number) helpline for Universal Credit claims.

Firstly, it must be understood that calls to 01, 02 and 03 numbers are charged in the same way.

The Basics of Number Prefixes, as used for Helplines

The **fair telecoms campaign** secured a great victory when, on Boxing Day 2013, the **Cabinet Office** published "[HMG Guidance - Customer Service Telephone Lines - Use of Number Prefixes](#)".

Compliance with this guidance was mandatory for all Central Government Departments and associated agencies, and strongly advisory for the rest of the public sector.

It established three important principles:

- A. Use of 084 numbers was prohibited
- B. Use of 01/02/03 numbers is the default
- C. Use of 080 numbers must be considered in particular circumstances

This sensibly reflects the reality of telephone call charges:

- A. 084 numbers (in common with "controlled premium rate service" 087 and 09 numbers) cause the caller to incur a 'Service Charge' to the benefit of the called party, plus an 'Access Charge' set by their own telephone service provider.
- B. All 01/02/03 numbers are "cost neutral". They yield nothing to the called party. For the vast majority of callers there is no call charge, because most users cover the cost of these calls through an inclusive call plan or bundle, but see "[Penalty Charges](#)" below.
- C. All calls to 080 numbers (0800 and 0808) are now free-to-caller. The call cost is met in full by the called party.

Given that most calls to 01/02/03 numbers are made at no, or minimal, cost, it would be a bonanza for the telephone companies if 080 numbers were to be adopted in general, rather than 01/02/03 numbers. The telephone companies would be receiving considerable additional revenue, at public expense, for relatively little benefit to citizens.

It is however imperative that 080 numbers be used for those situations where no caller should ever incur any call cost. The **Cabinet Office** Guidance describes these situations as follows:

"... 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".

DWP Policy

DWP applied the **Cabinet Office** guidance by moving all of its 0845 numbers over to 03. In most cases it retained the digits of the old number, but replaced the 0845 with 0345.

It also continued to operate 0800 numbers for the purpose of initial benefit claims. Because initial claims for Universal Credit are actually completed online, it failed to offer a 0800 support number, despite the **Cabinet Office** criteria being met in respect of those applying for Universal Credit.





The position of the fair telecoms campaign on DWP

We fully support the principles laid out by the **Cabinet Office**.

We have opposed those who have called for 0800 numbers to be used in general. A good example is found in an adjournment debate on 12 November 2012, where this possibility was raised and rejected, in this extract from Col 683 ([see Hansard](#)) *“The long-standing campaigner and expert David Hickson and the fair telecoms campaign take the same view—that 03 numbers are ‘a perfectly acceptable option for normal engagement between citizens and public bodies’”*.

In relation to the specific issue of the helpline used for those claiming Universal Credit, our position has also been clear. When presenting his **“Government Services (Telecommunication Charges)” Bill** on 21 February 2017, **Chris Stephens MP (SNP)** said at Col 871 ([see Hansard](#)): *“David Hickson of the fair telecoms campaign ... tells me that the campaign fully supports the use of 0800 numbers, and the consequent bonanza for telephone companies, in cases when it is essential that nobody pays for a call.”*

We strongly hold the view that the **Cabinet Office** criteria for use of a free-to-caller (0800) number are fully met in respect of calls for help with claims for Universal Credit, as with other benefits. This would require an additional helpline to cover enquiries at the initial claims stage – as is the case with all other **DWP** benefits.

In relation to the current state of the Universal Credit pilot roll-out, we are persuaded to go one step further by joining a call from **Citizens Advice** – see [“To fix Universal Credit, we recommend: ... Make the Universal Credit helpline free of charge, at least until the roll-out is complete”](#).

We question the “at least”, because we could foresee a situation in which the lessons from the piloting of Universal Credit have been learned and applied, and so the need for a free-to-caller helpline would only apply at the initial stage. It is not our place to comment on the extent to which Universal Credit has so far failed to meet its laudable objectives. We do however note the evidence that all claimants currently have an exceptional need for telephone support.

On a wider point, there are a number of other situations where the conditions to satisfy the need for a free-to-caller helpline are met in respect of **DWP**, but not currently applied in practice.

Without detailing every case, we would say that when a call to a helpline is **required**, i.e. there is no other way of addressing a situation, then this must be to a 0800 number. Two examples are:

- All cases where a claimant is **required** to make a telephone call to arrange an appointment
- Cases where a claimant has to make **urgent contact** and receive an **urgent response** – notably to report that a promised payment has not been received and resolve the situation.

On a positive note, we must record our commendation of how **DWP** dealt with the period when mobile companies imposed charges on 0800 calls. Its commitment to the relevant principles was demonstrated by it striking a financial deal with all of the leading mobile operators, which enabled them to waive the charges on calls to **DWP** 0800 numbers.

On consideration of the points made here and elsewhere, we look for a similar commitment to the principles outlined in **Cabinet Office** Guidance, by offering a 0800 number for Universal Credit.





Penalty Charges – ‘55p per minute’

With a few exceptions ([see below](#)) there has been a significant culture change in the way in which we pay for calls to ordinary numbers – those beginning 01/02/03 and normal UK mobile phones.

Calls to these numbers are covered by inclusive Call Plans and Call Bundles. Calls outside the terms of the consumer’s chosen plan or bundle are subject to a “**Penalty Charge**”.

Each operator and tariff has slightly different terms (we have an extensive detailed table), but the essential principle is the same across the board –

it is vital to ensure that all of your calls to ordinary numbers are covered by your plan or bundle, because the penalty for calling outside these terms is significant.

Even though the overwhelming majority of calls to ordinary numbers are made within the terms of plans or bundles, it is still common to see tables of call costs presented in total ignorance of this fact and with **Penalty Charge** conflated with the low rates offered by the exceptional cases.

A classic example of this misrepresentation is found with <https://www.gov.uk/call-charges>. This table includes some totally false information and is generally wholly misleading.

Many telephone companies themselves fail hopelessly in reflecting the principle stated above. Whilst some consumers may be wary of being persuaded to choose a plan that is too inclusive (and consequently a little more expensive) we believe the reality is that the telephone companies do very well out of the **Penalty Charges**.

The rates of **Penalty Charge** vary. On mobiles the maximum is 55p per minute (**O2** and **Vodafone**) with the other leading providers just below – **EE** (including **Orange** and **T-Mobile**) at 50p per minute, **Three** and **Virgin Mobile** at 45p per minute. On landlines, the rates are modelled on those of **BT** and split into two, with a per-call setup fee (around 21p) and a per-minute rate (12p).

Our campaigning position is to help the minority who pay **Penalty Charges** to get onto the right plan or bundle. We believe **Ofcom** needs to intervene, both with general guidance on the issue and with specific measures, at least to ensure that the telephone companies explain the situation more clearly.

Whilst that position is in line with our suggestion that use of free-to-caller numbers be severely limited, it does not contradict it.

There will always be those who fall outside the terms of their chosen plan or bundle and there are some calls on which the penalty they incur must be prevented. Whilst landline call plans are generally limited only by the time of day and day of week when the call is made, many mobile bundles are limited by the number of minutes allowed. An exceptionally long call (especially when much of the call duration is waiting on hold) will readily consume a month’s allowance for someone on a tight budget. This issue remains for now, but we propose a solution ([see below](#)).

Exceptions

Unlike other PAYG deals, those offered by Three and O2 are not based on use of bundles.





Our proposed solution to the “on hold” cost issue

We have long demanded that when any call centre cannot answer calls within a reasonable period (say a maximum of 5 minutes), then the caller should be presented with the option of an automated call-back, at the time when their call would have reached the front of the queue. Systems that deliver this functionality are widely available and widely used.

We see it as essential for **DWP** to implement such a system, because the irregular pattern of demand for its call centre services is such that there is often a long waiting time.

Given that advanced call-back systems commonly fail to obtain a reply from the called party, we believe that it is reasonable for a caller to accept their responsibility to be ready to answer the call back (if that is what they requested). We would think it reasonable that a call would be abandoned if the call-back was not answered promptly.

This is the complete opposite of the present “call back” situation, where a call back can only be offered after a caller has been connected with an agent – and probably already incurred most of the cost of the total call.

Our demand here is limited, so callers will always have to make the call, and possibly incur some cost. This would apply to the duration of the call during which the nature of the service requested, and the terms of the service, were explained by message and the time taken to go through the process of requesting a call back. Furthermore, if the expected wait time was not above the limit at which the call-back option was activated, then this solution would not be in effect.

This solution addresses two issues. Firstly, there is the cost incurred when hanging-on on a “dead” line. Secondly, there is the inconvenience of being engaged in a telephone call – listening to nothing – for a long period. The second of these would be addressed if the facility were deployed on calls to free-to-caller numbers, however the priority must be to address the first.

At present, such systems have to be deployed within the call centre itself. Given the sophisticated nature of telecoms technology at all levels, we see no essential reason why this facility could not be offered by telephone companies to their customers.

