"Dialight Robbery" - 3 pages from the Sun

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£56M PHONE SCANDAL

DIALIGHT ROBBERY

- Govt's 'helpline' rip-off
- Bereaved among victims

By TOM NEWTON DUNN, Political Editor

DESPERATE callers including crime victims and the bereaved were forced to fork out £56million last year — dialling Government helplines at premium rate.

They were among 131million callers charged up to 41p per minute to access compassionate services, a report says.

Three out of five calls to ministry helplines are charged at a higher rate, the Public Accounts Committee probe found.

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SCANDAL OF GOVT HELPLINES

CHARGED £26M TO STAY ON HOLD

A total of 365 customer phone lines for Central Govt services. Of these...

40 are Freephone numbers

205 use less expensive geographic or equivalent numbers

120 use higher rate numbers

Of the 120 higher premium rate lines, 59 are for services that help vulnerable and low-income groups. These include:

Bereavement Service helpline
0845 606 0265

Victim Support helpline
0845 30 30 900

All 0845 numbers charge...

Up to 10.5p per minute from a landline

Up to 41p per minute from a mobile

(Depends on service provider, where you're calling from)

Other services for the disadvantaged that use premium rate lines:

- HM Revenue and Customs
- Disability Living Allowance helpline
- Pension Service
- Maternity Allowance
- Universal Credit
- CAFCASS - The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service
- HMRC's Blind Person's Allowance
- Student Loans Company
- National Offender Management Service
- Pension Tracing Service
- Redundancy Payments Service helpline

Of the 208 million public calls to central Government departments in 2012-2013

3 out of 5 were to higher rate numbers

Total made from premium rate Government calls: £56 million

CALLERS to premium rate Government phone helplines were charged £26million while held in QUEUES, a report reveals today.

By TOM NEWTON DUNN, Political Editor

Of the 208million calls made to the services in the last financial year, 131million cost up to 41p per minute.

That landed taxpaying callers with a £56million bill – almost **HALF** of which was racked up as they held for replies.

In another outrage, profits from the lines don't even go back to the taxpayer. Instead ministers let private contractors who run them trouser all the cash they reap.

Of the 365 customer phone lines for central government services, 120 use the expensive numbers, an investigation by the Public Accounts Committee discovered.

Half of those are for services that help the vulnerable and poorly paid – including people newly laid off from work, the blind, the elderly and hard-up students.

They also include Victim Support, the Bereavement Service, Disability Living Allowance helpline and Pension Service.

Committee chairman Margaret Hodge blasted the "unacceptable" rip-off, saying: "Customers of government services should be able to contact them easily and cheaply.

"There should be low-cost alternatives for those used by a lot of vulnerable people."

Only 40 of the helplines are freephone, with the remaining 205 at normal rates. Only the Dept for Work and Pensions consistently uses automated messages to warn callers about high phone charges.

It also emerged ministers haven't asked line operators how much profit they make.

Meanwhile customer service standards were also deemed unacceptable. The average waiting time for HM Revenue and Customs was seven minutes earlier this year.

Wrong

Richard Lloyd, executive director of consumer group Which?, said: "It's ridiculous people face a bumper bill to call a public body, especially when they have to hold.

"This practice has been costing cash-strapped consumers millions."

TaxPayers' Alliance chief executive Matthew Sinclair said: "It's time ministers scrapped these charges. We pay enough for government bureaucracy already."

Officials last night admitted the rip-off lines were wrong and claimed a push to move all services online will help.

A Cabinet Office spokesman said: "We agree it is inappropriate for vulnerable people to pay high charges for accessing vital public services and we are clear that a more consistent approach is needed."

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Help after husband died cost 41p a min

BERYL Hassall, 83, struggled to get pension advice after her war hero husband Gerry died — and could not believe Bereavement Service calls can cost 41p a minute.

She said: "Pensioners like me are living hand-to-mouth as it is, without shelling out for premium rate calls."

Beryl, of Birmingham, added: "This will only add to their list of grief and worries — which is already bound to be long. I don't know how this government sleeps at night."

Call left me needing another student loan

IT engineer James Bensley is trying to build a career after university – but was hit by a big bill after ringing the Student Loans Company.

He said: "I assumed calls were free or just a few pence a minute. When my mobile phone bill arrived I almost needed another loan to pay it."

James, 25, of Southampton, said: "It's outrageous the government uses premium rates on services used by the most vulnerable and desperate people in society."

Victim billed £30 for 3 chats about crime

WORRIED Charlotte Edir phoned Victim Support for help three times after she was harassed by an ex — and was charged more than £10 for each call.

The bank worker, 28, of Hastings, East Sussex, said: "I was shocked and appalled. Three calls doubled my month's phone bill."

Cops suggested Charlotte use the helpline as she had no one to chat to about her fears. But she said: "I feel like I was taken advantage of at my most vulnerable."

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THE Sun SAYS

Phone rip-off

IT is outrageous we are charged premium rates to call helplines for Government departments funded by taxpayers.

Especially when those phone fees don't even replenish Treasury coffers – they go to private firms.

It is even more sickening that some lines that charge the most are specifically for the recently bereaved or victims of crime, who will rack up bills even while waiting on hold.

Consumer Minister Jo Swinson plans to force big retailers to scrap premium rate lines for customer complaints.

But Government departments are somehow exempt from the same ban.

This is rank hypocrisy.

Some MPs say the vulnerable and poor must never pay over the basic rate to call a Whitehall department.

They are absolutely right.

Until then contractors are ripping off society's weakest people . . . with Government approval.