fair telecoms campaign **press cutting**

Observer 15 July 2018 – Call to ban council helplines that rip off pensioners / Scandal of vital public services still using premium rate numbers

A major feature piece, covering one area of work by the **fair telecoms campaign**, appears on p50 of the Observer.

It is preceded by the following "News" item, highlighting the issue and signposting the feature article.

Call to ban council helplines that 'rip off' pensioners

Anna Tims

People around the UK are paying exorbitant bills for premium-rate phone lines to contact councils for essential services.

Three years ago the government told local authorities to stop using premium-rate lines, but more than 30 councils still advertise 0845 numbers, which can cost 65p a minute.

In Wiltshire, a disabled pensioner was charged £80 for ringing an emergency adult care helpline while rough sleepers were invited to call a 63p-a-minute number to get access to the council's severe weather facilities. In Nottinghamshire this month a council tenant incurred a £47 bill for reporting damage caused by the local estate management service.

Campaigners say that the policy disproportionately affects the elderly and disadvantaged, who don't have access to the internet. It comes as councils outsource core services to private contractors.

"In essentially every case, use of an 084 number is a rip-off and in some cases it is discriminatory against those who have to use the telephone," said David Hickson of the Fair Telecoms Campaign (FTC), which is lobbying councils to abolish them.

Businesses are prohibited from using premium-rate numbers for after-sales customer services, but the ban does not affect public bodies. Government guidelines merely declare their use "inappropriate" for core services.

Councils claim that they make no profit from the charges, most of which go to callers' mobile phone service providers, and those contacted by the *Observer* claimed to have been unaware of the high costs. Three of them, including Wiltshire, have since changed the phone lines to a standard-rate number.

According to the FTC, most councils agree to ditch premium-rate numbers when challenged. "We must continue to campaign for use of these numbers to be eradicated, except where a service charge can be justified," said Hickson. "The only real winners are the telephone companies."

ON OTHER PAGES

Scandal of premium-rate lines for vital public services Cash, page 50

An image of the feature follows – it is published online at this link - https://www.theguardian.com/money/2018/jul/16/premium-rate-phone-lines-still-used-vital-public-services-councils

It refers to a list of 33 cases published by the fair telecoms campaign – this is found at Rip-off surcharge on local authority payment lines.

What is charged

65p *a minute ... for rough sleepers to access Wiltshire council's severe weather plan by mobile during the heavy February snows*

63p *a minute ... for a resident to report an inaccessible disabled toilet on her estate to an outsourced contractor for Medway council*

60p *a minute ... charged to all Hounslow tenants who want to pay their rent by mobile phone*

For many older users without the internet or a landline, an 0845 number can rack up a huge bill if they are held in a queue. Alamy

Scandal of vital public services still using premium-rate phone lines

Callers facing huge mobile phone bills as several councils flout government call guidelines

Anna Tims

Peter Codner was in crisis. The retired barrister is confined to a wheelchair following a stroke and when one night he needed urgent assistance, he made several calls to Wiltshire council's out-of-hours adult care centre. The SOS cost him dear. Not until his mobile phone bill arrived did he realise he had been charged £80.

"The emergency number I'd been given was an 0845 one and I had no idea it was premium rate," he says. "They have a queuing system, so to start with you are one millionth in the queue and then the seasons change and you are 999th. When I needed to call back, I had to go through the same system. If I'd known it was going to cost me an arm and a leg I might have just sat and waited until somebody in the building noticed they hadn't seen me for the last few weeks."

Codner is one of thousands of people across the country being ripped off by premium-rate telephone numbers used for essential public services, despite government attempts to eliminate them. Many are disadvantaged residents who don't have access to the internet or a landline and need to use a mobile.

0845 numbers can cost up to 65p a minute from a mobile, depending on the service provider, and in 2014 the government banned businesses from using them for after-sales helplines. A year later, the Financial Conduct Authority prohibited financial institutions from doing the same.

However, neither affected public services. Instead, the government merely issued guidelines stating it is inappropriate for callers to rack up costs when trying to access core services, and recommending public bodies and third-party service providers switch to standard-rate 03 numbers.

Three years after the guidelines were published, over 30 councils are still operating 0845 numbers for services, including rent and council tax payments. Most have outsourced the services to third-party contractors who operate the phone lines and benefit from the revenue – some of which fail to outline the cost of calling as required by telecoms regulator Ofcom.

"There are very few, if any, cases where it may be justified," says David Hickson of the Fair Telecoms Campaign (FTC).

Wiltshire council has refunded Codner and discontinued the 0845 number in favour of a standard-rate line following pressure from the FTC and the *Observer*.

The council had advertised the same premium-rate number on Twitter when inviting rough sleepers to access its severe weather emergency plan during the snows of February. Anyone ringing it from a mobile would have had to pay up to 65p a minute. The council blamed an error when challenged by the FTC and promised to direct callers to the alternative local-rate number.

Although premium-rate numbers rack up rich revenues, councils scarcely see any of it. The main beneficiaries are the mobile phone operators, which charge up to 58p to put through a call, on top of the service charge levied by the owner of the line, which can be up to 7p a minute.

'To start with, you are one millionth in the queue, then the seasons change and you are 999th'
Peter Codner, pensioner

"Generally ... the council will be paying the telephone company to provide a service – for example, routing or re-routing calls," says Ofcom.

"It's probably true councils aren't receiving revenues from these numbers. But those that the telephone company receives from an 084 number could reduce the amount it needs to charge the council for providing the service. One option would be an 03 number, charged at a geographic rate and preferred by Cabinet Office guidance. But this could be more expensive for the council than an 084 number."

Many councils seem unaware of the cost of these phone lines. Last month a disabled resident on Twitter was directed by Medway council to an 0845 number when she tried to report an inaccessible disabled lavatory on her estate. The call would cost up to 63p a minute from a mobile and since the council outsourced its estate management services to a third party, all residents have had to call the premium-rate number.

The council says that a non-geographic number was chosen to avoid confusing the public with an unfamiliar dialling code, as the contractor was not locally based, and claims that neither it, nor the contractor, made any money from it. The number has now been replaced by a standard-rate line after pressure from the FTC.

Most of the premium-rate numbers used by councils are operated by independent contractors, which means residents who want to settle their council tax, or a parking fine, can face an unexpected levy.

Council tenants in Hounslow are unique in that they have to pay up to 60p a minute to pay their rent if they call from a mobile. Although that is in breach of government guidelines, the council is unapologetic. Its leader, Steve Curran, says: "This number is provided by a third-party payment service provider and customers are warned about the charges. The council encourages residents at every opportunity to use alternative payment methods such as online or via direct debit if they wish to avoid these charges. We regularly tender services with third-party providers to obtain the best value."

A premium-rate number is the only option available for South Oxfordshire residents who want to pay their council tax by phone. The council says it will review its use when it updates its payment software later this year, although 0845 can be switched to 03 alternatives within hours. South Northamptonshire council, which outsourced a line for council tax payments, changed it to a local rate as soon as the *Observer* questioned it, saying it hadn't appreciated the cost.

"We're sorry that we're still listing an 0845 number, and will change it to a local rate as soon as possible," it says.

In Wales, patients seeking health advice have complained of paying over £20 to call NHS Direct and queue for a consultation. Moreover, some Welsh residents have to pay an unspecified premium to find an NHS dentist while others can do it at local rates: NHS Wales uses 0845 numbers without advertising the call charges for three of its six regional dental helplines.

The Welsh government tells the *Observer*: "A national 111 service is being rolled out. This will provide a 24/7 free-to-call service for non-emergency healthcare and we would expect this to be used by local health boards to find a dentist."

According to David Hickson, the continuing use of these numbers is more "cock-up than conspiracy", as councils seek the cheapest deal to save taxpayers' money without realising it comes at the expense of those same taxpayers. Most councils agree to switch to standard-rate numbers when challenged, and 13 have done so since the FTC published a list of offenders in November.