fair telecoms campaign **open message**

Universal Credit telephone helpline – as discussed on "Any Questions" – 29 September 2017

This message seeks to clarify the issue of the "50p per minute – Universal Credit helpline" as raised on "**Any Questions**" this week - 👂 on BBC iplayer. It is addressed to the show and the MPs who spoke.

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 overwhelming 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 50p per minute, indeed 55p per minute is the maximum, 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.

Because 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 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.

The **fair telecoms campaign** holds detailed tables of the levels of the **Penalty Charge** for each of the major providers, and the consequent "break-even" points for selection of a particular plan. These "break-even points" are disturbingly low. Most consumers seem to be aware of this, as the overwhelming majority of calls to 01/02/03 numbers are made under the terms of call plans or bundles. Whilst there may be some who fail to reach the "break-even" point, we fear that very many people are paying "**Penalty Charge**s" due to being unaware of the foolishness of so doing.

David Hickson

Sunday, 1 October 2017

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For the purposes of a simple illustration, the cost of a non-inclusive call (**Penalty Charge**), lasting **10 minutes**, during **business hours**, to a number beginning 01, 02 or 03 is as follows:

O2 / **Vodafone**: **£5.50**, **EE** / **Orange** / **T-mobile**: **£5.00**, **Three** / **Virgin Mobile**: **£4.50**

BT / **Virgin Media**: **£1.41**, **Talk Talk**: **£1.55**, **Sky Talk**: **£1.45**.

In some cases this single **Penalty Charge**, for one call, is more than the cost of selecting a more inclusive plan for a month, or much larger bundle of inclusive minutes.

The **Penalty Charge** of 55p per minute (which is that set by O2 and Vodafone) is shown, at https://www.gov.uk/call-charges, as the maximum charge for calls to 01 / 02/ 03 numbers (there are also factual errors on this page). To help people understand the importance of choosing the correct call plan, we believe these **Penalty Charges** should be clearly identified as such.

We also think it important, focussing on the broadcast comments of Mr Burgon, to distinguish between the high cost that is necessarily incurred when premium rate numbers are chosen and the costs incurred by those who fail to select the appropriate call plan for their needs.

The former benefits both the telephone companies and the organisation being called. The latter (**Penalty Charge**) only benefits the telephone companies.

If the DWP Universal Credit enquiry Line (0345 600 0723) is a "50p per minute helpline", then so are the following, because exactly the same charging principles apply:

- £ 03700 100 444 - Any Answers
- £ 01772 746121 - All Hallows Catholic High School
- £ 0113 232 3266 – Richard Burgon MP Constituency Office
- £ 01768 484 114 – Rory Stewart MP Constituency Office
- £ 0121 454 5430 – Birmingham Edgbaston Labour Party Constituency Office (formerly serving Gisela Stuart)

In summary:

- **ft** DWP needs to reassess its use of 0800 numbers – offering them to UC claimants for necessary support, to ensure that nobody pays for such calls be it from their own phone, that of a friend or a payphone. (Payphone calls, other than to 080 numbers, are always chargable.)
- **ft** We all need to understand how telephone call costs work – especially those who are misled into paying "Penalty Charges".
- **ft** It is important to recognise that DWP has done the right thing by switching from 0845 to 0345 numbers, as the cost is now only that of calling any other ordinary number.

  Those who fail to select the appropriate call plan or bundle for their calling needs do however suffer very high Penalty Charges on all of their calls to ordinary numbers.

  For this reason it is necessary to offer 0800 numbers in all cases that meet the criteria laid out by the Cabinet Office; this includes enquiries about making Universal Credit claims, in common with all other initial claims enquiries.