fair telecoms campaign **press cutting**

Daily Telegraph – Government accused of profiting from victims reporting crime by collecting VAT on 101 calls

The article, see below, which is published here, is a follow-up to a previous article.

It was assembled following release of further information in the **fair telecoms campaign** news release – "We support calls to make 101 free-to-caller".

The Telegraph

News | Politics

Government accused of profiting from victims' reporting crime by collecting VAT on 101 calls

By **Charles Hymas**, HOME AFFAIRS EDITOR and **Gordon Rayner**, POLITICAL EDITOR
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The Government has been accused of profiting from victims reporting crime by collecting £1 million VAT on 101 calls to the police.

MPs and victims' campaigners expressed outrage after it emerged the Treasury takes 20 per cent VAT - or three pence - from each of the 32 million 15 pence calls that the public makes annually to 101 when they report a crime or appeal for help from police.

Lady Newlove, the Victims' Commissioner said the disclosure that a fifth of the £5 million 101 charges was going into Exchequer funds added "insult to injury, as no-one is a victim by choice."

It comes just a day after she published a report on anti-social behaviour calling for a review of the "fundamentally wrong" practice of charging victims a flat rate 15 pence to ring the 101 phone line.

Lady Newlove, whose husband Garry was murdered after their street was terrorised by youths, said 101 should be free like NHS 111 calls for non-emergency health advice and the energy industry's 105 phone line to report power cuts.

"If it is possible to offer a free helpline to report a power cut, I cannot understand why it is necessary to charge those reporting crimes," she told The Daily Telegraph.

Tim Loughton, a former Conservative minister and senior member of the home affairs committee, said he would be raising the issue with the committee and asking the Government to justify the charge, when VAT was often waived for good causes.

"It is a case of the Government actually profiting from people reporting crime. That is completely the wrong way round," he said.

"People really should not be deterred from reporting crimes by having to pay for it. The police will be charging an attendance fee when they turn up to take a crime report next - that is when they actually turn up."

Steve McCabe, a member of the Commons work and pensions committee who campaigned against premium charges on public helplines, said he was concerned the public were being directed to avoid using free 999 calls where possible but then pay for the alternative.

"They are using people's need for the police as an income generator. I don't think that is right or comparable with other situations. It's much more akin to exploiting people's need for a police service," he said.

Lady Newlove's report also found victims often faced lengthy waiting times when they called 101, which could result in victims giving up their attempt to report anti social behaviour, or being put off reporting in the future.

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) will publish an investigation later this year which is expected to recommend telecom firms should foot the £5 million administration bill when the contract to run 101 comes up for renewal next year, just as they are required by law to do for 999 calls.

Rory Geoghegan, head of criminal justice at the CSJ, said: "The poorest - disproportionately affected by both crime and anti-social behaviour - shouldn't have to choose between putting money on their electricity meter or calling 101. We also know some people call 999 in order to avoid the charge."

David Hickson, of the Fair Telecoms Campaign, said: "It could be argued that, now that austerity is over, we can afford to fund our public services properly, rather than charging a fee for access to the police."

The Treasury said: "EU law requires us to charge VAT on all telephone charges, including to premium rate numbers. There are no exceptions to this rule under EU law. The tax raised funds our crucial public services, including paying for our police service."

The Home Office said it was supporting police forces developing "digital front desks" for the public to contact the police online. A spokesman said the police forces made no money from the charges which were design to cover the cost of handling calls.

The issue about the VAT was only one of a number of points raised in our news release, although we are not surprised that the political value of this has been used to strengthen the case for a change of position by the Home Office.

We are delighted that this issue is now being raised in many channels, and will ensure that all are briefed.