
Secretariat memorandum

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Agenda item 10

CA026

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Use of 0845- prefixed numbers for passenger helplines - update

1 Purpose of report

- 1.1. To discover the cost of using 0845 and other premium rate transport operator helpline telephone numbers from mobile phones.
- 1.2. The Consumer Affairs Committee asked the Communications team to undertake an informal look into the provision of 0845/0870 numbers used for complaint or help lines. The Committee was concerned about the costs for passengers, and requested preliminary data as to whether these numbers were prohibitively expensive, and whether the business case for using (and retaining) 0845 numbers was compelling. After initial discussion, further information was requested and this is presented in this report.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1. Members are invited to note the report for information.

3 Background information

- 3.1. Organisations and companies who use 0845 numbers argue that it means they can use one number on all publicity, stationery and advertising. It is also argued that large volumes of incoming calls can be managed more easily, and therefore callers are less likely to encounter a 'busy' tone. These numbers are also beneficial for business continuity, as the same number can be kept if a business moves. The cost of moving with geographical numbers is much higher, and no revenue is returned (unlike 085x or 087x numbers).
- 3.2. In 2007 the Office of Communications (OFCOM) introduced 0300 numbers for public bodies, which cost no more from a mobile than a national call rate. Switching phone lines from 0845/0870 to 0300 numbers would not need any legislation, and would save money for many mobile phone users, without adversely affecting landline users. 0300 numbers are included in 'free minutes' monthly contract packages, but for pay-as-you-go (PAYG) users costs can still be as high as 20p per minute.

- 3.3. A study by the Citizen's Advice Bureau) found that PAYG customers were usually in the lower social bracket, and were therefore hit the hardest by calls costing between 15p and 50p per minute. As well as a pence per minute rate, most fixed line providers charge a connection fee of 5 to 10p for some calls.
<http://www.leedscab.org.uk/forms/hungupreport.pdf>

4 Research method

We looked at the costs of 0844/0845/0870 calls from landlines and mobile phones and identified which (relevant) companies used these numbers exclusively.

5 Results

- 5.1. The calling costs of various landline and mobile operators to call 0845/0870 were found to be as follows :

Premium rate call charges to transport operator help lines													
from	Landlines				Mobiles								
via	BT	Skype out	Virgin Media	Vonage	BT	Virgin	3	O2	Orange	Talk Talk	Tesco	T Mobile	Vodafone
to	Pence per minute ranged across weekend, evenings and weekdays, dependent on tariff												
0845	0.98 - 3.86	8.4	6.85	2.0 - 5.0	20.0	25.0	15.0	25.0 - 35.0	25.0	35.0	20.0	40.0	20.0 - 35.0
0870	Free - 5.88	11.8	9.79	3.0 - 10.0	30.0	25.0	15.0	25.0	25.0	35.0	20.0	40.0	25.0

- 5.2. The time taken after connection to reach an advisor at each transport operator was also measured at various times of the day, across bank holidays and weekends. This gives some indication of how long callers were on hold or working through menus before they found the advice they needed, and the results are listed below.

Company	Time taken to reach advice
Arriva	35 seconds
C2C	52 seconds
Chiltern	1 min 1 second
Congestion Charging (at weekend)	56 seconds
Congestion Charging (during the week)	54 seconds
East London and Selkent	3 mins 47 seconds
East Midlands	1 min 2 seconds

Company	Time taken to reach advice
First Capital Connect	49 seconds
First Great Western	1 min 12 seconds
Gatwick Express	3 min 40 seconds
Go Ahead	1 min 6 seconds
Go Ahead London	1 min 40 seconds
Grand Central	5 seconds
London Underground Customer Service	47 seconds
National Express Buses	2 mins 20 seconds
National Express Buses	2 mins 20 seconds
National Express East Coast	50 seconds
NSL (NCP Challenger) bus operator	4 seconds
Oyster Customer Service Centre	1 minute 10 seconds
ScotRail	44 seconds
South West Trains	40 seconds
Stansted Express	20 seconds.
Travel line	40 seconds
Virgin	9 seconds

Although no phone call took longer than 3 minutes 47 seconds, London TravelWatch recommends that transport companies provide an alternative number for customers who only have access to mobile phones, even though this may cause some initial confusion. Details on the calls listed above may be found at Annex A.

6 Additional information

- 6.1. There is increasing consumer opposition to non-geographic numbers due to the per-minute revenue sharing, most of all because call queuing is permitted whilst charging and thus revenue generation continues. This is because the public have become increasingly aware of the per-minute revenue sharing with non-geographic numbers.
- 6.2. During debates in the House of Commons, a number of Members of Parliament have criticised the use of 0845 numbers to provide access to government services, such as at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The criticism was that in general taxpayers are already financing government services via taxation, and in the specific case of DWP that callers might be for example benefit claimants with limited financial means. At the time of writing the DWP is in the process of migrating from 0845 numbers to 0800 or 03 numbers. In addition the Department of Health is currently undertaking a public consultation on banning 084 numbers in NHS services.
- 6.3. Some consumers have sought ways of avoiding calling non-geographic numbers by calling a non-advertised geographic number instead. Local-rate alternatives to non-geographic numbers can often be found through extensive online searches.

- 6.4. In August 2008 Which? magazine conducted a survey and found that around 50% of its subscriber avoid calling 0870 and 0871 phone numbers; 22% and 23% shun 0844 and 0845 phone numbers respectively, and more than 60% avoid premium rate 09 phone numbers.
- 6.5. In August 2009 Phone watchdog Ofcom introduced rules that it hoped would make it harder for home phone and mobile phone operators to charge more for customers to call an 0870 number than they pay to call a geographic phone number.
- 6.6. Although it has not explicitly banned revenue sharing on 0870, Ofcom expressed the hope that its new rules should 'effectively end revenue sharing on 0870 numbers' by limiting the revenue available to share in the first place. However these rules will not prevent companies that use 0870 from switching to another expensive phone number, such as 0871. Which? magazine is monitoring this, and has expressed the hope that organisations moving to 0870 numbers will adopt the new rules in the spirit in which they were intended.

7 Equalities and inclusion implications

- 7.1. The issue of 0845 numbers presents serious equalities and inclusion implications for access to information on the grounds of ability to pay.

8 Financial implications

- 8.1. The report poses no financial implications for London TravelWatch.

9 Legal Powers

- 9.1. Section 248 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 places upon London TravelWatch (as the London Transport Users Committee) a duty to consider – and, where it appears to it to be desirable, to make representations with respect to – any matter affecting the services and facilities provided by Transport for London which relate to transport (other than freight) and which have been the subject of representations made to it by or on behalf of users of those services and facilities. Section 252A of the same Act (as amended by Schedule 6 of the Railways Act 2005) places a similar duty upon it in respect of representations received from users or potential users of railway passenger services provided wholly or partly within the London railway area, and to make representations about them to such persons as it thinks appropriate

Annex A : Details of length of time taken to reach advice, by operator, with comments by testers.

Arriva Weeknight

I choose option 2, option 2 and call was 35 seconds

c2c Sunday 6/09/09

Immediate answer, then took option three. Whole call took 52secs

Chiltern

I Choose option 1, the whole call took 1minute 1 second

Congestion Charging 0845 900 1234 17/7/09

I selected the pay penalty option and it took 54 seconds to be answered.

Congestion Charging weekend

Whole call took 56 seconds

East Midlands 6/09/09

Immediate, then recorded message with five options, took 'buy ticket', then three options, I pressed 3, season ticket. Call took 1min 2secs

East London and Selkent 0845 300 7000 16/07/09

I selected the option for advice and was connected after 3 minutes and 47 seconds

First Capital Connect 0845 026 4700 31/08/09

Answered on first ring with five options to select for different functions – or hold for an operator. I chose the latter and almost immediately was answered by another recorded message telling me the office was closed but letting me know it opened 7am – 10 pm seven days per week. The whole call took 49 seconds

First Great Western 08457 000 125 31/08/09

Answered on first ring with a recorded message giving a list of five options. I chose fares and ticketing and reached another recorded message giving me two options, the second of which was to hold for customer services. I did this and 1.12 minutes into the call another recorded message told me that the office was open 7 – 10 seven days per week.

Gatwick Express 0845 850 1530 31/08/09

The call was answered immediately with (I think) a choice of eight options. I went for the hold for an operator option and 40 seconds into my call another recorded message told me that one of the team would be with me soon. I had to wait about three minutes to be answered but in doing this was told that they were very busy and given the option to keep holding or leave a message and they would phone me back.

Grand Central 0845 6034852 17/07/09

Answered in 5 seconds

Go Ahead London 0845 300 7000 16/07/09

I went through the option for information and to speak to an advisor. It took me 1 minute and 40 seconds to be connected.

London Underground Customer Service 0845 330 9880 17/7/09

I selected to speak to a customer service agent and was connected after 47 seconds.

Go Ahead London 0845 300 7000 31/08/09

The call was answered immediately by a recorded message which told me that the office was closed – but was open Monday to Friday 8 am – 8 pm except on bank holidays. I pressed 1 for more info and was transferred to TfL the whole call took 1.06.

National Express Buses 08717 818181 16/07/09

After an announcement about call costs I selected the option to book tickets. I was kept on hold and connected after 2 minutes 20 seconds.

National Express East Coast 08457 225 111 17/7/09

I chose option 3 to complain and I was connected after 50 seconds.

NSL 0845 300 7000 17/07/09

I choose option 1 to make a complaint and was connected after 4 seconds

Oyster Customer Service Centre 0845 330 9876 16/07/09

I went through the auto mated service and announcements for a broken oyster card and it took 1 minute10 seconds to speak to an advisor.

South West Trains 0845 6000 650 16/07/09

Option 1 transferred to National Rail Enquiries – 40 secs to speak to an advisor. Option 2 transferred to an operator for South West – 30 secs to be connected.

ScotRail 0845 601 5929 17/7/09

I selected complaints option 3 and the call was answered on 44 seconds

Stansted Express 0845 850 0150 17/7/09

I choose option I for tickets and my call was answered in 20 seconds.

Travel line 0871 200 22 33 16/07/09

I selected the local travel option and was connected to an advisor after 40 seconds.

Virgin 0845 3050 100 17/07/09

The call was answered after 9 seconds