

Digital Update

ISSUE 4

Welcome

Welcome to our latest digital update, giving you the latest news on the UK's transition from an analogue to an IP telephone network. This document has been created with the support of BT and Virgin Media following our recent UK Digital Roadshows and seeks to address some of the most commonly asked questions at these events. Please share this update with anyone else who may benefit from it, and you can find more information and sign up to receive future updates at tunstall.co.uk/digital-journey

Vulnerable service users and one-hour battery back-up

How are Communications Providers (CPs) identifying and protecting vulnerable customers?

All providers must identify vulnerable customers (known by CPs as special service users) under existing Ofcom regulations, and ensure that they are treated fairly and appropriately. This includes the provision of IP Voice services to these users. Ofcom has also published specific guidance on the provision of battery back-up for IP Voice services and requires providers to identify customers who are reliant on their landline phone service and provide them with a free back-up solution. Although back-up solutions may vary between providers, the guidance is common and sets a minimum standard to which all providers must adhere.

What are the timescales for the provision of battery back-up units?

The timescales for the provision of battery back-up units will be dependent on each CP, and in some cases may require an engineer visit to install the equipment. BT and Virgin Media have battery back-up solutions for VoIP technology available at launch. As the requirement is an Ofcom General Condition, we would expect all CPs to have solutions available. BT's current solution uses an external battery that will power the router in the event of a local power cut; pricing has not yet been released for this.

Can local authorities provide details of vulnerable customers to CPs to ensure the right support is in place?

We would be willing to work with LAs to support customers located in that area, subject to legal constraints (such as GDPR) on the sharing of personal data.

What plans do Communications Providers (CPs) have in place to negate the risk of mains failure in addition to one-hour battery back-up?

Ofcom's guidance on General Condition A3.2(b) sets out a requirement where customers are using VoIP technology that CPs should have at least one solution available that enables access to emergency organisations for a minimum of one hour in the event of a power outage in the premises. Each CP will have their own solutions, so the actual length of battery back-up will vary by provider. The power limitation of VoIP technology will be clearly explained to customers to ensure they seek alternative solutions where the CP provided battery back-up is insufficient for their needs.

What are the plans for agreeing SLAs (timescales) for the rapid restoration process?

CPs are still working on this, therefore no special services users will be able to transition to All IP in the early stages of the programme.

Have emergency services agreed to receiving extra calls during power outages?

We would not expect there to be anymore additional calls in an all IP world than in a PSTN world.

Relating to battery back-up, have renewable energies, i.e. solar power, been considered?

The complexity of solutions like solar power for just the router power supply are currently impractical but may form part of wider power resilience options.

In the event of the internet being down, what happens then to the phone line capability?

In the event of a network outage that affects broadband service the phone line would also not work. CPs' battery back-up solutions would allow emergency calls to be made over their back-up unit.

Are industry standards going to be altered to reflect the importance of continuous internet connection?

The industry standard that applies irrespective of how voice services are delivered is that customers should, take all necessary measures to ensure uninterrupted access to Emergency Services. This standard is still required to be met if voice services are provided over IP / Broadband.

Will a dementia-friendly router be designed with minimal buttons/lights to avoid them being unplugged?

Whilst a standard Hub will be used for all customers who take IP Voice, there are opportunities to ensure that vulnerable users are more protected.

Broadband/phone line cost

Many customers are unable to afford their phone lines or broadband. Will there be newer, easily accessible packages for vulnerable customers?

New IP Voice services should not leave customers any worse off than they were on an existing telephone service, and equivalents to current social phone tariffs and rules on debt handling will be applied to future voice services. Ofcom Connected Nations Report 2016 Para 7.38

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0035/95876/CN-Report-2016.pdf

BT, as the Universal Service Provider, has a specific obligation to offer a tariff suitable for lower income households; this will not change under the move to IP Voice. Other providers including Virgin Media have tariffs that are designed for vulnerable users. Switching should be straightforward, but for vulnerable customers, BT and Virgin Media offer manned installations.

If a customer does not have a router already (no broadband) will they be charged to install router and expected to pay a broadband charge?

Ofcom expects that a customer will be no worse off post migration, so therefore there should not be an installation charge, equipment charge or separate broadband charge if they continue to take just a voice product. The exact detail of any future packages and charges will be down to each individual CP to publish.

After switchover can we have broadband without paying for a landline?

CPs may choose to offer broadband only services for customers who do not require telephony services.

As IP is cheaper than PSTN, will this mean cost savings for customers?

IP is not necessarily cheaper than PSTN, especially in the short term when networks run in parallel. There may be additional costs associated with customer equipment (e.g. new hubs or battery back-up devices).

How does it work for customers tied into contracts with internet providers different to their line providers? Are they communicating? Will the customer pay?

These customers will need to be identified to ensure that their migration is handled appropriately, and future IP Voice services are provided by the supplier of their choice.

Advice to customers about the changes

Any advice for alarm providers about advising their customers of the coming changes?

CPs want to raise awareness of the forthcoming move to IP Voice services, and will provide briefings to enable alarm providers to understand the transition and to advise their customers on how it may affect them. We expect the majority of IP migrations to be initiated by the customer and they will be advised to inform their special service provider prior to us progressing their order.

How will you communicate these changes to the older and more vulnerable customers many of which do not access the internet?

The CP industry is seeking to work together to raise awareness of this issue and provide more information to all stakeholders to ensure that all end users can understand this change, and to make communications straightforward and relevant to all customers. BT and Virgin Media will test communication during a migration trial to ensure that it is appropriate for all customers. Where we identify a customer with a particular need (e.g. if we believe they rely on Special Services), then we will aim to offer additional or tailored communications to that group.

Current broadband solutions

Are all residential broadband routers compliant with delivering the IP solution?

Not all existing broadband routers will be compatible with IP Voice but customers will be provided with a new router as required when transitioning to all IP (Digital Voice).

Installation approach

Are BT and Virgin Media engineers aware of how to adjust their installation approach when they discover a user has a community alarm?

BT will exclude existing special service customers from initial migrations to allow time for incompatible systems to be upgraded and installation processes updated.

As Openreach will not reinstall or test existing telecare devices, what process will be in place so the resident is not left without their device?

This will be agreed with the special service equipment supplier as we do not want people to be left without services in such cases. We will delay migrating existing special service users until later in the rollout.

Telecare may need to be deployed rapidly; will CPs be able to accommodate these deployments by supplying the router with the battery back-up?

The router would be provided as part of the telephone line and subject to normal installation lead-times; there should be no difference in provisioning timescales of all IP than there is with current PSTN. Battery back-up units can be sent by next working day post.

Do you foresee any challenges stemming from rural locations, and will you be guaranteeing next gen comms to every home in the future?

Openreach is confident in supplying suitable lines to the vast majority of homes and businesses. It's not possible to offer a 100% guarantee, but where issues may exist other solutions including mobile communications are being looked at.

Does BT need the number of a device if it is an independent device, and so goes direct to a web portal instead of an ARC?

No, this would likely breach GDPR regulations and we have no need to identify telephone lines where IP based systems are already in use as these will not be affected.

Does BT's router ATA support more than one device? Can you connect multiple devices to the ATA socket e.g. PSTN phone and alarm unit? If so, how long will this be supported?

The ATA has a REN (Ringer Equivalence Number) value of four as per a standard telephone master socket; allowing up to four standard telephone devices to be connected. The ATA is an interim solution that will be provided whilst there is a customer need for it. In the future we expect the majority of telephone devices to connect wirelessly using DECT or Wi-Fi.

For what reasons would IP voice be incompatible during the switch? What are the long-term solutions?

The signalling and characteristics of IP networks are very different to existing TDM (Time Division Multiplexing) networks. Existing equipment may not work fully or at all so all equipment needs to be tested. IP based solutions will be fully compatible with the new networks.

Communication Providers working together

Are BT and Virgin Media sharing with each other their databases of ARC numbers?

BT and Virgin are currently sharing details of some contacts made, but there are restrictions in passing information such as ARC numbers between providers. TSA are also looking to build a list of ARC numbers so we hope that there will be a more centralised approach as the migration period progresses.

Are BT and Virgin Media digital connections being tested with each other?

Inter network testing is being looked at for interconnection and porting. The compatibility of telecare devices between networks is also being looked at by the TSA, which is publishing standards.

Are you going to inform ARC on switch over dates or inform TSA so it can inform its members?

Migration can happen in different ways some of which are not driven by areas. Where a migration is happening in an area, we will provide appropriate advance notice to customers in that area, and we are also considering which other stakeholders we can notify in order to ensure the smooth running of that migration. This is likely to be part of migration trials that are planned to happen before any geographic migration activity is launched.

Have you had any discussions with Sky and Talk Talk? How are they progressing?

Sky and Talk Talk are represented at industry forums including Ofcom's All IP Migration Working Group.

Have you thought about delivering training sessions for industries such as ours so we can upskill?

BT and Virgin Media have been working to deliver briefings to various industries and stakeholder for well over a year; we're always open to request to provide appropriate support to events.

Many special services clients are with smaller telephone providers (EE, Post Office etc). Will it be down to these to provide ATAs & battery back-up?

Yes, all CPs will be required to provide appropriate services to their end users. How they choose to meet the requirements set by Ofcom and the exact nature of the back-up they deploy will be down to them.

2025 deadline

Is BT on track to deliver by 2025 and what does that mean?

BT Consumer is working to move all of its PSTN voice customers to all IP voice services by the end of 2025.

How is the rollout going to be carried out? Exchange by exchange?

The roll out will broadly follow three overlapping phases: 1. sales to new customers; 2. migration of existing single customers who contact their provider (e.g. for faults or upgrades); and 3. geographic migration. It is only the final phase that is geographically tied to network equipment. Early work will be focused on selling IP Voice to new customers and migrating customers with less complex needs. Migration of customers within a specific area will be carefully managed, and BT and Virgin Media intend to undertake trial migrations before finalising the migration process or timetable. When we do migrate an area, we hope to communicate well in advance to customers, and are looking at which other stakeholders to be included in that communication.

Have you started anywhere in the UK with the migration?

Virgin Media has started to sell IP Voice to new customers joining Virgin Media, who have been advised that the IP Voice product and devices such as telecare alarms will not work in a local power outage.

BT - How do you think the switch to digital will affect older people?

Switching from PSTN telephony to IP Voice should not require any knowledge or use of the internet. The service should look and work like an existing phone service. There will be some differences, such as the need to keep the power turned on to the hub to keep the phone service on, so it will be important to make sure users do not turn the power off (e.g. at night time).

Do BT and Virgin have enough engineers to move every customer from PSTN to Digital?

It's big project, and one we have already begun. By offering IP Voice products to new customers we can migrate appropriate customers early, making it easier to migrate everyone else later on.

How does this align with the gigabit roll out that isn't supposed to be complete until 2032?

Migration to IP voice is different to the government's Gigabit targets. IP Voice relates to the voice service over the network, and changing the technology of how voice services are delivered. Gigabit ready is more about the capability of the underlying network, and whether the circuits need to be upgraded to allow for faster broadband speeds.

Please also see Openreach's recent announcement regarding its Gigabit capable Fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) roll out programme, which includes 36 new locations across the UK, making a total of 74.

<https://www.openreach.com/fibre-broadband/fibre-first/>

What can we learn from other countries that have already transitioned to a digital network?

Migrations have occurred in a number of different countries, but there is no single model of how providers have undertaken migration and the level of government or regulator involvement varies. Typically, European countries, despite having a common regulatory framework with the UK, place less emphasis on the need for power resilience for telephone lines. A report has been commissioned to look at migration experiences in France, Germany, Switzerland and New Zealand <http://www.broadbanduk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Plum-BSG-Preparing-the-UK-for-all-IP.pdf>. The report highlights challenges including the need for clear communication to customers and challenges in relation to services that use data over voice lines.