

The use of 084 telephone numbers in the NHS

A public consultation

16 December 2008–31 March 2009

DH INFORMATION READER BOX

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A public consultation on the use of 084 telephone numbers in the NHS

The Department of Health is holding a public consultation on whether it should prohibit the use of 084 numbers to access services provided by the NHS.

This consultation booklet is available in GP surgeries and online at:
www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Liveconsultations/index.htm

The Department of Health is keen to hear from:

- people who have experience of using 084 numbers to call services provided by the NHS;
- people who use a local number to call services provided by the NHS;
- GPs, practice managers, pharmacists, hospitals and other organisations providing services for the NHS that use 084 numbers;
- NHS organisations that do not use 084 numbers;
- the telecommunications industry; and
- other interested parties.

If you are a caller to the NHS, please complete the questions at Annex A (page 11).

If you are a GP, pharmacist, practice manager, or other staff working in the NHS in England who receives incoming calls from users, please complete the questions at Annex B (page 13).

Please send your responses to:

**084 Consultation Responses
Department of Health
2N16 Quarry House
Leeds
LS2 7UE**

You can also respond by emailing your responses to these questions to:
084consultation@dh.gsi.gov.uk

We have not provided specific questions for the telecommunications industry and other interested parties, but we welcome their contribution to this debate and encourage them to submit their views and ideas to us.

If you know of anyone who would like this consultation booklet in large print, braille or another language, please contact the 084 consultation team at the address on page 3.

The consultation runs from 16 December 2008 until 31 March 2009.

Why is the Department of Health holding a public consultation on the use of 084 numbers in the NHS?

The Government is considering banning the use of 084 numbers in the NHS. This is because patients who use 084 numbers are paying more than the equivalent cost of a local rate call to access services provided by the NHS. The Department of Health has issued guidance on several occasions which has made its position clear on this, and does not expect this situation to continue.

However, the Government recognises that the extra functions offered by an 084 number can improve access to services for patients. We wish to find out how valuable people think the enhanced functions provided by 084 numbers are, and how they might otherwise be provided without patients having to pay more than a local call rate for them.

What is a local call rate?

A local call rate is the amount you pay to make a telephone call within a local geographical area. Each geographical area has a specific area code, for example 0207 for central London. Calls to local numbers from landlines are usually charged at the local rate.

What is an 084 number?

An 084 number is a non-geographical number. It is being increasingly used as a means of patients accessing NHS services. 084 numbers allow the organisation receiving the calls to generate revenue from those making the calls.

What do they offer?

It is common in the NHS to have additional functions attached to 084 numbers. These functions are not generally available with local rate numbers, although it is possible to buy equipment to run alongside a local rate number that enables extra functions to be provided.

Why are these extra functions needed?

The extra functions are designed to improve the quality of the service and access for the caller and the operational efficiency of the organisation.

What are the extra functions provided by 084 numbers?

084 numbers provide several extra functions, including allowing a caller to:

- be held in a queue, so ending the problem of getting an engaged tone;
- access a push-button choice of options that can be used to route calls, for example to appointments, repeat prescriptions or a practice nurse;
- be redirected to other locations or other services such as out-of-hours services; or
- access automated booking and appointment systems.

Is there another way to provide the extra functions?

Yes, 03 numbers were introduced by Ofcom in 2007 as an alternative to non-geographical numbers such as 084 numbers. 03 numbers offer the same extra functions as 084 numbers but are charged at the same rate as a call to a local number. However, a charge is levied on the person or organisation receiving the call.

What is Ofcom?

Ofcom is the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communication industries, with responsibilities across television, radio, telecommunications and wireless communication services.

These are the key points about 03 numbers:

- 03 numbers provide the same functions as 084 numbers.
- 03 calls usually cost the same as calls to a local geographical number.
- There is a charge to the organisation receiving a call from an 03 number.
- GP practices and other NHS organisations using 03 numbers are unable to offset these costs.

Why are GP practices increasingly using 084 numbers?

The extra functions enable GP practices to provide a better quality service to their patients, because they can:

- receive multiple incoming calls;
- receive comprehensive information on the volume of calls, which enables them to manage demand and provide better services to patients;
- provide a more efficient service to patients by providing them with the option to undertake certain tasks, such as booking appointments and ordering repeat prescriptions, via an automated system;

- have automated call recordings, which have been shown to reduce frustration among patients, reduce verbal abuse and improve staff training; and
- route calls to another location, especially out of hours.

How much does it cost to call an 084 number?

The cost of calls made from landlines to 084 numbers varies according to the supplier of the 084 number, the tariff and the bundle package used by the caller. The average call to an 084 number is **more expensive** than the equivalent call to a local rate landline.

The cost of calls made from mobiles also varies depending on the supplier and the tariff. On average, calls to 084 numbers are **more expensive**.

What is a supplier?

A supplier is the company that supplies the 084 number, for example Orange, BT and Virgin Media.

What is a tariff?

A tariff is the fixed charge paid to a supplier for the different call plans or packages offered by the supplier, comprised of a range of call charges and monthly fees.

What is a bundle package?

A bundle package is a price plan offered by a supplier that includes the cost of calling certain numbers at no extra cost to the caller.

The charge of a call to an 084 number is made up of three elements:

- the standard line charge from the supplier;
- the cost of the call (which depends on how long the call lasts); and
- the cost of renting equipment needed to run an 084 number with extra functions.

On average, calls to 084 numbers last marginally longer, not only because the extra functions can mean that a caller may be held in a queue before their call is rerouted or they talk to a receptionist, but also because they can undertake certain tasks, such as booking appointments and ordering repeat prescriptions, via an automated system.

Does this mean that GPs and other NHS organisations make a profit from 084 numbers?

GP practices and other NHS organisations using 084 numbers do not make a profit from 084 numbers. The money generated by 084 numbers goes towards the cost of providing that number and the functions.

If 084 numbers offer a better service, why is the Government considering banning them?

The Government does not expect patients to pay more than the equivalent cost of a local rate telephone call when they are accessing services provided by the NHS. In 2005, it banned the use of premium and national rate numbers to telephone local services provided by primary medical services providers (GPs) in England. The ban did not extend to 084 numbers.

A number of people have raised concerns about GP practices that use 084 telephone numbers. The main concerns are:

- that it costs more to call a practice using an 084 number; and
- that GPs using 084 numbers are generating an income through revenue-sharing schemes.

What is a revenue-sharing arrangement?

Revenue-sharing arrangements allow for a proportion of the money paid to the supplier to go towards the ongoing cost of running an 084 number, which includes the cost of renting the equipment from the supplier.

How do local rate, 084 and 03 numbers compare?

| Local rate numbers | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Is there an additional cost to the patient? | No | |
| Is the quality of the service better? | No | Callers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • get engaged tones at busy times; • may need to redial repeatedly before they can speak to someone; • cannot navigate through the system; and • may need to be redirected or transferred. |
| Is there an additional cost to the GP or other NHS organisation? | No | No information is available on the number of incoming calls. |

| 084 numbers | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Is there an additional cost to the patient? | Yes | |
| Is the quality of the service better? | Yes | <p>Callers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> do not get engaged tones; do not need to redial; can navigate through the system; and may find that it is ultimately quicker, as they do not need to be redirected, be transferred or redial. |
| Is there an additional cost to the GP or other NHS organisation? | No | <p>Revenue-sharing schemes allow for the cost of providing an 084 number to be offset.</p> <p>Information on the number of incoming calls enables patients to receive a better service.</p> |

| 03 numbers | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Is there an additional cost to the patient? | No | |
| Is the quality of the service better? | Yes | <p>Callers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> do not get engaged tones; do not need to redial; can navigate through the system; and may find that it is ultimately quicker, as they do not need to be redirected, be transferred or redial. |
| Is there an additional cost to the GP or other NHS organisation? | Yes | <p>There are no revenue-sharing schemes, so the cost cannot be offset.</p> <p>Information on the number of incoming calls enables patients to receive a better service.</p> |

What are the options?

It is not an option to leave things as they are. If no action is taken, some patients will continue to pay more than the equivalent cost of a local rate call to access services provided by the NHS.

If the Government decides to ban the use of 084 numbers to stop there being a national disparity in accessing NHS services by telephone, one solution could be to use 03 numbers universally across the NHS. The use of 03 numbers would enable the NHS to offer a better quality service at no additional cost to patients. One of the questions we are asking is, who should pay any additional cost?

If there are other options we have not identified that will provide the solution we are seeking, we would like to hear from you what they may be.

Our aim is to try to find a solution that retains the benefits that the most valued extra functions offer and to make sure that, wherever you are in the country, you get the same quality of service and better access and pay no more than the equivalent of a local telephone call.

Your views, experiences and ideas will help us to find the best solution.

What happens at the end of the consultation?

At the end of the consultation, all the completed response forms, electronic responses and any other relevant correspondence we have received will be considered, and a response to the consultation will be published on the Department of Health's website (www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Responsestoconsultations/index.htm) by the end of April 2009.

About this consultation process

This consultation follows the Government's Code of Practice on Consultation. In particular, we aim to:

- formally consult at a stage where there is scope to influence the policy outcome;
- consult for at least 12 weeks, with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible;
- be clear about the consultation process in the consultation documents, what is being proposed, the scope to influence and the expected costs and benefits of the proposals;
- ensure that the consultation exercise is designed to be accessible to, and clearly targeted at, those people it is intended to reach;
- keep the burden of consultation to a minimum to ensure that consultations are effective and to obtain consultees' 'buy-in' to the process;
- analyse responses carefully and give clear feedback to participants following the consultation; and
- ensure that officials running consultations are guided in how to run an effective consultation exercise and share what they learn from the experience.

The full text of the Code of Practice is on the Better Regulation website at:

www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/bre/policy/scrutinising-new-regulations/reviewing-consultation-process/page44083.html

Do you wish to comment on the consultation process itself?

If you have concerns or comments relating specifically to the consultation process itself please contact:

The Consultations Coordinator

Department of Health, 3E48 Quarry House, Leeds LS2 7UE

Email: consultations.co-ordinator@dh.gsi.gov.uk

Please do not send consultation responses to this address. These should be sent to:

084 Consultation Responses

Department of Health, 2N16 Quarry House, Leeds LS2 7UE

Email: 084consultation@dh.gsi.gov.uk

Confidentiality of information

We manage the information you provide in response to this consultation in accordance with the Department of Health's **Information Charter**.

Information we receive, including personal information, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the access to information regimes (primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please be aware that, under the FOIA, there is a statutory Code of Practice with which public authorities must comply and which deals, among other things, with obligations of confidence. In view of this, it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department of Health.

The Department will process your personal data in accordance with the DPA and, in most circumstances, this will mean that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.

Summary of responses to the consultation

A summary of the responses to this consultation will be made available before or alongside any further action, such as laying legislation before Parliament, and will be placed on the Consultations website at:

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Responsestoconsultations/index.htm

Annex A

Questions for callers to the NHS

Q1

Do you agree with the principle that people should not be charged more than the cost of a local rate call to access NHS services by telephone?

Yes

No

Q2

As a patient or carer calling the NHS, would you prefer to call a telephone number that has extra functions? (See page 5)

Yes

No

If your answer to Q2 is Yes:

- Which functions do you value most when calling a telephone number such as 084, which has enhanced functions?
- Why do you value these functions?
- Who do you think should pay the additional cost of providing this type of telephone system in the NHS?

If your answer to Q2 is No:

- What are your main reasons for not liking these functions?

Q3

The Government is considering banning the use of 084 numbers in the NHS where the cost to the patient is greater than calling a local geographical number. Do you think they should be banned?

Yes

No

Please give your reasons.

Any other comments?

Please use the space below for any additional comments that you would like to include.

Please post your response to:

084 Consultation Responses
Department of Health
2N16 Quarry House
Leeds
LS2 7UE

You can also respond by emailing your responses to these questions to:
084consultation@dh.gsi.gov.uk

Annex B

Questions for GPs, pharmacists, practice managers and other staff working in the NHS in England

Q1

Do you agree with the principle that people should not be charged more than the cost of a local rate call to access NHS services by telephone?

Yes

No

Q2

Do you use 084 numbers?

Yes

No (please go to Q3)

If your answer is Yes, what do you value most about using 084 numbers?

Do you receive any funding towards the cost of providing this service? If so, please give details.

Q3

Would you like to offer your patients the extra functions that a number such as the 084 range can provide? (See page 5)

Yes

No

If your answer to Q3 is Yes:

- Why would you like to use the extra functions these numbers provide?
- What is preventing you from using these numbers?
- Who do you think should pay the additional cost of providing this type of telephone system in the NHS?

If your answer to Q3 is No:

- What is your main reason for not wanting to use extra functions?
- Which functions do you think could be useful?

Q4

The Government is considering banning the use of 084 numbers in the NHS where the cost to the patient is greater than calling a local geographical number. Do you think they should be banned?

Yes

No

Please give your reasons.

Any other comments?

Please use the space below for any additional comments that you would like to include.

Please post your response to:

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