Tuesday 14 January 2025, LGA

The digital switchover of the public telephone network (PSTN) is a priority, with communication providers are migrating customers from the aging PSTN network to a more reliable digital one, starting with non-vulnerable customers and gradually expanding to include those who may need additional support.

The migration process involves identifying vulnerable customers, and those with telecare devices, or who are landline-only, and ensuring they receive the necessary assistance. BT is focusing on migrating customers from the Openreach network, while Sky and TalkTalk are prioritizing customers on their own IP-based networks.

It was discussed how the PSTN switch is causing concerns about access to emergency services for vulnerable customers, particularly those without mobile signal. Communication providers are required to offer alternative solutions, such as battery backup, to ensure access to emergency services.

CPs informed the panel that they deliver community outreach and engagement, including face-to-face interactions and partnerships with charities, to help vulnerable customers understand and navigate the switch. Witnesses also raised that local authorities are being encouraged to sign data sharing agreements to identify customers with telecare devices. While some local authorities are refusing, collaboration with the LGA and DSIT has helped increase awareness and engagement.

The communications industry informed the inquiry that it is transitioning to a more electricity-dependent model, raising concerns about vulnerable individuals who may lose power for extended periods. While backup solutions are being implemented, such as battery units and hybrid phones, the reliance on electricity and potential for widespread outages remain significant concerns. Addressing the needs of those without mobile coverage or access to backup power is crucial to ensure their safety and ability to make emergency calls.

Witnesses raised concerns about vulnerable customers being misled about the cost of migrating to a new phone line and not receiving battery backups for their telecare devices.

The evidence session discussed plans for a national telecare campaign to educate the public about telecare, identify vulnerable individuals, and encourage them to contact their service providers. The campaign aims to be government-branded and will utilise various communication channels, including TV, radio, and social media, to reach a broad audience.

The role of local authorities in the process of migrating to digital services was discussed in how funding constraints may slow down the migration. Housing associations, which often have separate contracts for telecare and business lines, present a challenge in terms of data sharing and efficient migration. The switch from 2G and 3G networks also raises concerns, particularly in rural areas, and lessons from the digital switchover should be applied to ensure a smooth transition.

The switch-off of 2G and 3G networks poses challenges, particularly for telecare alarms relying on these networks. Collaboration with the TSA and local authorities is crucial to ensure a smooth transition, especially for vulnerable populations.

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