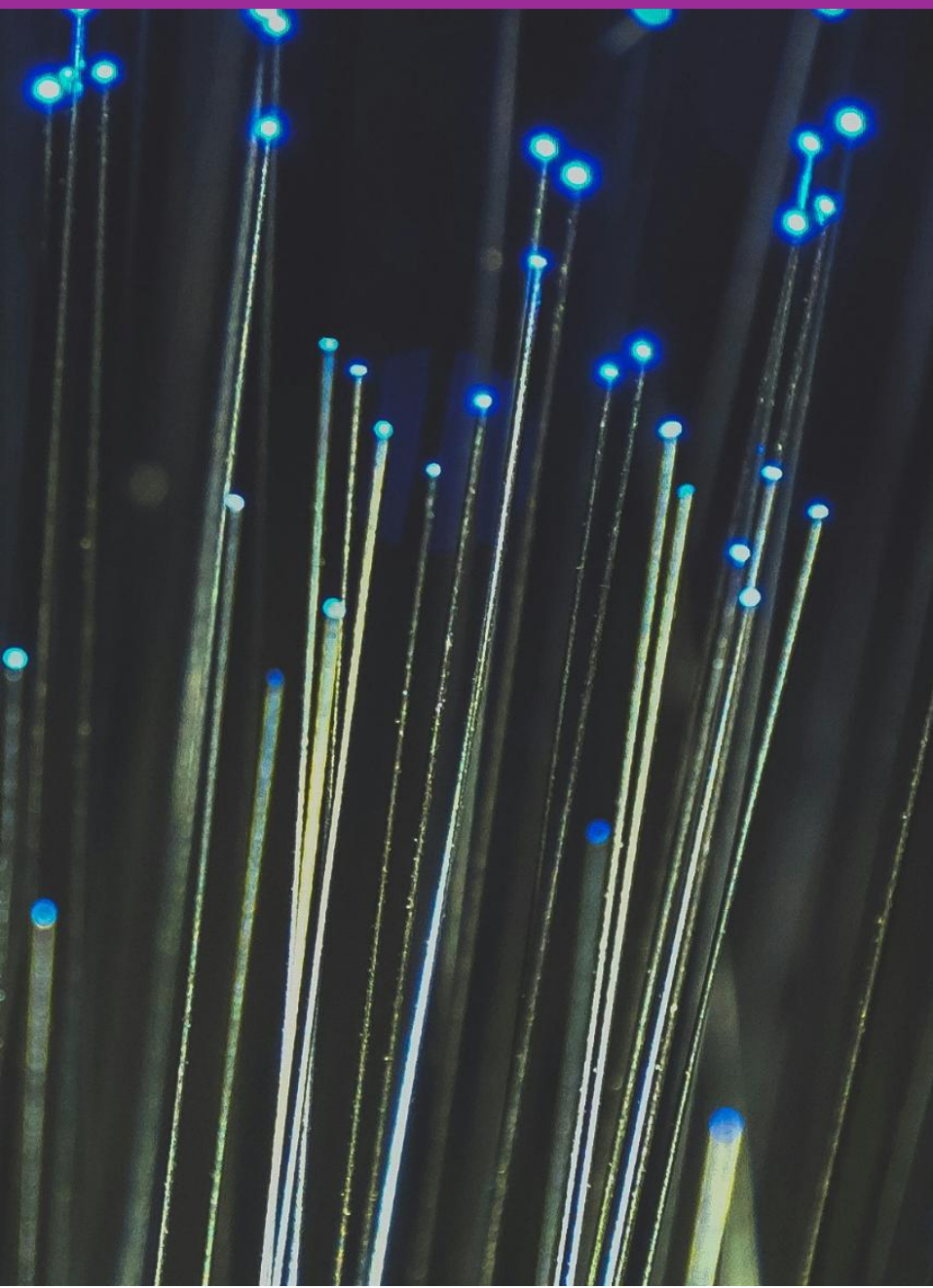




Digital Communities APPG

Care to connect: Public Switched Telephone Network Migration



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Digital Communities All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG)

Care to connect: Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) Migration

Executive summary

The Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) migration – also known as the digital switchover – is a major digital transformation project, affecting millions of UK residents, businesses, public services and critical national infrastructure. Communication providers (CPs) are leading this programme, working closely with national and local government, and partner organisations. BT and Virgin Media O2 are migrating the largest number of residents from the rapidly deteriorating analogue line to a more reliable digital network.

Whilst there is a critical need to move away from the analogue network, and there are opportunities that come from fibre connections, the PSTN migration is not without risk. This risk is particularly focused on the millions of residents still connected to the PSTN and those reliant on telecare services. If they are not moved away from the old network, or accurately connected to the new line, they may be left isolated and unable to receive vital, life-saving care and support.

In what is a technical project with deeply personal repercussions for those receiving telecare, successive governments have taken a 'backseat' to the delivery of this digital transformation programme. However, in recognising the risk and confusion that comes with hundreds of CPs working to different timescales, varying customer size and technological solutions, (and some not migrating customers at all) government ministers have more recently increased their involvement in the digital switchover through a series of interventions. With both charters and checklists, ministers have hoped to enhance scrutiny of CP operations as well as put in place appropriate safeguards for the most vulnerable in society. However, the success of these efforts can only be measured with the effective and safe migration of residents.

Throughout the PSTN switchover, the identification of vulnerable residents has proved challenging. However, utilising and signing a common data sharing agreement (DSAs) with local authorities and private telecare suppliers, CPs have sought to identify residents that may require additional support throughout this process. The approach from CPs in securing DSAs has been inconsistent, with the response from local authorities and private telecare providers also varying.

Beyond individual CP engagement in communities across the country, BT and Virgin Media O2 (VMO2) have committed to a national telecare campaign (NTC) to raise awareness of the digital switchover amongst telecare users. This is a campaign under development, and whilst the intent and investment from the BT and VMO2 is welcome, there are concerns over the management of the NTC and how this could potentially lead to an increased risk to residents' health. Equally, as awareness improves across the country, there is the potential that scam activity also rises, further endangering residents. DSAs have allowed CPs to more accurately identify residents meaning that the NTC is an additional activity to 'complete the picture.' However, witnesses raised concerns that self-identification throughout the PSTN migration misunderstands the needs of this particular group.

Industry fragmentation has the potential to undermine the delivery of an effective NTC which stakeholders are eager to see delivered. To support the effective delivery of the campaign, the voluntary and community sector (VCS), local government and the telecare industry are essential groups to harmonise and prepare local engagement and activity. A campaign where these groups are uncoordinated or unengaged would not serve the interest of the intended audience. DSIT must now step up to lead and coordinate this aspect of the NTC.

The challenges and concerns of the PSTN migration worryingly run deeper. There are significant issues related to the sunsetting of mobile networks, particularly the switch off of 2G and 3G, that are taking place at the same time as the digital switchover. This is of particular concern where replacement telecare devices have already been purchased and rely on devices that use 2G/3G mobile SIMs. Additionally, the continued sale and resale of analogue devices further endangers life. Evidence to this inquiry also raised the issue of battery back-up solutions, citing Ofcom's guidance as completely insufficient with more frequent and extreme weather conditions are felt by every community.

The role of government during digital transformation needs to be clearly defined. Government coordination across Whitehall is critical to support inter-sector collaboration and the safe delivery of digital transformation programmes both now and in the future. However, organisations such as the TEC Services Association (TSA) and the Local Government Association (LGA) have an important role to play in leading digital transformation projects through embedding standards and coordinating activity among partners and stakeholders. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) (and other relevant government department as appropriate) should be empowering these organisations – and their members – to support industry and national government during such projects. Providing ringfenced funding to improve capacity and capability of dedicated digital teams will enable combined authorities/strategic authorities to coordinate and deliver digital transformation and adoption.

Recommendations

National government

- The **PSTN Charter** should be updated to include the agreed supported journeys definition during the PSTN migration.
- The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology must set out how it monitors compliance with the **PSTN Charter** and the **PSTN non-voluntary migration checklist**.
- The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology must set out how it plans to enlist all CPs to both the **PSTN Charter** and the **PSTN non-voluntary migration checklist**.
- The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), working with the TSA, must take every reasonable step to end the **sale of analogue-enabled telecare devices**.
- The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should deliver **ringfenced funding** that enables combined authorities/strategic authorities to improve capacity and capability of dedicated **digital teams** to coordinate and deliver digital transformation and adoption.
- **Future digital transformation** projects should be coordinated centrally by national government, leveraging local and regional government and industry representatives.
- A ministerial statement must be heard in Parliament ahead of the launch of the **national telecare campaign** to support awareness raising.

Local government

- Local authorities and housing associations should sign **DSAs with all relevant communication providers**, regardless of where they are at with the digital switchover.
- Local authorities should perform an **audit** of the technology they own to understand what might be impacted by the digital switchover.

Businesses

- Businesses should perform an **audit** of the technology they own to understand what might be impacted by the digital switchover.

Power and battery back-up solutions

- Ofcom, Ofgem and the Government should continue discussions on power back-up solutions. As a first step, Ofcom should update its guidance on **resilience solution in the home during a power cut** for customers reliant on their landline to call emergency services and to increase this from one hour to at least four hours.
- Ofcom should update its guidance to increase the minimum requirement for **power back-up solutions** from four hours to at least six hours for equipment in newly installed cabinets of fixed networks.
- Where battery back-ups are used as power solutions in the event of an outage, the **battery back-up** deployed should run for at least six hours.
- Resolving the issue of **power back-up solutions** should be a joint undertaking between energy and communication providers, with oversight from Ofgem and Ofcom.
- The APPG supports the creation of a **multi-sector priority service register** covering energy and communications.
- CPs performing the PSTN migration must undertake an audit with residents to understand what **alternative means of communication** they have in the event of a power outage and inform them of the support that is available to them, embedding [Ofcom's guidance](#) as standard practice.

Telecare sector

- All telecare service providers and suppliers, including private providers and suppliers, must be certified to TEC Quality's **Quality Standards Framework** to reach the highest standards on their digital switchover procedures.

2/3G sunsetting

- **Data** gathered on 'vulnerable' people through DSAs should be shared with mobile network operators (MNOs) as 2G and 3G sunsetting progresses. If this is not possible, the London Office for Technology and Innovation (LOTI) and the LGA should recreate a universal DSA for MNOs to use.
- CPs should be actively informing consumers about **2G and 3G sunsetting** when performing PSTN migrations.
- **Audits** should be conducted by local authorities and businesses to understand what technology is owned that might be impacted by **2G and 3G sunsetting**.

Background

The PSTN migration will see CPs move customers from the existing analogue landline network to new, upgraded fibre services, of which over half of lines have already been migrated. There is unanimous agreement that the analogue network is rapidly deteriorating and that the new network will provide a future-proof and more reliable service. Some of the equipment required to maintain the analogue line is no longer being manufactured, making spare parts difficult to source. The digital switchover is industry led, although not all CPs need to migrate customers because they do not have responsibility for any PSTN lines. Whilst timelines vary between them, CPs are broadly working to migrate all customers by 2027.

The digital switchover is of particular concern for residents with telecare devices, of which many are older or have a disability and need additional support. If not safely migrated, residents may find their landline phone and/or telecare device disconnect and be left unable to receive care or support in the event of an emergency. Other technology, such as burglar and elevator alarms, CCTV, and traffic lights, as well as housing associations and CP business customers may also be affected by the PSTN switchover.

The Digital Communities APPG agreed to undertake a rapid inquiry into the PSTN switchover, conducting three evidence sessions with stakeholders from across the telecommunications industry, local government, and the third sector.

About the APPG

The Digital Communities APPG is a cross-party group of parliamentarians, with the aim to promote the delivery of digitally equipped places that support and foster a connected, healthy, and productive community. This includes the creation and maintenance of sustainable digital infrastructure, as well as providing residents with equal opportunity to thrive in a digital world. The LGA provides the secretariat to the APPG.

About the LGA

The LGA is the national voice of local government. We are a politically led, cross party membership organisation, representing councils from England and Wales. Our role is to support, promote and improve local government, and raise national awareness of the work of councils.

Delivering the digital switchover

Role of government

Successive governments have considered the PSTN switchover to be an industry-led project, with DSIT holding ministerial responsibility. DSIT works closely with the DHSC, given the impact on adult social care and telecare. The publication of the [Telecare National Action Plan](#) by DHSC is a testament to this relationship.

Ministers in DSIT have become gradually more involved in the PSTN switchover with interventions to monitor CP management of the switchover and to put additional safeguards in place for residents. Former government minister Sir John Whittingdale MP introduced the [PSTN Charter](#) in December 2023, which set out an agreement between the Government and CPs to protect vulnerable residents during the switchover. The charter included commitment to develop a shared definition of vulnerability that would support CPs to identify vulnerable customers. The [Network Operator Charter](#) was published in March 2024 to set out a voluntary agreement between the government and the operators of telecoms networks. DSIT has since [published guidance](#) that defines who those in need of additional support are.

The PSTN Charter also came with a request from the then Secretary of State for DSIT Michelle Donelan MP that CPs pause non-voluntary migrations unless a customer had not used their landline in the previous 12 months. In July 2024, Minister for Telecoms Sir Chris Bryant MP, reiterated the pause to PSTN non-voluntary migrations following reported concerns about residents' safety where telecare devices have failed to work properly, including a small number of fatalities. Non-voluntary migrations can now only resume after CPs meet the safeguards in the [PSTN Checklist](#) that was published in November 2024.

Witnesses to this inquiry supported government action in recent months. Some, however, challenged that engagement from across Whitehall – including from within DSIT – was inconsistent making it difficult to manage the digital switchover across their respective sectors. Some witnesses went further to express reservations on the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as the PSTN Charter which is voluntary and not signed by every CP. How DSIT monitors compliance with the charter and checklist was also questioned.

It is important that DSIT sets out how CPs are held accountable during the switchover. The PSTN Charter must also be updated to include the now agreed definition of [‘supported journeys’](#), and more action is needed to increase the number of CPs that are signatories to both documents. The role of Ofcom to monitor the migration and ensure consumers, particularly those who are vulnerable, do not suffer undue disruption and are protected from harm, as set out in its [guidance](#), also needs to be reflected on.

Moreover, the role of government needs to be clearly defined in digital transformation projects. For as long as the PSTN migration remains an industry-led programme, with CPs working to different timelines, coordination across Whitehall is needed to support inter-sector collaboration, provide leadership across the programme and, more importantly, give clarity for partner organisations. DSIT must lead on this and future digitisation projects, working with industry, local and regional governments, charities and other third sector organisations.

Other government departments need to do more to support DSIT and DHSC's management of the PSTN. The absence of MHCLG was noted by several witnesses, given the role of local government in the PSTN migration and the cost implications for managing the transition locally. Witnesses felt that MHCLG could play an effective role on securing DSAs and providing guidance on how local authorities source replacement telecare devices. MHCLG should also work with the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) to manage consumer protection in this regard, including through National Trading Standards.

Data Sharing Agreements (DSA)

Communication providers are working with local authorities, the telecare sector and housing associations to identify telecare users, utilising the DSA template and guidance drafted by the London Office of Technology and Innovation on behalf of and in consultation with the LGA. DSAs will result in a list of landline phone numbers shared with CPs that are cross-referenced with CP data to identify customers with telecare devices.

BT and VMO2 are leading collaboration to share relevant local authority contacts to support this process, with other major CPs supporting where contacts are known. However, CPs face difficulties in identifying a single point of contact within local authorities that have both adequate knowledge of the PSTN migration and seniority to approve a DSA. Even if successful, CPs still faced challenges in acquiring the required data. The support from the LGA to connect CPs with local authorities was recognised and appreciated. DSIT have also intervened and written to local authorities to encourage DSAs to be returned.

Housing associations were identified as a particular challenge for CPs to establish contact. In some instances, housing association properties may have a single communal analogue phone line that serves multiple residents. As such, individual residents may not be independently listed in telecom provider records, making it harder to track who is affected. Residents in a housing scheme may be registered under one main account managed by the housing provider rather than having individual plans. Support from MHCLG may help in ensuring that housing associations are actively engaging with PSTN migrations, both in terms of auditing properties and signing DSAs.

Evidence identified that some local authorities have declined to sign a DSA. The most common reason for this was that some authorities either viewed the digital switchover as 'complete' across their footprint, or that the PSTN migration is manageable without the need to share resident data with CPs. Witnesses from local government raised the financial, resource and capacity pressures facing councils that contribute to the challenges highlighted by CPs. Local government is finding it increasingly difficult to dedicate resource to this non-statutory service despite recognising how important it is to resident safety.

The signing of DSAs is further complicated by the lack of alignment amongst CPs. Currently, the majority of DSA requests to local authorities and housing associations come from BT and VMO2, although other CPs are making similar requests. However, CPs, such as Sky and TalkTalk, are yet to resume non-voluntary migrations, and do not require DSAs. Industry fragmentation means that we do not know the full extent that other, often smaller providers represent unidentified telecare users. This means that, in some instances, there is a risk that telecare users may be left behind with no clear route of support available to them. This inconsistency is fuelling confusion and frustration amongst local authorities that are eager to complete the digital switchover and focus on other pressing issues.

The APPG recommends every local authority and housing association to work cooperatively with CPs and to sign DSAs, regardless of their perception of the digital switchover. However, the pressures facing local authorities, coupled with the inconsistent approach from the telecommunications sector, make this unnecessarily challenging. Coordination from DSIT to manage CP PSTN migration approaches, along with close collaboration from MHCLG, would have streamlined this activity, reducing the administrative burdens on councils and ensuring residents were identified quickly with full DSA coverage.

A change of approach at this stage would be counterproductive, with the vast majority of DSAs in place for BT and VMO2. For local authority areas and housing associations without a DSA in place CPs, the Secretary of States for DSIT, DHSC and MHCLG should write a joint letter to chief executives strongly encouraging them to sign a DSA.

It is critical that BT and VMO2 continue to support other CPs by sharing experiences and contact details (where they have them) for when other migrations resume. It will also be important to remind local authorities and housing associations that other CPs require DSAs beyond BT and VMO2. They should also be informed when CPs that are not currently undertaking non-voluntary migrations plan to resume non-voluntary migrations. Many local authorities and housing associations will not understand that these are needed alongside ones already signed. DSIT, with the relevant CP, should write to all councils to inform them as and when this happens.

Protecting residents

National telecare campaign (NTC)

It is important to acknowledge that this campaign is still in development and that since the APPG conducted its evidence gathering, further details of the campaign have been revealed that address some of the concerns raised in this report.

In addition, the APPG understands that the launch of the NTC has been pushed back from Spring 2025 to Summer 2025. It is hoped that issues raised in this section of the report continue to be addressed to deliver an effective campaign.

The 'industry-led' approach creates a complex landscape in what is a technical project with deeply personal repercussions. It is particularly challenging when customer size, migration approach, technological solutions, and timelines for migrations varies from CP to CP. The awareness and understanding of the digital switchover requires improvement, including accurately communicating what the digital switchover is and how it will affect residents.

It is the APPG's understanding that BT chairs regular stakeholder and partner meetings to keep key organisations up to date on the PSTN. The cross-CP Telecare Action Board and BT's own Digital Voice Advisory Board function as platforms to update the wider stakeholder network. Some CPs, such as BT and VMO2, go further by undertaking regional customer engagements, including conducting local trials. VMO2's Stockport trial is a particularly good example of collaborative working between different stakeholders in the interest of resident.

Stockport Council trial with Virgin Media O2 and TSA to enhance support for telecare users during Digital Voice switchover

Stockport Council and Stockport Homes, which provides the council's housing services, established a partnership with Virgin Media O2 and TSA to work together to improve the support given to telecare service users as they go through the Digital Voice switchover. The Stockport Council trial aims to develop, test and refine ways for the telecoms industry to work with local authorities to identify and migrate these customers.

Carecall supports around 4,800 older and disabled people in the local area, and it is part of Stockport Homes Group, which provides housing services to Stockport Council.

Over ten weeks, the Carecall team worked closely with the national telecare body TSA and Virgin Media O2, as they upgraded traditional landline services in the local area.

Stockport Homes Group used an updated data sharing agreement, approved through their governance structure, to share telephone numbers of Carecall customers with Virgin Media O2.

This enabled the identification of 191 individuals who were all Carecall telecare users, Virgin Media O2 customers and who hadn't had their landline upgraded.

TSA and Carecall then risk-profiled these 191 customers, identifying those people with reduced mobility, dementia, severe disabilities or no next of kin. They were prioritised for enhanced switchover support. Appointments were booked in by Carecall and attended by one of their independent living officers and an engineer from Virgin Media O2.

The results:

- Migration appointments were successfully booked with 90% of all customers contacted – showing the power of Virgin Media O2 working with the local authority and trusted telecare service.
- 17% of these bookings were only secured when a customer's next of kin or support worker were involved or a welfare visit had taken place.
- By the end of the 10-week trial, 96% of all appointments had resulted in a successful migration of the customer's landline and telecare equipment.
- Of the 4% that were unsuccessful, this was mainly due to customers' complex health issues, or no-one being at home.

Representative bodies like the LGA and individual councils like Essex County Council have recognised the challenges created by the PSTN migration and have responded by commissioning communication campaigns to raise awareness with their respective stakeholders. The telecommunications industry has itself acknowledged that it needs to go further and beyond DSAs to identify residents likely to be impacted by the digital switchover.

A national telecare campaign, funded by BT and VMO2 to raise awareness of the digital switchover and further identify vulnerable residents beyond DSAs, is in development. Both CPs are working collaboratively together and closely with DSIT, DHSC, the LGA and TSA to shape and deliver this campaign. For the campaign, the LGA and TSA have assumed a consultative role to support the two CPs, DSIT and DHSC.

The Digital Communities APPG supports the principal of a national telecare campaign to inform and protect vulnerable residents and appreciates BT and VMO2's investment to deliver this campaign. However, it is the strong view of the APPG that public service announcements that have the potential to impact millions of people should by default be fronted and coordinated by central government, and not by an individual company or industry. Campaigns of this scale require centralised coordination, and it was clear that DSIT has left BT and VMO2 to fulfil this role and bear responsibility for its delivery. Evidence to this inquiry raised concerns about the delivery of the campaign and identified potential unintended consequences should the campaign not be managed effectively.

Some witnesses told this inquiry that they felt they had little engagement from BT or VMO2 on the national campaign, beyond updates at the Telecare Action Board (TAB) and BT's Digital Advisory Board. Evidence suggested that whilst TAB and BT's Digital Advisory Board are important and appreciated, they do not provide guidance, or indeed challenge, which is required or expected, particularly in the context of national campaigns.

Reflecting on the complexity of the digital switchover, the needs of the residents and businesses likely to be affected, and the differing approaches and timelines by CPs, buy-in and support from the VCS is critical to the campaign's success. Community engagement is needed to compliment and align with any 'above the line' activity to deliver a pincer-like movement that targets both telecare users and their support networks. However, witnesses from local government, the telecare sector and the VCS, informed the APPG that they need sufficient notice of the campaign's intended launch to be able to support a campaign effectively and to ready local and regional partners and networks.

These witnesses also highlighted that a lack of direction on this from those leading the campaign would only add further confusion to what is already a complicated programme. Preparation and understanding of messaging and customer journey – and how this adopted throughout the wider CP industry – is important to reassure residents and safeguard them from scammers. There was agreement from several witnesses that DSIT should step up to lead and provide coordination to the national campaign. This was a sentiment echoed for future digital transformation projects.

The APPG is particularly concerned by the expectation of residents self-identifying their vulnerability to CPs during the NTC. Many people will not know that they need to self-identify nor view themselves as vulnerable or at risk or be aware of the Government's Supported Journeys guidance and the broad definition of vulnerability this carries. Some residents will not know that they have a telecare device or refer to it as such. There is also significant concern for those that are already digitally excluded and may not have the skills or knowledge to respond to the campaign. It is crucial to remember that this cohort of residents are likely to be much older and/or have a disability or illness, which makes them far more at risk.

As the digital switchover continues to progress, the needs of this smaller group will become more acute. Self-identification will only go so far, and people's support networks are essential to engage so that they can do this on behalf of friends and relatives. This is why support networks are absolutely essential to engage throughout the national campaign so that they can do this on behalf of friends and relatives.

Local authority witnesses raised reports that they have seen an increase in scams and expressed concerns that this will only worsen as a result of the national campaign. Clear communication is important in managing scams, particularly when reflecting on public perceptions of CPs. It is important that BT and VMO2 leverage their connections with organisations such as Which? and Citizens Advice through the Digital Voice Advisory Group to combat scams. Central government must also raise this with National Trading Standards so that local teams are prepared to manage enquiries. The switchover should come at no cost to residents and this needs to be communicated in a way that is similar to how banks communicate scams to their customers. Residents may not come forward to CPs if they fear costs are to be incurred.

When the exact details of the campaign are confirmed, including branding and the call to action, DSIT, working with MHCLG and DHSC, should convene a meeting that outlines the roles and responsibilities of key organisations, and provide timelines and guidance to the wide range of stakeholders that can help amplify the campaign's message. A ministerial statement must be made to Parliament ahead of the launch to inform parliamentarians of the NTC. This will also help increase awareness amongst residents and key stakeholders.

More specific concerns from the APPG include:

- How the national campaign will communicate a simple and succinct message to telecare users and their support networks, including for those where English is not their first language or have additional needs.
- The process for residents to identify themselves to CPs.
- Where information about the campaign will be hosted.
- That not all CPs are aligned or engaged in the campaign.
- The ability of emergency and health services, telecare providers, local authorities, and the VCS to respond to the campaign.
- That proposals do not raise the impact of the PSTN switchover on businesses or other technology on analogue lines.

- The omission to communicate the benefits of all residents having fibre connections in their homes by default.

Power and battery back-up solutions

The APPG is acutely aware of extreme weather conditions resulting in more frequent and longer lasting power outages affecting communities across the UK.

Where a customer relies on their landline to call emergency services Ofcom [requires telecoms providers](#) to offer at least one solution in the event of a power cut which should work for at least one hour and be free of charge. The guidance allows for solutions that range from battery back-up units to special landline phones that can connect customers to a mobile network, in the event of an emergency.

To address the risks posed by bad weather on wider connectivity infrastructure such as cabinets and overhead lines, in September 2024 Ofcom published [updated resilience guidance](#) setting out the expectation that telecoms providers should deliver power back-up of around four hours for equipment in newly installed cabinets of fixed networks.

For residents reliant on telecare, there is a particular worry if power is lost. Those that are yet to be migrated, are incorrectly migrated, or whose device fails, are at high risk if landline connections are lost. In these cases, residents are unlikely to be able to contact others in the event of an emergency, either through their landline direct to friends, family, or support networks, or by pressing their telecare alarm.

With landlines down and Wi-Fi connection lost, mobile phones and mobile data are the only alternatives for these residents to contact emergency services and/or their support networks. For those living in particularly remote, rural, and isolated areas, mobile signal is often intermittent, with many experiencing lower-level speeds or living in so-called not-spots compared to those living in more urban areas (although urban areas are not without their own challenges). It is also important to consider that for this group, mobile phones are not as frequently used and for some, mobiles will be left uncharged with the sole purpose of being used in an emergency.

For the remainder of the digital switchover, it is recommended that CPs migrating residents undertake an audit with the resident to understand what communication routes are available in the event of a power outage. [Ofcom guidance](#) on informing customers that digital landlines will not work in a power cut needs to be consistently applied across the telecommunications sector. Residents should be asked whether they have broadband/Wi-Fi and/or a mobile phone and be advised about the risks they may face in a power outage and what support and services are available to them. Some CPs will already be performing this, but it will not be universally applied. Power outage solutions should be a mandatory discussion between CPs and residents. Importantly, this information must be delivered in a way that is easily understood by the resident given the characteristics of this group, their skills and needs.

The APPG agrees with witnesses that it is not an issue that Ofcom or the telecommunications industry can solve alone. Power outages are fundamentally a grid issue, therefore Ofgem and the energy sector need to help deliver a solution that safeguards residents for a longer period.

The protection and safety of residents is paramount, as is the need to improve weather resilience across the county. Whilst there are significant costs associated with battery back-ups that last for longer periods of time, this should be considered in the wider context of the economy and productivity lost. The APPG recommends that the energy and telecommunication sectors work together to provide adequate battery back-up.

Before a more practical, long-term solution can be found, the APPG believes that the Ofcom resilience guidance that telecommunication providers deliver power back-up of around four hours for newly installed cabinets should be increased to at least six hours.

For customers reliant on their landline to call emergency services, the required duration of a resilience solution in the home during a power cut should be increased from one hour to at least four hours. Where battery back-ups are used as a solution by telecommunication providers to meet Ofcom guidance, in the event of a power outage, the battery back-up deployed should run for at least six hours. From a telecare device standard, the minimum battery back-up requirement is 24 hours, so the lack of increased battery back-up from CPs is a significant backward step in terms of resilience in the event of a power cut. If these recommendations are adopted, they will need to be reflected in the PSTN Charter.

Whilst some CPs already go further to support residents for longer during power outages, witnesses believed that this is longer sufficient due to increasingly worse weather conditions faced by residents. CPs committed to work towards exceeding this in the PSTN Charter. Action must be taken as a priority.

Other action should also be taken to protect residents during power outages. To follow up on their oral evidence, Citizen's Advice wrote to the APPG concerning the protection of vulnerable residents during power cuts. They submitted that it would be to the benefit of residents if there was *'a multi-sector priority service register covering energy and communications, where local authorities could share their local knowledge of vulnerable individuals, formalising the existing relationships that have been built up between communications providers and local authorities during the PSTN transition.'*

The needs of the cohort identified in the Government's Supported Journeys guidance are likely to remain the same for those on other priority service registers. The APPG therefore agrees with Citizen's Advice and supports the creation of a multi-sector priority service register as an additional layer of protection for residents. DSIT, DBT, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero should initiate this activity.

Telecare industry standards

The TSA's TEC Quality's [Quality Standards Framework](#) (QSF) provides a set of outcome-based standards that support organisations providing TEC products and services to reach the highest standards. The QSF also provides reassurance to local authority commissioners. If council TEC services have been QSF certified, then they meet the highest standards.

However, not all telecare service providers or suppliers are certified to this framework. It is therefore recommended that all service providers and suppliers are certified to TEC Quality's QSF to reach the highest standards on their digital switchover procedures. Performance Measurement, in line with the QSF, is equally important and will help organisations to assess if contingency plans are working, or whether further modifications are needed.

Future projects

2G and 3G sunsetting

The UK's mobile network operators have confirmed that they do not intend to offer 2G and 3G mobile networks beyond the end of 2033. The process for sunsetting 2G and 3G networks is also industry-led with providers similarly working to different timescales. Some telecare devices may connect to these networks using international roaming SIMs. Equally, analogue devices continue to be sold. Lessons from the PSTN migration need to be applied to the

sunsetting of mobile networks. It should be noted that three of the four providers have already switched off their networks.

SIMs

Evidence to the inquiry raised concerns that some local authorities may have purchased telecare devices that rely on 2G/3G devices using international roaming SIMs as replacements for those that used the PSTN for connectivity. There may also be residents that, independent of their local authority, have purchased similar devices.

It is understandable that given the financial situation local authorities face, many councils will have purchased these lower-cost devices as an interim solution. However, it is insufficient for councils to purchase interim products that rely on 2G/3G networks knowing that these networks will also end in the coming years. Purchasing these devices will result in a double cost to councils and increases the risk to residents as they undergo replacement technology twice.

Sale of analogue devices

Suppliers of telecare devices certified against the QSF can no longer manufacture analogue-only equipment. Evidence from the TSA informed this inquiry that, as of November 2022, no new analogue-only telecare devices have been manufactured for the English market. This further underlines the need for telecare standards to be universally applied and adopted.

The Government, working with the telecare suppliers and telecare service providers, must go further and faster to halt the sale of analogue devices and the redeployment of analogue alarm devices already in circulation. It should also provide additional financial support to local authorities to cover the cost of replacement telecare devices. Personal telecare buyers are encouraged to look out for devices that meet TSA's Quality Standards Framework to ensure they are purchasing high quality devices.

Best practice

A national awareness campaign will be required for when timelines are confirmed that mobile networks will no longer be available for consumers. Whilst 3G networks are accepted as largely being already turned off, 2G sunsetting is still to be delivered. The issues and recommendations outlined in this report related to the national telecare campaign will bear some relevance to the aims of a 2G/3G sunsetting campaign. This includes centralised coordination and leadership from DSIT and utilising local and regional governments and the VCS to support with raising awareness about the switch off.

CPs should support mobile network operators (MNOs) with the sunsetting of 2G and remaining 3G networks, through sharing best practice about how to raise awareness with vulnerable residents, identifying key stakeholder contacts, and supporting partner readiness.

The APPG recommends that CPs migrating customers during the PSTN migration inform them of 2G and 3G sunsetting, particularly those that may be reliant on mobile connections. Some CPs will already explore this issue with residents; however, the approach to do so is inconsistent across the sector. The underlying view is that addressing 2G/3G sunsetting earlier will provide an extra safeguard for vulnerable residents.

Digital Champions

Delivering on projects like the PSTN migration requires a concerted effort to empower local authorities, who possess invaluable local knowledge and insights to address local connectivity challenges and digital inclusion. The APPG heard evidence how some of the challenges experienced during the digital switchover could have been managed more effectively if local

authorities had dedicated resource to deliver digital transformation projects. The PSTN migration has also exposed the critical need to fix the country's digital foundations.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), and Greater London Authority (GLA) are amongst leading examples of local government who are collaborating with their constituent and neighbouring authorities and engaging closely with partner organisations to provide support and guidance on both the digital switchover and other digital transformation projects. This is not, however, the same across every part of the UK. To unlock this insight and improve cross-sector collaboration, organisations such as the LGA and MobileUK have long campaigned for ringfenced funding to support the national roll out of 'Digital Champions.'

The UK Government's [Digital strategy and leadership guidance](#) from 2018 provides the current definition of this role, however witness evidence suggested that the role of a 'Digital Champion' may have lost some meaning since the guidance was first published. The definition of a 'Digital Champion' varies from place to place and institution to institution. A Digital Champion is a role which can coordinate connectivity & digital transformation activity across multiple departments, with decision-making power or influence that will be crucial to generating outcomes. In some organisations, this is a voluntary position or delivered in addition to an existing role. Equally, where these types of roles sit within an organisation varies and is inconsistently applied across other sectors that may have need for similar positions. Others may have dedicated teams that occupy a range of digitally equipped/skilled roles.

This varied approach is particularly evident across local government. As a non-statutory service, and with rising costs on core services it was unsurprising to hear evidence that it is becoming increasingly difficult for local authorities to continue to fund digital roles, let alone dedicate resource to support digital transformation projects.

The UK Government's ambitious goals for economic growth, regional equality, and digital transformation of public services rely heavily on residents and business having universal access to fast and reliable broadband and mobile connectivity. To support these ambitions, the Government must recognise the leadership and convening power of local and regional government which can drive connectivity levels and reduce the digital divide.

Recognising this government's ambitions for greater devolution and the reorganisation of local government, as set out in the [English Devolution White Paper](#), the APPG recommends that the Government empowers existing combined authorities and newly created strategic authorities to improve capacity and capability of dedicated digital teams that cover a range of roles and deliver both digital transformation and technological adoption. These roles should support collaboration and innovation both within council structures as well as facilitating close relationships with the private sector to deliver greater connectivity and efficiencies in the public sector. These teams should work across the authority's geographical footprint but also engage neighbouring councils where appropriate.

The Digital Communities APPG will be exploring this proposal throughout its work programme and is keen to collaborate with Whitehall and interested stakeholders to develop this proposal further.

Glossary

APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group
BT	British Telecom
CP	Communication Provider
DPA	Digital Poverty Alliance
DSA	Data Sharing Agreement
DHSC	Department for Health and Social Care
DSIT	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
GLA	Greater London Authority
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
LGA	Local Government Association
LOTI	London Office of Technology and Innovation
MNO	Mobile Network Operators
MobileUK	The membership body for the UK's mobile network operators
MHCLG	Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government
PSTN	Public Switched Telephone Network
QSF	Quality Standards Framework
Support journeys	The Government's agreement with communication providers on defining vulnerability during the PSTN migration
TAB	Telecare Action Board. Established in January 2024 and is the vehicle for ongoing engagement for stakeholders for telecare and the digital phone switchover
TEC	Technology Enabled Care
TSA	TEC Services Association
Telecare	Technology-based healthcare
VCS	Voluntary and community sector
VMO2	Virgin Media O2
WMCA	West Midlands Combined Authority

Annex

Evidence sessions

Session One – Tuesday 14 January

Panel	Helen Morgan MP	Wendy Chamberlain MP	Liz Saville-Roberts MP	Lord Clement-Jones
Witness	Lucy Baker, Consumer all IP Director, BT	Cristina Luna-Esteban, Director, Telecoms Policy, Ofcom	David Christie, Senior Regulatory Specialist, VMO2	Luke Davies, Policy Manager, SKY

Session Two – Wednesday 29 January*

Panel	Helen Morgan MP	Archie Ratcliffe, Secretariat		
Witness	John Steward, Digital Infrastructure Policy Advisor, GMCA	Chris Hudson, WM5G Connectivity Director, WMCA	Paul Wehren, Market Engagement Lead, Essex County Council	Alyson Scurfield, CEO, TSA

Session Three – Tuesday 4 February

Panel	Helen Morgan MP	Baroness Verma	Lord Clement-Jones	Victoria Collins MP
Witness	Elizabeth Anderson, CEO, Digital Poverty Alliance	Dr Greg Stride, Senior Policy Researcher, Citizen's Advice	Caroline Abraham, Charity Director, AgeUK	

The APPG received written evidence from the Greater London Authority.

The APPG met with FarrPoint and Digital Office (Scottish Local Government) to discuss resilience.

*Also in attendance: Lily Fairbairn, Digital Policy Project, and Support Officer, GMCA and Matt Dean, Programme Communications Officer, Essex County Council.