

GPC GUIDANCE: USE OF 084 NUMBERS IN THE NHS

January 2010

Introduction

In December 2008, the Department of Health (DH), England, published a consultation on *The use of 084 telephone numbers in the NHS* www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Closedconsultations/DH_091879

In the GPC response, we highlighted that calls to NHS services should incur as low a charge as possible, but that this must be balanced by the quality of communications service that the patients are accessing. Many practices value 084 numbers because they improve patient access by providing telephone numbers with extra functionality. Practices should not be penalised for following the DH's previous advice to adopt 084 number systems in order to improve access for patients. The GPC also supported a voluntary switch for practices to revert to local numbers, and advised that the DH should ensure that practices are allowed to serve out the terms of their contracts with phone companies if restrictions on the use of 084 numbers were to be implemented.

The DH published their response to the consultation on 14 September 2009, which concluded that the use of phone numbers that charge the public or patients a premium rate to contact the NHS were to be banned in England. However, 084 numbers could continue to be used if call charges were no more expensive than those of the equivalent local calls. The DH's response to the consultation can be read here:

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Responsestoconsultations/DH_105089

Please note that this applies in England only as there are no intentions to draft regulations in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

What will this mean in practice?

This announcement means that the DH has banned all parties within the NHS from using premium rate lines (which is in line with what they have done previously for 0870 numbers). Currently excluded from this ban is NHS Direct, because alteration of its 0845 number to a three digit non-emergency number has been under consideration as part of a recent three-digit non-emergency number consultation. If a decision is made not to introduce a three-digit non-emergency number, the new regulations regarding the use of 084 numbers in the NHS will apply equally to NHS Direct.

GP practices (and all others bodies within the NHS using 084 numbers) should obtain written confirmation from their phone service supplier that the charge for a call to their number is no more expensive than making an equivalent local call. The DH has been assured by the main phone service supplier, NEG (Network Europe Group, a national provider of telephony services such as Surgery Line), that this is the case.

This does *not* mean that the use of 084 numbers in itself has been banned. As long as the tariff is equivalent to local rates, and the practice obtains a written guarantee from their phone supplier (usually NEG) that they are charging rates in line with local geographic calls, then they will be deemed to have fulfilled their medical services contract. **If any legal action should be taken to challenge this, it would be against the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and not the practice.**

New or existing contracts

Practices entering in to new telecommunications contracts would normally be expected to have a clause inserted to allow them to cancel the contract if the company is not using an appropriate call tariff. However, the DH has been unable to persuade NEG to insert such a penalty-free get-out clause into existing contracts.

If a practice is tied into a contract which does not comply with the new regulations, it must remain with its telecommunications supplier until the contract terminates. Thereafter, it will be obliged either to ask for a revised contract from the same supplier, which complies with the new regulations, or to find another supplier.

When signing a *new* contract, the GPC's legal advice is that practices must ensure that there are flexible (i.e. 1-3 months' notice period), penalty-free cancellation clauses in the contract.

From 21 December 2009, when the legislative changes were made, PCTs and practices have been expected to review the contractual arrangements with their telephone provider annually. This should take the form of obtaining a written guarantee from the telecommunications supplier about call charges.

Note that revenue sharing (this is where the supplier of the 084 line receives a proportion of the call charge as well as the caller's telephone line supplier) has not been banned by the Government.

Glossary of the terms used in this guidance

01, 02 numbers – See 'Geographic numbers'.

03 numbers - These numbers were introduced to replace 0870 numbers. Calls to 03 numbers cost the same as those to Geographic numbers for landline and mobile phone users. Revenue sharing is not allowed with 03 number services.

084 numbers – Telephone numbers beginning '084', which often offer extra functionality (such as call routing and queuing), but cost more for callers to call – up to 5p per minute for callers from landlines, and up to 40p per minute for callers from mobile phones. Part of the cost of the call is paid to the call recipient (i.e. revenue sharing).

0870 numbers –The cost of calling an 0870 number is usually higher than the cost of calling a geographic 01 or 02 number, especially for mobile phone users. Revenue sharing on 0870 numbers was ended by Ofcom in February 2008. 0870 numbers were used by businesses and services.

Extra functionality – Extra functions such as call routing, queuing, automated appointment alterations, provided by the phone system.

Geographic numbers - Local Area Code Numbers (also called UK Town Numbers or STD Codes) all begin with the digits 01 or 02 and relate to a specific area of the UK. Calls to such numbers will usually be charged at a low rate for both landline and mobile phone users.

Local numbers – Telephone numbers with the same area dialling code as that of the local area. Calls between local numbers are usually low cost. Calls from mobile phones to local numbers are usually included in users' calling plans or are of low cost. May also refer to 'Geographic numbers'.

Premium rate numbers - Connect the callers to a service, for which prices far higher than those of a normal (geographical) call are charged. Part of the call charge is paid to the service provider, thus enabling businesses to be funded via the calls.

Revenue sharing – Calls to numbers which operate revenue sharing will generate income for both the telephony provider and the recipient of the call. As a result, charges for calls to such numbers are higher than the cost of calling a geographical number.

Frequently Asked Questions

When will the ban take effect and how will it be enforced?

The ban came into force on 21 December 2009 when the *Directions to NHS bodies concerning the cost of telephone calls in relation to health services 2009*, were issued:

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Legislation/Directionsfromthesecretaryofstate/DH_110480

The Directions mirror the proposed amendments to the GP contract regulations and the GPC was consulted on both the Directions and the amendments to the GP contract.

The DH expects NHS organisations to adhere to its position on this issue – patients should not be expected to pay more than the equivalent cost of calling a geographical number.

Why hasn't a blanket ban been issued on 084 numbers in the same way as with 087 numbers?

Banning 084 numbers outright won't necessarily solve the issue that some patients are paying more than the cost of calling a normal geographical number to contact the NHS. The ban on 087 numbers demonstrated that banning a specific number range simply leads to the use of other number ranges, which generate similar problems and result in presentation of the same issues yet again. The current ban prevents the use of any number, now and in the future, which costs the patient more to call the surgery than the cost of calling a geographical number.

What do practices have to do to prepare?

Practices must carry out a review, checking their telecommunications supplier contract to ensure that their supplier offers telephone call rates in line with local charges. NEG, who hold most of these contracts, have assured the Government that they can offer their customers such a guarantee.

Can practices sign up to new contracts before the ban comes into effect?

As part of the legislative changes, all NHS organisations (including GP practices) will be required to review their current telephony arrangements. Where it is found that the cost of calling the practice is not comparable to calling a normal geographical number, all 'reasonable steps' must be taken to rectify this. For example, where calls to the practice are charged at a rate that is more than the equivalent of a call to a geographical number, the practice might seek to vary or renegotiate the terms of its existing contract, terminate its existing contract, or offer a call-back service to patients who do not wish to use a premium rate number to contact it.

Should GPs terminate their contracts with existing providers?

Existing contracts do not need to be terminated, but where there is evidence that callers are being charged more than the geographical call rate, then GPs are expected to take all reasonable steps to prevent this from happening. Whilst terminating their telephony contract is an option open to GPs, practices can also consider varying or renegotiating the terms of their contract or providing a call-back facility for patients who don't want to pay a premium rate.

What does this mean for GPs tied into long-term contracts?

Unfortunately the Government was unable to persuade NEG to add a clause into existing contracts to allow NHS organisations an early release without penalty, but practices should ensure that any new contracts they enter into do include such a clause.

However, if a patient wishes to make a complaint about the cost of calling the practice, they should make the complaint against the PCT, not the practice. Should legal costs be incurred, the PCT would be liable.

What if the phone company tries to get a practice to sign to a 5-year contract?

We would not recommend signing up to long-term contracts. The practice would also need to ensure that calls to its number do not cost more than calls to a geographical number. The practice should ask its supplier for written confirmation of this, and check that there are cancellation clauses in the new contract that are flexible and do not incur a penalty if the telephony provider cannot fulfil its obligations under the Directions.

What will happen if costs are disputed?

Both parties in a dispute should be able to provide clear evidence that calls to 084 numbers are either more or less expensive than an equivalent call to a normal geographical number. Where there is evidence that calls are more expensive, the NHS body is expected to take reasonable steps to address this according to paragraph 2(3) of the Directions.

Will practices that move away from 084 (and similar) numbers miss out on the added functionality that these numbers can provide?

No. Telecommunications solutions are available to rent or purchase which operate with 01, 02 or 03 telephone number schemes. These solutions can streamline calls, queue calls and provide automated appointment handling so that patients can call 24 hours a day to book, amend or cancel appointments.

Why can't practices just move to 03 numbers?

The DH has stated that it does not wish to micro-manage the contracts that general practices hold with telephony providers, and has left it for GPs to decide which number is most suitable to use for callers to contact their practices, providing that calls to such numbers do not incur higher charges than geographical number calls. The DH's intention is to set clear guidelines, via the introduction of new legislation.

Why can't GPs themselves decide what phone systems they use?

The provision of telephone services for patients and the public is a matter for the local NHS. However, the DH issued guidance in 2006 asking PCTs to 'ensure that patients telephoning practices do not pay more than they would if they called a local geographical telephone number'¹. After learning that in some cases this guidance was still not being implemented, it was felt necessary to amend legislation in order to address the issue effectively.

Will patients who call their practice from a mobile phone still pay more?

The new legislation will mean that if patients call a practice using their mobile phones, they will be charged no more than if they had called a normal geographical number from their mobile phone. In terms of call tariffs, the call rates which patients are charged depend on their mobile phone service provider. It is a matter for individual members of the public to ensure that they are happy with the terms and conditions of the mobile phone arrangements that they enter into with their mobile phone provider.

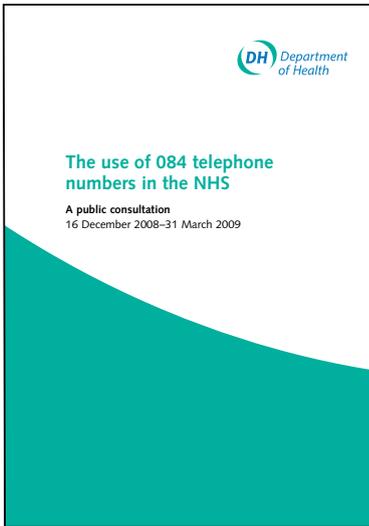
Do practices have to provide information about their telephone system and rates under the Freedom of Information Act (FoIA)?

Yes, practices are obliged to reply to such a FoIA request. It is likely that other practices would receive similar requests, so the Local Medical Committee should co-ordinate replies so that all practices provide a consistent message. In the FoIA reply, it should be highlighted that when all costs are taken into account, the practice does not gain financially from 'revenue sharing', and that provision of an 084 telephone line service may even cost the practice more than that of a standard phone system. Practices can also ask their supplier to provide the information necessary to demonstrate that their call charges are in line with geographic call charges, as required by the new legislation.

¹ www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_064288.pdf

Using 084 telephone numbers in the NHS What do you think?





This Easy Read booklet

This is an Easy Read version of a booklet called **The use of 084 telephone numbers in the NHS – a public consultation**.

A **consultation** is when the Government asks people what they think about its plans for the future.

What the words mean

When we say **we** in this booklet we mean the **Department of Health**.

When we say **NHS** we mean the **National Health Service**.

When we say **084 number** we mean a telephone number that begins with the numbers 084.

There are some difficult words in this booklet.

There is a list of these words and what they mean on page 31.

These words are in **blue** letters in the booklet

Support

You may like to have someone to support you when you look at this booklet.



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What is this booklet about?



The Department of Health wants to decide if we should stop **NHS services** using telephone numbers that start with **084**.



This booklet explains why we think NHS services should stop using **084** numbers.



It also tells you why **084** numbers can sometimes be helpful for some people.



Before we decide what to do, we want people to tell us what they think.



We want to hear from:

- People who have called **NHS services** on **084** numbers



- People who use a **local number** to call NHS services.



This booklet has some questions at the end for you to answer if you want to.

We tell you how to do this on page 22.



Please tell us what you think by answering the questions before **31 March 2009**.



We also want to hear from:

- GPs



084 ✓

- People who work in GPs' surgeries, hospitals, pharmacies and other **NHS services** that use **084** numbers



084 ✗

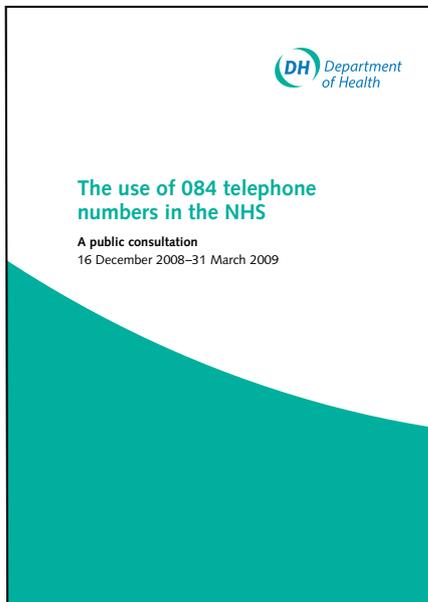
- People who work in NHS services that do **not** use **084** numbers



- People who work for telephone companies



- Other people who are interested in this subject.



This Easy Read booklet is **not** for people in this list, unless they have called the NHS service as patients.

These people should answer the questions in the full-length booklet.

What is wrong with 084 numbers?



People who call **084** numbers pay more than for a local call.



We do not think that people should have to pay extra to call **NHS services**.



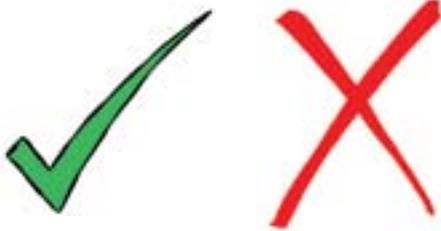
A lot of NHS services use **084** numbers. One of the reasons for this is that the caller pays more to call an **084** number. This extra money helps the NHS service pay for the extra cost of having the **084** number.



We are thinking about stopping NHS services from using **084** numbers. We have already told NHS services that we think they should **not** use **084** numbers.



But **084** numbers can have special **functions** that can make it easier for people to use some services. When we say **function** we mean something special that a telephone service can do to help the caller or the NHS service provider.



We want people to tell us what they think is good and bad about **084** numbers so that we can find ways to give better **NHS services** without callers having to pay more.

About telephone services

What is a local call rate?



A **local call rate** is what you pay to make a telephone call in the same area.

For example, if your home telephone number begins 0207 you will pay the local call rate for any call you make from your home telephone to a number that starts with 0207.



084 numbers are not linked to one area so they cost more.

What is good about 084 numbers?

It costs more to call **084** numbers.

But 084 numbers can make it easier for:

- the caller to use an **NHS service**
- the NHS service to give a better service.



084 numbers can have functions that do things like:



- Keep you in a queue so you do not have to call again if the line is busy



- Give you a list of choices so you get through to the right department by using your telephone keypad. The keypad is the buttons on your telephone



- Tell you about other services, like out-of-hours services



- Let you do things like book an appointment automatically using your telephone keypad.

What does it cost to call an 084 number?



The cost of calls from **landlines** and **mobile phones** to **084** numbers depends on:



- Which telephone company supplies the **084** number



- How much the telephone company charges a service to use the **084** number
- What sort of deal the caller has with the company that provides their telephone services



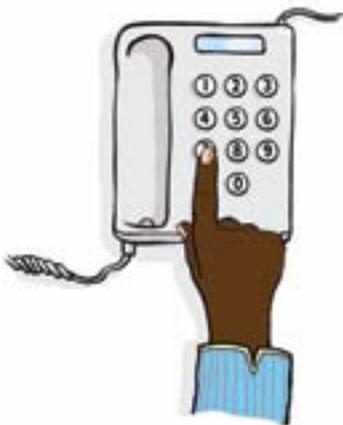
- How long the call lasts.



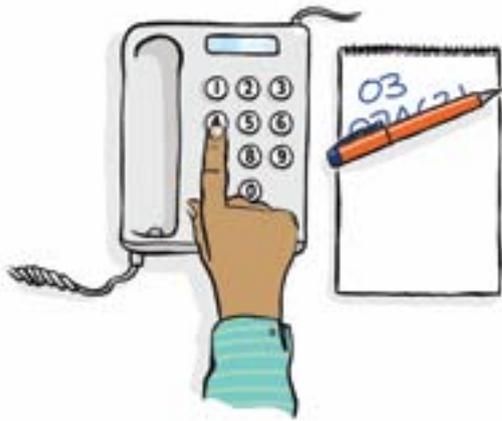
The average cost of a call from a **landline** or a **mobile phone** to an **084** number is more expensive than a call to a landline at a **local call rate**.

Calls to 084 numbers often last longer because:

- You may be kept in a queue before your call is answered
- You may spend time doing things like booking an appointment or ordering a repeat prescription using your telephone **keypad**.



About 03 numbers



Telephone numbers that begin with **03** can do the same things as **084** numbers.

- **03** numbers usually cost the same as a **local call rate**, but
- services that have **03** numbers have to pay to receive calls.
- GP practices and other **NHS services** using **03** numbers cannot get this money back.

Why do GPs and other NHS services use 084 numbers?



084 numbers can help GPs to give a better service.



084 numbers can help services:

- Receive lots of calls at the same time
- Get information about how many calls they have had. This helps them to plan better services for patients
- Let patients do things like book appointments and order repeat prescriptions automatically, using their telephone **keypad**.



084 numbers can also help services:



- Record calls automatically. This can help stop people getting angry on the telephone. It is also useful for training staff



- Divert calls to another place, for instance when the surgery is closed.

Why do we want to stop NHS services using 084 numbers?



We think that people should only pay the **local call rate** when they call **NHS services**.

In 2005 we said GPs in England must **not** use telephone numbers that charge premium rates or national rates. (Premium and national rates are higher than local call rates.) But we did not say they must not use **084** numbers.

People have now told us that they are worried because:

- It costs more to call an **084** number



- They think that GPs are making money from the **084** numbers.



084

GPs do **not** make money from **084** numbers. But the extra cost to the caller helps them to pay for the **084** number and for the extra things the **084** number can do.

How do the different numbers compare?

	Local rate numbers		084 numbers		03 numbers	
Does the number cost the caller more?	No ✗	Callers pay the local call rate	Yes ✓	Callers pay more than the local call rate	No ✗	Callers pay the local call rate
Is the service better for the caller?	No ✗	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Get engaged tone at busy times ● May need to call many times before they speak to someone ● Cannot do things automatically using their keypad ● May need to call a different number or be transferred 	Yes ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do not get an engaged tone ● Do not need to call again, even at busy times ● Can do things automatically using their keypad ● May find that it is quicker to do some things 	Yes ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do not get an engaged tone ● Do not need to call again, even at busy times ● Can do things automatically using their keypad ● May find that it is quicker to do some things
Does the number cost the GP or NHS service more?	No ✗	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● But they do not know how many calls they get 	No ✗	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● They can use the extra cost to the caller to help pay for the 084 service ● They know how many calls they receive. This helps them give better services to patients 	Yes ✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have to pay for the full cost of having the 03 number ● They know how many calls they receive. This helps them give better services to patients

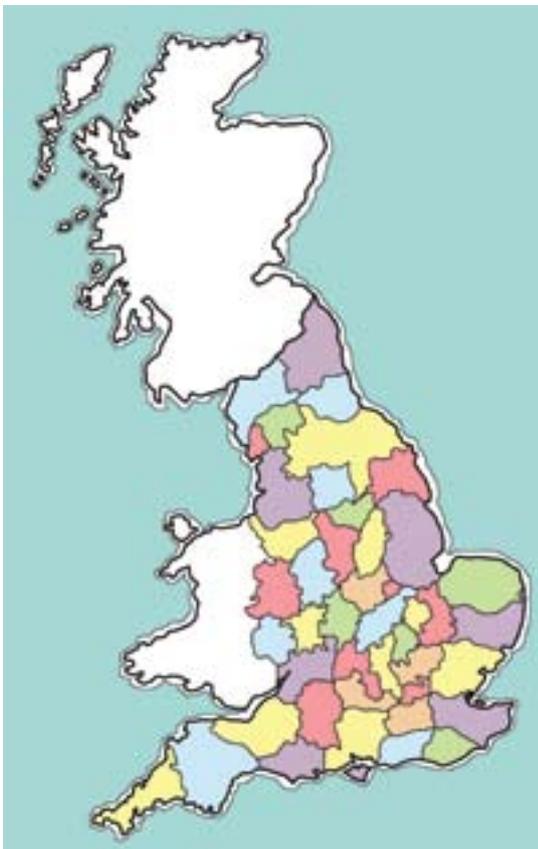
What can we do?



It is not fair that some people pay more to call **NHS services**. So we cannot leave things as they are.



We want to make sure that people can still get the good **functions** that **084** numbers can give.



But we also want to make sure that everyone gets the same quality services at the same cost, wherever they live.

We want to find the best answers to these questions:



- If we say **NHS services** cannot use **084** numbers any more, should we say they must use **03** numbers instead?



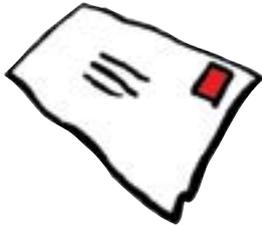
- But this would cost the NHS services more. So who should pay the extra cost?



You can help us decide what is the best thing to do by answering the questions on pages 26 to 30.

How to answer our questions

Please write your answers to the questions on pages 26 to 30 and post them to:

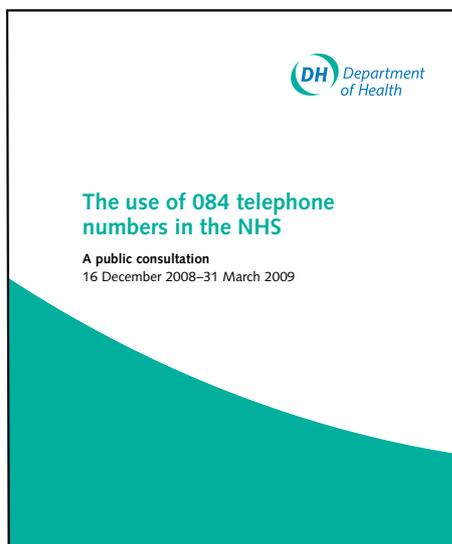


084 Consultation Responses
Department of Health
2N16 Quarry House
Leeds LS2 7UE

Or email them to:
084consultation@dh.gsi.gov.uk



Please send us your answers
before **31 March 2009**.



The questions are part of a **consultation** we are having about **084** telephone numbers.



We follow the Government's rules about how to run a **consultation**. You can see a list of the rules on the Better Regulation website: www.berr.gov.uk

Freedom of Information



The Freedom of Information Act says that we must share the information you give us, if people ask us for it.

If you do not want us to tell other people what you have said, please tell us why you would like us to keep it a secret when you send us your answers.

We will try to do what you ask, but we cannot promise to keep your information secret.

We will **not** usually share your personal details with other organisations.

Comments or complaints

If you want to comment or complain about something to do with this **consultation**, you can write to:



**Consultations Co-ordinator
Department of Health
3E48 Quarry House
Leeds LS2 7UE**



Or email:
**consultations.co-ordinator@dh.
gsi.gov.uk**

(Please do **not** send your answers to the questions to these addresses.)

What next?

When everyone has told us what they think we will:



- Think about everything they have said



- Write a report before the end of April 2009



- Put the report on our website:
www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Responsestoconsultations/index.htm



- Change the law about what telephone numbers **NHS services** should use in future.



Please write your answers to these questions in the spaces. If you need more space, please use a new piece of paper.



Thank you for helping us with our **consultation**.

Question 1

Do you agree that people should not pay more than the cost of a **local call rate** when they call **NHS services**?

Yes 

No 

Question 2

When you call an **NHS service**, would you prefer to call a number that can do things automatically? This means **functions** like keeping you in a queue when the line is busy, putting you through to the right person automatically, or letting you make your own appointment using your telephone **keypad**.

Yes 

No 





If your answer to Question 2 is Yes:



Which do you think are the most useful functions that **084** numbers can have?

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Why do you think these functions are important?

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Who do you think should pay the extra cost for a telephone system that has these functions?

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If your answer to Question 2 is No:



What do you **not** like about these **functions**?

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Question 3

We are thinking about stopping **NHS services** from using **084** numbers if it costs the patient more than a **local call rate**. Do you agree with us?

Yes 

No 

Please tell us why you think this.

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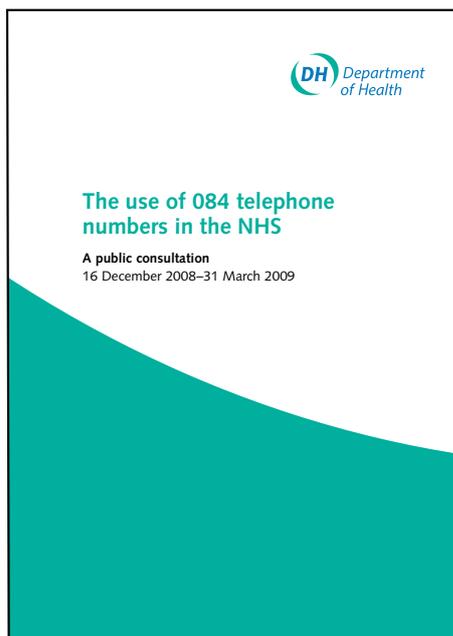
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What the words mean

consultation	When the Government asks people what they think about its plans for the future
function	Something special that a telephone service can do that helps the caller or the service provider
keypad	The buttons on your telephone that you use to dial a number or to send text messages
landline	A telephone line, usually in a home or business, which is connected by wires (or optic fibres)
local call rate	What you pay to make a telephone call in the local area
local number	A landline telephone number that starts with the same 4 or 5 numbers as the landline telephone you are calling from
mobile phone	A telephone that is not connected by wires and does not need a landline
NHS services	In this booklet we mean GPs, GPs' surgeries, hospitals, pharmacies and other organisations that provide health services for the NHS

How to find out more



If you want to read the full-length **consultation** booklet, **The use of 084 telephone numbers in the NHS – a public consultation**, visit: www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Liveconsultations/index.htm



Or you can see a copy in your GP's surgery.

If you want more copies of this Easy Read booklet or a copy of the full-length booklet you can:



- Telephone: **0300 123 1002**



- Visit:
www.orderline.dh.gov.uk
- Email: **dh@prolog.uk.com**



- Write to:
DH Publications Orderline
PO Box 777
London SE1 6XH

Please tell us whether you want this Easy Read version (order number 293270) or the full-length **consultation** (order number 292267) when you contact us.



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The use of 084 telephone numbers in the NHS

A public consultation

16 December 2008–31 March 2009

DH INFORMATION READER BOX

Policy HR/Workforce Management Planning/Performance Clinical	Estates Commissioning IM&T Finance Social Care/Partnership Working
Document purpose	Consultation/Discussion
Gateway reference	10878
Title	The use of 084 telephone numbers in the NHS
Author	Department of Health
Publication date	16 December 2008
Target audience	Members of the public, the telephony industry, GP practices, pharmacists or other staff working in the NHS in England who receive incoming calls from patients
Circulation list	
Description	This is a public consultation document seeking views from all interested parties on the use of 084 numbers in the NHS. The Department of Health will publish a response to the consultation, which will set out proposed action as a result of the consultation.
Cross reference	N/A
Superseded documents	N/A
Action required	N/A
Timing	Consultation responses invited: closing date 31 March 2009
Contact details	Lois Quayle Service Design Division 2N16 Quarry House Leeds LS2 7UE 0113 254 5451
For recipient's use	

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:

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

You can also respond by emailing your responses to these questions to:
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