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What is Oftel?

The Office of Telecommunications – Oftel – is the independent regulator for the UK telecommunications industry. Our goal is to make sure you receive the best quality, choice and value for money for all your telephone services, including fixed and mobile services and Internet access.

Later in 2003 Oftel will be merging with other organisations to form a single regulator for the UK communications industry, the Office of Communications (Ofcom). For more information, see www.ofcom.org.uk

Why should I read this leaflet?

This leaflet outlines what you need to consider when choosing and using your mobile service – whether you are a new buyer or a more experienced user thinking about a change of service. It may help you get a better deal, avoid surprises about charges, and understand more about switching your service. It also tells you where to get more information about mobile services.

How to choose a mobile service

What are the most important things to think about?

The key thing to consider is how you expect to use your mobile phone:

- how much will you use your phone?
- what time of day will you make most of your calls?
- which mobile network is used by most of the people you are likely to call?
- what kind of services do you want on your mobile (eg mobile Internet services)?
- will you make much use of the more expensive types of calls, such as calls to premium rate services or using your phone whilst abroad?
- which networks have 'coverage' (give a good signal) where you will use your mobile?

How can I compare prices?

There are so many mobile services and prices change so often that any detailed summary or price comparisons in this leaflet would quickly be out of date. The best deal depends on each customer's needs and usage pattern – so general advice could be misleading.

But there are ways to compare prices. Before you buy, it helps if you have some idea of your general usage, perhaps from old telephone bills. You could then refer to:

- retailers' or independent magazines – these generally provide up-to-date prices and detailed assessments of handsets;
- best-buy calculators – these are available at some retailers and price-comparison websites. Taking your basic usage details, they calculate the cheapest deal for you – but they may not consider all mobile phone companies.

How do I find out what standards of service are offered by mobile phone companies?

You can find out more about network coverage from:

- mobile phone companies' websites (where you can check detailed factual information on coverage by postcode);

- mobile phone shops; and
- Ofcom's website. For figures on calls connected and completed on each network for each UK region, see our consumer information section at www.ofcom.gov.uk/consumer/advice.

In that section we also publish information on customer satisfaction and numbers of complaints.

What are the different ways to pay for my mobile service?

There are three main ways to pay. Each method should offer you a choice of tariffs so you can select the one that best suits your needs.

Monthly contract

- you are billed for calls and monthly subscriptions, typically for a minimum contract period of at least 12 months;
- there is a wider choice of services and handsets;
- call charges and handsets are generally cheaper; and
- you normally get inclusive call minutes, ie an allowance of call minutes (and perhaps also text messages) which is included in your monthly subscription and not charged for separately.

Prepay (or 'pay as you go')

- you pay before making calls, eg with a call voucher or credit/debit cards;
- unlike a monthly contract, there are no credit checks or minimum contract period;
- there is usually a more limited choice of services and handsets; and
- it is easy to control spending, but you will not get an itemised bill and call charges tend to be higher than with a monthly contract.

Pay up front (or 'no line rental ever')

- you are billed monthly, so you can see where your money is going;
- you are not charged monthly subscriptions; and
- call charges and the price and range of handsets are similar to prepay.

How can I control the cost of my mobile service?

Apart from choosing the right mobile phone company and tariff for your usage pattern, you might find it useful to consider these questions:

What does it cost to call people on other networks?

Often you will pay more to call someone on a different mobile network than to call someone on the same network. On average, you pay over three times as much, but the difference can be even bigger, especially outside peak times. You may be able to save money by choosing a tariff where:

- the inclusive call minutes cover all networks, not just your network; or
- charges for calling different networks do not vary much.

What is included with my monthly contract?

Find out exactly what you can get for your money:

- do inclusive call minutes cover calls to people on other networks as well as yours?
- do you get inclusive text messages and/or mobile Internet call time?
- are calls to retrieve voicemail free?
- can you buy 'add on' services to save you money overall, eg cheaper rates for text messages or calls to other networks?
- for how long will any unused inclusive call minutes in one month be carried forward ('rolled over')?
- can you use more than one handset on the same account? (Normally this involves a relatively low extra monthly fee, and a different phone number for each handset).

How much will it cost to use my mobile phone abroad?

Calls and text messages can cost much more if you use your mobile abroad, especially if you have a prepay service. You will also normally pay to receive calls and to pick up voicemail when abroad. What you are charged and the services available can vary according to the country visited. Details of charges and services are available from mobile phone companies – check websites or leaflets, or speak to a customer service adviser.

You can cut your costs, in some cases significantly, in various ways – the best way for

you depends mainly on how much you use your mobile abroad. Customers on all types of tariff can make savings by selecting some of these options:

- choose a monthly contract instead of prepay;
- if you do have a monthly contract, pay extra rental while you are away in return for lower call charges;
- use text messages instead of voice calls;
- change the network that your phone connects to while abroad (see your handset guide or ask your service provider);
- swap the SIM card in your phone. This is the small plastic-coated electronic chip that links your phone to a particular network and a particular phone number. It takes under a minute for you to replace your normal SIM card. If you use your mobile a lot when abroad, or travel abroad regularly, you can cut costs considerably by using SIM cards from foreign mobile providers. Some of these cards are sold in the UK; and
- get incoming calls diverted directly to voicemail (or to someone in the UK) and do not access voicemail while abroad. Alternatively, get incoming calls totally barred. You may need to do this through your mobile phone company before you go abroad.

Note that your phone may not work in some countries. In this case it may be possible to rent or buy a different phone to use abroad. You can do this before you travel.

The consumer information section on our website at www.oftel.gov.uk/consumer/advice gives further advice on cost saving.

What insurance and warranties should I get?

You might want to protect against costs like theft, damage, and unauthorised calls. This may be part of your mobile package, or you may be able to choose separate mobile or household insurance.

Not being insured can prove costly. Mobile phones are often sold at a subsidised price. But if you lose a phone and don't have insurance, normally you can only replace it by paying the full cost of the phone. Also, you may have to continue paying monthly subscriptions for the lost phone until the contract period ends, even if you buy a new phone.

What does it cost other people to call my mobile?

You might want to think about how much it will cost others to call you, whether they are your friends, family (especially if you pay their bill) or customers. Whether they are calling from a fixed line or a mobile phone, what they pay depends on your choice of mobile network.

What else should I know about mobile charges?

Some aspects of mobile charges might be unexpected:

- calls to numbers beginning 0800 are often referred to as ‘freephone’ calls, but if you call from a mobile you may actually be charged;
- calls to numbers beginning 09 are for premium rate services, eg for information and advice services, and competition lines. Calling these numbers from a mobile often costs much more than the advertised rate;
- some phone companies will charge for sending you itemised bills; and
- weekday peak periods usually run from 7am or 8am to 7pm, but times vary between tariffs, and some tariffs do not even have peak periods.

How can I change my mobile service?

Switching your tariff

If you have a monthly contract, you can often switch to another tariff if your usage pattern differs from what you expected. Some phone companies will advise you that changing can save you money. You may be able to buy ‘add on’ services, eg cheaper rates for text messages, calling other networks or using your mobile abroad.

Some phone companies have different prepay tariffs, which you may be able to switch between, to suit different types of user. You may also be able to stay with the same phone company, and keep the same handset, but change between contract and prepay.

Changing your mobile phone company

If you have a monthly contract, you will probably be committed to paying monthly subscriptions for a year. But if you can change, consider the following:

Keeping your handset when moving to a new mobile phone company

If you want to keep your handset and switch to another phone company, you will need to make sure that your handset is not ‘locked’.

Many mobile handsets in the UK are locked by mobile phone companies so that they cannot be used with another phone company. Your phone company can unlock your phone, but you typically have to wait a minimum period and pay a fee first. Mobile phone companies can tell you about their locking policies.

Before unlocking, you should check that your mobile will work on your intended new network. Retailers can advise you on this.

Alternatively, you can buy a phone that is not locked ('SIM-free') and combine it with a SIM card bought separately from a mobile retailer.

Most 'SIM card only' packs are priced like prepay tariffs. Mobile retailers can advise on this.

With an unlocked handset, you can also swap back and forth between different SIM cards, to pay less for specific types of call or to get better reception. But bear in mind that each SIM card has its own mobile phone number.

Keeping your mobile number with a new phone company

Mobile phone companies allow you to keep the same mobile number if you change to a new provider. Keeping your number is generally free and can take as little as five working days. Your current or potential mobile phone company can tell you more about the process.

Changing your handset

Upgrading

Contract customers can often upgrade their handsets during the contract as well as at the end. This tends to cost less the longer you are into your contract period. Check if upgrading will tie you into another 12-month contract.

Trade-in value

You can often get some money or credit back for trading in your old handset. The amount will depend on several factors, including whether you are buying contract or prepay, and which network you are signing up to with your new phone. The trade-in value is often higher if you also return the phone charger, manual and SIM card.

Keeping your information

Some phone companies and retailers can quickly transfer your address book to your new handset, and can also keep a secure record of your numbers so that you do not lose important details if your phone is lost or stolen.

Other mobile issues

What does the 'mobile Internet' offer me?

The term 'mobile Internet' covers various ways of supplying information and services from the Internet, involving different handsets or other equipment. Mobile service providers and retailers are best placed to tell you in detail what is on offer.

What extra services are available for older and disabled customers?

Mobile phone companies must provide elderly and disabled people with free directory enquiry services. Mobile service providers can tell you about special products for hearing- and speech-impaired customers.

Ricability, an independent research organisation, has produced a consumer guide, *Stay in touch: a guide to telephones and services for older and disabled customers*. For a free copy, contact Ricability or Ofcom's Research and Information Unit (see 'Contact details').

What can I do about mobile phone theft?

If your mobile is stolen, report it as soon as possible to your provider as well as to the police. You may be liable for the cost of calls made on it until you report the theft, and your insurance claim could be affected if you delay.

More advice on theft is available from the Home Office (see 'Contact details') and some mobile shops.

Are mobile phones safe to use?

A report in 2000 by a UK group of independent experts (the 'Stewart Group') found that the balance of evidence did not show that mobile phones caused health problems, but recommended a 'precautionary approach' to mobile phone use until more research was done. This includes such things as keeping calls brief and encouraging children to use mobile phones for essential calls only.

What if I have a concern about a mobile mast?

Local planning authorities handle questions about the siting of mobile phone masts.

Contact details

Contacts at Oftel:

Our address

Oftel

50 Ludgate Hill

London EC4M 7JJ

Our website: www.oftel.gov.uk

lo-call rate number: 0845 714 5000

phone: 020 7634 8888

fax: 020 7634 8845

textphone: 020 7634 5370

e-mail: advice@oftel.gov.uk

Research and Information Unit

phone: 020 7634 8761

fax: 020 7634 8946

e-mail: infocent@oftel.gov.uk

Important note: all of the above contacts will be changing in late 2003 when Oftel is replaced by Ofcom.

Other useful organisations:

Ricability

30 Angel Gate

City Road

London EC1V 2PT

phone: 020 7427 2460

textphone: 020 7427 2469

e-mail: mail@ricability.org.uk

www.ricability.org.uk

Home Office

For a leaflet on theft, Protect Your Phone

phone: 0870 241 4680

www.crimereduction.gov.uk

You can also get this leaflet from mobile shops.

Department of Health

For leaflets on health issues, Mobile Phones and Health and Mobile Phone Base Stations and Health

phone: 020 7210 4850

www.doh.gov.uk/mobilephones

Radiocommunications Agency

For location and other details of mobile transmitters

phone: 020 7211 0211

www.sitefinder.radio.gov.uk

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

For details of the planning systems for mobile mast location

phone: 020 7944 3947

www.odpm.gov.uk

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

For advice on security and other aspects of using your mobile phone abroad

phone: 020 7008 0232/0233

www.fco.gov.uk/travel

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