

Reference: 01280179

1 July 2021

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Freedom of Information request: Right to know request

Thank you for your request for information concerning maintenance of digital internet telephone services during a power outage. Your request was received on 21 June 2021.

Your request:

After the copper telephone network switch-off, there will be no provision (by BT/Openreach, at least) for battery-backed-up operation of an FTTP-based Internet Telephone service. Early BT FTTP installations did include a battery-backed-up power supply for the Optical Network Terminator (ONT) 'box', which included an analogue phone port, so the presumption was that an analogue telephone could continue in operation during a power outage. BT are currently installing FTTP using cables containing and optical fibre AND two copper wires: the copper wires are used to connect the landline phone to the existing copper network. If the 'switch-off' of the copper network takes place as planned, this can only be a temporary solution. Since mobile phones in rural areas (with unreliable or zero signal) often rely on home WiFi, they cannot be relied upon in a power cut. The only way to make an emergency call in a power cut would be to travel to a spot where there is a mobile signal. In a rural area, this may be a lengthy journey. What is your understanding of this situation now and in the future?

Our response

It is correct that unlike traditional corded phones connected to the PSTN, IP-based phones will not work without power to the phone/router and therefore will not work during a power cut to the premises without additional measures put in place. Ofcom's [General Conditions of Entitlement](#) place an obligation on communications providers to ensure 'uninterrupted access to emergency organisations as part of any publicly available telephone services offered'. Emergency organisations are defined in our General Conditions as 'the relevant public police, fire, ambulance and coastguard services for that locality, and any other organisation, as directed from time to time by Ofcom as providing a vital service relating to the safety of life in emergencies'.

In 2018, we published [guidance](#) on how providers can meet this obligation as customers move from traditional landline services to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, given VoIP landlines will not function in a power cut. This states that providers should have a solution

available that enables access to emergency organisations for a minimum of one hour in the event of a power outage in the premises. It should be provided free of charge to customers who are at risk as they are reliant on their landline, for example, because they do not have reliable indoor mobile coverage, or no mobile phone.

Our guidance does not specify what the solution should be, and providers may offer different solutions as long as they adhere to the principles outlined in our guidance. Our guidance does state for example if the solution relies on the mobile network to work then the provider should ensure that the customer lives in a premises with mobile coverage. In practice, many communications providers are providing a battery back-up unit which can power the phone for at least one hour and should allow a consumer to make calls to any number during this time. However, some providers offer a solution which only enables calls to be made to emergency organisations (police, fire, ambulance and coastguard).

I hope this information is helpful. If you have any further queries, then please send them to information.requests@ofcom.org.uk quoting the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

Zach Westbrook

If you are unhappy with the response you have received in relation to your request for information and/or consider that your request was refused without a reason valid under the law you may ask for an internal review. If you ask us for an internal review of our decision, it will be subject to an independent review within Ofcom.

The following outcomes are possible:

- the original decision is upheld; or
- the original decision is reversed or modified.

Timing

If you wish to exercise your right to an internal review **you should contact us within two months of the date of this letter**. There is no statutory deadline for responding to internal reviews and it will depend upon the complexity of the case. However, we aim to conclude all such reviews within 20 working days, and up to 40 working days in exceptional cases. We will keep you informed of the progress of any such review. If you wish to request an internal review, you should contact information.requests@ofcom.org.uk.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF