

We (Ofcom) are the independent regulator of television, radio, telecommunications and wireless communications services in the UK. Our role is to look after customers' interests.

This booklet is a summary of our consultation on phone numbers. We would like your views on the important proposals set out in this document.

Phone numbers are something that people and businesses mostly take for granted. But they are an essential part of how you receive and pay for your telecommunications services, from making a basic local call to using services like helpdesks and chat lines, as well as many important public services. Businesses cannot work effectively without them.

We manage phone numbers so that they:

- are available when needed;
- don't need to be changed; and
- mean something to people (for example, the location of the person being called).

Our consultation is about:

- how you use phone numbers now;
- how you might use them in the future; and
- how to manage them so that customers get the most benefit.

Your views count

We hope you'll take a few minutes to read this summary and tell us what you think. Page 15 tells you how you can do this. We've also included some questions about the things we are especially keen to get your views on.

Our deadline for receiving responses is 4 May 2006, at 5pm. After considering those responses, we will publish another document this summer, containing final decisions on some issues and more detailed suggestions on some others. We will make final decisions on all the suggestions by the end of this year.

If you want to look at our suggestions in more detail, you can find the full consultation document on our website at **www.ofcom.org.uk**.

Our proposals

We are carrying out this major review because a lot of customers are concerned about how certain numbers (especially ones starting with 08 and 09) are being used, and because we could face big changes in the future as technology continues to develop.

This review also looks at concerns like scams, and confusion over how much it costs to call different types of phone number. We also aim to find ways of avoiding possible future problems, such as not having enough numbers available.

We don't want to make any widespread changes to people's home phone numbers (for example, by changing area codes). We're suggesting ways to avoid that until developments in technology mean we no longer have to make any changes.

We are suggesting the following things to benefit customers.

- Making sure there continue to be enough numbers for all the services and companies that need them, so there can be new services and lower prices.
- Making it easier to tell from the number you dial what kind of services and price you can expect.

- Not giving numbers to companies who treat their customers badly so that they cannot offer services to you.

We are also suggesting some new numbers.

- Numbers starting with ‘03’ for public and private organisations (phoning these would cost the same as a local or national call).
- ‘Personalised’ numbers, starting with ‘06’, that can ‘follow’ you so people can contact you on the same number no matter what phone you’re using at the time, even if you change your phone company.

Here is our plan for how phone numbers might look in a few years’ time. Some of these changes will happen gradually to reduce the cost to businesses.

Our plan is based on a set of principles that we use to make sure our decisions always consider the customers and businesses they affect.

Numbers starting: Service provided:



Geographic numbers



Countrywide numbers



For future use



Personalised numbers



Mobile numbers



Freephone



Chargeable services



Premium-rate services

Keeping familiar numbers the same

Geographic numbers (01 and 02)



Most people are familiar with numbers that begin with '01' or '02'. They are our home phone numbers and many businesses also use them.

Our research shows that, although fewer people think it is important to be able to tell the area that a number represents, most people don't want to be forced to change their number. So we are trying to limit as far as possible the chance of needing to change any numbers, now or in the future.

This is a challenge because new technology and more competition mean that more companies want these numbers so they can offer their services.

New telecommunications networks (called 'next-generation networks') will sort this problem out within about five years. But we think that we can cope with the higher demand for numbers until then.

The main way we plan to cope with the problem is to give smaller groups of numbers to communications providers. This will mean that more of the numbers we give out will end up being used by customers. We already do this for over 50 of the area codes. Using this approach for more areas would mean that we are much less likely to run out of numbers for current area codes. You shouldn't notice any change to the service you receive or to your phone numbers.

We expect that this will be enough to prevent number changes in most areas. But some areas may still run out of numbers if:

- they have always been quite short of numbers because of the way the numbers were managed many years ago; or
- the local economy has grown very quickly, with new homes and businesses in the area.

We have also considered three options for what we could do if this happens.

Option 1 – giving a second local code (an ‘overlay code’) to new numbers in areas that have run out of numbers. We may be able to make the second code memorable in some way, for example, by following on from the last number of the first code.

Option 2 – ending the ability to dial locally. This would mean having to dial the full number when you call someone with the same area code. We would probably make this change across the whole of the UK.

Option 3 – grouping many area codes together into new ones, known as ‘wide area’ codes, as was done for London with the ‘020’ code. Everyone living in a ‘wide area’ would have to change their area code, but the rest of your number would not change.

We prefer option 1 – overlay codes – because it:

- does not make anyone change their current number, as only new numbers will be given the new code; and
- doubles the supply of numbers available in areas that are affected.

Option 2 also avoids people having to change their number, but it adds only 25 per cent more numbers.

If we make the changes we have suggested to how we give out numbers to phone companies, not very many areas (perhaps 10 to 20) will have a shortage of numbers. Because of this low number, we would prefer not to make major changes that affect areas that do not have a shortage of numbers. Overlay codes do not greatly affect anyone outside the area that has the shortage.

Mobile numbers



Most people know that mobile numbers begin with '07', and there are plenty of spare 07 numbers left. People appreciate being able to tell a mobile number from a fixed-line number. We don't suggest changing mobile numbers, and we plan to keep all unused 07 numbers reserved for mobile services.

We are aware that customers want the costs of calling mobile phones to be shown more clearly, but we don't think that changing numbers can solve that. This is because it is hard to know

how much a call to a mobile phone will cost just by looking at the number. This is because:

- it can cost more to call people on a different mobile network from yours; and
- more people are keeping their mobile number when they change network, so the numbers originally used by each network get mixed up.

Another issue with mobile numbers is that new technology allows not just voice calls but also new mobile services like video calls, which may have lots of different price plans. We could keep back some 07 numbers for this sort of service to make it easier to tell the service and cost when dialling these numbers.

Improving 08 numbers

The need for change

Numbers starting with '08' were originally introduced for national businesses and national public services, so that people contacting them need to use only one number.

These numbers also allow the organisations to benefit from a system called 'revenue share'. Under that system, some of the cost of the call may be passed on from the phone company to the organisation you call, for example, to help fund information services provided on those numbers.

However, customers are not clear enough about the cost of calling 08 numbers. Many people think it costs more than it really does, and don't realise that some 08 numbers cost more to call than others. This stops some people from making calls to these numbers. Another problem is that some groups of 08 numbers are running out, because more and more organisations want to use them.

We want to:

- make more 08 numbers available; and
- reorganise current 08 numbers so that it is easier to tell from the number what the cost will be.

New 'Countrywide' numbers (03)



We plan to create a new type of number – starting with '03' – for public services and business who want to use the same number across the UK, but do not want extra money from people who phone them. These would replace some 08 numbers.

Making a call to a Countrywide number should cost the same as calling a geographic number. This is because the organisation you call will not be able to collect any money from the cost of the call.

Countrywide numbers would benefit public services and businesses by:

- providing a single UK number; and
- allowing them to direct calls to the least busy lines at any time, so customer calls are answered more quickly.

We could organise 03 numbers in the following ways.

- Organisations changing from '08' numbers could change the '8' to a '3' but not change the rest of their number.
- We could make it clear which numbers are national rate, by using numbers which are easy to remember, such as '030' or '033'.
- We could use different 03 numbers for different services, such as '030' for some essential public services.

Simplifying other 08 numbers



Other 08 numbers will be used by the information services and other organisations that still want to get funding from the cost of the call.

We plan to simplify those numbers so that their costs are easier to understand. We suggest that a higher number after the '08' should mean a higher price. For example, numbers beginning with '087' could cost more than '084' ones.

This does not mean prices will go up. There would be enough 08 numbers in each group (from 081 to 089) so that the new 08 numbers do not run out.

We could reorganise 08 numbers from '081' to '089' to show:

- whether a call is local or national;
- what the highest price is for each group of numbers; or
- both of these things.

We might want to keep things very simple by having only a few types of 08 numbers, so that the differences between them are clearer.

It is important that our decision limits the cost for businesses when they have to change from current 08 numbers. We don't plan to force them to make changes overnight, as that could mean high costs are passed on to customers. But we hope that many companies will want to change to new 03 numbers anyway, as we expect them to be popular.

Freephone will not change



Freephone numbers will not change. Most people recognise these and trust they will not be charged for the call. There are plenty of Freephone numbers available.

Clearer information

One problem with understanding the prices for 08 services is that current price limits only apply to BT lines. This also applies to other types of number. We are considering making all numbers from all phone lines (which may include mobiles and payphones) follow the same price descriptions.

Improving confidence in 09 numbers



'09' numbers are used to call 'premium-rate services' (PRS). These include competitions and voting lines, weather forecasts, charity fundraising, and sex lines.

Currently, 09 numbers face the same problems as 08 ones, but to a greater extent. Many people do not trust 09 numbers and most people do not dial them. Their negative image is partly because people have run 'scams' on some 09 numbers, damaging the reputation of other services.

Also, as more 09 services are provided, the numbers for some services and price levels have run out. Numbers used to dial 09 services have got mixed up, because more numbers had to be given out. This makes it hard for the numbers to give clear messages about 09 services such as the price level or the type of service.

We want to give you more confidence to use the 09 services you want, by simplifying 09 numbers and protecting them against scams.

Simplifying 09 numbers

We could say that any 09 number could be used for any premium-rate service. This would rely on the current requirement on organisations to tell you the price when they advertise services. But this approach would not make people trust 09 numbers more.

Because of this, we would prefer a plan similar to our suggestion for 08 numbers. That means reorganising 09 services so that the first number after the '09' lets people know what kind of price and services they are getting.

People will have different views on how much information the numbers should give about the services and prices. For example, they may want to be able to tell from the number dialled what is the cost for every minute or the cost for each call. Or they may be more concerned to know that certain types of 09 number mean that sexual content is involved in the service received.

Reorganising 09 numbers could give customers more confidence to use some 09 services. For example, we could

allocate '092' numbers to 'charity fundraising', or '098' to 'sexual content'. We could have categories for competitions and votes, or for various business services. And we could use different numbers for different price levels.

Separating different 09 numbers in this way should allow customers to prevent people from dialling specific 09 services from their phones. This can be done using 'call barring' services where you cannot phone the chosen numbers unless you enter a code first. For example, parents might want to stop the family from phoning sex lines but continue to phone charity donation lines. Or you could prevent people from making calls to the more expensive numbers.

This should be good for customers and for many of the organisations who provide these services. Many organisations should change from the old 09 numbers to the new ones, so their numbers are not included with the ones customers do not want to access.

Protecting against scams

To reduce the number of scams on 09 numbers (and other numbers), we plan to introduce a 'consumer protection test'. This would target the small number of organisations that give others a bad name.

The consumer protection test would allow us to stop providing numbers to organisations who treat their customers badly (for example, by providing offensive content and not awarding competition prizes quickly enough).

We are confident that we can develop a test that cuts the number of scams without affecting genuine services. We may also use this test for other numbers to avoid similar problems.

Our other proposals

New 'Personalised numbers' (06)



We are suggesting a new range of 'Personalised' numbers, starting with '06'. With one of these numbers, people could contact you on whichever phone you are using at the time (including a mobile). You could also keep your Personalised number if you change your phone company.

Our research says that many people are interested in having a Personalised number. These services actually exist now, but they are not well-known. This is because they start with '070', which is too similar to mobile numbers. So we are suggesting we change current 070 numbers to 06 numbers.

Because most people are not aware of 070 numbers, there have been scams with high prices being charged. We are suggesting a limit on the cost of calling 070 numbers, where any organisation charging more than this limit must announce the price at the start of the call, before they begin charging you. We would also use this limit on 06 numbers so the same scams don't happen again.

Other numbers

You might be wondering what will happen to some numbers that we have not mentioned yet. For some familiar numbers, we do not suggest any changes. These include '999' (emergency services), '100' (operator) and '118' (directory enquiry services).

Also, we are making sure that we keep some numbers back in case we need them for other services in the future. This includes all '04' and most '05' numbers.

Cutting administrative activities

We want to manage numbers differently, by giving phone companies the responsibility for making more decisions about how they use numbers. This would start with charging phone companies (**not** customers) for the numbers we provide, so that they think carefully about the numbers they really want. This would encourage phone companies to use numbers more efficiently, which will reduce the risk that numbers will run out. This plan is at an early stage and we will make more detailed suggestions this summer.

Some questions for you

We are particularly interested in your answers to these questions, and we also welcome any other comments you want to give.

A/ Do you agree that we should try to make as few changes to geographic numbers as possible by changing how we give the numbers to communications providers instead?

B/ Do you agree that ‘overlay codes’ are the best option for areas which still need more numbers?

C/ In what ways, if any, do you think that mobile numbers could give more information about call charges?

D/ Should we keep back some ‘07’ numbers for new mobile multimedia services (such as video calling), to help make people more aware of the costs of these calls? If so, how?

E/ Do you agree that we should introduce new ‘Countrywide’ (03) numbers?

F/ How should the different ‘03’ numbers be organised to show prices and services?

G/ How should the different ‘08’ numbers be organised to show prices and services?

H/ Do you support the idea that the maximum prices for each type of number should be the same no matter what phone line you call from, or which network you use?

I/ Would you trust '09' numbers more if they were organised more simply, as we suggest? If so, what is most important to you in how the numbers are arranged (for example, price for each minute, price for each call, or whether the call includes sexual content)?

J/ Which '09' numbers might you want to be able to prevent people from calling on your phone (for example, ones over a set price, sex lines, gambling lines, or a general 'adults only' category)?

K/ Do you agree with us using a 'consumer protection test' to make sure we don't give numbers to organisations with a record of treating their customers badly?

L/ Would you be interested in having a Personalised number? If so, why?

M/ What do you think is the best way to make customers aware of the services and prices associated with each type of phone number?

N/ What do you think about the pictures and terms that we suggest using to describe each type of number? Do you have any other ideas for what we could use?

How to respond

Phone numbers affect us all, so please tell us your views.

If you have any comments on the issues raised in this booklet, please e-mail your comments to us at **NumberingReview@ofcom.org.uk**

If possible, please attach your response to your e-mail as a Microsoft Word document. Please also attach the response cover sheet, which you can download separately from the 'Consultations' section of our website.

You can also post or fax your response, marked 'Telephone numbering – consultation', to:

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The closing date for responses is 5pm on 4 May 2006.

To simplify the process, we do not usually acknowledge that we have received your response.

We think it is important that anyone interested in our consultation can see the views we receive. For this reason, we will put all responses on our website when the consultation period is over. We will treat your response as confidential only if you ask us to.

After the consultation period, we will publish a statement. This will be in summer 2006. At the same time, we will carry out more detailed consultation on some policy issues.

Any general comments

We also welcome any comments you may have on the way we have organised this consultation process. Please contact:

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