

Report to Cabinet

Digital switchover's impact on the Helpline & Response Service

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Reason for Decision

Funding is required so to mitigate the risk of Helpline & Response customers becoming disconnected from the service as a result of the national digital switchover programme.

Executive Summary

The report provides details on the Helpline & Response service incompatibility issues which may occur as a result of the national digital switchover programme.

The UK's digital network delivery providers (BT, Virgin, Talk Talk etc) are introducing a fully fibre UK-wide digital network by the end of 2025. Every business and home will have their connections upgraded. For anyone using an analogue phone, the ability of this 'old' technology to then function properly becomes problematic, due to complexities around analogue protocols not being robust over a digital network.

Current alarm units are not digitally enabled. To fully replace these with digital units will incur a significant IT capital cost but will future-proof customers for years to come.

Recommendations

- To **note** the potential impact and proposed solutions to the customers of the Helpline & Response service as a result of the digital switchover.
- To **agree** with the recommendations that are set out in the confidential Part B report on the private agenda.

Digital switchover's impact on the Helpline & Response Service

1. Background

- 1.1 The UK's digital network delivery providers are in the process of rolling-out a full digital network by the end of 2025. This means that every business and home in the country will have its connections upgraded. People will no longer be able to make landline calls using the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN). Instead, calls will use Voice over the Internet Protocol (VoIP). This will have a significant impact to the Helpline & Response service, commissioned by Adult Social Care, which has close to 4,000 customers.
- 1.2 Adult Social Care commissions MioCare to deliver the service, providing an emergency call system for use by people in their own homes. Customers receive a central console unit, known as a Lifeline unit, and a personal alarm, also known as a pendant (the vast majority of units are supplied by Tunstall). Working together, the system connects people to trained staff in a 24/7 response centre.
- 1.3 As context, for 2022/23, the service supported 3,836 Oldham residents. In the 12-month period over 58,000 calls were taken, and almost 6,000 of these were assessed as requiring a physical response from the team (10%) with 2,462 people requiring a fall response.
- 1.4 Whilst the existing technology can work with a digital phone line, when the switch is made in a customer's property, most will plug their unit into the broadband router that then plugs into the newly installed data socket. This creates the following risks:
 - While the router acts as an analogue to digital converter (ATA), this is okay for the customer's telephone, but it's not that simple for the alarm unit. This is because alarm units use complex tone-based protocols that can fail. In addition, the ATA element will be switched off in the long-term.
 - In moving to the new set-up in people's homes, there is no longer a power back-up option, so should the customer lose power in their home, the alarm system will not function
 - Whilst the old/existing PSTN network has meant reliability has been good, the analogue unit will not/cannot proactively tell the Helpline & Response service that it isn't operational (though if the Lifeline unit has a low battery, this is currently flagged and acted upon).
- 1.5 To safeguard a customer, the answer is to change the alarm to digital at the same time as their property's connectivity.

2. Impact

Oldham residents: homeowners and private tenants

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- 2.1 There are approximately 1,800 Oldham households receiving the Helpline & Response service at any one time. This is likely to grow in future years, and the recent Care Technology business case (by PA Consulting) puts forward options for how this might happen.

Current position

- 2.2 Some lines have started to be upgraded to digital in some areas of the borough i.e. when a customer orders a new phone line, the telecoms providers will install a digital line. This has resulted in some Helpline & Response customers already being affected without being aware of this. A note from the service initially went to all customers in February 2023 highlighting this change. All customers received a telephone call from MioCare during August and September 2023, advising them of the issue and asking them to undertake some basic checks and to notify the service should there be an issue, followed up by a letter to all customers. The service's online presence has also been updated with key messages.
- 2.3 There will be a second call to all customers during December, with this then an ongoing exercise every quarter until all customers have safely transferred their phone line.
- 2.4 In addition, the telephone numbers of customers are being shared with BT and Virgin Media O2 (and the aim is also to include Talk Talk and Sky) each quarter, to get the providers analysis on which customers have switched to digital, and also to note what their future work programme looks like across Oldham postcodes. During November, we have received the first set of data back from Virgin Media O2, which represents approximately 17% of the customer base – from this, we have established three customers had non-functional units due to recent engineer visits (these have been subsequently fixed)
- 2.5 Despite all actions taken above, this doesn't provide a long-term, future-proof and safe service. The only way to do this is to invest and upgrade in the alarm unit itself. This paper puts forward the option of rolling out the Legrand Reach IP unit – a digital alarm unit that works with the existing pendants in use. An initial 10 such units have been purchased and are being installed as a trial to allow installers to be familiar with the process and for the procedure to be documented and verified with customers.

3. Options

- 3.1 There are three elements where decisions are required for Oldham Council to have a Helpline & Response service which is digitally compatible and fit for the future:
- a) New digital alarm units.
 - b) Installation for the new units.
 - c) Ongoing SIM annual costs

4. Preferred Option

- 4.1 The options are detailed in the confidential, Part B report on the private agenda.

5. Consultation

5.1 In order to reach this position and fully understand the impact meetings have been held with:

- Head of Customer and Digital Experience for early situational awareness and to discuss potential options
- Council's IT department – where subsequent meetings have been held with Openreach
- Strategic Housing – for an understanding of their plans with Council-owned PFI homes
- Helpline & Response service
- Central procurement
- MioCare's Digital Project Board

5.2 In September 2023 all customers were called and written to explaining the potential issue of the switchover and asking them to test their current equipment. A Facebook post also went out illustrating the same and is repeated monthly. In addition all customers will be called again during December to again check if their line has been switched over and to test if there are any problems. This will then be repeated quarterly until all units have been installed.

5.3 When the new digital units are in stock and ready to be installed, customers will be prioritised for switchover by the service based on vulnerability factors.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 As set out in the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

7. Legal Implications

7.1 As set out in the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

8. Co-operative Implications

8.1 As set out in the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

9. Human Resource Implications

9.1 Not applicable.

10. Risk Assessment

10.1 As set out in the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

11. IT Implications

11.1 As set out in the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

12. Property Implications

12.1 As set out in the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

13. Procurement Implications

13.1 as set out in the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

14. Environmental and Health & Safety Implications

14.1 There are none.

15. Community cohesion, including crime and disorder implications in accordance with Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

15.1 There are none.

16. Oldham Equality Impact Assessment including implications for Children and Young People

16.1 A PDF version of the Impact assessment is attached to the confidential Part B report on the private part of the agenda.

17. Key Decision

17.1 Yes.

18. Key Decision Reference

18.1 HSC-19-23

19. Background Papers

19.1 Not applicable

20. Appendices

20.1 Not applicable.