HARROW
MONITORING GROUP

advocating inclusion so everyone can access - and shape - the services they need
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Digital landline switchover: emergency safeguards for vulnerable residents in four London boroughs

To: Ofcom and the Chief Executives of the London Boroughs of Harrow, Hillingdon, Barnet and Brent

Dear Sir or Madam

Harrow Monitoring Group (HMG) seeks assurance about the protection of older and vulnerable residents during the digital landline switchover, following the BBC report, "Landline switchover could cut people off in emergency, minister warned". Our focus on Harrow, Hillingdon, Barnet and Brent reflects our community links across these neighbouring boroughs and our concern for residents who rely on landlines and care alarms to summon help. Although the report highlights remote communities, power failures, unsuitable equipment and difficulty using mobile phones can also leave London residents unable to obtain emergency assistance.

We ask Ofcom and the four councils to address the following questions within their respective responsibilities:

1. How are landline operators identifying customers who depend on their landline, use a care alarm, or need additional support, including those not receiving council services?
2. What checks ensure that personal alarms and communal emergency systems work through to their monitoring centres before migration is completed? Who confirms that a switch is paused where safe arrangements are not established?
3. How are operators ensuring that eligible customers receive a suitable emergency backup solution **free of charge**, including installation and clear instructions, without having to purchase additional services?
4. How is backup provision assessed against individual needs, including limited mobility, dementia, sensory impairment, inability to use a mobile phone and unreliable indoor mobile coverage?
5. What protection is available when a power cut lasts longer than the backup battery, and who is responsible for checking, maintaining and replacing backup equipment?
6. In each borough, how many council-provided or commissioned telecare installations and sheltered housing systems still require upgrading, how many have passed testing, and when will outstanding work be completed?
7. How are councils, housing providers, telecare suppliers and telephone operators coordinating their work, reaching users of privately purchased alarms and providing information to residents who cannot access online advice?
8. How does Ofcom monitor emergency access failures and telecare disruption associated with migration, and what action does it take when operators fail to provide adequate safeguards?

The scale of the older population makes this a substantial local concern. Based on the published Census 2021 age bands, approximately 15.4% of Harrow residents were aged 65 or over, compared with 13.4% in Hillingdon, 14.5% in Barnet and 11.6% in Brent. These are census benchmarks rather than current estimates or counts of vulnerable residents. Nevertheless, they demonstrate why all four boroughs need clear arrangements for identifying and supporting people whose safety depends on reliable communication.

HMG recognises the need to replace ageing telephone infrastructure. However, the benefits of modernisation must be accompanied by practical safeguards for residents living alone, managing disabilities or depending on emergency alarms. Published plans and equipment contracts should be supported by evidence that installations work and that residents can summon help during an outage.

Ofcom's published advice states that customers who depend on their landline and lack a working mobile phone or reliable mobile signal must be offered a free backup solution lasting at least one hour. We ask Ofcom to ensure that operators explain this entitlement clearly and provide the equipment and assistance needed. Residents should not have to discover this protection themselves or be left with an alternative they cannot use. The one-hour minimum also requires careful consideration where a longer outage could leave a vulnerable person without access to help.

We seek evidence of effective protection, without presuming that failures have occurred in these boroughs. Please provide a substantive response within 20 working days, or advise when one can be expected, identifying the organisation responsible for addressing any outstanding risks.

In line with HMG's commitment to transparency and public accountability, this letter is in the public domain and is being widely shared, including with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department of Health and Social Care, which jointly developed the Telecare National Action Plan.

BBC report: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c6x29g1nlr51o

Ofcom advice: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-and-broadband/landline-phones/future-of-landline-calls

Yours faithfully

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