

HMG Guidance

Customer Service Telephone Lines

Use of Number Prefixes

1. Introduction and Scope

- 1.1 This statement is effective from 1 July 2015 and sets out the key principles to assist departments when making decisions on prefix number selection. It aims to retain consistency in the number prefixes used and to keep cost of accessing public services down.
- 1.2 The guidance applies to central government departments, public bodies that fall within their organisational hierarchy and also services provided by external private partners on behalf of department. It may also be helpful for other bodies across the public sector landscape.
- 1.3 Customer Telephone Service Lines are defined as those lines provided by central government and partner organisations for members of the public to access public services.
- 1.4 This guidance has been agreed by a cross-departmental group convened by the Cabinet Office that includes operational departments with significant experience in managing telephony, as well as advisory members from the communications regulator, Ofcom.
- 1.5 This guidance is not commercial advice to departments for procuring telephony services.

2 Numbering

- 2.1 Departments remain responsible and accountable for their choice of number prefix, supported by an appropriate numbering policy position. This section of the guidance sets out recommended number prefixes for departments with an overarching principle to ensure the number prefixes chosen are fair to callers.

Recommended Prefixes for all Departments

- 2.2 It is inappropriate for callers to pay substantial charges for accessing core public services, particularly for vulnerable and low-income groups.
- 2.3 01, 02 and 03 numbers are the default number prefixes recommended, as they are all charged at standard geographic rates and are always included in available minutes within call packages. Consequently, these prefixes are likely to represent the most cost effective telephone lines for the majority of the public and they are simple to understand.

Exceptions to recommended prefixes

(084 and 087)

- 2.4 If Departments can justify it they can continue to offer 084 and 087 numbers in parallel (to 01, 02, 03 prefixes), in order to allow the caller a choice based on their call package arrangements. However, if this prefix is retained it is the responsibility of the department to ensure they have up to date evidence that their customer base would be disadvantaged if the 084 or 087 numbers were withdrawn and that retention of those prefixes is justifiable.
- 2.5 If this approach is taken departments are encouraged to regard 01, 02 or 03 as their primary number given the guaranteed inclusion in call packages and because callers are likely to know what the standard geographic charges their call package offers.

(080 'Free to call')

- 2.6 "Free to call" numbers (080) can be considered in certain circumstances, for example where a department provides a service to callers who are likely to be part of a vulnerable or low income group, particularly when the typical call duration is long and could result in substantial charges. Such numbers may also be applicable when there is a need to positively reach out and attract telephony contact (e.g. health campaigns).

(09 'value add')

- 2.7 For some exceptional cases, and where departments are delivering “value add” services beyond their core services, it can be possible to justify the use of other numbers to partially or fully recoup the additional cost of that particular service. The DVLA, for example, uses a 09 number for a service line that was introduced at the request of industry, who are prepared to pay for a priority service which checks driving licence details. Again, it remains the responsibility of the Department to be prepared to justify why such a decision was taken.

(084) 'revenue generation'

- 2.8 If (084) or any other revenue sharing number is used the department should ensure that they receive any revenue share available and that this is not retained by the industry provider.

Publicising the Service Charges

- 2.9 If departments are using 084, 087 or 09 numbers they need to publicise the service charge associated with the number which reflects a statement of the revenue / cost offset being charged by the department.

Summary

- 2.10 In summary, departments should use 01, 02 or 03 as the default prefixes for services. However, where differing numbering options are required, departments should be able to justify these exceptions.

Reviewing and Monitoring

- 2.11 Numbering policy of departments should be reviewed at least annually or in the event of a material change to market conditions, such as the implementation of any revised Ofcom regime. Departments are required to publish exceptions to the 01, 02, 03 default on an annual basis.