

## The Great Telephone Switchover

Founded in 2004 (and formerly known as ITSPA), Comms Council UK is a UK membership-led organisation that represents companies who provide or resell business and residential customers voice services over data networks (VoIP) as well as other “over the top” applications including instant messaging and video. The membership is a mixture of network operators, service providers, resellers, suppliers, and consultants involved in a sector that is diversifying rapidly from just voice services to other innovative IP applications.

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### The background

The UK telephone network that weaves throughout the country is going through a major technological change. This national network has been the backbone of our communications for over a century, linking our homes and businesses across every village, town and city, via local telephone exchanges and copper lines, but this is about to change.

### The upgrade

The aim is that, by the end of 2025, all telephone services that currently use the copper network will be switched over to operate using VoIP technology – “Voice Over Internet Protocol”, to give it its full name. These digital “fibre” networks use fibre optic cables instead of copper wires to transmit your telephone calls and internet traffic far more efficiently, enabling additional services to operate. The old copper wire network will be switched off.

**This is not something that your provider is deciding to do by themselves – the telephone network across the whole country is being changed to the new internet-based system, and every household and business will have to adapt.** This is essentially the telephone version of when analogue terrestrial TV switched over to digital terrestrial TV between 2007-12.

Equally, this is not a bold jump into the unknown – many homes and businesses have been using VoIP for their telephone calls for over 10 years now. We have simply reached a turning-point where we need to move away from the 140-year-old copper-based service and bring everyone on to a modern, internet-based network.

Although different parts of the country will switch over to the new telephone network at different times, in the end the whole of the old copper network will be switched off, and so you will have to ensure that you are ready for the new way of doing things.

### What the network changes mean for your service

Whilst the fabric of how the telephone network operates might be changing, it does not mean the things you are used to, rely on and might even love about your telephone need to change.

For a start, **your telephone number does not need to change.** Friends, family and customers that already know your number can call you in the same way. And when they do, **you will still be able to answer the call using a physical handset,** just as you already do today.

Whilst telephone providers will be aiming to upgrade their services to match what you have today, as with all technological advancements, this will bring newer and improved services that are more flexible and better designed for today’s modern life. Businesses can particularly benefit from a wide range of improvements that will help them better meet the needs of their customers and integrate with their online and business software systems.

There will, however, be some choices for you to make. If all you want is for your existing service to work in much the same way as it does today, then **you will need to tell this to your existing provider** when they contact you regarding any change. It will still be worth seeing what different services they have to offer, but it is expected that the vast majority of providers will offer what is termed a “like-for-like” replacement.

Whatever you choose, some physical changes may be needed to keep you connected to the new network. Firstly, if you do not already have one, **you will need a certain type of telephone handset that can connect to this new network**. Secondly, it is possible that **the switchover will require an engineer visit to move your existing copper connection to a fibre connection**. However, some providers will not require this and, depending on your situation, you may just have to simply plug your telephone into a different socket or your existing internet router. Ask your telephone service provider for more information on this.

### **Access to emergency services**

A really important thing to be aware of is that your old connection to the network provided power to your telephone, making it possible to call 999 and reach emergency services even in the event of a power cut. **It is not guaranteed you will have this power when you are moved over to a fibre connection and use the internet-based service**. Unless specific equipment is provided to keep your VoIP service operating using a battery back-up, it should be assumed that you will lose the function of your telephone when there is a power cut. **A mobile phone might make a suitable alternative but only if there is signal at your premises**.

The elderly, infirm or anyone that relies on their telephone for emergency services **must make their provider aware of this prior to switch over**. Your provider should check this with you when they switch you over and they should provide a battery-backup solution if necessary to ensure you can continue to contact the emergency services.

### **Other considerations**

For businesses, there might be some extra considerations due to alarm systems, credit card machines, faxes and even lifts that use telephone lines. In those cases, specific advice from suppliers may be required and suitable alternatives, usually selected using your internet connection.

### **The time frame**

The end of 2025 is the current goal for all of this to be completed by, but some areas may be ready sooner, and others later. There isn't a single date that everyone will switch over and timings will depend on where you live and how your existing provider is managing the switchover.

Across the UK, providers have been working hard preparing for this and it is your existing provider who will be responsible for coordinating the switchover with you. Indeed you may have already been contacted about this plan. If you have any queries or concerns, **we encourage you to speak to your existing provider early so that they can help you get ready for the change**.

### **FAQs for consumers**

#### **When will this switch over be happening?**

Currently, the end of 2025 is the industry target date. Different areas of the country will switch over at different times and this is something your existing provider will organise with you. As you would expect with a national project of this size, the end date could extend past 2025.

#### **Can I keep my existing telephone number?**

Yes. There will be no change to your telephone number but do make it clear to your provider that you wish to keep your number and telephone service just in case.

**Will I be able to keep the same type of service I have today?**

It is expected that the vast majority of providers will offer a “like-for-like” service that will mean you will use your telephone service in the same way after the switchover.

**Will I be able to keep my current handset?**

This may be possible, although this will be dependent on your provider. VoIP phones look and operate similarly to the older phones, except are based on the newer technology. You may need to plug your existing phone into a different socket.

**Will I have a choice of new handsets if I need one?**

This will be dependent on individual provider service offerings but most will give you a choice. This will include alternatives such as mobile Apps, meaning you can use your mobile phone instead.

**Will an engineer visit be required?**

This will depend on your provider and which fibre service you are moving to. Some will require an engineer visit, although not unless it is entirely necessary. There are providers and services that do not require visits. Check with your provider if you are unsure.

**Are there any limitations with VoIP Services?**

VoIP services require a dedicated power supply and do not work like the traditional phones which took their power from your copper wire telephone line. This does present a problem for those that rely on the telephone for emergency use.

Providers are required to ensure that the elderly and vulnerable will still be able to use their phone or have a backup option in case there is a power loss.

**Are ISDN services included in this switchover?**

Yes. Businesses that are using ISDN will need to move to a VoIP-based service. There are many different paths to doing this. In most cases, a business can decide to do this switch sooner if they wish, subject to their existing contracts. Since businesses have a larger set of requirements and operational needs, it is important for business owners to take an active interest in how the switchover will affect them. Many businesses are already benefiting from VoIP-based services and it is expected that the vast majority will be better off in some way after switchover.

**Do I have to stay with my existing provider?**

No. As with any telephone service, you have the right to change provider and keep your telephone number in the process. If your existing provider does not offer you the service you are looking for, then you can always choose another provider that better suits your needs.

**I have other services that require a telephone line – what should I do about those?**

For services like alarms, credit card machines, faxes and emergency lift phones, you will indeed need to take some action if they are still dependent on copper telephone lines.

It is very likely that the suppliers of these services will be able to provide you with an alternative. You should contact them regarding how to do this.

These services now operate using internet, Wi-Fi and mobile networks, so it's worth considering how these options fit with the other communications available at your premises. In most cases this will probably mean that these services will migrate to use your internet connection.

### **Further reading**

- The Government published its own advice on this topic earlier this year [here](#). It contains detailed guidance for vulnerable users.
- The telecoms regulator Ofcom has published its own guidance [here](#). It contains more details on the nature of the changes, and more information on what you need to tell your provider in advance of the switch to get ready.
- The [Future of Voice](#) website was launched by industry in 2020 and sets out a basic guide of the changes and what to look out for.

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