



Cambridgeshire
& Peterborough
Campaign to Protect Rural England

BT's move to digital voice technology and the effect on rural dwellers – an update

In September 2023 we outlined our concerns regarding the move by BT and other providers to replace the old copper wire telephone system with digital voice technology (also known as Voice over Internet Protocol – VoIP). BT originally hoped for this work to be completed by December 2025. However national concern and campaigning, particularly regarding the impact the switch would have on the elderly and vulnerable, has seen this deadline put back to end-January 2027. Age UK has more detailed information about the changes – see <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/money-legal/consumer-issues/changes-to-landline-telephones/>.

We're revisiting this subject as we've become aware of other issues that may seriously and negatively affect rural dwellers and rurally-located businesses. Our concerns include:

- **Mobile phone signal:** There will be an impact on those living in rural areas where there is no or variable mobile signal, for example Wilburton and Little Thetford in East Cambridgeshire, and those who do not use computers. This is likely to have a particular impact on the elderly, as around 95% of those over-65 still have a landline in their home and may not necessarily have a broadband connection.
- **Broadband servers:** As well as good mobile phone signal, digital voice technology is reliant on stable and secure broadband provider servers. What happens if servers go down – possibly for several days – as can happen, and has happened recently to at least one server run by an ISP removing broadband from some of their customers right across the country including some in Cambridgeshire?
- **Telecare devices and alarms:** The switch to digital landlines will affect telecare devices and other equipment in the home and workplace, such as personal alarms, fire alarms and security alarms. It was understood that BT would adapt their Redcare alarm service to operate across digital landlines. BT have now made the decision to withdraw their Redcare alarm signalling services from the market completely by 1st August 2025. Consequently, anyone with monitored electronic systems that use BT Redcare or any other landline signalling will need to make alternative arrangements before the cut-off date. The onus is on the telecare/alarm user to contact their device supplier and telephone provider to check if it will work with the new system or whether any equipment will need to be upgraded. For example, some alarm suppliers are moving to dual cell-phone network signalling but this is usually at considerable expense because in many cases alarm equipment has

to be changed. In some areas there not two independent networks with good signals or even one.

- Power cuts: a digital phone will only work in a power cut if it has a battery back-up, because it uses home electricity. Providers are advising people to use mobile phones as a backup. For those dependent on a landline phone, providers should offer a free of charge “resilience solution. This could be a mobile phone – but we’ve already mentioned the variability of mobile phone signal in some rural areas. It may be a battery-backup unit that connects to your landline phone and provides power in case of a power cut – these batteries will run out in the event of a prolonged power cut.
- Batteries: More re-chargeable batteries, means increased risk of fire and explosion from them, as has happened with battery-powered e-bikes and scooters.

Silver Voices campaigned for the current deadline of December 2025 to be extended and enhanced protections to be developed and introduced. The Director of Silver Voices, Dennis Reed, was invited to attend a meeting at the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). In a Silver Voices Briefing note, Mr Reed reports:

“The meeting was very useful in that we learned of the commitments made to the Government by the Industry on the future roll-out, commitments which are not being widely publicised by leading firms such as BT at local level. These include:

- There will be no non-voluntary switchovers for the time being and the firms must seek consent from the customer before doing so;
- The above condition also applies to renewed contracts, where previously the firms had often insisted that taking Digital Voice had to be part of the renewed contract. Completely new contracts are not covered, however
- The Government is working with the Industry to develop a definition of a “vulnerable customer”. This will be wider than whether they have a personal alarm and will certainly involve age as a factor. This process will take several months to complete
- “Enhanced” protection will have to be introduced for those customers classified as vulnerable”.

We support the Silver Voices campaign and will update you on any future developments. For more information about Silver Voices go to <https://silvervoices.co.uk/>.