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We got a £184 bill for changing flights: Soaring cost of being left on HOLD as more firms quietly scrap free helplines - we call for an end to the rip-off

- Soaring complaints over shoddy service drives some call times up over an hour
- 0800 and 0808 numbers are free with 01, 02, 03 numbers charged at local rate
- 09 or 084 numbers are expensive as callers pay an access and service charge
- [Can you save money on broadband, TV and phone? Compare the best deals](#)

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PUBLISHED: 22:40, 3 May 2022 | **UPDATED:** 09:27, 4 May 2022



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Money Mail and This is Money are today calling for an end to fee-charging customer service lines that punish callers with costly bills for waiting on hold.

Financial firms have been bombarded with calls in recent months from households worried about soaring bills, seeking advice.

Complaints about shoddy service have also driven up call times, with customers waiting an hour or more to speak to someone.



Waiting time: Financial firms have been bombarded with calls in recent months from households worried about soaring bills, seeking advice

Despite this, many big firms no longer offer free telephone services, and customers end up with eye-watering phone bills as a result.

Even some Government departments do not offer free helplines — including those used by many of the poorest households in the country.

Martyn James, of Resolver, says: 'It is completely unacceptable for anyone to be charged for seeking customer service.'

£184 bill on calls to change flights

Tarryn Gorre and Samuel Hewitt were landed with a £184 bill after calling British Airways to change their flights last year.

The couple had paid £1,600 to travel to South Africa but needed to change the date after it was put on the pandemic red list in November.

When searching online they found a 084 number and didn't realise there was a cheaper 02 alternative listed further down on the airline's website.



Grounded: Tarryn Gorre and Samuel Hewitt had to delay their trip South Africa due to Covid

But it took six attempts to get through — and they had to wait on hold for a total of 220 minutes.

And while Samuel, who lives with Tarryn in Kensington, London, had inclusive minutes as part of his EE mobile contract it did not include calls to 084 numbers.

Tarryn, 37, says: 'We were pretty livid, especially as so much of the call was spent on hold. We had no idea it would end up costing as much as it did.'

A BA spokesman says the number was listed for new bookings only and is no longer in use.

He adds: 'All of our lines for customers with existing bookings are charged at local rates.'



How much could you end up paying?

How much you are charged depends on your landline or mobile provider, and the type of number you are calling.

Some, including 0800 and 0808 numbers, are free. But those starting with 01, 02 or 03 are charged at a local rate.

When calling from a mobile, you would typically pay between 3p and 65p per minute. From a landline, it's usually 16p per minute, but some firms charge an additional 23p to connect the call.

If you have free minutes as part of your landline or mobile deal, these numbers should be included — if you have not exceeded your limit.

However, nearly one in seven people only have a pay-as-you-go mobile phone — rising to one in three among over-75s, according to watchdog Ofcom.

Numbers beginning with 09 or 084 cost more as callers must pay both an access and service charge.

Access charges range from 8p to 67p. Service charges can cost up to 7p per minute for 084 numbers and up to £3.60 for 09 numbers and are unlikely to be covered by inclusive minutes.

If businesses do not offer a freephone number, it can easily land you with a big bill.

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Which big names are charging customers?

Nationwide is going to charge for eight helplines by the end of the year. And Santander is axing ten free helplines and replacing them with 03 numbers from July.

But as one Money Mail reader says: 'Like many older customers, I have a pay-as-you-go mobile so any call is 8p per minute.'

Consumer campaigner Baroness Ros Altmann adds: 'For many older people, this is just another form of digital discrimination.'

Thanks to soaring energy bills, power giants' helplines are in high demand. Yet, of all the major firms, only Scottish Power and Octopus offer a freephone number.

When Money Mail called energy firm Utilita's 03 number helpline this week, it took just under 13 minutes to get through — or £8.45 for some customers.

Sky was the only major telecoms giant with a fee-charging 03 number for customers.

And callers to some Government helplines, such as the DVLA which has a 03 number for questions about licences, also face hefty bills after long waits on hold.

Calls to the Department for Work and Pensions are free, but one helpline offering food vouchers for low-income parents and pregnant women has a 03 number.



British Airways is experiencing high levels of calls after cancelling thousands of flights but the airline's only free number is for disabled customers calling its special assistance team

Healthy Start is run by the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Care.

Its helpline has call waiting times averaging just under 13 minutes, which could cost some claimants £8.45.

Labour MP Gareth Thomas says: 'In the midst of this government's cost of living crisis, it's extraordinary that ministers still force people to pay through the nose to wait to speak to someone who works for a minister.'

Utilita and NHSBSA spokespeople said they were experiencing higher than usual demand.