



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Karen Wall
Hall Farm
Brendon
Lynton
Devon
EX35 6PS

16 April 2024

Our Ref: SS37928

Dear Karen

Re: Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN)

Thank you for contacting me about the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) on behalf of Brendon and Countisbury Parish Council and apologies as we did not receive your initial letter.

This is an issue that I have been greatly concerned about for some time, and as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Broadband and Digital Communication, I have been fighting the corner for our rural communities.

I enclose a Press Release from January on the back of an industry recognition that considerably more work needs to be done to protect vulnerable households.

Supporting access to improved telecommunications and enhanced coverage is something which my colleagues and I consider to be of the utmost importance. While the analogue landline network, also known as the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) is privately owned, and the decision to upgrade it has been taken by the telecoms industry.

Let me assure you that the retirement of PSTN does not mean that landlines will become obsolete nor that handsets will need to be replaced. Rather, landline operators in the UK will switch every home phone in the UK to an internet based connection. I am told that this will help to reduce the costly maintenance of the current PSTN system and support improved call quality.

While the switchover is being led by broadband and phone companies, I am glad that the Government and Ofcom, the UK's independent telecommunications regulator, are supporting efforts to improve the UK's telecommunications infrastructure and are working with industry to help ensure they deliver a smooth transition. This is helping to ensure consumers and sectors are protected and prepared for the switchover process. For further details on the PSTN switchover process, you may wish to visit the Future of Voice website which can be accessed here: <https://www.futureofvoice.co.uk/>



Furthermore, the Government is working closely with industry to ensure nobody is adversely affected by the upgrade, including the small number of rural areas which have limited digital connectivity like your own.

The replacement Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services require a minimum stable connection speed of just 0.5Mbps in order to function correctly. As a result, rural communities with limited digital connectivity can also be upgraded to digital telephony services. For current landline-only customers, it will be possible to order a VoIP landline without purchasing a general internet connection. Moreover, the migration from analogue landlines does not affect the universal service obligations set in the Electronic Communications (Universal Service) Order 2003 which require the designated providers, BT and KCOM, to offer telephony services throughout the UK.

Ofcom's rules ensure that all phone users must receive equivalent protections, however their landline is delivered. The regulator has also made clear that those without broadband internet connection should be given the option to purchase a simple connection for making calls only, rather than having to pay for full internet services.

I appreciate your concern about how the changes will affect the ability to use a phone during a power outage. I have the same concern where I live in Westleigh, maybe not as quiet and rural as Brendon and Countisbury, and as far away as you can be on the North Devon coast from you, but I am also very prone to power outages.

At present, usually it is possible to use a traditional plug in landline phone during a power outage as long as nothing has happened to bring the phone network down, too. I understand this is because the telephone line takes its power from the local telephone exchange, which has back up power available.

Ofcom places a regulatory obligation on communications providers to take all necessary measures to ensure uninterrupted access to emergency organisations for their customers. Ofcom has issued guidance explaining how providers can fulfil this regulatory obligation during power outages, stating that at least one solution must be available for a minimum of one hour that enables access to emergency organisations in the event of a power cut. Any solution must be made available free of charge to customers who providers determine are reliant on their landline to make emergency calls during a power cut.

For most customers, telecoms companies recommend using a mobile phone as a backup in case of a power cut. If you do not have a mobile or live somewhere where there is no signal, your landline provider should offer you a solution such as a battery back up unit. This will mean that you can still make emergency calls during a power cut.

In the UK, national roaming is enabled in order to make emergency calls. This means you can use any mobile phone network to contact the emergency services, even if you are not a customer. You may see the message 'Emergency calls only' displayed on your handset if this is the case.





Alongside this, the emergency services have access to a number of resilient communications systems to coordinate emergency response activity via mobile networks. This includes the current Airwave system, and they will make use of the Emergency Services Network once transition has completed. Furthermore, calls to 999/112 can be made via another network if the caller's mobile provider cannot provide a signal to make the call.

If you currently have wireless broadband, as much of Exmoor does then you will be able to upgrade to FTTP using the new voucher system that will be coming into effect shortly. I do, however, think it is more important that your mobile signal is looked at as ultimately, regardless of the retirement of PSTN, mobile signals are increasing important, if not essential.

I am more than happy to look into what if any planned upgrades there are and if not, whether they can be instigated. I am sure this is something that as a Parish you have looked into and would appreciate it if you could email me details of any previous attempts or communications with providers about mobile signals.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me and if I can be of any further assistance on this or any other matter, please do not hesitate to contact me again.

If you would like to keep up to date with what I am doing in Westminster and what it means for you, your family and North Devon, do please sign up to my e-newsletter by visiting my website at www.selainesaxby.org.uk

Yours sincerely

Selaine Saxby
MP for North Devon