Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 29 September 2023

Subject: Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) Switchover

Report of: Councillor Nick Peel, Portfolio Lead for Digital; and Joanne Roney, Portfolio Lead Chief Executive for Digital

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to highlight changes in UK telecoms infrastructure that will impact a significant number of people and organisations across the city region and seek approval for the recommendations listed below.

Recommendations

The GMCA is requested to:

1. Note the paper and progress towards supporting PSTN switchover in GM.
2. Support advocating that the Government should play a stronger and more active role in the PSTN switchover.
3. Endorse the need to ensure that public sector organisations and their partners are undertaking appropriate steps to upgrade or mitigate.
4. Support work between local authorities and industry to identify vulnerable households and request that no-one is disconnected by industry until a suitable alternative connection are available.
5. Endorse the establishment of a GM PSTN Switchover working group to coordinate activity and communication, in partnership with ISPs and Local Authorities.

Contact Officers

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Equalities Impact, Carbon and Sustainability Assessment:

Recommendation - Key points for decision-makers

Insert text

Impacts Questionnaire

Impact Indicator	Result	Justification/Mitigation
Equality and Inclusion	G	This proposal will positively impact and support those who are facing disadvantage by mitigating the risks that may be faced with people that face additional challenges and communicating support to help understand the change. This proposal will positively impact access the ability to access public services, and mitigate risks where cost is an issue. This proposal could support communities by actively communicating switchover changes, GM plans and potential impacts, as well as where to go for support.
Health	G	The change in infrastructure means that there could be significant negative impacts initially for sectors such as telecare and concerning impacts therefore to residents.
Resilience and Adaptation	G	This plan will positively impact residents who are digitally-excluded, dislike change and those that use telecare services. This proposal and plans will help drive awareness and action to empower businesses and communities navigate the switchover. These recommendations will not only drive awareness to GM residents, it could help mitigate risks for those classed as most vulnerable. This plan should help to support and mitigate risks around scamming by sharing what to look for and where to go for support.
Housing		
Economy	G	
Mobility and Connectivity	G	
Carbon, Nature and Environment		
Consumption and Production		
Contribution to achieving the GM Carbon Neutral 2038 target	N/A	

Fur	G	Positive impacts overall, whether long or short term.	A	Mix of positive and negative impacts. Trade-offs to consider.	R	Mostly negative, with at least one positive aspect. Trade-offs to consider.	RR Negative impacts overall.

Carbon Assessment

Overall Score

Buildings	Result	Justification/Mitigation
New Build residential	N/A	
Residential building(s) renovation/maintenance	N/A	
New build non-residential (including public) buildings	N/A	
Transport		
Active travel and public transport	N/A	
Roads, Parking and Vehicle Access	N/A	
Access to amenities	N/A	
Vehicle procurement	N/A	
Land Use		

	No associated carbon impacts expected.	High standard in terms of practice and awareness on carbon.	Mostly best practice with a good level of awareness on carbon.	Partially meets best practice/ awareness, significant room to improve.	Not best practice and/ or insufficient awareness of carbon impacts.

Risk Management

The switch off the Public Service Telephone Network (PSTN) poses a significant risk to some SMEs; public and sector; voluntary, community & social enterprise organisations; and vulnerable residents.

Legal Considerations

The legal considerations for the GMCA and local authorities are detailed in this report and its recommendations.

Financial Consequences – Revenue

There are no revenue finance consequences for the GMCA from this report and its recommendations.

Financial Consequences – Capital

There are no capital finance consequences for the GMCA from this report and its recommendations

Number of attachments to the report:

None.

Comments/ recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Not applicable.

Background Papers

- PSTN switchover report to Wider Leadership Team, July 2022.
- External Link: <u>Upgrading landlines to digital technology – what you need to know - Ofcom</u>
- External Link: Future of Voice – Homepage
- External Link: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/uk-transition-from-analogue-to-digital-landlines

Tracking/ Process

Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution?

No

Exemption from call in

Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency? **No**.

GM Transport Committee

Not applicable

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Not applicable

1   Introduction

1.1   Telecommunication companies providing physical copper lines to homes and businesses intend to withdraw this analogue telephone system - called the Public Switch Telephone Network (PSTN) - by December 2025. This process has already commenced. All services currently provided over PSTN will need to be upgraded to a fully-digital service that uses internet protocol (IP) across a fibre-based network. This includes landlines, telecare systems, and business telephone systems.

1.2   Unlike the move to digital TV from 2007 to 2012, which was government-led, the government has decided that the withdrawal of the PSTN should be industry-led as the network is privately owned. However, the government has recognised it has a responsibility to ensure the change is achieved safely and effectively.

1.3   PSTN is an ageing network that is becoming harder and more expensive to maintain and it is positive that this technology is being retired both in the UK and

internationally. The switchover will significantly reduce UK energy demand as the Openreach exchanges and street cabinets currently account for over 85,000 kWh of energy equating to 20,000 tonnes of CO_2 per year. Industry stakeholders have highlighted other benefits of the switch to digital, such as improved call quality.

2   Risks associated with PSTN switchover

2.1 Reliance on PSTN Services

2.1.1 PSTN switchover will not have a significant impact on most households with a landline, as 90% of the current handsets can be connected to an internet service via an interconnecting device.

2.1.2 Of particular concern are those households and organisations that are most reliant on PSTN services. Anyone wishing to maintain a landline telephone or any service that currently operates over PSTN will be required to install an internet connection and deploy new technology with any cost borne by the household or organisation.

2.1.3 These include:

- Many emergency and telecare call buttons and pendant alarms used in households and care homes.
- Fax machines (they are still used in small numbers, particularly in health and social care).
- Remotely monitored alarm systems.
- Some point-of-sale terminals and payment card readers.
- Anyone with an ISDN service, either an office PBX or ISDN modem. This includes traditional commercial phone systems used by many organisations.
- Emergency telephones in lifts.

2.2 Older people and disabled people

2.2.1 These groups rely more heavily on traditional phone services for communication and access to essential services, and may also be dependent on social care support services using PSTN equipment.

- A recent Uswitch survey showed that 95% of over-65s still have a landline compared to 52% of 18–24-year-olds. For many older and disabled residents, their telephone is essential to connect with family, friends and local services, and a change of technology may be difficult to cope with and manage.

- The loss of dialling tone when the switch over is made is likely to result in some residents become confused and anxious. There is a need for these residents to receive support to manage this transition, particularly those with a cognitive impairment. The GM Ageing Hub, national charity Independent Age, and the Greater Manchester Disabled People's panel (GMDPP) have evidence that some priority groups have begun to receive some limited information on the PSTN change.

- These organisations have reported that amongst these priority groups in Greater Manchester, there is confusion around practical implications of the switchover on customers. Specific issues raised include the costs associated with the switchover (both equipment and increased electricity usage, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis), the timelines around when individuals will be switched over, the support that will be available and how to access it, and the process of making the change. All this uncertainty is resulting in high levels of anxiety amongst older people and disabled people, many of whom are not online. The different approaches and timings taken between each telecom providers are adding to the confusion. In addition, older adults are less likely to have access to a mobile phone as a backup.

- These priority groups may have difficulty using digital services and may be impacted by the costs of new specialist equipment and the operational differences.

2.3 Telecare users

2.3.1 It is estimated that there are approximately 110,000-130,000 telecare users in Greater Manchester and many telecare call buttons and pendants use PSTN. For example, Stockport Homes' 24/7 CareCall Service is based on PSTN and receives 185,000 emergency calls per year from its 5,000 customers, with 450+ emergency home visits each month.

- The cost of upgrading and operating its telecare equipment is significant, approximately 240% of the analogue cost. No funding is available from government or industry to support this transition.

- In Lancashire, a decision by local government to introduce charges for clients using telecare services to cover the costs of the technology upgrade for the

PSTN switchover have resulted in 50% of users withdrawing from the service, with implications for increasing 999 and health and social care service demand.

- There are significant concerns around shortages of the equipment needed to support telecare services provided over digital, with a 6 - 8 month lead time to replace this specialist equipment. Telecare providers also need to test devices to see which work on PSTN and may need support in communicating with customers and training call wardens and colleagues who are handling calls. They may need support in planning the process and will need to be aware of costs related to replacing devices and upgrading schemes.

2.4 Access to emergency services during a power cut

2.4.1 Unlike traditional landline phones that get their power from the telephone exchange, internet-based phones rely on the electricity in the home. This powered connection is one reason why so many services run across PSTN.

2.4.2 The switch means that when the power goes out in a home, so does the internet phone service. Therefore, internet phone users may not be able to make or receive calls during a power outage including if there was an emergency. Households would need to have a mobile phone as a back-up which might not be an option in areas of poor signal or for cost reasons, or a back-up power supply to their landline which industry may provide.

2.5 Awareness and coordination

2.5.1 A recent Which? Survey showed that 74% of consumers with copper landline connection were unaware of the migration. In addition, a solely industry led approach increases the risk that consumers and businesses will either not engage at all (because of a lack of trust). Whilst BT and Virgin Media account for a large proportion of households, the industry is highly fragmented with over 450 telecoms providers across England.

- The switchover is taking place on a region-by-region basis, and plans differ depending on the telecom provider. It is understood that most telecoms providers will contact customers around 6-12 months before the switchover to inform them of their next steps.

- Internet service providers are phasing vulnerable people toward the end of the programme with enhanced support and a commitment not to forcibly switch

vulnerable people, whilst also maintaining the December 2025 deadline. However industry is also asking councils, housing, health and care organisations for help in identifying vulnerable people which creates data protection challenges.

- Industry is holding fast to the December 2025 deadline, with support for vulnerable people being addressed by the telecom industry towards the end of the switchover programme. However, this is likely to coincide with adverse winter weather conditions and a time when vulnerable people are more reliant on landline services, highlighting the need for this to be resolved in partnership significantly before then.

- The lack of a consistent brand and approach increases the risk that households and vulnerable people could be targeted by scammers.

2.6 Local Authorities and GM businesses

2.6.1 The LGA is recommending that Local Authorities, other public sector organisations and businesses delivering services currently using PTSN equipment undertake reviews to determine their level of vulnerability to the change and plan for transition. This has been discussed at the GM ICT Leaders Group and the Digital Inclusion Locality Leads Group. At present:

- There are a variety of different approaches being taken across the public sector. Some Local Authorities either do not have a focussed person to support the coordination locally, a switchover plan in place or limited focus on service users, such as residents that are supported by telecare services.

- The GM Chamber of Commerce has highlighted concerns about the low level of awareness across SMEs in the City Region and is keen to work with industry to address this. It is recognised that there is a risk of interruptions to some services if businesses do not plan and audit to determine everything that is connected to the PSTN. Businesses that do not switch to the VoIP system in a timely manner may also choose suppliers who charge higher costs.

3 PSTN Opportunities

3.1 As referred to above, PSTN switchover will reduce carbon emissions across the country not only because of reductions in power consumption but also the cost of manufacturing, installing and operating duplicate infrastructure.

3.2 PSTN switchover also presents opportunities to encourage or enable some residents to get broadband who might otherwise might not. This may enable a broader range of services such as Hospitals at Home and enable online council services to be accessible to a greater number of people, however there would need to be support in how to use the internet safely and effectively.

4 Support for switchover and mitigating activities

4.1 GM has been proactive in engaging with government and industry, however it should be noted that the UK government is not providing any resources to enable national, regional or local communication or coordination. Whilst GM are not offering to take on responsibility for coordination and messaging around the switchover, we are calling for the communications around this transition to be better coordinated, transparent and easy for residents to navigate and understand what to expect and where they should go if they have questions or need further support.

4.2 Ofcom and Government activity

4.2.1 The Department of Science, Technology and Industry (DSIT) are supporting the change by:

- Monitoring the change by having regular meetings with Ofcom and communication providers.
- Attending working groups such as the Local Government Association (LGA) and National Telecare Stakeholder Working Group.
- Raising awareness of the change by attending events and corresponding with relevant partners.
- Publishing guidance on their website.
- Co-ordinating quarterly engagement surveys and cross-departmental meetings to keep updated with the ongoing rollouts.

4.2.2   Ofcom requires telecom providers to take measures to ensure uninterrupted access to emergency services including during a power cut and is engaging with government and industry over switchover.

4.3   Industry activity

4.3.1   Industry has been working towards PSTN switchover for several years with GM engagement via TechUK and major suppliers. BT and Virgin Media are planning a set of regional activities across GM in October 2023 as part of a national engagement series targeted at household customers, with the potential for a focused event for telecare and local authority customers. Both telecom organisations are seeking support from councils to establish data-sharing agreements relating to identifying vulnerable people.

4.3.2   BT currently have no plans to prioritise switchover for telecare customers, adults over 70s, or residents with no mobile connectivity (landline only) unless these residents proactively opt in.

4.4   Local Government Association (LGA) support

4.4.1   The LGA has established a National Switchover Working Group including a range of local authorities and industry, is engaging with government and has developed a set of materials to support local awareness raising and planning for transition. These are available at [Digital switchover hub | Local Government Association](#).

4.5   Greater Manchester response

4.5.1   Following a report on PSTN to the GM Wider Leadership Team, a Digital Voice Switch Over event was held in Salford in March 2023 with a broad range of stakeholders. It was followed by a PSTN Roundtable chaired by the GM Mayor and Cllr Nick Peel in June 2023 which convened a broad range of industry, housing, and public sector stakeholders to explore the opportunities and challenges of the switchover. These events highlighted the range of concerns reflected in this report and have led to this escalation to GMCA.

4.5.2   GMCA Digital has also been in discussions with the Scottish government and Greater London Authority to hear about their plans and approach to the switchover. Whilst Scotland is in an advanced position, catalysed by funding for a dedicated team and activity and Greater London regional authority is at the start of their thinking, what is clear are the concerns around impacts, resilience and a lack of

national coordination is a common theme for all authorities.

4.5.3 A GM PSTN Working Group is being convened in September to bring together key stakeholders. An initial focus will be BT's PSTN Regional Roadshow in October and maximising communication coordination and impact including:

- Identifying vulnerable groups and investigating how data can be shared through a data-sharing agreement to allow telecom providers to target these individuals.

- Potential for co-branding communication between industry and local authorities to reduce the risk of scams and anxiety related to the planned changes.

- Creating a toolkit of resources which can be shared with relevant stakeholders to raise awareness.

- Ensuring that no one will lose access to their phone service (or other devices using PSTN) and that the switch over will come at no additional costs to residents on lower incomes.

GMCA are engaged with the National Telecare Stakeholder Group to understand the national challenges and landscape around the telecare transition, the impacts on customers and telecare resilience. There is interest from industry in GM being a large-scale first mover on a more coordinated approach.

5   Summary and recommendations

5.1 The PSTN switchover will not significantly affect most homes and organisations, but there are significant risks for some of our most vulnerable people and a more coordinated approach is needed which gives people and organisations confidence and clarity of the process. Industry has been asked to lead this however it is fragmented. Whilst regional authority is not in a position to take ownership of the communications, regional and local governments have a role to play. However, there are barriers that can only be overcome at a governmental and national level.

5.2 Therefore, in addition to the activities outlined above it is recommended that:

- **GM presses government for more holistic coordination**. Given its likely impact on vulnerable people, on SMEs, and the lack of general awareness, there is a strong sense that the government needs to be taking a more active role at a national level with a more highly organised campaign working with industry.

- **GM's public organisations undertake PSTN health checks and encourage partner organisations to do so** if not already undertaken. Reviews will enable identification of lines and assess which use PSTN. Action can then be taken to switch over lines that are needed. Local authorities should also consider appointing a PSTN project lead to act as a key point of contact including engagement with industry. Budgets may need to be identified early to cover implementation costs and support coordination. It is recommended that PSTN is included in locality risk logs as a business continuity risk to support effective management. In addition, it is recommended that Local authorities engage with their social care and community providers to ensure that there is sufficient awareness of planned changes and action plans in place.

- **GM enhances regional and local communications.** It is proposed that GM works with industry and government to enhance communications and engagement with residents and businesses using existing channels, but that capacity for this is currently very limited.

- **GM collaborates to share information on vulnerable households with the major telecoms companies** where there is additional reliance on landlines and navigating the impacts and risks is a joint effort. GMCA and local authorities will work with industry to identify the people directly affected by the change but there should a recognition that this will require resource to complete and this work is unfunded by government.

5.3 Recommendations

See top of the report.