

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 31st January 2025
Subject: Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) Switchover Update Report
Report of: Councillor Nick Peel, Portfolio Lead for Digital and Tom Stannard, Portfolio Lead Chief Executive for Digital

Purpose of Report

The purpose of the report is to provide an update on the risks of the implementation of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) Switchover and their mitigating activities, following incidents and concerns impacting vulnerable residents across the city region.

Recommendations:

The GMCA is requested to:

1. Encourage GM Local Authorities to sign Data Sharing Agreements with telecom providers (using the agreed LGA national template) to mitigate risks for vulnerable people, including those in receipt of private telecare services; and to review PSTN switchover readiness drawing upon the Guidance published by Government on 18th November 2025.
2. Monitor incidents of frauds related to the digital switchover to inform and influence the national communications campaign launched next year and understand the scale of the problem.
3. Maintain oversight of the risks associated with the PSTN switchover at least until January 2027 when switchover will be completed.

Contact Officers

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Report authors must identify which paragraph relating to the following issues:

BOLTON
BURY

MANCHESTER
OLDHAM

ROCHDALE
SALFORD

STOCKPORT
TAMESIDE

TRAFFORD
WIGAN

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	<p>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.</p> <p>This proposal will positively impact access the ability to access public services, and mitigate risks where cost is an issue.</p> <p>This proposal could support communities by actively communicating switchover changes, GM plans and potential impacts, as well as where to go for support.</p>
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	<p>This plan will positively impact residents who are digitally-excluded, dislike change and those that use telecare services.</p> <p>This proposal and plans will help drive awareness and action to empower businesses and communities navigate the switchover.</p> <p>These recommendations will not only drive awareness to GM residents, it could help mitigate risks for those classed as most vulnerable.</p> <p>This plan should help to support and mitigate risks around scamming by sharing what to look for and where to go for support.</p>
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	
Overall	G	<p>Positive impacts overall, whether long or short term.</p> <p>A Mix of positive and negative impacts. Trade-offs to consider.</p> <p>R Mostly negative, with at least one positive aspect. Trade-offs to consider.</p> <p>RR Negative impacts overall.</p>

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					
Le	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 of 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

There are no legal considerations for GMCA.

Financial Consequences – Revenue

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

Financial Consequences – Capital

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

Number of attachments to the report:

Two attachments

1. Letter to Adult Social Care Leads from Minister of State for Care Stephen Kinnock and Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms Chris Bryant, 29th August 2024
2. Letter to Portfolio Leads for Adult Social Care from Portfolio Lead for Digital Councillor Nicholas Peel, 4th September 2024

Comments/recommendations from Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Not applicable

Background Papers

- [Report to GMCA on Public Switched Telephone Network \(PSTN\) Switchover – 23 February 2024](#)
- [Report to GMCA on Public Switched Telephone Network \(PSTN\) Switchover - 29 September 2023](#)
- [Mayors express grave concerns about impact of digital switchover on residents \(7 City Region Mayors joint letter to DSIT, DHSC, DLUHC\) - GMCA \(22 March 2024\)](#)
- [Guidance: UK transition from analogue to digital landlines - GOV.UK \(6 January 2023\)](#)
- [Upgrading landlines to digital technology: What you need to know \(Ofcom\)](#)
- [PSTN: Critical National Infrastructure Charter - GOV.UK \(18 November 2024\)](#)
- [Public Switched Telephone Network charter - GOV.UK \(18 December 2023\)](#)
- [UK transition from analogue to digital landlines: guidance for local authorities - GOV.UK \(18 November 2024\)](#)
- [Supported journeys: defining vulnerability during the PSTN migration - GOV.UK \(18 November 2024\)](#)

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?

GM Transport Committee

Not applicable

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Not applicable

1. Introduction and background

- 1.1. Telecommunications providers are currently moving their residential and business customers from traditional analogue landlines - known as the Public Switched Telephone Network or PSTN service - to digital landline services. This is because PSTN is an ageing network that is increasingly hard to maintain, energy intensive, and expensive. The Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), that is used to deliver traditional telephone services, is also being switched off. The upgrade is being delivered by the telecoms industry in a phased approach. The industry is upgrading landline services to new digital technology using an internet connection, such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), Digital Voice or All-IP telephony.
- 1.1.1. Issues relating to PSTN switchover have been escalated to Government on multiple occasions, including in a letter from the Mayor of Greater Manchester and six other Combined Authority mayors, in March 2024. This letter raised a range of concerns and proposed several mitigations, with a particular focus on alleviating the impact of switchover on vulnerable people and addressing cost pressures on local authorities.
- 1.1.2. In 2023 it was estimated that 100,000 people in GM used PSTN based telecare services, mainly older residents. A high proportion of users are supported through local authority social care and housing services. However, a considerable number also receive private telecare support.
- 1.2. Before the general election, the UK government was increasing its oversight of PSTN switchover, however this has stepped up since July providing more national and strategic leadership and coordination of the switchover programme.
- 1.3. As a consequence of this and activity by the LGA and others, Openreach extended the deadline for switchover by 13 months, from December 2025 to January 2027. Whilst other telecom operators have not publicly committed to extending their own deadline, the Openreach extension means that most of the network is now bound to the extended timeframe.

- 1.4. On 18th November 2024, Sir Chris Bryant, Government Minister for Telecoms and Data Protection in Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), held a roundtable with industry partners, Local Government Association and two City-Region representatives. GMCA Group Chief Executive Caroline Simpson represented Greater Manchester to discuss the issue and how best to manage the risks involved. Following this constructive roundtable, DSIT issued helpful guidance to local authorities and published an industry-supported PSTN Critical National Industry Charter.
- 1.5. Greater Manchester's local authorities and housing organisations have been making steady progress on switchover with two impacted service areas being the main focus: Estates Management and Adult Social Care services.
- 1.6. Whilst the direction of travel is now positive, there are outstanding risks and concerns.

2. Risks and mitigation updates

2.1. National Action Plan and funding

- 2.1.1. A national Telecare Action Board has been in place since April 2024, with wide industry and government representation, to oversee the development of a National Telecare Action Plan and a National Communications Campaign.
- 2.1.2. The Telecare National Action Plan work is led by the Department of Health & Social Care and is due to be published by Government in January 2025, following consultation with industry, Local Authorities and the LGA. It is hoped that this will provide a clear forward plan and set out how risks are to be mitigated. The Plan is expected to include the development of a clear "On the day" process, which sets out how vulnerable people will be safely transitioned learning from the pilots currently being undertaken by BT in Cardiff and VMO2 in Stockport (see section 3.2 below). Pressure continues to be applied by the LGA, GMCA and other City Regions to ensure the Plan is properly funded.
- 2.1.3. Alongside this, Ofcom is implementing and leading enforcement of a reporting mechanism to record and escalate serious issues as they arise.

2.2. Supporting vulnerable people and Data Sharing Agreements

- 2.2.1. The PSTN report to GMCA in February 2024 highlighted issues relating to identification and support for the vulnerable people most impacted by the switchover. There has since been some clarification set out in the local authority guidance published by UK Government on 18th November 2024. However, there is still a heavy reliance on the need for vulnerable people to self-identify, which increases the need for data agreements between telecom providers and local authorities.
- 2.2.2. The LGA published a PSTN data sharing agreement in May 2024 which had been agreed with BT and VMO2 together and other providers in an effort to standardise data sharing in relation to vulnerable people and ease the process of putting arrangements in place with the main telecommunication providers.
- 2.2.3. Local authorities and private telecare have been encouraged to use this agreement. Council Chief Executives and Adult Social Care leads have been contacted by Government (see Appendix 1) and GMCA Digital Portfolio Leader Councillor Nicholas Peel contacted Directors of Adult Social Care (see Appendix 2) in September 2024 to request that this was given focus.
- 2.2.4. GMCA has liaised with all ten councils and feedback suggest that at least four local authorities will have complete their switchover of telecare users by April 2025. However, only 3 of 10 Greater Manchester local authorities currently have a data sharing agreement in place with BT and/or VM02 (over 80% of local authorities nationally have yet to engage with communication providers).
- 2.2.5. For those councils that have completed or are nearing completion of switchover, there is a disincentive to implement this sharing protocol. However, it is recommended that all ten still do so to ensure that vulnerable people are treated as such by telecoms companies. There is risk that vulnerable people receiving non-local authority funded / private telecare services will not be supported appropriately.
- 2.2.6. A September 2024 BT investigation into issues associated with migration highlighted that in 59% of cases there was no data sharing agreement in place with a local authority, and in 41% of cases the local authority and BT did not know the resident was using telecare devices. In these cases, it was assumed they were private telecare users.

2.3. Public awareness and communications campaign

- 2.3.1. The February 2024 GMCA report highlighted concerns about the lack of awareness of the switchover and the need for a clear messaging. Work to develop a National Communications Campaign targeted at telecare users and their support networks to improve awareness of the PSTN switchover has been ongoing since April 2024. This work is being led by BT and funded by telecommunications providers with HM Government branding expected to be used.
- 2.3.2. Delays in the campaign launch, which has been pushed back to April 2025, has led to concerns about increased risks of scamming. GMCA work with the LGA is therefore stressing the need for messaging to be clear as scamming will become an increasing risk once launched on a national scale. GM Ageing Hub has been working with AgeUK and the GM Older People's Equality Panel to determine risks.
- 2.3.3. The LGA has been actively engaging with industry and government to help shape campaign messaging. This has included an ask for an automated 0800 number for at risk groups.
- 2.3.4. GMCA Digital is a member of the BT-chaired Telecare Action Board (TAB) with the LGA and through this continues to work to ensure that local authority and resident voices are embedded within the campaign.

3. Local Authority readiness and progress

3.1. Local Authority readiness

- 3.1.1. In line with the recommendations of the February 2024 GMCA report, GMCA Digital has convened three PSTN Readiness Workshops to determine and monitor local authority readiness for the PSTN switchover and provide a platform to escalate concerns.
- 3.1.2. In addition, a readiness survey was conducted with Estates Management and Adult Social Care departments in each council. The findings highlighted that all Greater Manchester local authorities are progressing the switchover at pace.

- 3.1.3. The cost of switchover has been highlighted as one of the biggest concerns of councils and funding remains a significant issue. On average, this equates to an additional £1m per Greater Manchester local authority, which has had to be found from constrained budgets. GM local authorities continue to flag concerns about the lack of awareness of residents and the need for a clear communications campaign coordinated by Central government.
- 3.1.4. Local authorities have also confirmed that constrained budget have limited their ability to futureproof buying decisions. Several local authorities have selected hybrid analogue to digital solutions as a stop gap until future funding for the full transition of services is available. GMCA will continue to lobby and escalate funding concerns to central government.
- 3.1.5. Feedback from local authorities suggests that some costs have inevitably been passed onto residents for technology upgrades. For example, full digital alarm systems require a roaming SIM card. Depending on the scheme, the charge can be additional charge of £1.50 a week, with the risks that some users will stop the service and rely on a 999 response as has occurred in other parts of the country. This is counterproductive for reasons of cost, effectiveness, and appropriateness of response.

3.2. **Pilot and progress**

- 3.2.1. GM has been at the forefront in working with the telecoms industry on identifying PSTN Switchover risks. Stockport Homes conducted a National Risk Profiling Pilot alongside Virgin Media O2 (VMO2) and the Tech Enabled Services Association (TSA) to mitigate the risks of migrating vulnerable residents. This confirmed the benefits of local collaboration with a 90% success rate for migration appointments for the vulnerable comparing to VM02's usual 20% engagement rate when working alone with residents.
- 3.2.2. The work with Stockport Homes has also led to discussions with GMCA Digital about the innovation opportunities arising from the PSTN Switchover and the potential to develop wide programmes where digital devices can support other health and wellbeing priorities including falls prevention.

3.3. Digital innovation opportunities

- 3.3.1. Issues arising from switchover and Openreach's timeline extension have brought forward some new technologies being developed in telecoms and telecare. GM Digital is working closely with the Telecare Services Association (TSA) to introduce innovators in this area to local authorities to inform buying decisions.
- 3.3.2. In particular, the switchover to digital communications coincides with a maturing set of home based "smart" and resident care and wellbeing solutions that align with Greater Manchester's live well, housing first, and net zero priorities, as well as relating to NHS work to reduce ambulance call outs and free up hospital beds through more home support. This potential is being explored through the GMCA's Connected Places programme through the likes of the £3M 5G Innovation Region Smart Decarbonisation pilot and emerging work on "Connected Homes, Inclusive Places", in discussion with Directors of Place.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1. Several risks associated with the PSTN switchover are decreasing because of the UK Government taking greater oversight of this industry-led transition, which has been championed by GMCA, other city regions, and LGA. That said, there are still outstanding issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the necessary safeguards are in place for vulnerable residents – particularly those receiving private telecare services. GMCA will continue to lobby and escalate funding concerns to Government.
- 4.2. GMCA Digital will continue to work with the Telecare Action Board to help shape the national communications campaign and ensure that local authority and resident voice is embedded within the National Communications Plan.
- 4.3. Local authority awareness of the switchover in Greater Manchester is high with plans in place in each district albeit with variable positions of readiness.
- 4.4. The GMCA Digital team will continue to support and engage with localities, GM Ageing Hub, Falls Prevention, and the Tripartite Agreement between Social Housing, NHS, and GMCA to examine smart digital innovation opportunities, funding permitting.