

Primary and Community Care Directorate  
Primary Care Division



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Fergus Cochrane  
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Our ref: PE1285

25 November 2009

Dear Fergus

Thank you for your letter of 4 November 2009, following up the initial considerations of the Petitions Committee on PE 1285. This petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to '*urge the Scottish Government to make arrangements for all calls from mobile phones to NHS 24 to be free of charge to users*'. The attached annex provides responses to the specific questions in your letter and we have liaised closely with NHS 24 in the preparation of this reply.

More generally however, the Petitions Committee will be aware of the recent Ofcom consultation on the release of a new 3-digit number for access to non-emergency healthcare services. It is expected that an announcement on whether or not this number is to be released will be made very soon and, if it is released, it will then follow that the 3-digit number will initially be piloted in a few Strategic Health Authorities in England from next spring. The Scottish Government has been clear that we will consider using the 3-digit number in Scotland to serve the same function as the current NHS 24 number, though any final decision will depend on a range of factors including the outcome of the pilot sites in England, the cost of implementing the call platform and the costs to the public and / or NHS 24 and the Scottish Government of the tariff decided on by Ofcom.

At this stage it is not known what the tariff would be for this number if released but it is likely that this decision will impact on the issues raised in this petition. If Ofcom decide to release the 3-digit number the Scottish Government and NHS 24 would need to undertake an analysis and costing exercise to consider what the cost implications would be. The Ofcom consultation sought views on a range of tariff options, including freephone and free to caller, which would have implications for callers, phone companies and the NHS / Government. The costs for the NHS in Scotland associated with the eventual tariff option will need to be considered as part of the final decision.

We believe that any decision about changes to the number or associated costs used by patients in Scotland to access non-emergency healthcare should be informed by the outcome of the process outlined above.

I hope this reply provides the Petitions Committee, and the Petitioner, with an assurance that this is a matter that we are looking at very closely. Please get back in touch should the Committee require further information.

Yours sincerely



**FRANK STRANG**  
Deputy Director for Primary Care

## SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

### CONSIDERATION OF PETITION [PE1285](#)

*Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make arrangements for all calls from mobile phones to NHS 24 to be free of charge to users.*

### SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FROM COMMITTEE

- **Will it intervene with mobile phone companies to try to come to some agreement on how it would be possible to make the NHS 24 service available free of charge for mobile phone users?**

We note that the Committee have written to the mobile phone companies in pursuance of this proposal and, rather than duplicate these approaches, we propose that the Scottish Government and NHS 24 consider the terms of any responses to the Committee. However, we remain of the view that the costs of all calls to NHS 24, mobile and landline, are best considered as part of the wider work outlined in the covering letter.

- **Why is the cost split between the NHS and the caller for a landline phone but not for a mobile phone?**

The cost of a call is not split between NHS 24 and a caller, NHS 24 does not charge for calls. The organisation pays BT a quarterly rental for the use of the 08454 24 24 24 number and the platform used for call delivery to NHS 24. This platform includes the following functionality: routing calls via push-button choice options, intelligent call routing and allowing NHS 24 to control call delivery for business continuity. NHS 24 does not receive any income from any charges which telecom providers charge customers for the use of the 0845 number.

In the past, callers phoning their local GP surgery for assistance out-of-hours would have received a message asking them to call a second number, for example their local GP's home or OOH co-operative for assistance. Such calls would have been charged at a local rate cost. When NHS 24 was established, it was determined that the use of a single low-rate 0845 number would continue to provide access to out-of-hours care at the same cost as had previously been the case for callers.

The 0845 number used by NHS 24 is a non-geographic low rate number which should cost the caller no more than the price of a local telephone call from a BT landline. The use of an 0845 local rate number replicates the tariffs which would have been levied on callers accessing out-of-hours services before the existence of NHS 24, when calling from a BT landline.

Recent changes to certain types of contracts mean that currently, for people who have a BT Call Plan, calls to 0845 numbers, including NHS 24 can be free (free at the weekends with the Unlimited Weekend Plan; during the evening and weekends with the Unlimited Evening and Weekend Plan and anytime with the Unlimited Anytime Plan). Calls from mobiles and other networks may vary and the service provider may charge a minimum cost per call. The cost of calls from mobile phones to NHS 24 varies depending on the service user's contract with their network supplier.

However, in order to safeguard patient safety, NHS 24 does have a policy of calling mobile phone users back if they have insufficient credit on their phones to cover the time period necessary for their call to the service.

- **What is its answer to the point made by Marlyn Glen MSP regarding NHS 24 responding to text messages sent by callers?**

NHS 24 is positively committed to exploring the use of technology such as text-based inquiries in the future. As part of their aim to continually improve services, they are exploring established and upcoming technologies such as web-based and email systems and whether SMS text could be used to offer information on healthcare to assist the public in Scotland.

Text messaging systems would be unlikely to be used for managing acute illness in patients, but might be used, for example, to issue reminders or general advice to people with specific needs or answer health information queries. NHS 24 could only proceed with such a service when they had absolute assurance of patient safety.

Examples of where NHS 24 already use developments in technology to enhance their service includes the successful development of the website [NHS24.com](http://NHS24.com). This now provides the public with a vast range of online services including a health encyclopaedia, self-care guide and database of local community pharmacies, GP and dental practices across Scotland. The website has also supported a number of national health campaigns during the year including meningitis awareness and cervical screening.

The development of the online enquiries service has allowed NHS 24 Health Information Advisors (HIAs) to respond to email inquiries about general health issues. HIAs also support online enquiries from Health Scotland's fighting cervical cancer website and act as a complimentary service to the NHS helpline that supports the national immunisation campaign.

- **Should NHS 24 not be seen as an emergency service? If not, why not?**

The Scottish Ambulance Service remains the agency in Scotland responsible for medical emergencies. NHS 24 is the access point for patients requiring non-emergency assistance during the out-of-hours period. NHS 24 works closely in partnership with the Scottish Ambulance Service, Accident and Emergency Departments, Out-of-Hours Primary Care services and other partner organisations across NHS Scotland. Callers to the service are assessed and then signposted to the most appropriate form of care. The core unscheduled service is available for people who need support and help when their GP surgery is closed and if a caller requires an emergency response NHS 24 can transfer calls immediately to the Scottish Ambulance Service.