DIGITAL TELECARE MIGRATION ISSUES

Insight Service
DIGITAL TELECARE
Scottish Local Government

The transition from analogue to digital telecare has a huge impact on service users. It is important that their analogue telephone line and equipment is safely upgraded to continue to receive their vital services.

Digital Telecare for Scottish Local Government and the TEC Programme have been working with TEC Leads across the Scottish Local Government to identify any issues that have resulted due to the digital migration. As well as this, Digital Telecare have been working with Telecom Companies directly to determine what work is being done to identify and insulate service users or vulnerable groups from adverse effects of digital migration. This insight service will explore the identified digital telecare migration issues and the work Digital Telecare is carrying out to minimise disruption to services.

Colin McFadyen, Project Manager for Digital Telecare for Scottish Local Government, introduces telecare

Telecare Migration Survey

As Telecom companies continue to roll out digital media services, including but not limited to fibre broadband and VOIP calls and digital media boxes, there is an increased risk of them coming into contact with telecare service users. Without careful planning, there is a risk that telecare users may end up without an active telecare service, and indeed in some cases may not realise the service is not functioning.

Digital Telecare for Scottish Local Government and the TEC Programme created a Telecare Migration Survey which was issued to TEC Leads across the Scottish Local Government. The aim of this survey was to document any cases, either current or historic, of issues resulting in the digital migration of service users.

The survey findings highlighted the following:

There are increased incidences of failed calls affecting various Partnerships that appear to be related to digital migration within the telephony networks. These can last for several hours, days or weeks and affect large numbers of service users. They may resolve through continued actions by the Partnerships Telecoms Provider or through actions by the partnership. They are currently very difficult to predict and will be unlikely to avoid entirely until a digital transition is finalised. Bearing in mind that Telecom companies themselves are increasing the tempo of their digital migration, it is reasonable to expect considerable increase in the instances of these failed call issues in future.

There are also a number of verified reports from Partnerships across the country of service users being migrated to digital lines or services without being made aware of the consequences for their alarm services. This has resulted in service users being left in a variety of situations which counter or remove the alarm system including having connecting cables cut, unplugged or digital equipment installed which their alarms are not compatible with. There is a very real risk for service users and service providers in this situation that they will still be expecting to rely on alarms which are in fact non-functional. Partnerships that have reported this have been made aware either through reports from concerned service users, test calls or other equipment checks. Partnerships should consider issuing a blanket communication to service users to highlight changes that may be coming and to ask them to get in touch should their Telecom Provider change or make changes.

These risks to citizens and challenges for providers, mirror the experience of digital migration programmes in other countries. In order to learn from these experiences, and identify potential issues involved in the migration, the Broadband Stakeholder Group commissioned a report from Plum Consulting, examining international examples of a migration to All-IP and retirement of the PSTN in France, Germany, Switzerland and New Zealand. This report was published in 2018 and established a range of risks and issues related to the operation of analogue devices and in particular medical devices attempting to send analogue signalling over digital lines. During their digital switchover, Sweden launched a national digital upgrade programme after failed telecare calls were widely reported and one fatality occurred after the citizens analogue alarm was unable to connect via the digital network. Ofcom have confirmed that the migration in the UK will impact a range of areas including telecare provision as these "rely on some attributes of the PSTN that may not be fully replicated in VoIP-based", and that analogue "DTMF tone transfer will be affected in ways that may make some security and care alarms malfunction".

Digital Migration Report

Following concerns raised in the survey that was issued to TEC Leads, Digital Telecare for Scottish Local Government was asked to investigate what procedures Telecom Companies have in place to identify vulnerable users/ those with service alarms when instituting migrations.

The key findings of the report suggest there is a great deal of variety in how Telecom Companies check for service users when processing Fibre or digital upgrade requests including:

- Entirely relying on the service user to state they have an alarm on the line;
- Stating in their terms and conditions that it is the responsibility of the alarm user to ensure the equipment will work after digital migration.

The understanding of the Digital Telecare team is that Telecom Companies (Telco's) are expected to be asking questions to identify telecare users when they interact with Telco agents regarding digital upgrades. Marketing materials provided by Telco's should be highlighting a risk to 'Special Users' during such upgrades and asking those service users to make themselves known.

Telecom Companies should also be checking call records from their customers to identify households that have been making calls to Telecare numbers in an attempt to proactively identify potential Telecare users, who can then be flagged for further customer care. The report carried out will not be able to identify or comment on any of this activity, however from the work here, there are some potential questions to be raised; It does appear that all not Telco's are interrogating their customers to the same degree when contacted about digital upgrades, which raises the possibility of service users not being identified and therefore losing connection to the Alarm system. Similarly, while direct marketing material and mailshots were not reviewed for this report, few Telco's reported these as being used and most indicated that customers should check their website for details. There is some question then whether this would be sufficient information for service users who may not appreciate the technological changes in digital telecare and again could lose connection to their alarm system without realising.

It is our understanding that the steps outlined here for Telco's are voluntary or best practice approaches and the Terms and Conditions for all Telco's are clear that they consider the service user responsible for ensuring the equipment within their home continues to connect to the telecare alarm system. The best response could be considered to be those companies that either precheck for telecare users or proactively warn those who may be affected with text outside of the terms and conditions. Those who also offer an advice or support line for affected users would also be regarded as providing added service.

Given the highlighted concerns over service users having their in home alarms disconnected during digital upgrades, It is appreciated that Telco's are unlikely to be able to accept responsibility for the variety of telecare apparatus on the market which they have little knowledge of. Equally, it would appear unfair to pass responsibility for ensuring technology remains updated to those who need to make use of telecare services, especially when their only potential indicators may be some lines on a website.

Next Steps - What are Digital Telecare for Scottish Local Government doing to support this?

Digital Telecare for Scottish Local Government will continue to monitor and attempt to quantify migration issues and share any lessons learned particularly in adapting current systems or providing workarounds. We are currently developing a formal reporting structure to allow Health and Social Care Partnerships to highlight any issues which they have encountered.

Following on from the survey distributed over the summer, the planned next step will be to develop a monthly report which will allow Partnerships that have come across migration issues to report these, and these can then be escalated as required to Ofcom, the Office of the Telecoms Adjudicator and other bodies. The Digital Telecare team will continue to work with these regulatory bodies and engage with Telecom Providers to ensure they are aware of the challenges faced by telecare services and attempt to resolve these issues as quickly as possible.

If you are experiencing issues in the outlined areas or would like to discuss any of the content further, please get in touch.