

Digital switchover is coming! What's coming? Digital switchover, that's what.

Across the country, Openreach and other telecoms companies are re-wiring the telephone network to do away with the “copper wire”, known as Analogue, and replace it with “fibre”, which is Digital. The old analogue networks have been in operation for decades and have reached the end of their serviceable life. The telecoms industry is finding it difficult to source the parts required to maintain or repair connections as suppliers are no longer manufacturing them.

New digital phone lines will allow phone companies to offer consumers and businesses clearer and better quality phone calls, as well as new features such as anonymous caller rejection or three-way calling (for instance where you could speak to your Son in Newcastle and your Daughter in Kent all on the same phone call).

This is great news for most as it will be a more reliable connection and faster broadband. But, as with all new technology, there will be losers as well as winners. The losers are likely to be the older and more vulnerable people.

The old analogue landline carries a low voltage power connection directly from the telephone exchange, which is sufficient to power some basic corded handsets without needing a mains electrical supply. This means that in the event of a local power cut, these corded handsets will continue to function as long as the telephone exchange still has power.

Digital landlines cannot carry a power connection, which means handsets and routers must be powered from your home power supply, and they will not function in a power cut unless you have a backup power system such as a battery or generator.

This means elderly and infirm people with care-lines may not be able contact their care provider via their special adaptor during a power cut. We would expect that your local borough/district “care-line” service would already be checking their clients, but many people use private care-line companies. The solution in most cases is a modern SIM-based “box” which uses mobile phone technology. Also be aware that your burglar alarm company may still use this old land-line technology and so that link will also fail during a power cut. We would suggest you contact your burglar alarm company to check.

If you have managed to keep up with the above it will be clear that our elderly/infirm family and neighbours are the ones likely to have issues. BT are being very good about providing solutions, but I cannot see any other telephone service provider doing anything. If you or a neighbour/family member use care-line services please contact the service provider if there is a concern. If you or they are not sure who provides it, and the current service uses the land line, trigger the alarm and see who answers!

BT are running events across Surrey in September. Watch out for notifications of these events.

The digital switchover is happening now and will be completed by end of 2025. Please don't blame the government – this is not their doing, for once.