Basic advice to end-users

The changes to the UK telephone system – how it may affect your burglar alarm

Introduction

BT is upgrading its telephone and ISDN lines to a "next-generation network" (NGN). BT is using the more friendly term "21CN" for this. Customers will be "migrated" from the existing ("20CN") lines to 21CN lines over the coming years. 21CN is a digital system and one effect of this is a delay in the transmission. This is similar to the delay you may have noticed with digital compared to analogue TV. In the majority of cases this migration will have minimal effect on voice calls, but some pieces of equipment connected to your phone line may be affected. This includes some security related equipment such as burglar alarms that are used to send alarms to monitoring or alarm receiving centres (ARCs). Other communications providers are making similar changes so you may be affected even if you do not use BT.

What should you do about this now?

During the course of BT's migration, the problems that may be experienced will vary. You should be aware that problems might occur before the migration of your phone line – for example when the ARC is migrated. Initially you should contact the company that maintains your burglar alarm. In most cases they will be able to advise you of the likelihood of any impact you may experience. Testing has been performed on most of the common burglar alarm devices and it is known that some will have very few problems, whilst others will be prone to frequent problems. Your alarm company may suggest that your system needs to be modified or updated to minimise the problems you experience. It is possible that your equipment is of a type that will not be affected.

What can happen when your line is migrated

During the actual migration of your phone line, neither you nor your alarm system will be unable to dial out for up to three minutes and unable to receive calls for up to 30 minutes. This means that the burglar alarm may detect a line fault and react to it (perhaps by sounding a warning "beep"). You will not be able to use the landline to contact the alarm company, but with some systems they may detect the loss of a line and the ARC may attempt to contact you or the keyholder (the person nominated to be called in the event of an alarm). You could prepare for this in several ways, for example providing a mobile phone number. Beware that in some cases the ARC may call the police and, to your detriment, this could be classified as a false alarm. When the ARC is migrated they will make special arrangements to prevent similar problems with their phone lines.

What can happen after migration?

If there is a problem it will probably have one of two forms. Either the alarm system will not be able to signal to the ARC at all or it will successfully send messages to the ARC, but will not realise and so will repeatedly try to send the message. In the first case there will be no response to the alarm (e.g. the police will not be called) and the ARC may be unaware there is a problem with the signalling. In the second case the ARC will know there is a problem and will probably receive alarms. In either case there may be multiple call attempts with an associated high phone bill. Any problems will most likely be the result of delays, which may vary from call to call. This means the problem may seem to be random or intermittent. Note that it is normal for the alarm system to send many non-alarm messages to the ARC (for example to check that messages can reach the ARC). It is likely that the alarm panel will provide a warning message to tell you that it is not working properly but this will not always be the case. Obviously it is important to ensure that the alarms can reach the ARC so the maintenance company should regularly check the system.

It is very important to maintain regular contact with your alarm system provider.