FMBusinessDaily

Stop Sell is here, the next stage of the UK Digital Switch – are your lift alarms ready?

3 years ago

Insight from Matt Davies, Business Development Manager for Digital & Services at Memco

From 5th September 2023 Openreach (the UK landline infrastructure provider) has instituted its 'stop sell' program nationwide. This is the latest step in the 'digital switch' of the UK telephone network from copper/analogue to fibre optic/digital technology. In my previous article 'What you need to know about the digital switch and lift alarms' (FM Director, July 2023 edition, page 62) I briefly touched on the potential risk associated with stop sell and the resilience of lift alarm connections. In this article I'll go into more detail about stop sell and the options available to you to keep your lift alarm connections resilient so lift alarms can function when they are most needed.

It's worth reiterating that the underlying risk of using fibre telephone lines for lift alarm connections, is that a fibre telephone line requires its own mains power supply to function. There is therefore a risk that in the event of a mains power failure the fibre phone line will fail, rendering the lift alarm useless. Mains power failures are also a key time in which lift entrapments occur.

To quickly recap: new analogue (copper) telephone lines have not been available for new developments in the UK since late 2019. It was still possible to order new analogue lines for existing buildings. However, the goal of the digital switch is to transition all lines in the UK from analogue to digital by December 2025.

Openreach therefore created their 'stop sell' program in 2021, to completely stop the sale of new analogue lines in the UK. Until now 'stop sell' has only been applied to individual exchange areas (the areas Openreach divides the UK into, based around the location of telephone exchange buildings) which had reached 75% or more fibre lines. However, this has now been extended to cover all exchange areas across

the UK.

One of the most important things to understand is how Openreach are defining ‘new’ analogue lines: ‘when customers sign up for a new contract – or when they switch, upgrade or re-grade their service via their provider – they’ll be moved onto a new digital line rather than an analogue one’. It’s the ‘switch, upgrade or re-grade [your] service’ bit that I need to highlight. This means that if you have an existing analogue line and decide to change communication provider (the company you pay your phone bill to), have a tenant move out of a building and a new one move in (called ‘working line take over’) or try to make any other changes to that existing analogue line you will automatically be upgraded to fibre.

I highlight this because many people assume they will have to pro-actively request a fibre line, but as you can see above there are several ways you can trigger the removal of an existing analogue line and its replacement with fibre. This greatly increases the risk that lift alarms will be moved over to non-resilient fibre connections, possibly without the lift owner realising.

So, what can you do to ensure your lift alarm connections remain resilient?

Power Backups for Fibre Lines

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Apply a battery backup, or another form of uninterrupted power supply (UPS), to your fibre line so it won’t fail if the mains power is removed. However, battery backups are not being offered as standard on fibre lines. In 2019, Ofcom (the UK communications regulator) ruled that battery backups only needed to be provided for ‘vulnerable customers’. A vulnerable customer is defined as somebody in a residential setting who cannot be expected to use a mobile phone to call 999 during a power failure. This has led to a situation where the provisioning of power back up for commercial lines is currently unclear.

It’s worth noting at this point that any power backup for a fixed telephone line cannot be provided by your lift maintenance company. The provisioning of the telephone line sits outside the scope of the Lifts Regulations and therefore outside of the scope of works for lift companies.

If a battery backup can be sourced for a fibre line the next consideration is how that backup will be managed.

The battery backup will need to be maintained to ensure it is in good working order and the batteries will need changing at regular intervals (this will vary on the type of battery used). Whilst the provisioning of battery backups by communication providers is unclear, what is clear is that the management of these backups will sit with the building. Thus far we have not seen battery backups in the market with any form of remote management, meaning that it is likely that visual inspection will be required to determine their status.

Move to the Mobile Network with a Battery Backed Gateway

The obvious alternative to a fixed telephone line is the mobile network. The fixed telephone line connection for the lift alarm can be removed and replaced with a gateway which routes the communication through the mobile network. These are typically referred to as “GSMs” in the lift industry. GSM is in fact a slightly misleading term as it only refers to 2G devices. As 2G will be switched off in the next few years it would be inadvisable to fit a 2G gateway and lift owners should fit 4G devices.

Gateways designed for the lift industry feature an inbuilt battery backup which typically has some form of remote monitoring to report its status. Gateways can also be provisioned as part of the lift installation by your lift maintenance provider. When having a gateway provisioned in this way it's imperative that you establish with your lift maintenance provider how they will be managing the gateway. The gateway will require regular battery changes and as network technologies change/are withdrawn the gateway itself may need to be updated (e.g. the removal of the 3G network in 2023-2024).

Move to a Managed Connectivity Service

The other alternative is to move to a fully managed connectivity service. As part of the service the connectivity of your lift alarm can first be updated from a fixed line to a gateway. Then your service provider can manage battery changes, network technology upgrades (both gateway and SIM card) and provide you with regular reports on the "health" of your lift alarm connections.

Memco's Sentinel service includes all the above as well as your call and data costs, with no upfront fee. On top of this the Memco team actively monitor the connection and can inform you of any issues that may occur as well as performing remote diagnostics and fault finding. If the worst happens and connectivity is completely lost, we can pro-actively alert you and perform a site visit in partnership with your lift maintenance provider to get you back up and running.

About the author: Matt Davies is Business Development Manager for Digital & Services at Memco. In addition to his role at Memco, Matt holds a seat on the British Standards Institute committee for lift safety (MHE/4) and the European Committee for Standardization's working team responsible for standards covering lift alarms (CEN TC10/WT4).