

BT DIGITAL VOICE

If you are a BT customer, and have recently been converted to fibre broadband, then BT may also have offered to switch your landline to its new home phone service, known as Digital Voice. This is the name BT has given to its next generation landline telephony system, designed to work over broadband internet, instead of using the copper wired network, some of which has been around for 100 years or more.

BT officially launched Digital Voice in February this year, although some customers had it installed and working before then. At the moment, if your broadband is to be upgraded to full fibre, then BT may or may not offer you the option to transfer to the new service: its plan is to convert the whole country by the end of 2025, so it's definitely coming to everyone sooner or later. At the moment the rollout seems to be only to randomly selected customers. Some customers have reported that they have been offered the new service only if they change their phone number, whereas others have had it installed without such a change.

If you are upgraded to the new service, BT will provide one new advanced handset (*branded 'Advanced Digital Phone'*) or two new standard handsets (*branded 'Essential Digital Phone'*) free of charge, which are designed to take advantage of the new service features.



BT's Essential Digital Phones (left) and Advanced Digital Phone (right)

These handsets connect wirelessly to the new Smart Hub 2, using DECT: the Smart Hub is broadcasting both a WiFi and a DECT radio signal for this purpose. You can continue to use your old handsets if you so wish, by plugging one into the phone socket on the back of the Smart Hub 2, but your existing wall-mounted phone sockets will be de-commissioned; and the old phones will not be able to take advantage of many of the service's new features.

The advantages of the new service include HD-quality calls (*although I would have thought that it would be difficult to notice this until the whole network has been converted*); the ability to have two lines on the same number (*you can make or answer a call even if a call is already in progress on a different handset*); and various free features which have previously required payment, such as voicemail and call-divert.

The main disadvantage of the new service is that, in the event of a power cut, your landline will not work. This is because Digital Voice relies on both the Openreach fibre modem (*also known as the Optical Network Terminal or ONT*), and BT's Smart Hub 2 being powered on in order to connect to the network (*the ONT is the white box inside your property to which the incoming fibre cable is connected*). In other words, you can no longer plug an old-style cabled phone into a wall socket

and expect it to work during a power cut: your old wall sockets are de-commissioned, and the one on the back of the BT Smart Hub 2 will not work without power.

Please be aware that under OfCom guidelines, your telecoms provider is obliged to ensure that you are not left without a means of contacting the emergency services during a power cut, for a period of at least 1 hour. This means that if you do not have a mobile phone, or are in an area where there is no mobile phone signal indoors, then BT are obliged to supply two battery backup units (*BBUs*) to power both your fibre modem and Smart Hub 2, so that the new service will work during a power outage for at least one hour. The BT sales team should advise you of this fact when you sign up for Digital Voice, but they sometimes fail to do so (*they didn't inform us*). If you have had the service installed already, and were not aware of this, then you can phone BT, ask to talk to the Broadband Faults and Complaints team, and they will send you a pair of battery backup units free of charge. If you wish to buy this equipment yourself from the BT shop, the cost will be approximately £170, but cheaper alternatives are available from well-known online retailers.

Incidentally, if you go to the BT shop online, and enter 'battery backup unit' into the search box, it will come back saying 'No Results Found'. If you then send an email to the BT shop, enquiring as to the existence and availability of a battery backup unit (*as I did*), you will receive a reply saying '*we do not provide this but it may be best to contact BT who will advise where you can get them*'. Also, they bizarrely said '*Unfortunately we don't deal with BT services or have any system integration with them*'. Strange, I thought they were the BT shop. Anyway, it is possible to find the required battery backup unit in the BT shop online by using the direct link at the end of this article. But remember, if you are entitled to it for free, then contact BT's Broadband Faults and Complaints team by phone rather than go to the BT shop.

As mentioned previously, BT plan to roll out the new Digital Voice service to all customers by the end of 2025, so it is coming to you, whether you like the sound of it or not. When you are scheduled to receive it, then remember to do the following:

- Ask BT which new free handset you will be receiving (*they are not always forthcoming that free handsets are available*) - remember, you can have 1 advanced, or 2 standard;
- If you wish to maintain landline connectivity during power cuts, and don't own a mobile phone, or have no mobile signal within your home, then insist that BT provide you with 2 Battery Backup Units for the ONT and Smart Hub 2, as per OfCom guidelines.

Useful links:

Independent review of Digital Voice: <https://kenstechtips.com/index.php/bt-digital-voice>

BT Digital Voice FAQs: <https://www.bt.com/help/landline/digital-voice-phones>

BT shop - Battery Backup unit for BT Digital Voice: <https://tinyurl.com/digitalvoice-bbu>

Alternative BBU from Amazon: <https://tinyurl.com/BBU-amazon-version>

OfCom Guidance: Protecting access to emergency organisations when there is a power cut at the customer's premises: <https://tinyurl.com/ofcom-guidance-for-power-cuts> (*this is a lengthy document but the important part is on page 44*)

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