

Brownhills & Aldridge North Local Neighbourhood Partnership – 10th July 2006

Removal of public call boxes

Purpose of the Report

This report seeks to inform the Local neighbourhood Partnership of the decision by Cabinet that LNPs be given the lead role in deciding the local response to the Ofcom consultation on the removal of the last public call box in an area, albeit the formal response will be from the Council.

Recommendations

The LNP is asked to note Cabinet's decision about the role they would like to see LNPs take in the local consultation about the removal of the last public call box in an area/local neighbourhood.

Background

Ofcom has recently completed its review of the Universal Service Obligation (USO) which ensures that basic fixed line telecoms services are available at an affordable price across the UK. The review was undertaken to ensure that the USO requirements keep pace with changes in consumer demands and technology, and that the benefits of USO reach those who really need them. Phone boxes provide an essential service for those who do not have a landline at home or where using a mobile phone is not possible.

Ofcom has concluded that local communities must continue to have the final say in decisions about keeping or removing the last phone box from a particular location – 'the local veto'. Although the final decision would formally rest with the Council, in practice the Council will be asking the LNPs to form the final view.

Ofcom's revised set of rules and guidance confirm that:

- the local veto will be available to unitary, metropolitan, district and equivalent councils. Other local bodies must still be consulted.
- The consultation period for proposals to remove the final phone box will be extended from 42 to 90 days.
- The local veto will apply to the last phone box within a 400 metre area.
- There will be more freedom to use cashless phone boxes where there are incidents of repeated vandalism or they are needed primarily for emergency use.

How the consultation process will work

If the last phone box is to be removed, BT must display a notice on the call box and write to the local authority giving details of the call box they want to remove, why they wish to remove it and the date they posted the notice on the call box.

The Council will seek the views of community groups and residents through the Local Neighbourhood Partnership to give them the opportunity to have their say about whether or not the call box should be removed. This will allow the LNPs to have the final say on behalf of the Council as to whether or not the call box should be removed.

Once local views have been sought, Ofcom expect the Council to consider:

- the type of housing around a phone box (for example if the neighbourhood has mainly rented properties people could be on low incomes who need that phone box)
- whether the phone box is more likely to be used for emergency calls than another. The example given is if the call box is near a known accident blackspot it may strengthen the argument for it to be kept.
- The amount of money people spend in making calls from the phone box (BT can provide this information). If it is low, again this may support the case for it to be removed.

The LNP could consider BT's wish to remove a phone box at their bi-monthly LNP meetings. Further consultation and consideration can be undertaken at the monthly community action group meetings. If the local veto is to be used by the Council, there are sufficient LNP meetings and community action groups within Ofcom's 90 day consultation period for this to comfortably happen.

Should the local veto be used to keep the last phone box in an LNP area, the Council would need to inform BT after 42 days of them publishing their notice to remove it, of the reasons why they wish to retain the call box. At the 90th day of the consultation period, a final notice would have to be published by the Council and distributed to all those consulted setting out the final decision and the reasons behind it.

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