

Pelsall and Rushall Local Neighbourhood Partnership –11th July 2006

Removal of public call boxes

Portfolio: Local Partnerships

Service Area: Neighbourhood Services

Wards: Pelsall, Rushall Shelfield

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

Contact Officer

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Cabinet – 14 June 2006

Removing public call boxes

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| Portfolio: | Councillor Garry Perry, Safer stronger communities, partnerships and Vision 2021 |
| Service: | Neighbourhood partnerships and programmes |
| Wards: | All |
| Key decisions: | No |
| Forward plan: | No |

Summary of report

This reports provides an update on the recent changes introduced by Ofcom (Office of Communications) relating to removing public call boxes and suggests a role for local neighbourhood partnerships in working with the Council to have the final say in decisions about keeping or removing the last phone box from a particular location.

Recommendations

That LNPs be given the lead role in deciding the local response to the Ofcom consultation, albeit the formal response will be from the Council.

Resource and legal considerations

The existing resources available from within the neighbourhood partnerships team and constitutional services will be able to support the LNPs' contribution towards the final say in decisions about keeping or removing the last phone box in their area.

Citizen impact

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 would 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.

Community safety

A decision could be taken to keep the last phone box because it offers public reassurance as a means to contact emergency services or because it’s near a known accident black spot. Public reassurance and community safety are two important targets in the Local Area Agreement and are a common concern to all LNPs when considering the priorities for their neighbourhood agreements.

Environmental impact

Some public call boxes cause a local nuisance as they are the focus for anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood. The LNP may be of the opinion that their removal could contribute towards creating a cleaner and greener environment as a result of a reduction in the number of incidents of anti-social behaviour in their area.

Performance and risk management issues

The actions delivered as a result of listening to LNPs will be monitored by the neighbourhood partnerships team and linked to the reporting and tracking mechanism of the Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership’s (WBSP) Shared Partnership Information Resource (SPIR). This will evidence and track change in key targets covering LNP boundaries. Progress reports will be published annually and made available to the public.

Equality implications

Using LNPs to have the final say in decisions about keeping or removing the last phone box from within their community will create an open and fair process, accessible to the diverse communities that are currently engaged with their LNP.

Consultation

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 can 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 would 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 would 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.
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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.

Vision 2008

Utilising the LNPs to seek views on retaining or removing a local resource such as a public call box will add further evidence of how the Council is listening to what local people want and taking action in response to this.

Background papers

- Report to Cabinet – 14 September 2003, Consultation on Local Governance Arrangements in Walsall
- Report to Council – 12 January 2004, Leader of the Council's Proposals for the Establishment of Nine Local Neighbourhood Partnerships
- Report to council – 19 April 2004, Local Neighbourhood Partnerships
- Report to Cabinet – 12 May 2004, Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNPs) – Progress Update

- Report to Cabinet – 14 July 2004, Local Neighbourhood Partnerships: Guidelines on Selection Processes for Locally Appointed Partners (LAPs)
- Report to Cabinet – 19 January 2005, Implementing Local Neighbourhood Partnerships
- Report to Cabinet – 23 March 2005, Local Neighbourhood Partnership Plans
- Report to Council – 24 April 2006, Proposal to consider revised governance arrangements for Local Neighbourhood Partnerships.
- <http://www.ofcom.org.uk> – Ofcom web site giving more details and a guide to the rules

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2 June 2006



Councillor Garry Perry
Portfolio holder

2 June 2006