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# **REPORT ON THE RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION BY BRITISH TELECOM ON THE PROPOSED REMOVAL OF PUBLIC PAYPHONES IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS**

**Report by Chief Executive**

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## **SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL**

**10 November 2016**

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### **1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to agree the response to the consultation by British Telecom on public payphone removals in the Scottish Borders.**
- 1.2 Scottish Borders Council received details in mid-August 2016 from British Telecom of a consultation on the proposed removal of 104 payphones in the Scottish Borders (see Appendix 1). This is part of wider consultation taking place across Scotland by BT about payphone removals. The consultation has been driven according to BT by the decline in the overall use of payphones. Local authorities have the responsibility from Ofcom the telecommunications regulator to gather views from local communities and to provide a reasoned response either objecting or agreeing to the removal of payphones. The deadline for responses is 29 November 2016.
- 1.3 The Council has carried out a consultation with local communities by contacting community councils and community resilience co-ordinators. A judgement has then been made on retaining or removing payphones based on the views of communities; the quality of mobile phone coverage; the use for 101/999 calls; proximity to main roads; and usage and access by local communities (see Appendix 2). It is considered that payphones need to be seen as a key part of the resilience and emergency infrastructure of local communities linking to the Scottish and UK Government's national resilience structure.

### **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **2.1 It is recommended that:**

- (a) The Council agrees the response as set out in Appendix 2 to British Telecom's consultation on the removal of public payphones**
- (b) The Council makes the case to the Scottish and UK Governments that public payphones should be recognised as a key part of the resilience and emergency infrastructure of local communities.**

### **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 British Telecom (BT) is undertaking a consultation on a programme of public payphone removals. In the Scottish Borders they have proposed 104 public payphones for removal. This consultation is part of a Scotland wide consultation with around 1500 public payphones proposed for removal. The closing date for responses is 29 November 2016. Local authorities have been given the responsibility by the communications Regulator OFCOM to respond to such consultations.
- 3.2 In identifying payphones for removal BT have indicated and they have prioritised those payphones located:
- In a suicide hotspot.
  - In an accident blackspot.
  - In an area without any mobile coverage.
  - Within 400 metres of the coast.

In addition BT has said that they will not remove payphones where there is a reasonable need. For this assessment they have stated the following criteria has been used and where all three apply they propose retention:

- The only payphone within 800 metres.
- Had at least 12 calls of any type within a 12 month period.
- The local population is not fewer than 500 households within 1 km of the phone box.

### **4 RESPONDING TO THE CONSULTATION**

- 4.1 In responding to the consultation the Council needs to take a reasoned approach. In developing the response the Council has sought views from Community Councils and Community Resilience Coordinators. The public payphones proposed by BT for removal have been assessed on the basis of the views of communities, the quality of mobile phone coverage, the use for 101/999 calls, proximity to main roads, and the usage and access by local communities.
- 4.2 The results of the assessment are shown in Appendix 2 and a case is made for the retention of almost all the public payphones in the Scottish Borders.
- 4.3 The approach being taken by BT to the removal of payphones is based solely on costs and it is evident that the savings from the closure of these payphones will be marginal in terms of the overall costs of their business. It is considered that the assessment by the Council clearly shows that there is a need for public payphones to be recognised as a key part of resilience and emergency infrastructure of local communities that links to the Scottish and UK Governments' national resilience structures.
- 4.4 During the storms of late 2015 and early 2016 BT public payphones were the sole method of communication in some of the more rural communities to report issues of trees down and road blockages due to the insufficient mobile phone coverage that currently exists within the Scottish Borders. The BT landline telephone infrastructure offers the best resilience in any emergency.

- 4.5 Public payphones should:
- Be a key point of contact for Emergency Services in providing access to a telephone for 101/999 calls in their local communities.
  - Provide a backup telephone line available to all in the case of electrical power blackouts when mobile phone masts can be out of action;
  - Be used more innovatively, for example 'wifi' for access to emails etc.; community wifi, charging up mobile phones etc.

This approach would lead to a new and more positive role for public payphones. This type of initiative would need the support of both the UK and Scottish Governments.

- 4.6 It is considered that as part of this approach BT should also be encouraged to work much more closely with communities on the use of payphones. This might lead to communities supporting the cleaning and painting of them and public payphones being better promoted and valued.
- 4.7 As part of consultation BT mentions the opportunity for communities to adopt a traditional red 'heritage' phone box (with no pay phone service) to use as an asset for the local community at the cost of £1. The problem with the 'adopt a box' scheme is that the telephony is removed which means that the public payphones are taken out of use. It is recognised that some communities use adopted box for uses such defibrillators. However it is considered that public payphones could also be used for this purpose in partnership with BT.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial**

There are no financial implications for the Council arising from this report.

### **5.2 Risk and Mitigations**

It is considered that there are increased safety risks to the resilience of communities in the Scottish resulting from the removal of payphones.

### **5.3 Equalities**

There are potential equality impacts arising from the removal of payphones as lower income groups, migrant workers and families, vulnerable people in emergency situations may be more likely to make use of this facility.

### **5.4 Acting Sustainably**

No decision is required that will have economic, social, or environmental implications.

### **5.5 Carbon Management**

There are no effects on carbon emissions.

### **5.6 Rural Proofing**

Many of the payphones are located in rural areas where there is no or limited mobile phone coverage.

## 5.7 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

There are no changes to be made.

## 6 CONSULTATION

- 6.1 The Corporate Management Team, Chief Financial Officer, the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Chief Officer HR and the Clerk to the Council are to be consulted on this report and any comments received have been incorporated into the final report.

### Approved by

**Tracey Logan**  
**Chief Executive**

**Signature .....**

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**Background Papers:** None

**Previous Minute Reference:** None

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