
Report on the Response to the Consultation by British Telecom on the Proposed Removal of Payphones in the Scottish Borders

Report by the Chief Executive

Scottish Borders Council

31 October 2019

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 from British Telecom (BT) in July 2019 of a consultation on the proposed removal of 95 payphones in the Scottish Borders (see Appendix 1). This is part of a wider consultation taking place across Scotland by BT on public payphone removals. According to BT, a key driver behind the consultation is the decline in the overall use of payphones due to increasing mobile phone coverage and the need to reduce costs. Ofcom, the telecommunications regulator, has delegated the responsibility for responding to public payphone removal consultations to Local Authorities. This involves gathering views from local communities and providing a reasoned response either objecting or agreeing to the removal of payphones.
- 1.3 In developing the Council response on the future of the payphones identified by BT for removal, a set of risk criteria has been developed with Scottish Borders Council's Emergency Planning service. This is because payphones need to be seen as a key part of the resilience, emergency and community safety infrastructure of local communities. The criteria for supporting the retention of payphones based on this assessment comprises:
 - The quality of mobile network coverage in terms of access to the main mobile phone networks (based on an assessment of the information on the Ofcom web site).
 - Proximity to main arterial routes i.e. A68/A7/A1/A702/A697/A72
 - Closeness to important nationally recognised walking routes i.e. the Southern Uplands Way, St Cuthbert's Way, John Buchan Way, Borders Abbey Way and the Berwickshire Coastal Path.
 - Usage for police and emergency service calls i.e. 101/999/111 calls based on information provided by Police Scotland and BT.
 - Closeness to the coast or a fresh water location which is considered high risk.
 - Usage by local communities (8 and more calls over the past year).
 - Whether the payphone is the final one in a village community.

Each payphone has been assessed against this criteria. Also the Council has carried out a consultation with local community councils and their responses have been considered. The resultant recommendations on whether to retain, remove or for the community to adopt a payphone are shown in Appendix 2.

- 1.4 Based on this assessment 11 payphones have been identified for removal, 2 for adoption and the 82 for retention. Some community councils particularly in villages where the only payphone has been proposed for removal by BT have expressed an interest to adopt a payphone but this would mean the telephony would need to be removed. Also other community councils expressed concerns about the poor maintenance and the need for payphones to be cleaned in a more effective way. There is a need to discuss with BT whether solutions can be found to these problems particularly through closer working with local communities.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that the Council:

a) Agrees the response as set out in Appendix 2 to British Telecom's consultation on the removal of public payphones

b) Discusses with BT the possibilities of:

- **Providing emergency only phones instead of payphones in communities where there is a very low usage.**
- **Communities being able to adopt payphones and keep emergency only telephony.**
- **Working with communities on ways to clean and maintain payphones in a more effective manner.**

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 British Telecom (BT) has been undertaking a 90 day Scotland wide consultation on a programme of public payphone removals. According to BT, a key driver behind the consultation is the decline in the overall use of payphones due to increasing mobile phone coverage and the need to reduce costs. In the Scottish Borders there are a 149 payphones. A total of 95 public payphones have been proposed by BT for removal. A previous consultation by BT was carried out in the autumn of 2016, which was only three years ago.
- 3.2 Ofcom, the telecommunications regulator, has delegated the responsibility for responding to public payphone removal consultations to Local Authorities. This involves gathering views from local communities and providing a reasoned response either objecting or agreeing to the removal of payphones. It has been agreed with BT that the Council's response can be submitted at the end of October 2019 to allow this report to be considered by Scottish Borders Council.
- 3.3 In identifying payphones for removal BT have excluded 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 proposed not to remove a payphone where there is a reasonable need. They have stated where all the following three criteria are met the payphone should be retained:

- 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 The development of response to this consultation requires that local authorities take a reasoned approach taking account of Ofcom's Guidance consult https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/28507/removals.pdf. This means that each public call box should be considered separately. Any local authority objection to the removal of a public call box should be supported by clear, objective and proportionate reasons, related to the provision of the communications service at the box in question. Also as part of the development of the response local authorities are expected to consult with local community bodies, principally community councils.
- 4.2 In developing the Council's response it is recognised that public payphones should be seen as a key part of the resilience, emergency and community safety infrastructure of local communities for the Scottish Borders. Payphones provide a key point of contact for Emergency Services in providing access to a public telephone for police and emergency service calls i.e. 101/999/111 calls in their local communities. Also they provide a backup telephone line available to all in the case of electrical power blackouts when mobile phones can quickly run out of charge and phone masts become disabled.

- 4.3 On this basis a set risk criteria has been developed by Scottish Borders Council's Emergency Planning service for the assessment of the payphones. These criteria are as follows:
- The quality of mobile phone coverage in terms of access to all main mobile phone networks in an area (using the Ofcom mobile coverage web site).
 - Proximity to main arterial routes i.e. A68/A7/A1/A702/A697/A72.
 - Closeness to important walking routes i.e. the Southern Uplands Way, St Cuthbert's Way, John Buchan Way, Borders Abbey Way and the Berwickshire Coastal Path.
 - Usage in terms of more than one police and other emergency services calls i.e.101/999/111 calls based on information provided by Police Scotland and BT.
 - Closeness to the coast or a fresh water location is considered high risk.
 - Usage by local communities (8 and over calls over the past year).
 - Whether the payphone is the final one in a village community.
- 4.4 Each payphone has been assessed against these criteria. Also the Council has carried out a consultation with local community councils and their responses have also been considered. The resultant recommendations on whether to retain, remove or for the community to adopt a payphone are shown in Appendix 2.
- 4.5 The results of the assessment are that 11 payphones have been identified for removal, 2 for adoption and the 82 for retention. This recognises that public payphones are a key part of resilience and emergency infrastructure of local communities. These results are in line with the similar exercise carried out by the Council three years ago based on similar criteria when only a limited number of payphones were supported for removal.
- 4.6 Some community councils particularly in villages where the only payphone has been proposed for removal by BT have expressed an interest in adopting the payphone. However, this would mean the telephony being removed and not being available for emergency purposes. A number of community councils also expressed concern about the poor maintenance of payphones and the need for them to be cleaned in more effective ways. It is considered that there is a need for the Scottish Borders Council to discuss with BT whether solutions can be found to these problems through working more closely with local communities. This might involve: the provision of emergency only phones by BT instead of payphones in communities where there is very low usage; communities being able to adopt payphones and keep emergency only telephony; and working with communities on the cleaning of payphones.

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 Borders resulting from the removal of payphones.

5.3 Equalities

There are potential equality impacts arising from the removal of payphones because 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

The loss of a payphone may have social or environmental implications for local communities.

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 maybe issues surrounding access for emergency purposes.

5.7 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

There are no changes required to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation.

6 CONSULTATION

6.1 The Council’s Corporate Management Team, Chief Financial Officer, the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Legal Officer, the Service Director Strategy and Policy, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Chief Officer HR, Communications and the Clerk to the Council have been consulted on the report.

Approved by

**Name
Title**

Signature

Author(s)

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Background Papers:

Previous Minute Reference: N/A

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Douglas Scott can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

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