

## **BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

### **Report of the Deputy Chief Executive**

#### **OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 18 JUNE 2009** **(Author: Mark Broughton, Member Development & Scrutiny Officer)**

### **CASHLESS CONVERSION OF BT PAYPHONES IN BRECKLAND**

#### **1. Purpose of Report**

The report concerns the proposed conversion of 29 existing cash use payphones to card use within the Breckland district.

#### **2. Recommendation**

The OSC is recommended to endorse the proposed official Council response to BT which argues for the retention of 12 cash-use payphones.

Note: In preparing this report, due regard has been had to equality of opportunity, human rights, prevention of crime and disorder, environmental and risk management considerations as appropriate. Relevant officers have been consulted in relation to any legal, financial or human resources implications and comments received are reflected in the report.

#### **3. Information, Issues and Options**

##### Background

3.1 The Council received a letter from BT in late April 2009, termed a “courtesy notification”, setting out plans to convert some 29 current cash use payphones into card only use, so called “cashless conversion”. Appendix A details the payphones which BT intend to convert to cashless use.

##### Issues

3.2 Last year the OSC formed a task and finish group to examine the then proposals of BT to withdraw payphone service from some 70 kiosks throughout the district. In investigating this matter the task and finish group discovered that the introduction of cashless conversion, whilst successfully seeing the retention of public telephony, often led to a significant decrease in usage.

3.3 In its final report the task and finish group postulated that cashless conversion was a way to enable BT to further run down public phone services prior to ultimate removal on the grounds of diminishing use making these facilities uneconomic.

3.4 Under the relevant Public Call Box Direction, the telecoms regulator Ofcom decreed that at least 70% of public call boxes must accept cash as a payment facility. BT has stated that “they welcome this announcement as by removing the cash collection requirement for some little used payphones it helps us save on the cost of maintenance and thereby allows us to redirect resources to better serve the more widely used public payphones amongst our estate. Furthermore, removal of the cash facility prevents ongoing theft and vandalism caused by cash attacks in some areas”. In fact BT have provided no statistics detailing the occasions of theft or vandalism to payphones located within the Breckland district.

3.5 BT state in their correspondence that they “...continually strives to ensure that the national network of call boxes is meeting customer need and operating at optimal efficiency”. However there are known cases locally (e.g. Little Fransham) where payphones have been

out of order for months due to damage or vandalism and the service has not been restored which rather flies in the face of BT's claims.

3.6 Figures provided by BT in 2008 do however clearly illustrate that once cashless conversion has been undertaken the usage figures for rural boxes plummet. As such, the task and finish group concluded last year that cashless conversion is often merely a prerequisite to ultimate removal of a public phone.

3.7 BT has claimed that calling cards and credit/debit cards are alternative methods to access public phones. Recent research indicated that few outlets actually stock calling cards and even where they do so, sales are very modest. By their own admission, BT states that they have not advertised the use of such calling cards in local or national media. Under 18's are legally unable to open bank accounts and thus are unable to access credit cards, whilst some elderly people may also not possess such cards or feel comfortable using them for making phone calls, even if they do have them.

3.8 In providing public telephone services BT are bound by the Public Call Box Direction which places a duty on the telephone provider to ensure suitable availability based on a number of criteria including the provision of social housing nearby and mobile phone signal strength. The latter criteria was instrumental in the basis for the task and finish group's objection to the proposed removal of a number of payphones last year and remains a key factor in retaining cash use rural phones.

3.9 An interim response to BT's letter of 8 April 2009 has been sent to BT recognising the critical time factors in responding in a timely fashion as shown at Appendix B. Using a scientific approach based on the criteria laid down in the Public Call Box Direction allied to the usage figures provided by BT and in the knowledge that conversion to card only use may be simply a delaying tactic prior to the future removal of public phone service, it is suggested that the Council through the OSC make full and formal representations to BT to retain some 12 payphones as cash use facilities.

#### Options

3.10 To formally respond to BT as stated or with amendments

3.11 To not formally respond to BT

#### Reasons for Recommendations

3.12 Previous representations made by the Council resulted in the retention of some threatened payphone services and similar representations now may result in similar success to safeguard accessible rural payphones in the District.

### **4. Risk and Financial Implications**

4.1 None

### **5. Legal Implications**

5.1 None

### **6. Other Implications**

6.1 Equalities, S17 Crime and Disorder Act, S 40 Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006, Human Rights, Other: None

## **7. Alignment to Council Priorities**

7.1 Building Safer and Stronger Communities

7.2 Your Council, Your Services

## **8. Ward/Community Affected**

8.1 Thetford, Wayland, Two Rivers, Conifer, Dereham, Upper Wensum, Eynsford, Taverner, Mid Forest, Shipdham, Springvale & Scarning, East Guiltcross, Upper Yare, Nar Valley, Weeting, Attleborough, Necton, Harling & Heathlands.

### **Lead Contact Officer:**

*Mark Broughton – Member Development & Scrutiny Officer*

*E-mail: [mark.broughton@breckland.gov.uk](mailto:mark.broughton@breckland.gov.uk)*