

Proposed Cashless Conversion of BT Pay Phones in Breckland

1. Breckland Council received a “courtesy” notification from BT (letter dated 8 April 2009) of proposals to convert some 29 existing payphones to cashless use within the district.

2. In a major review of payphone services provision in response to BT proposals to remove some 70 payphones which was undertaken by the Council’s Overview & Scrutiny Commission in Spring 2008, it was recognised that the conversion to cashless operation often seemed to be nothing other than a convenient stepping stone to facilitate the future removal of public phone service on the back of reduced usage.

3. Figures provided to the Council by BT support this assertion. The period surveyed was January 2006 as cash use to January 2007 when card only operated. Examples are:

- (1) Festival Road, Billingford (01362 668335) Reduction from 332 to 32
- (2) Welgate, Mattishall (01362 850402) Reduction from 267 to 14
- (3) The Street, Hockering (01362 880311) Reduction from 312 to 6
- (4) Goose Green, Ashill (01760 440610) Reduction from 268 to 127
- (5) Watton Road, Lt Cressingham (01953 881611) Reduction from 509 to 37

4. The latest proposal by BT to convert 29 payphones to cashless use simply reinforce the view that service to rural users is being earmarked for further erosion pending future total withdrawal on the basis of further depressing usage. Whilst the Council recognises an economic imperative for BT to operate as a competitive organisation and in seeking to obviate theft and damage to cash-operated facilities, there is a clear threat that people living in rural areas are being geographically disadvantaged in comparison to urban areas.

5. In its Revision to the Public Call Box Direction, industry regulator Ofcom in 2005 concluded that 70% of public call boxes must accept cash as a payment facility. In your letter of 8 April 2009, BT state 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”. BT goes on to state that “BT payphones continually strives to ensure that the national network of call boxes is meeting customer need and operating at optimal efficiency”. The evidence locally suggests that this is not the case, with damaged payphones remaining unrepaired for many months at a time.

6. Of course it is recognised that the number of people possessing landlines and or mobile phones has grown substantially in the last couple of decades which has resulted in lower use of public payphones. However, by Ofcom’s own guidelines, there is an onus to provide public payphone facilities where mobile phone signal strength is variable and where certain other conditions apply e.g. concentrations of social housing are located nearby. Parts of the

Breckland district demonstrably have poor signal strength which means it is important to retain easy access operational cash-use payphones.

7. It is questionable that cashless conversion does not equate to easy access use as under 18's cannot by law possess credit cards and many elderly people are simply not comfortable with the idea of using debit and credit cards, if they possess them in the first place. The ready availability of BT calling cards and Chargecards is also questioned in the light of BT's claim that these are sold at newsagents and post offices. The evidence suggests that this is not the case in Breckland. Of nine local post office and newsagents outlets contacted in late May 2009 only two reported that they stocked such calling cards. Upon further investigation, the number of such cards sold appeared to be extremely low. It is also noted that BT have not widely advertised or highlighted the cashless conversion programme and the availability of such calling cards.

8. Breckland has historically rejected any charge of mass objection to proposed BT payphone removals. Throughout the process last year (2008) the Council was extremely even handed and scientific in its approach and ultimately objected only to the removal of 19 (of a total 70) boxes. Furthermore, earlier this year, following representations from a local householder in Thetford who was experiencing repeated anti social behaviour to a BT phone box situated directly outside her property, Breckland indicated that its removal would be justified and we have not objected to the subsequent removal notice. In fact this concerns the box at Icknield Way which is on the list for cashless conversion, so this removal will represent a "saving" in resource terms to BT.

9. The Council has thus taken a sensible and reasonable course in relation to payphone removals and we would expect BT to be responsive and exhibit the same spirit in retaining adequate telephony where justified within the currently threatened 29 boxes. The Council formally requests that BT retain as cash operation the following boxes:

a) St Martin's Way, Thetford (01842 753061)

This is a well used facility (referenced by BT's usage figures) and is situated near Redcastle School. It is repeated that many younger school age children do not possess mobiles and in any case young people do not possess bank cards either.

b) Junction of London & Station Roads, Thetford (01842 753240)

Again this facility is comparatively well used and is sited in a busy and well frequented area of Thetford.

c) George Eliot Way, Dereham (01362 692762)

Reasonable usage, the local councillor reports this is used by children on the school route and there are many elderly people living in the area.

d) The Street, Bawdeswell (01362 688221)

Centrally located in a growing village with variable mobile phone coverage in the area.

e) Swaffham Road/Sandy Lane, Dereham (01362 692136)

Good usage, situated in a prominent position near to shops, social housing and on a school route.

f) The Common, Lyng (01603 872235)

Extremely variable mobile phone coverage in this village.

g) The Street, Foxley (01362 688225)

Limited mobile phone signal strength in an area populated by a sizeable retired population.

h) The Green, Shipdham (01362 820211)

Good usage figures, centrally located near local shops and services.

i) Dereham Road, Scarning (01362 687685)

This is the last phone box in the old established part of the village and the parish council and both district councillors representing this ward strongly feel that the box should be retained as a cash operated facility.

j) Hereward Way, Weeting (01842 810278)

Well used in a growing village earmarked for expansion, situated near shops and local services

k) Canterbury Way, Thetford (01842 761051)

Good usage figure in area with a concentration of social housing.

Overview & Scrutiny Commission
Breckland Council

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