

Strategic Review of Telecoms - Consultation Response

Public Call Boxes

As South West Norfolk Labour Parliamentary Candidate I have completed a survey of members of the public in South West Norfolk with regard to the future of public call boxes in the area. South West Norfolk is one of the largest geographical constituencies and has a mixture of urban and rural areas. It is mostly rural.

Maintenance and upgrade costs

I received support for the proposal that in future Ofcom protects public call boxes, rural call boxes in particular, through implementing a fair levy across all service providers, which would be used to fund any maintenance or upgrades of existing call boxes. It is suggested the levy is based on market share and a % of annual profit of all SPs.

Restore call boxes removed during 2004 from rural communities

Given the loss of public call boxes this year as a result of BT activity there is also public support for call boxes in rural locations which have been removed to be restored. A number of people have complained they did not realise BT had the power to remove call boxes, and having seen the notices on local call boxes, had assumed the local authority would respond.

The existing rules which enable service providers to remove call boxes require a review. The onus is placed on members of the public or local authorities to justify the protection of call boxes.

This is not practicable in the timescale of 40 days provided. At worst this timescale should be extended to one quarter i.e. three months.

Ownership of empty call boxes

Concern has been raised that where BT has removed telephones from call boxes, in some areas such as Downham Market callboxes have been vandalised, with no apparent owner now responsible for their maintenance. Any future SP agreement should ensure clarity in this scenario with regard to responsibility for maintaining the structure of a call box where the telephone has been recovered or clear agreement with regard to the cost of removal of all network infrastructure required to support call boxes earmarked for removal.

This information should be made available to the public to enable the public to report damage to vacated call boxes.

Preserving rural culture

I have also received requests from villages who are seeking the option to have the historic red call boxes returned to their villages.

Red call boxes are often considered attractive "street furniture", and in many rural communities reflect the character of the village, being cleaned, and sometimes decorated by local villagers.

Future agreements should require service providers to take into the consideration the unique requirements of small villages with call boxes where the call box is a key feature of the village. It should be possible for villagers to retain traditional red call boxes (or other colour depending on the age of the callbox) regardless of the telephony service provider.

Consultation with Parish councils and local residents is requested before changes are made to "modernise" call boxes.

Provision of a service enabling villages to request the replacement of modern inappropriate call boxes, with traditional call boxes is required.

Safety - Travellers, walkers/hikers, rural workers

The loss of call boxes in remote rural areas has raised considerable concern. In such areas the call box may be the only form of communication in an emergency.

It is not appropriate to assume in a rural community if houses exist that occupiers will be willing to open the door to any seeking assistance, given concerns regarding their own safety.

It is not appropriate to assume that mobile phones work in all rural areas, or would necessarily be available in the event of a serious accident.

Future service agreements should ensure it is not possible for service providers to remove public call boxes from remote areas where it is proven mobile phones do not work. This would mean only where ALL mobile phone networks work can call boxes be removed. The function of one network is not sufficient given the variety of mobile networks now available to mobile phone users.

Where call boxes have been removed already from such areas they should be restored as a priority.

e-communications via public call boxes

To support the Government policy of providing e-access to rural communities I suggest that call boxes located in villages should be upgraded to telephones with built in key board, screens and internet access to provide parity with urban pay phones and those provided in service stations, airports etc.

This will enable those rural people such as pensioners and young people, unable to afford computer equipment to have access to e-mail and the internet provided locally.

The use of such service should be made available by local service providers at a reasonable, low cost fee to encourage use and growth of awareness of the e-environment. Such equipment should be located so as to be accessible to disabled/wheelchair users and should be designed so as to be useable by deaf and visually impaired people.

Network upgrade

Where viable, to support the e-communications, proposal it is recommended public call boxes are upgraded to Broadband. When future network developments occur the call boxes should be maintained in keeping with the public telephony network.

Please note the comments raised also reflect the views of comrades in Scotland and Lincolnshire.

Best Regards

Charmaine Morgan
South West Norfolk Labour Parliamentary Candidate