

Surrey Heath Borough Council

Review of the Universal Service Obligation

Surrey Heath Borough Council does not intend to comment on the entire consultation document. However, there are two issues of concern:

1. Public Call Boxes

Local Councils- Borough/District -should be included in all consultation on Public Call Box siting and proposed removal and be provided with a specific opportunity to give their views. In addition Parish Councils should also be consulted as call boxes which come under threat may be those located in Village centres. Though such call boxes may well be under used in the terms of the telephone service, they could be a vital link for more deprived areas and contribute to social inclusion.

2. Low cost schemes

Low cost schemes contribute to the government agenda to enable older and vulnerable people to live as independent lives as possible. The use of a telephone plays an important part in this, therefore the option should not be removed.

This Council has an issue that the proposal is for the schemes to be confined to those with an income of less than £10,400 **and** on state benefits. Those older and vulnerable people in receipt of a basic pension/benefits would be eligible but anyone in receipt of a small occupational pension would not necessarily be. For example a person receiving the State pension plus a further pension of say £3,500 would not necessarily be eligible for Council tax or housing benefit. The phone is a vital link for those living alone, yet the fixed charges can be a deterrent to regular use.

In the Surrey Heath community the Council is aware that there are residents who are 'asset rich but cash poor'. These people could be vulnerable to the loss of low user schemes or to schemes that excluded them because their income is between basic state pension and £10,400 but they do not claim or are not eligible for benefits.

The Council suggests that the income criteria is re visited- perhaps reduced but the need for eligibility for state benefits as well is removed or alternatively the state pension is one of the benefits that is included together with the existing income level.