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Universal Service Obligations, Consultation Response.

Please find below the National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) response to the Universal Service Obligations consultation.

Background: The Importance of Local Councils

The National Association of Local Councils is the national voice for community, parish and town councils in England and Wales.

There are some 10,000 first tier councils in England alone, estimated to represent some 15.8 million people. Local councils are democratically elected and are accountable to the local taxpayer. They have a precept raising power, which is not subject to limitation. Their proximity to the community and their knowledge of the local area help to ensure their value to local communities. Their importance has been recognised across the board for many years. As far back as 1969 the Radcliffe-Maud Report on the *Future of Local Government*, stated that parish councils are seen as "contributing a vital element to democratic local government. Their key function should be to focus opinion about anything that affects the well being of each community". More recently the Local Government White Paper, *In Touch with the People*, stated that local councils are an "essential part of the structure of local democracy in our country". The recent Urban and Rural White Paper again highlighted the essential role of first-tier councils.

The National Association's views are rooted in the fundamental principle that parish, town and community councils are a basic element of local government in this country. As such local councils should be as far as possible provided with the same opportunities and subjected to the same conditions as other tiers of local government.

NALC is pleased to respond to this consultation.

Town and Parish Councils has always looked at, and responded to, the applications by BT to remove or amend phone box provision; many successfully obtained a review and subsequent saving of boxes where their local knowledge provided additional information.

This could only be done because of the local knowledge of the inhabitants in that area and a geographical knowledge of the surrounding streets. Although the removal of one box might only mean a further 400yd walk according to the map and in line with the proposals in the consultation, that walk might well be down a very steep hill. This is something that would not necessarily be known at a Principal Authority Council 20 miles away.

It is important that the local veto is retained and that Parish and Town Councils continue to be included in - and respond to – consultations.

The local knowledge means they can also give a positive response when they know that the removal of boxes, or their alteration from cash to card, will not cause a problem (or any problem can be minimised by the inclusion of details of the nearest cash call boxes). NALC is of the view that retaining such obligations that presently exist, including “the local veto” power, is not “unduly restrictive” and is in fact a useful resource for BT and Kingston to utilise in improving their services.

The National Association of Local Councils will oppose any proposals that stem from this consultation that remove real “local” involvement and will utilise all its influence to ensure no dilution of status takes place.

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