

BT promise to repair phone boxes in the wake of planning refusal for street hubs

Plans by BT to install digital screens on streets across the capital have been refused by Edinburgh City Council, despite growing calls to have dozens of smashed-up and vandalised phone boxes removed.

Planners have now refused the telecoms firm permission to remove 35 dilapidated payphones and install 17 'Street Hubs' in their place because the 75-inch LED displays would amount to an "unacceptable and unnecessary intrusion into the streetscape" and constitute "advertisement clutter".

The unsuccessful applications relate to old phone kiosks on Portobello Road, Dundas Street, Ferry Road, Bruntsfield Place, Gorgie Road and a number of other locations throughout Edinburgh.



BT Phone Box, Sundas Street. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam
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They have been targeted by vandals over the years and left in a state of disrepair, with many missing glass panes, repeatedly spray-painted and no longer functioning as call boxes.

Whilst making efforts to coincide their decommissioning with the roll-out of Street Hubs, which BT argues will be essential for the introduction of 5G in the city, the company has agreed to refurbish phone boxes around the city centre in the meantime.

The new Hubs – which have already been set-up in 23 UK cities including Glasgow, London and Birmingham – are touted as a modernisation of the classic telephone box – offering free Wi-Fi, calls, phone charging and maps and directions.

They also provide free digital advertising space for the council and local businesses.

Labour councillor Ross McKenzie, who has called for the removal of payphones on Dalry Road in his ward, said BT “needs to accept that their advertising hubs aren’t going to be approved” and should “focus their efforts on removing the disused boxes that blight the streets of our city”.

He added: “Recent moves to start cleaning-up boxes in response to complaints are welcome, but most of them are beyond repair and serve no purpose. It’s time to get rid of them.”

Finlay McFarlane, SNP councillor for City Centre, also raised the issue with BT after his constituents complained.

He said: “Pavement is a premium in Edinburgh because it’s a historic medieval city and we’re trying, rightly, to make it more walkable, more accessible for people in wheelchairs or prams and buggies and when you’ve got three or four derelict BT kiosks where the phone receiver isn’t even a receiver it’s just a dangling wire, what right do they have to take up that public realm? The space belongs to everybody.

“You can’t hold the council to ransom over the use of public space like that. You should take an application of its merits and there’s two World Heritage sites in my ward. Putting a large digital LED screen in certain places is entirely inappropriate – we have to think about heritage and conservation and all the rest of it.”

David Hunter, convener of Living Streets Edinburgh, said: “We want to see BT remove old, dilapidated phone kiosks which add clutter to many city streets and are often frankly in a revolting condition.

“However, while we recognise that the new BT ‘street hubs’ have some benefits (like better accessibility and perhaps community safety), we also have a lot of concern about expanding and intrusive digital advertising by private companies on public streets. We need to ensure that the interests of the public come first in decisions about what can

be put on our pavements.”

Council leader Cammy Day, Labour, met recently with BT staff to discuss the way forward and said: “I hear their commitment to clean up phone boxes, remove some older unused ones and update some to new BT hubs providing free calls and WiFi.

“I hope their commitment to clean up phone boxes across Edinburgh will be completed soon and continue.”

A BT spokesperson said: “We have taken on board concerns of residents and will be deploying extra resources to clean these units and to help tackle vandalism of our phone boxes in Edinburgh.

“We would urge anyone with concerns to report this to our team by emailing customer.serv.payphones@bt.com

“We are in discussions with Edinburgh Council to bring our new Street Hubs to the city, which cut the risk of anti-social behaviour whilst providing community benefits like free ultra-fast WiFi, free calls and 5G mobile signal boosters.

“This could see up to 27 of the Hubs introduced and the removal of around 50 traditional phone boxes.

“We’d love Edinburgh to join Glasgow, Aberdeen and many other UK cities so they can enjoy the broad benefits of our Street Hubs. We already have over 400 Street Hubs active in the UK.

“The Council has previously worked with us on the rollout of the Street Hubs which will also provide boosted 5G connectivity in Edinburgh city centre.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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A BT phone box at the foot of Easter Road at Tesco ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter