

Council continue to reject BT street hubs

Efforts by BT to introduce 'street hubs' in Edinburgh have again been rejected by the council.

Plans to replace 50 derelict payphones in the capital with 26 digital advertising boards have so far resulted in just one successful bid, for a site outside the Commonwealth Pool, after a decision was appealed and overturned.

A further 10 appeals lodged by the telecoms company were reviewed by councillors this week for hubs in locations including Dundas Street, Gorgie Road and Fountainbridge, nine of which were refused.



BT Phone Box, Dundas Street. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam
www.martinmcadam.com

An application relating to Haymarket Terrace was continued as members called for transport officers to look at how the plans clash with the City Centre to West East Link (CCWEL) project which is currently under construction.

It comes after the same committee upheld officials' decision to refuse six street hubs in September.

Describing the three-metre high units as "advertisement clutter" and raising concerns about the units taking up pavement space and obscuring views, planners have taken a hard-line approach to the proposals since they first emerged.

And BT has also come under fire for not removing the eyesore phone boxes sooner – and for making their removal conditional of gaining permission for the replacement screens, which also provide wi-fi, calls and USB charging amongst other features.

The council's local review body met again on Wednesday with all members opposing the hubs going ahead.

The latest round of appeals related to existing phone kiosks on Bruntsfield Place, Dundee Street, Fountainbridge, Gorgie Road, Haymarket Terrace, Roseburn Street, Dundas Street, Ferry Road, Raeburn Place and South Clerk Street.

Cllr Chas Booth, Greens, reminded members that BT "don't need permission to remove the old phone boxes".

"If they were being responsible they would have removed them a long time ago," he said.

He added the often-vandalised payphones are now "clearly obsolete" and have become "a magnet for graffiti and anti-social behaviour".

Cllr Booth also challenged BT's claim that the new units will 'promote sustainable travel' by providing directions and bus

times, saying he was “struggling a wee bit to understand their argument”.

Cllr Euan Hyslop said: “They’re so obtrusive, they block all sight and I’d be really worried if we granted permission for this.”

Planner Gina Bellhouse explained the council’s view that street hubs would have a “significantly greater impact than the existing static adverts on the phone boxes on both short and long distance views”.

She said the authority has a presumption against granting permission for ‘free standing digital advertising’ unless there is exceptional circumstances, adding: “No exceptional circumstances have been identified.”

Cllr Jo Mowat argued there needs to be a “a very clear policy discussion” before granting planning permission for any BT street hubs, which have already been rolled-out in a number of UK cities.

“There obviously is an enhancement involved in this application which is the removal of the existing phone boxes,” she said.

“But the installation of digital advertising I do not consider an enhancement and actually a detriment to the area.

“We’ve actually got a really clear policy position on this and I suppose I take a view on this that until we review that policy we should be sticking by that policy.”

Cllr Mowat added she was “really uncomfortable” with the applications.

“They make all sorts of claims about ‘you can count data, you can assess routes, you can monitor pollution and you can check how many cyclists there are’. As a city this is information we would like open-sourced so that not only we could use it but

the public could.”

She said the “small print” showed this is “not what is being offered”.

The committee refused all appeals apart from plans relating to Haymarket Place as it was pointed out the layout of the street has changed since work on the CCWEL begun earlier this year. Councillors agreed to continue the application for transport officers to give their view.

Cllr Mowat said: “What’s on the ground at the moment is not what’s reflected in the photograph.

“There’s quite extensive works going on here and they’re putting a cycle lane along.”

Cllr Booth added: “If it is the case the location they want to put the hub is in fact going to be on or right next to a cycle lane, and even if the impact of the combination of factors – the work on CCWEL and the hub – means that perhaps that might mean there’s such a restricted pavement width there, I would prefer that we delay and get a view from transport on this.”

by Donald Turvill

The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) is a public service news agency: funded by the BBC, provided by the local news sector, and used by qualifying partners. Local Democracy Reporters cover top-tier local authorities and other public service organisations.



Information panel at Edinburgh Bus Station which is separate from the BT applications – but the application is for something similar to this one.

Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com



BT Phone Box, Dundas Street. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com