

# **‘Grotty’ city centre phone boxes finally removed**

**Old eyesore payphones have been removed from Edinburgh city centre following calls for action to be taken to rid the streets of the “grotty” boxes.**

Two phone boxes at Hunter Square which a councillor said had turned into public toilets and convenient hiding places for drug dealers were finally taken away by BT, alongside three from Hanover Street which had also been badly vandalised and were leaning to one side.

Despite dozens of other dilapidated kiosks across the city being the focus of negative attention, BT said no more removals are currently planned – and is persisting with its efforts to get permission to replace them with ‘Street Hub’ digital advertising billboards, despite [repeated rejection of the plans](#) by the council.

Finlay McFarlane, SNP councillor representing the City Centre, said the Capital continued to be “held to ransom” by the telecoms company which he said has a “responsibility to the general public”.

He added he would “keep on pushing” for more removals, particularly in the Old Town where he described the “dirty” units as a “public health risk”.

As footage emerged of the disused call boxes being loaded onto a truck and taken away on Sunday (April 2) Cllr McFarlane

welcomed news they had “bit the dust” in a celebratory tweet.

Speaking to the LDRS he said even the police had been pushing BT to get rid of the Hunter Square payphones.

“They were associated for a very long time with antisocial behaviour, public urination, defecation and also they are a convenient way of hiding from CCTV cameras if you want to deal drugs or things like that,” he said.

“They were so run-down and grotty looking.”

He added phone boxes are also “barriers to people with disabilities trying to get around the city”.

The councillor has been critical of BT’s plans to replace 50 redundant kiosks in Edinburgh with new ‘Street Hubs’. Applications to install the double sided advertising screens, which are already in operation in other cities and offer phone charging, free calls and wi-fi, have failed to get the backing of planners.

Bids for the three-metre high digital units relate to payphones across the city including on Dundas St, Gorgie Road, Ferry Road and Fountainbridge, many of which have now been rejected twice following appeals by BT.

The council ruled that they go against planning policy, describing them as “advertisement clutter” which take up too much pavement space and obscure views.

Officers continued to refuse applications last month, throwing out plans for Street Hubs at Haymarket, Brandon Terrace, Brunswick Street, Bernard Street and Piersfield Terrace.

However it is anticipated once the council’s planning system has been exhausted, BT will lodge appeals with the Scottish Government in the hope it will overrule the local authority as was the case in Dundee.

Cllr McFarlane said this would be a “lethal and permissible” move.

He said the city was being “held to ransom,” adding: “They know that once [the payphones] are gone there is not a hope in hell of getting planning permission to put anything new in, so they’re trying to leverage these Street Hubs in for better or worse through the promise of removing large swathes of these redundant phone boxes.

“They are designed as a big billboard; advertising for advertising revenue – to make money. They are distracting, they’re super bright and also what I would say is in other cities where they have them, in Glasgow for example I walked past one the other day and it was all smashed to pieces.”

City leader Cammy Day said officials have engaged with BT regarding phone boxes but added the company has “no obligation” to remove them and the council “has no powers or ability to instruct their removal”.

Cllr McFarlane called for “more joined up thinking and a bit more impetus” from the council leader. He added: “It should not be up to individual ward councillors to push and fight with [BT] ourselves.”

And he said the council should take some inspiration from London’s Camden Council who “served notice on 19 phone boxes on one road”.

“They are basically saying that they were put in with permitted development rights subject to the condition that they should be removed if they are no longer required for telecoms purposes through a breach of condition,” he explained. “What they’ve been able to do is say ‘well we only need one every 400 metres, there are 30 within the space of one kilometre on this street therefore we are ordering you to remove them’.”

Cllr Day said officials would “speak to colleagues in other authorities, including the Camden Council, to identify best practice and will adopt processes which could successfully put maximum pressure on BT for the removal of redundant phone boxes”.

*by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter*

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Hunter Square phone box removals. Image: John Mitchell.



Cllr Finlay McFarlane



