

BT confirm they will at last remove old phone boxes in Edinburgh

Dozens of old phone boxes will be removed from Edinburgh's streets during the next six months, BT have confirmed, after its hopes of replacing many with giant advertising screens were dashed by The City of Edinburgh Council.

New plans to scrap 85 derelict and vandalised payphones across the capital have been hailed as a "massive victory" following calls to get them cleared away to improve pedestrian space and the "aesthetics and cleanliness of our streetscape".

It is not known which kiosks have been designated for removal, but it is expected that they will be removed by the end of March 2024.

Over the past two years BT has been repeatedly refused permission in their bid to replace 50 Edinburgh phone boxes with 26 double-sided screens known as 'Street Hubs' offering free calls and Wi-Fi, which the telecoms company argues are needed to meet its legal obligation to continue providing phone coverage.

Only one has been approved so far and planning permission has been refused for the rest, with the 10 foot-tall units described by city planners as an "unacceptable and unnecessary

intrusion into the streetscape which would result in advertisement clutter”.

Earlier this year two payphones at Hunter Square which SNP city centre councillor Finlay McFarlane said had become “convenient hiding places for drug dealers” were loaded onto a truck and taken away.

Several others around the city centre including those on Hanover Street have been removed since. Meanwhile cleaning teams have been deployed by BT over the past year to “tackle vandalism of our phone boxes in Edinburgh” following complaints from residents.



BT phone boxes on Hanover Street PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

Cllr McFarlane – who has criticised the company for holding the city “to ransom” by making the removal of kiosks conditional of getting permission to replace them with Street Hubs – said news that another 85 were set to go was a “massive victory”.

BT confirmed in an email to him the move was part of the “street rationalisation that is informed by the revised Ofcom guidelines”.

The email said: “Some of this number are what we describe as “last at site” and so they will require a notification period, as mandated by Ofcom.

“This runs until the end of November. Once that’s complete, we would expect the vast majority (and hopefully all) to be removed by the end of March 2024.”

Cllr McFarlane said: “This follows a long campaign that initially secured a clean-up operation of the city centre kiosks earlier in the year alongside the removal of phone boxes from Hunter Square and Hanover Street which were particularly problematic and unsafe to the public.”

“It will be particularly welcome by those concerned with creating more space for pedestrians on Edinburgh’s already narrow and crowded pavements in addition to going some way to improving the aesthetics and cleanliness of our streetscape, although I don’t believe we are fully there yet.

“Whilst kiosks do provide a necessary service including emergency calls, there can be little reason or demand to justify multiple kiosks stacked back to back in a location.”

“I would continue to encourage residents to report defective or damaged phone boxes directly to BT for maintenance by emailing customer.serv.payphones@bt.com in the meantime with details of the fault and their location.”

A BT spokesperson said: “We’re planning to remove more than 80 redundant payphones in Edinburgh as part of our wider programme to remove underused payphones across the UK. These removals are being carried out in line with Ofcom’s latest guidance.

“With the vast majority of people now using mobile phones, it’s led to a huge drop in the number of calls made from payphones. At the same time, mobile coverage has improved significantly in recent years due to investment in masts and the Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme.

“That’s why we’re continuing to review our payphones estate, making sure we’re prioritising the removal of those not being used. We’d urge any communities that would still like to retain their local red kiosk to take it on for £1 through our Adopt a Kiosk scheme.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter.



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