

BT lodge fresh bid for Street Hubs roll-out despite over 30 refusals

BT have launched another bid to install large advertising screens on pavements across Edinburgh, despite the council rejecting over 30 attempts in the last six years.

The 'Street Hubs' are touted as a high-tech replacement for derelict phone boxes, offering users free wifi and phone charging.

But planners and councillors have been mostly unconvinced of their benefits, and have cited concerns over the three-metre high units cluttering-up pavements and obscuring views.



Plans were first lodged six years ago for 12 double-sided screens around the city centre, on Queen Street, George Street and other nearby spots. However, consent was refused due to their potential impact on the capital's World Heritage Site status.

The decision to make the removal of its disused and often unsightly phone boxes dependent on getting planning approval for Street Hubs sparked accusations from councillors the telecoms giant was 'holding the city to ransom'.

Then in 2022 it submitted 25 new applications for Street Hubs, but this time at existing phone box sites outside the city centre, at locations including Nicolson Street, Ferry Road, Dundee Street and Leith Walk. These were also thrown out as planning officers said the units would be an "unacceptable and unnecessary intrusion into the streetscape which would result in advertisement clutter".

Following appeals, refusals were upheld by councillors.

One was successful however. In September 2022, a planning appeals committee overturned a ruling against a Street Hub on Dalkeith Road, outside the Commonwealth Pool, due to what members called "exceptional circumstances". Installed earlier this year, it remains Edinburgh's only Street Hub approved to date. Meanwhile, roll-out of the technology has been more successful in other cities Scottish such as Glasgow – although in Dundee one screen was smashed before it was even turned on.

To get the go-ahead BT has to obtain advertising consent as well as planning permission for the physical structure. While the latter has been refused in 37 out of the 38 cases to date, most of the 2022 advertising consent bids have been granted following appeals to the Scottish Government's planning appeals division.

Now in the latest development of the long-running saga some of

these planning permission applications – for hubs on Dalry Road, Haymarket, Gorgie Road, Roseburn Street Dundas Street and Fountainbridge – have been re-submitted to the council.

In addition, BT is eyeing up 14 new spots occupied by phone boxes. These are at Vanburgh Place, Buckstone Terrace, Portobello High Street, Piersfield Terrace, Glasgow Road, Lothian Road, Cluny Gardens, Merchiston Place, Gibson Terrace, Easter Road, Newkirkgate, Portland Place, West Maitland Street and Potterrow

The public are invited to comment with their views on the latest applications through the council's planning portal until November 15.

A BT spokesperson said: "Our plan to convert several payphones into brand new Street Hubs could result in the removal of around 80 payphones in Edinburgh, linked to our UK reductions, in line with Ofcom policy.

"The Street Hubs provide free Wi-Fi, public messaging, and the ability to help boost 4G and 5G capacity in the city, where we know the demand is high from the summer festivals."

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter