

Annual Rollout Plans 2008/9

Transparent Network Development



Introduction

In October 2008 the five mobile network operators provided to all 431 local planning authorities across the UK plans showing their existing sites and network proposals for the next 12 months.

The operators have been providing this information to all local planning authorities since 2001 as part of the 'Ten Commitments to best siting practice.'

The plans provide local authorities with a "look ahead" at the forthcoming mobile network development in their area and the opportunity to discuss the proposals face to face with the operators well ahead of the formal planning application process.

It is important to note that the plans are a 'snap shot' produced in October of each year and can be subject to change during the subsequent twelve months for a range of reasons. Nevertheless, the operators endeavour to ensure that the plans are as accurate as possible. If there are any major changes during the year, operators will make local authorities aware of them.

With over 74 million mobile connections in the UK there is a continuing demand by the public for increased mobile services including data transfer using 3rd generation technology. All mobile services require a network of base stations to transmit and receive radio signals. Working closely with local authorities helps the operators to achieve the right balance between the need for base stations and environmental responsibility.

How the plans were sent out

This was the fourth year that the network information was provided electronically to local authorities from one source. MONO Planning Consultants Ltd was commissioned by the Mobile Operators Association (MOA) to manage the distribution of the plans. They were provided in the form of an Excel spreadsheet with a covering explanatory letter and were emailed to all Local Planning Authorities and National Park Authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland by 31st October 2008. Confirmation of receipt was obtained from all recipients.

In addition to providing this important information in electronic form the operators continued to offer to meet with local authority planners and elected members to discuss their plans. Such meetings give planning officers and/or members the opportunity to discuss proposed mobile phone network development in their own area at an early stage. This is about continuing transparency in network development.

The MOA coordinates arrangements with local authorities that wish to hold joint operator meetings. As in previous years, contact details were provided for each operator to those local authorities that preferred to meet or speak with operators individually.

Meetings with local planning authorities

Between October 2008 and March 2009 4% of local authorities across the UK took up the offer of a joint operator meeting. This compares to 12% in 2007, 9% in 2006 and just under 5% in 2005. A feedback questionnaire sent to all local authorities explored the reasons why the take up of meetings was lower this year (details below).

The meetings usually took the form of roundtable discussions with officers or combined rollout and training sessions for both officers and members.

Feedback

A feedback questionnaire was emailed to all recipients of the annual plans to gain an understanding of whether the needs of local planning authorities were being met.

- The feedback questionnaire received a 37% response rate with 161 authorities responding. This is 5% increase from last year.
- 94% of authorities which responded were satisfied with the level and content of information sent to them.
- 99% of respondents said it was helpful to receive the information electronically and jointly from all five operators.
- 86% of respondents shared the rollout plans with fellow officers, 37% shared the rollout plans with councillors and 19% shared the information with the general public.
- Again this year 74% of respondents confirmed their authority has a mast register.
- The questionnaire asked why the offer of a joint meeting was not taken up. Of the 161 respondents – 55 said it was because there were too few sites proposed to make it worthwhile, 33 said very little had changed from last year and 32 said it was not a priority compared to other development. 26 respondents had not taken up the offer of a meeting due to lack of staff resource.

Conclusion

The value in issuing the annual plans jointly and via email is clear given the positive feedback from local authorities. The operators will continue to issue their annual plans in this way and to review the accuracy and presentation of the data.

Local authorities, which have not yet taken up the offer of an annual rollout meeting, are very welcome to do so - operators are willing to meet with planning officers and/or members throughout the year. Any local authority wishing to arrange a meeting should contact: nicoladavies@ukmoa.org