

Annual Rollout Plans 2006/07

Increasing transparency in network development



Introduction

Under the “Ten Commitments to best siting practice”, the mobile operators (the operators) have undertaken to provide local planning authorities on an annual basis with plans showing their existing sites and network proposals for the following twelve months. Since 2001 this has provided planning authorities with a ‘look ahead’ at the forthcoming mobile development in their area and the opportunity to discuss the proposals with the operators well ahead of the formal planning application process.

With over 65 million mobile phones in use 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.

In October 2006, for the second time, the 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 issue of the rollout plans. A total of 431 annual rollout plans in the form of an Excel spreadsheet with a covering explanatory letter were e-mailed to all Local Planning Authorities and National Park Authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland between 5th and 20th October 2006.

In addition to providing this important information in a combined electronic format from one source, the operators continued to offer to meet with local authority planners and councillors to discuss their plans, thus giving local authorities a forward look at proposed mobile base station development in their own area. This is about increasing transparency in mobile network development.

The operators have increased the take-up of the offer of face-to-face meetings by local authorities by again providing the information in a combined electronic format. This initiative provides an improved opportunity for local authorities to have direct input into the network development process.

Rollout format

The Excel spreadsheet was accompanied by an explanatory covering letter from the MOA. The letter offered a joint or individual operator meeting with the authorities to discuss rollout plans. Local planning authorities wishing to hold a joint operator meeting were recommended to contact the MOA to coordinate arranging a meeting. As in previous years, contact details were provided for each operator to those local planning authorities that preferred to meet or speak with operators individually.

Meetings with local planning authorities

To date, 40 planning authorities, out of a total of 431 rollout plans that were issued, took up the opportunity to request a joint operator meeting. This equates to approximately 9% of authorities having taken up the offer of a joint operator meeting. However, this is a 50% increase from the 2005/2006 time period.

A small number of authorities noted they were unable to hold a meeting due to staff shortages or stated that as there was little planned in their area a joint meeting was not considered necessary. A number may have held or requested meetings with individual operators.

Feedback

As this was the second year the rollout plans had been issued jointly via email from one source it was important to obtain an understanding as to whether the needs of local planning authorities were being met. In December 2006 a questionnaire was emailed to gauge the response of the authorities to the method and content of the rollout plan submissions. A summary of results is as follows:

- The feedback questionnaire received a 36% response rate with 155 authorities responding. This is twice as many compared to 2006.
- The rollout plans were well received by the Planning Authorities with 85% of responders stating that the information either met their expectations or above.
- The majority of authorities were happy with the information they received (85%)
- More authorities took up the opportunity of a Joint Rollout Plan meeting than last year (35 compared to 20)
- 75% of authorities confirmed they have a mast register
- An overwhelming majority of respondents (98%) were happy to receive the information jointly from all Operators as they stated it made it easier for them to share the information both within their authorities and with the public

As with the 2005/2006 period, the majority of respondents (95%) were pleased with the fact that the information was provided electronically and jointly from all operators as it made it easier to share the information both within their authorities and with the public. It also allowed the creation and updating of 'mast registers' and could be added into GIS systems to produce an integrated map of existing and proposed sites within a local planning authority's area.

Comments from planning officers

"We found it very helpful and useful."

"Also suggest that these proposal listings are potentially just as useful to the Operators, who should work jointly on potential site shares and joint applications before consulting the local planning authority."

"The meeting was very useful and particularly helpful to our cabinet member for planning who attended the meeting."

"Receiving the 5 operators jointly was hugely beneficial, particularly in terms of understanding overall network coverage and site sharing, but also simply in terms of information management. The information is disseminated through the Council's Telecommunications Register whereby the information contained in the rollout plans is built into the database. The Register is available to the public, officers within the Council and Councillors."

Conclusion

The positive feedback received from local planning authorities means the joint electronic circulation of the operators' annual rollout plans will continue in the future.

The provision of data involves considerable effort from the operators and it is hoped that another significant increase in the number of operator/local authority meetings will be observed when the operators issue the next set of rollout plans in October 2007.

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