

Annual Rollout Plans 2007/8

Continuing to increase 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 12 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 70 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.

Rollout Format

In October 2007, for the third time, the rollout information was provided electronically to local planning 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 emailed to all Local Planning Authorities and National Park Authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland between 5th and 10th October 2007. By 31st October 2007 confirmation had been received from all authorities that the rollout plans had been received.

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 phone development in their own area. This is about continuing transparency in mobile network development.

Local authorities wishing to hold a joint or individual 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, 12% of local planning authorities have taken up the offer of a joint operator meeting. This compares to 9% taking up the offer in 2006 and just under 5% in 2005.

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

Feedback

Since the operator's rollout plans were first issued jointly and via email in 2005 it has been important to obtain an understanding of whether the needs of local planning authorities were being met.

- The feedback questionnaire received a 32% response rate with 139 authorities responding. This is slightly lower than the number, which responded last year.
- Overall 90% of authorities which responded were satisfied with the level and content of information sent to them.
- The provision of the rollout plans in electronic format was considered to be useful by 98.5% of authorities.
- It was considered beneficial to receive the information jointly from all operators by 99% of respondents.
- 88% of respondents shared the rollout plans with fellow officers and 32% shared the rollout plans with councillors.
- Around three quarters of respondents, 74%, confirmed their authority has a mast register.

Response to Feedback

The feedback was mainly very positive and there were some clear suggestions of ways in which the rollout plans process could be improved.

For example, some planning officers observed that the information was not as accurate as they would have liked. The five operators have taken these comments seriously and are working to ensure that the information issued in October 2008 is as accurate as possible.

The operators have taken on board the feedback that the consistency of information between the companies could be improved. To improve clarity the five operators will all apply the following site categories and definitions:

- **Proposed:** A proposed site that has not received planning approval.
- **Planning Permission Granted:** A proposed site that has received planning approval.
- **Site Built:** Construction of the site is complete and it may or may not be taking call traffic.

It is important to note that the annual rollout 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. Should there be any major changes to the rollout plans during the year operators will contact local planning authorities to make them aware of the changes.

Operators are very willing to meet with planning officer and/or members at any point throughout the year to discuss their rollout plans.

Comments from planning officers

"We don't have a mast register at present but will use this spreadsheet to help create one"

"I can confirm that the Council found the rollout extremely beneficial and proved to be a useful tool in the planning process"

Conclusion

Positive feedback from local planning authorities emphasises the value in issuing the operators annual rollout plans jointly and via email. This will continue in the future.

The operators will continue to review the accuracy and presentation of the rollout data to ensure that it continues to be a useful resource for local authorities.

The operators hope that the take up of the offer of annual rollout meetings will continue to increase as it has done for the past three years.

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