

**READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES**

TO:	PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE		
DATE:	3rd June 2020		
TITLE:	INFORMATION ON THE PLANNING REGIME AND THE DEPLOYMENT OF 5G TELECOMMUNICATION APARATUS TO EXTEND MOBILE COVERAGE		
	COUNCILLOR PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT
	COUNCILLOR MCKENNA		CHAIR, PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE
SERVICE:	PLANNING	WARD:	ALL
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1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 At the Planning Applications Committee on 29 April; 2020 officers were asked to provide a report to explain the role of the planning regime in the roll out of 5G technology and how safety measures are enforced.
- 1.2 The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) are jointly pressing for improved national mobile coverage. Last year in August we were consulted on proposals to reform the current permitted development rights to allow the roll out to happen with fewer planning obstacles but the outcome of the consultation has not been published. A report on the reforms being looked at was provided to this committee in October 2019 (see background papers). So the current permitted development rights for Code Operators remains as set out in Part 16 Schedule 2 of the Town & country Planning (General Permitted Development)(England) Order 2015 (as amended in 2016). This report will clarify what these controls are and what this council's planning policies say about 5G.
- 1.3 This report will not attempt to discuss the science but will try to explain, in lay person terms, the public health concerns and what role the planning system plays in addressing these concerns.

2.0 RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the report.**

3. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 3.1 The Electronic Communications Code (the Code) was introduced in 2017. This sought to encourage and support network investment by making it cheaper to install and upgrade communications equipment and there is a clear desire for the UK to become a "world leader in 5G" with all 4 main mobile network operators committed to begin deploying 5G.

- 3.2 Investment in better ground and building-based telecommunications equipment and masts has been happening for some time with national planning policy amended in 2018 to support the expansion of electronic communication networks with a commitment to keep the planning regime under review so that it can better support new technologies coming forward.
- 3.3 Over these recent weeks with millions of people attempting to work and provide services from home; emergency services relying on it and the introduction of tracing and identifying applications connected with Covid-19; the call to improve mobile data access and provide effective broadband connectivity has become even more urgent.
- 3.4 To improve coverage and to deploy 5G network operators are primarily seeking to upgrade existing sites by making masts bigger or taller to take more equipment or to increase coverage. Currently mobile network operators either need to apply for full planning permission for the equipment or, on some limited sites, can make use of permitted development rights with prior approval from the LPA needed or sometimes they only need to provide notification to the LPA of their intention to carry out work.
- 3.5 The main issues when dealing with planning applications for new masts are illustrated by the application on the agenda tonight. The application 200339 for a 25 metre high lattice tower to support 5G on the existing Burghfield Road telecommunication mast site was deferred from the previous meeting following concerns about the appearance of the mast and the impact on the character and appearance of the area and reassurance sought on the effect that the 5G technology has on public health.
- 3.6 These issues are no different to the ones faced when considering the original telecommunication masts 20 years ago when the height of masts were similar to taller lampposts at approximately 15m high. We are now considering applications for masts at around 20m to 25m high and with either thicker structures or lattice towers to remain structurally sound and to support the weight of the equipment.

4. PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT & PLANNING POLICY

- 4.1 Under the current General Permitted Development Order, as amended in 2016, Code Operators, where there is an existing mast, are able to:
 - a. Replace a mast with another mast of the same height; or
 - b. Increase the height of the mast up to 25 metres above ground level on unprotected land, subject to prior approval where it exceeds the height of the original mast and is taller than 20 metres above ground, or
 - c. Increase the height of the mast up to 20 metres above ground level on Article 2(3) land or land which is on a highway, subject to prior approval.
- 4.2 However, if the Code Operator proposes to increase the width of the existing ground-based mast beyond one third, or to increase the height of the existing mast beyond the current height of 25 metres on unprotected land, or 20 metres on Article 2(3) land or land which is on a highway (whichever is greater); an application for full planning permission is required.
- 4.3 The relevant local plan policy is OU3: Telecommunications. It states that proposals for telecommunications development will be permitted provided that:
 - They do not have an adverse impact on the visual amenity of the surrounding area or on the significance of a heritage asset;
 - The apparatus will be sited and designed to minimise its visual impact by the use of innovative design solutions such as lamp column 'swap-outs' or concealment/ camouflage options; and

-Alternative sites and site-sharing options have been fully investigated and it has been demonstrated that no preferable alternative sites are potentially available which would result in a development that would be less visually intrusive.

- 4.4 This is consistent with Paragraph 112 of the NPPF 2019 which explains that advanced, high quality and reliable communications infrastructure is essential for economic growth and social well-being. Paragraph 113 states that the number of radio and electronic communications masts, and the sites for such installations, should be kept to a minimum consistent with the needs of consumers, the efficient operation of the network and providing reasonable capacity for future expansion. Use of existing masts, buildings and other structures for new electronic communications capability (including wireless) should be encouraged.
- 4.5 The policy does not stipulate that character assessments are required to evaluate the visual qualities of a site to determine if a mast will harm it. If a mast were located close to a conservation area and heritage asset there would be a basis for seeking further analysis but in other areas a subjective assessment can normally be sufficient. The policy does however support site sharing to minimize the number of masts needed and to improve their appearance.

5. PUBLIC HEALTH

- 5.1 The following information is taken from Public Health England's (PHE) pages on Gov.uk. Telecommunication masts have been installed for many years and studies have shown that exposures of the general public to radio waves are well within the international health-related guideline levels that are used in the UK. These guidelines are from the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP).
- 5.2 ICNIRP's role over the past 20 years at least has been to provide guidance on non-ionizing radiation protection and this guidance underpins relevant health protection policies at UK and European levels. ICNIRP does not issue certificates to verify the safety of any device or installation or provide a service to evaluate the accuracy of the certificates or declarations provided as part of a planning application by code operators. However, code operators work to ICNIRP guidelines, which remain applicable to the new 5G devices and networks.
- 5.2 Exposure to radio waves is not new and health-related research has been conducted on this topic over several decades. Since 2000 dedicated national and international research programmes have examined concerns arising from the growth in the use of wireless technologies. The main focus of recent research studies has been on exposure to the types of radio signals used by current communications technologies and at the frequencies they use, up to a few GHz. Fewer studies have been carried out at higher frequencies but the biophysical mechanisms that govern the interaction between radio waves and body tissues are well understood at higher frequencies and are the basis of the present ICNIRP restrictions. The main change in using higher frequencies is that there is less penetration of radio waves into body tissues and absorption of the radio energy, and any consequent heating, becomes more confined to the body surface. PHE accepts that there may be a small increase in overall exposure to radio waves when 5G is added to an existing network or in a new area. However, the overall exposure is expected to remain low relative to guidelines and, as such, there should be no consequences for public health. They will continue to monitor evidence and if needed review their advice.
- 5.3 The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) public information states "Reflecting public concern, the Government advice is that all operators of mobile phone masts should comply with international guidelines to ensure that public health is not put at risk. These

guidelines are precautionary; this means that they include a very large safety margin for limiting public exposure. Compliance with these guidelines is taken into account by the local planning authority when considering an application for a base station. Ofcom carries out audits of the emissions from mobile phone base stations. The measurements show that the levels of radio waves around base stations are consistently much lower than the safe levels recommended by the guidelines.

- 5.4 The Local Planning Authority will require that the code operator provides a declaration or certificate to confirm compliance with ICNIRP guidance. Clearly, planning officers do not have the scientific expertise to scrutinize the data provided but can check that the applicant has addressed the relevant guidance. Should a health concern arise it will fall to Ofcom and the HSE to monitor and address.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 6.1 The Planning Service contributes to the Council's strategic aims in terms of:

- Seeking to meet the 2019 Corporate Plan objectives for "Keeping the town clean, safe, green and active."
- Seeking to meet the 2019 Corporate Plan objectives for "Providing homes for those in most need."

Facilitating the 5G network on appropriate sites meets the third aim of:

- Seeking to meet the 2019 Corporate Plan objectives for "Providing infrastructure to support the economy."

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 Some members of the public are concerned about the impacts of 5G technology and with this report and earlier responses to questions asked it is considered that there has been an adequate level of community engagement on this matter.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 Where appropriate the Council must have regard to its duties under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, to have due regard to the need to—

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

- 8.2 There are no direct implications arising from this report.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are none arising from the report.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no direct financial implications resulting from this report.

Background

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/5g-technologies-radio-waves-and-health>