Re-use of Telephone Boxes

Planning Committee
9 March 2006

1 Purpose of report

1.1 To address a request from the DQ Sub Committee on 11 January 2006 which asked the Head of Planning to report further on the re-use of the redundant telephone boxes and to present an amended supplementary planning guideline on ATMs (automatic teller machines) for approval as a draft for consultation.

2 Summary

2.1 The use of public telephone boxes has declined rapidly in recent years due to increased mobile phone use. British Telecom (BT) has been seeking to find additional uses for its phone boxes to raise income and protect the public call box service. In Edinburgh, phone boxes have been subject to commercial advertising and applications have been submitted for the conversion of phone boxes to cash machines with a public phone element.

2.2 This report outlines the proposed Council position on the use of phone boxes for other purposes and suggests changes to supplementary planning policy to address this issue. The revised ATM guideline is presented as a draft and consultation is recommended.

3 Main Report

Background

3.1 The number of phone calls made from BT payphones has almost halved in the last three years resulting in a significant drop in takings. Over 50% of payphones lose money. Where possible, BT is removing redundant boxes and a number have been removed throughout the City. However, BT is legally obliged to provide an essential payphone service and this involves the retention of loss making payphones.
3.2 BT is unable to subsidise its payphones with profits from its other operations. In recent years, BT has therefore developed other uses for the phone box to provide an additional revenue stream to help secure a commercially viable public payphone service.

Other Uses

3.3 New activities, for example the introduction of internet kiosks, are connected to public communication and do not require significant alteration to the external appearance of the boxes.

- Advertising

3.4 However, there has recently been a sharp increase in the appearance of commercial adverts on the side of telephone boxes. This appears to be exclusively on the clear-sided BT boxes. Such advertising is being actively promoted by the telephone operators as a means of raising revenue.

3.5 The majority of these phone boxes with advertising are located within the World Heritage Site. These phone boxes, by virtue of the advertisements, have a high visual impact that is detrimental to the streetscape.

3.6 The adverts on phone boxes do require advertisement consent and it is considered that adequate supplementary planning policy is in place to address this issue. The existing DQ Handbook guideline on Advertisements and Sponsorship states that “advertising will not be supported on items of street furniture other than bus shelters”. This policy has been used to dissuade potential sponsors of litter bins and lamp posts from using such items of street furniture for advertising purposes. Edinburgh has a long history of strict and successful advert control and the current adverts on telephone boxes threaten to undermine this.

3.7 Given the number of unauthorised adverts and the location of the phone boxes on the public road, the most appropriate means of securing the removal of the adverts needs to be pursued.

- Cash Machines

3.8 In addition, BT has developed a cash-dispensing phone kiosk which features a cash machine on one side and an exterior public phone on the other side (see Appendix 1). These boxes have a solid appearance, unlike payphones which are largely glazed. They are obtrusive, unattractive additions to the street scene and are contrary to public realm objectives of creating clutter-free streets.
3.9 The number of cash machines located within buildings has increased throughout the City; there is therefore no overriding need for the service they provide.

3.10 The ATM payphones require planning permission as they are considered development, which is not permitted under Class 67 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development Order) (Scotland) 1992. They replace, rather than convert, an existing phone box and the public payphone element is no longer the predominant use.

3.11 The existing DQ Handbook guideline on ATMs does not adequately cover the issue of free-standing structures to support ATMs. A revision is therefore proposed make to it clear that free-standing ATMs will not be acceptable in principle. The revised guideline is attached as an appendix (Appendix 2) and the proposed changes are highlighted in bold.

3.12 It is recommended that the proposed changes are subject to public consultation but since this is not a major policy change; the revised guideline should be applied once approved in draft form. The results of the consultation will be subject to a further report.

Removal of Phone Boxes

3.13 The quality of the public realm is a concern for the City and the recent draft Edinburgh Standards for Streets outlines the aspirations for the public realm. The reduction of street clutter is key aim. Phone boxes should not be viewed as development opportunities and the preference would be to remove redundant boxes.

4 Financial Implications

4.1 This report does not raise any financial implications.

5 Conclusions

5.1 The difficulties facing BT in its provision of a public phone box service are appreciated. However, the quality of the public realm is important for the City and a key objective is to remove street clutter in order to create a more attractive streetscape.

5.2 The current proposals to introduce new uses results in the phone boxes becoming obtrusive and unattractive elements which have no immediate public benefit. The re-use of phone boxes is to be resisted with the Council’s aim being to remove redundant items of street furniture.
6 Recommendations

6.1 It is recommended that the Committee:

a) approves the revised guideline for consultation;

b) agrees the use of the revised guideline for DQ purposes;

c) agrees that the Council pursues measures to remove unauthorised advertising.

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Director of City Development

Appendices

Appendix 1: Images of ATM Payphones
Appendix 2: Revised guideline: ATMs

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Wards affected
All

Background Papers
Draft Edinburgh Standards for Streets, 205
Appendix 1: Images of example ATM Payphones
OBJECTIVE

These guidelines are supplementary to local plan conservation and design policies, providing additional guidance on the siting of automatic teller machines (ATMs).

POLICY CONTEXT

Local plan policies promote an attractive street scene, high quality new design and also protect the character and appearance of listed buildings and conservation areas. For example, policy CD19 of the Central Edinburgh Local Plan states:

"The Council will permit alterations and extensions to buildings which in their design and form, choice of materials and positioning are compatible with the character of the original building. Particular attention will be paid to ensuring that such works to listed buildings and non listed buildings in conservation areas do not damage their special architectural character."

SCOPE OF GUIDANCE

These supplementary guidelines apply on a city-wide basis.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Free-standing ATMs or ATM terminals which materially affect the external appearance of a building will normally require planning permission. Listed building consent is normally required for an ATM on the outside or inside of a listed building. In addition, advertisement consent may be required for any additional signage.

POLICY GUIDANCE

A  GENERAL PRINCIPLES (applicable city wide)

1. Within new developments where ATMs are likely to be required, they should be an integral part of the design concept.

2. Terminals should be sited to avoid pedestrian congestion at street corners and narrow pavements.

3. Where ATMs are removed, the frontage should be reinstated to match existing.

4. New free-standing mechanisms to accommodate ATMs or the conversion of existing structures to form free-standing ATMs will not normally be acceptable.
B SENSITIVE LOCATIONS

In addition to the General Principles, this guidance applies in the following sensitive locations:

- Listed Buildings
- Conservation Areas
- World Heritage Site

1. Prior to the consideration of any external ATMs, the possibility of installation within the building should be first investigated. In the case of listed buildings, this will only be acceptable where no features of architectural or historic interest are affected.

5. Where possible, ATMs should be located in concealed positions on the facade, within inner vestibules or on secondary (side) elevations.

6. ATM terminals should not be fitted to finely detailed façades or shopfronts of historic or architectural merit. ATMs will not be acceptable where stone frontages, architectural features or elevational symmetry will be disturbed. Proposals to create new slappings for ATMs will generally be discouraged.

7. Where acceptable in principle, only one ATM will normally be allowed on the exterior of any building. Additional ATMs will be considered where there will be no adverse impact on the frontage or townscape.

8. The installation of ATMs on the exterior of a building will not normally be allowed if there will be an adverse impact on the townscape or any key views.

C DETAILED DESIGN GUIDANCE (applicable to sensitive locations)

1. ATM terminals should be sensitively designed as modern additions to the existing architecture.

2. ATM terminals should be as small as possible with only the terminal being presented to the external elevation. The terminal should be formed in high quality materials and should not be surrounded by coloured panels or other devices.

3. Any surrounding space should be in a material and design to match the facade. (Especially important where terminals are fitted to stonework or plate glass).

4. Where existing terminals are to be replaced, the new ATM should be no larger than the existing.

5. Signs advertising the ATM other than those on the terminal should not be erected.

6. Where new steps and railings are required these should be appropriate to the townscape, of a high quality design and in materials to match existing.

7. Waste paper receptacles should be designed as an integral part of the ATM.

REASONED JUSTIFICATION

An increasing number of ATMs are being installed on financial and non-financial buildings throughout the City to meet demands for easier access to a wide range of financial facilities. The benefits of ATMs are recognised and in the many locations, they will have no adverse visual impact.
However, inappropriately designed or sited ATMs can be an unacceptable intrusion into frontages of architectural merit and can adversely affect the character of listed buildings, conservation areas or the World Heritage Site. The control of ATMs in such sensitive locations remains an overriding consideration. An objective of the Council is to remove unnecessary street furniture and to promote a high quality streetscape so the preference is to locate ATMs within buildings rather than utilising free-standing structures.

For further details contact:

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