

Condemned red phone boxes could be saved

Thousands of condemned red phone boxes could be saved after BT agreed to review its plans and consider letting local people take responsibility for running them.

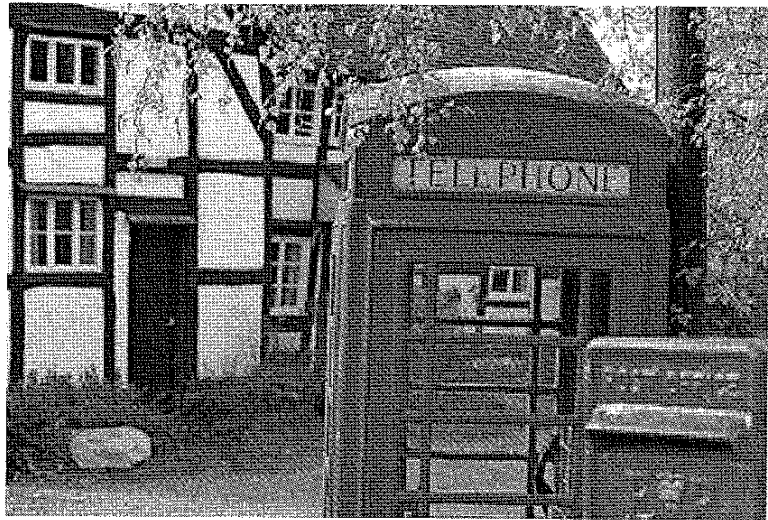
By Christopher Hope, Home Affairs Editor
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BT wants to shut 9,000 of its 62,000 payphones, claiming that nearly two-thirds of them are unprofitable.

However, the company has now agreed to investigate whether groups like councils or even local charities can take charge of traditional red kiosks they want to save.

The plan is similar to a scheme hatched by Essex County Council to take over the running of unprofitable post offices which were closed in the current round of cuts by Post Office Limited.

Ian Livingston, the chief executive of BT, said in a letter to Alan Duncan MP that he was examining a proposal "of allowing local councils to retain and assume ownership of red kiosks, where they enhance their setting".



Potentially thousands of red phone boxes could be saved if the new plan becomes widely known. Photo: JOHN ROBERTSON

Mr Livingston said that while the proposal was being considered, no more phone boxes would be axed.

"BT will not remove any red kiosk where there is a request to keep it until we have examined these proposals," he said.

BT also said it was in talks with English Heritage about the plan and industry regulator Ofcom, which has given the plan its blessing.

Ed Richards, Ofcom's chairman, said he welcomed plans to let councils and other community groups run them.

He said: "We understand that some of the concerns about the removal of boxes are based on aesthetics of the red box rather than the communication service it provides."

Mr Richards said Ofcom would make sure it cleared away any regulatory hurdles if local people wanted to take over their phone boxes.

BT wants to scrap the payphones because usage has halved in just two years in part because of the popularity of mobile phones.

But the company's plans have encountered fierce opposition from hundreds of local campaigners who have grown deeply attached to traditional red kiosks.

Currently, as part of BT's consultation programme, councils are allowed to object to a closure of the phone box, but they are not allowed to take over the running of them.

Potentially thousands could be saved if the new plan becomes widely known.

Mr Duncan, the Conservatives' Business and Enterprise spokesman, said: "The red phone box is part of our heritage and, like the Routemaster bus, it is an iconic symbol of British design around the world. This is not something that we should be just chucking away with a load of old telephones. If people wish to keep them they should be allowed to.

"With Labour's cuts to the post offices, the closure of police stations, and the decline of small shops, people are genuinely concerned that their local communities are losing their identities.

"We must make doubly sure that any local communities – from the local parish councils to a resident's association – are given the chance to adopt any red phone boxes that are under threat."

The traditional British red phone kiosk was originally designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in the 1920s. By 1980 there were 80,000 of them across the UK.

Numbers started to dwindle, especially after BT was privatized and the company brought in a series of new steel and glass designs.

So far, around 2,000 red phone boxes have been listed.

A BT spokesman said: "We are reviewing this with some urgency. At the moment BT will not remove any red kiosk until we have examined these proposals."

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10 July 2008

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Council has also sought advice from BT in relation to options for the community or organisation to either have the upkeep and line rental paid for by their community, or to have the phone disconnected and purchase the kiosk for aesthetic purposes.

In this respect, BT have been inconclusive in their comment stating:
"At the moment this is not an option. We are however looking at a way round this. We are advising councils with this sort of query to raise an objection to the removal but also to state that they would like to keep the kiosk as a functioning payphone by paying a line rental or to keep the kiosk as a non-functioning payphone by purchasing the kiosk. At this stage I cannot however give any guarantees that either of these options will be available"

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Maintenance Cost's

The BT accepted the value of payphones in emergency services, but stated that they could not provide them solely for that purpose as they were reliant on the revenue generated by the payphones to pay for their upkeep. BT also stated that they could not consider contributions from councils towards the upkeep of public payphones because they were of the opinion that not all councils would be in a position to make any contributions. Half of the payphones nationally were now running at a loss and a number of different initiatives have been tried to generate revenue and reduce costs. There was still, however, a need to review the population of kiosks in order to safeguard the future of the payphone network. Following further discussion the Committee agreed to request the Chief Executive to write to BT stating that the Committee could see no reason why local authorities could not subsidise payphones and that in an attempt to keep down costs Parish Councils should be encouraged to adopt a kiosk for cleaning and maintenance purposes. The Chief Executive was also requested to send a copy of his letter to Ofcom for their information.