

Report for Resolution

Report to Executive
11 June 2008

Report of Assistant Director – Neighbourhood Development

Subject Communal Aerial Digital Upgrade - Draft

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Purpose

To feedback to the Executive the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee's examination (22 May 2008) of the options identified by Executive on 19 March 2008 in respect of the potential for opting out of the new communal aerial system for council properties.

Recommendations

1. Members note the recommendations from Scrutiny Committee and accompanying officer comments.
2. Members approve the criteria for future individual satellite dish installation for tenants and leaseholders, as set out in this report, and the intention to ensure that this information is available in a clear and transparent manner for tenants and leaseholders.
3. Members decide on one of the following:-
 - a.-That the option of opting out of the new communal aerial scheme is not available to anyone who is currently in receipt of communal aerial systems.
 - b-That the option of opting out of the new communal aerial scheme is only available to leaseholders. Therefore the Council will meet any additional costs generated by this decision through a raised charge to those accessing the scheme.
 - c- That the option of opting out of the new communal aerial scheme is available to both tenants and leaseholders. Therefore the Council will meet any additional costs generated by this decision through a raised charge to those accessing the scheme.
4. Members confirm that hardware be installed to enable all properties to be potentially connected to the system. i.e. Cables are run to the exterior of properties that are initially opting out.
5. That the communication process and plan are acceptable.

Financial Consequences

This report relates to entering into a 20 year leasing agreement to supply a digital TV signal to homes (typically blocks of flats) currently on a Council provided communal TV aerial. This involves a charge that could be fully recovered through service charges to tenants and leaseholders. The current weekly cost equates to 35p per property and the estimated charge for the new system will increase these costs by 29p per week to 64p.

If members agree to tenants and/or leaseholders having the ability to opt out of the scheme the amount of the weekly charge will increase proportionately. Also the cost of retrofitting the TV aerial connection into individual dwellings will be considerably more than the cost of initial installation. This cost will be born by the Council for tenants. Leaseholders would be responsible for this charge for their properties.

Any charges which form part of a tenancy agreement, and are, therefore, not optional, will be recoverable via Housing Benefit for those tenants who are in receipt of this payment.

Strategic Objective/Service Priorities

This report helps to achieve the corporate objective to strive for sufficient, good-quality, affordable housing, providing choice and accessibility. It also complies with the service plan priority to ensure that current tenancy agreements continue to be met through the provision of a digital TV reception for all homes served by a communal aerial when the analogue signal is switched off in 2011. This action also supports the council in its endeavours to meet the needs of its diverse communities as the new communal TV aerial system will allow access to multi-cultural programmes through programme service providers.

Executive Member: Housing and Adult Services

Ward: City-wide.

Contact Officers

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Background Documents

Report

Background

1. The Council is responsible for providing a communal TV aerial system to approximately 50% of the housing stock, including both tenants and leaseholders. These systems were designed to carry five television channels (BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) transmitted in the traditional, analogue format. (However channel 5 is not available in all areas.) The current distribution systems are not capable of transmitting digital channels from the terrestrial (Freeview) and the satellite (Sky and others) broadcasters. This means that from 2011 when the analogue television signals are switched off in the Anglia region, in favour of digital transmission, the existing communal television aerials will cease to deliver a television signal.
2. Because most new televisions have integral digital capability and Freeview set-top boxes can be bought for as little as £20, there are already an increasing number of residents and leaseholders requesting the capability of receiving digital broadcasts.
3. The implication of digital switchover is that all landlords must decide on a planned response to the switch-off of analogue broadcasting in the UK. This means that as the switchover timetable approaches it will become increasingly difficult for landlords to find aerial contractors with a good track record of installing digital television distribution systems. Given this and customer demand there is the need to act now. For those dependant on the communal aerials the Council have an obligation to upgrade the system, otherwise in 2011 these residents will have no access to TV.
4. Council must act to ensure that the terms and conditions currently available to tenants are maintained i.e. those currently receiving a communal aerial system continue to be provided with a communal aerial system which enables them to access TV programmes.
5. As stated above the timeline makes it imperative that the Council acts now. Planning regulations, as explained in this report, restrict the number of 'personal' satellite dishes that can be erected per block, thus restricting the options for residents making their own arrangements in the absence of a communal solution.

IRS the preferred solution

6. At the meeting on 19th March 2008 the Executive decided to confirm that the Integrated Reception System (IRS) solution was the preferred option, to replace the current communal aerial system.
 - This reiterated an earlier decision made in July 2006 when IRS system was seen as the way forward. A new IRS system will, subject to residents having a digital TV or Freeview box, ensure that areas that currently have a poor signal, for whatever reason, will get a signal as good as the rest of the city because it will be able to be beamed via the satellite instead of an aerial, as at present.

7. Groups for whom English is not their first language will be able to access foreign language channels via a programme service provider.

Referral to Scrutiny Committee

8. At the request of the Executive the Scrutiny Committee was asked to consider the following issues that will arise during the next stages of implementing this project:

- i - **Opt out** . Whether to give residents who currently receive communal aerial services but have already installed their own individual systems, the option of opting out of the new communal service and charge.

- ii – **Hardware provision**. The options for the initial hardware and cable requirement and the implications these have for future connections and costs.

- iii – **Satellite Dishes**. Approve the conditions for allowing residents to erect their own satellite dishes in future.

- iv – **Communications**. The communications plan for the project/process.

9. The table in Appendix A contains detail of the issues discussed at Scrutiny and the Committee's recommendations together with officers' comments.

Conclusion

10. Executive has approved the installation of the new communal aerial system (the IRS system) in order to provide an equitable response to the challenge of digital TV enabling it to meet the needs of a diverse community. A decision is now required as to the roll out of the scheme including consideration of options for opting out, the communication plan, and level of hardware provision.