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Steve Robertson
Chief Executive Officer
Openreach

12 July 2010

Dear Mr Robertson

IMPACT OF BROADBAND STREET CABINETS

I am writing on behalf of community groups across England to seek your assurance that the extension of broadband coverage is being achieved at minimum cost to the street environment.

Civic Voice is the new national charity for the civic movement in England. We launched in April 2010 to champion and support voluntary civic societies and other local community groups in making the places where we all live more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive and to promote civic pride. We have already been joined by over 250 civic societies with more than 65,000 individual members. Civic societies are the most numerous participants in the planning system nationwide.

The quality of the public realm and the street environment is central to our mission. We are concerned to ensure streets and public spaces are well maintained and free of unnecessary clutter. It is the focus of our Street Pride campaign which has attracted wide support. There is widespread concern within the civic movement that the development of street cabinets to support an extension of broadband coverage is not being handled sensitively and is causing unnecessary harm to the street environment.

Civic Voice recognises the benefits of wider broadband coverage. We also welcome your commitment to the National Joint Utilities Group vision for minimising disruption to local communities through street works. We regret this is not being supported by the experience of many civic societies on the ground.

Cabinets are being poorly located, inflexibly designed and made unnecessarily intrusive. Even in conservation areas, where you are required to notify local planning authorities, many groups report scant regard being given to the quality of the street environment. We are also aware of notifications being rejected by local authorities on grounds of inadequate information being provided.

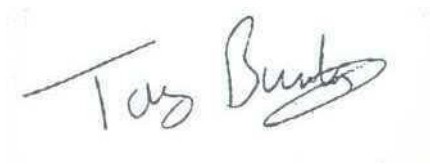
This is an issue which goes beyond your compliance with the regulations. Openreach has responsibilities not only to broadband customers but also to the millions of people in whose local environment your cabinets are being located. This wider responsibility is notable by its absence in your mission and strategic objectives and it would be helpful to know what urban design criteria you use when siting street cabinets both inside and outside conservation areas. This is especially important where express planning consent is not required.

We would also welcome a discussion on how you might engage more strategically with civic societies and other local groups when considering proposals for a wide area and not just on individual proposals. It would be helpful to know how you are responding to the statutory presumption in favour of undergrounding apparatus in conservation areas and we are also receiving confusing reports about the design of the street cabinets. In some areas your teams are saying there is no flexibility over the 1.6m high cabinet and yet in others smaller cabinets have been installed. It would also be helpful to know how you will address the likely redundancy of the cabinets as the nation moves to FTTP broadband in future years.

We are keen to understand your plans more and it would be helpful to meet and discuss these. We want to work with you to find solutions. We believe many of the current issues can be addressed by earlier and more strategic involvement of local community groups and a clear, urban design led, approach to siting and design supported by appropriately trained and supported Openreach staff.

I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Burton". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tony Burton
Director