

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INSTALLATIONS

Guidelines to good practice

With the use of mobile phones continuing to increase, the telecoms companies are continuing to seek suitable sites to locate their equipment. Churches are often the tallest buildings in their locality and so a church tower, spire, or roof can be an attractive site. Usually the first a church knows about anything is a letter from the telecoms company or their agent, suggesting that you might have a suitable site and perhaps mentioning an annual rent of a few thousand pounds. The notes that follow suggest some of the things you might wish to think about and some of the things you must and must not do.

1 Terms

The terms initially offered will almost certainly be significantly below the best that can be obtained both in terms of rent and other conditions. It is **essential** that the church obtains professional advice. The Synod surveyors have staff with considerable experience in negotiating such agreements and are aware of important issues. These include rent reviews, access, responsibilities, power supply and a lot more besides, including payment of the church's professional costs.

2 Documentation

The local church cannot enter into any form of legal agreement such as a lease or even sign what are known as "Heads of Terms" for an agreement. This must be done by the Trustees – usually the Yorkshire Congregational Union. Our legal costs will generally be met by the telecoms company and this is part of the surveyor's negotiations.

3 The Community

The location of telecommunications equipment, particularly antennae and masts, is very emotive. There is probably scientific research available that will "prove" whatever stance people choose to adopt, but the balance of independent evidence would seem to suggest that the standard equipment is not hazardous to health.

For each church the issues will be different but it is **essential** that these are considered carefully long before any decisions are taken. If there have been protests locally about other proposed sites for this equipment then it is likely that placing it on the church will cause a similar outcry. Some churches have considered this and have taken the decision very quickly that they do not wish to pursue the initial approach believing that any benefits from the income are outweighed by the damage that might be done to their future outreach and relationship with their community.

Other churches might choose to consult with the community once they have more information. It is a diplomatic minefield and will need careful thought and sensitive handling. Each church knows – or should know – its local community and must decide how best to handle these discussions. The community will not always object to these installations.

4 Approvals

Assuming that everything has been considered and the church wishes to go ahead with a scheme, then approvals are needed.

4.1 Church Meeting must pass a resolution approving the scheme and asking the Trustees to enter into the relevant legal agreement.

- 4.2 If the building is listed then it is important that the Listed Building Advisory Committee is consulted at an early opportunity. If Ecclesiastical Exemption is needed – and it probably will be – then this procedure does take a little time and the earlier it is begun the sooner it will be completed and the next stage of approvals can be obtained.
- 4.3 After Church meeting has approved the proposal then this must go to District Council and it is useful to contact your District Secretary early to check on the timing of meetings.
- 4.4 District Council will pass the papers to the Synod Office and the scheme will be considered by the next meeting of the Synod Property Committee. If the building is listed then the Property Committee must await the recommendation of the LBAC before they can consider the scheme.

5 General

There are churches in the Synod with agreements in place and telecoms equipment on their building. There are others who have been approached and have decided it was not appropriate for them, and still others where it has been a divisive issue within the local church or between church and community. There are no right answers and there is no standard URC policy. Each local church must act as they feel appropriate.

It is important that, if you receive an approach from a telecoms company, you contact the Trust and Property Secretary at the Synod Office who will help guide you through the process and involve the Synod Surveyor as soon as that is appropriate. You can be put in touch with churches who have gone ahead or with some who have not, if you wish to hear the experience of others.