Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: PE 1416

Main Petitioner: Councillor Eileen Baxendale

Subject: Review of health issues and planning guidance in respect of telecommunications masts

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to undertake an independent review of current scientific evidence in respect of possible health risks particularly to young children from the siting of telecommunications masts near residential property, schools and children's nurseries, and to examine the extent to which the recommendations of the Stewart Report and the planning guidance contained in PAN 62 and NPPG 19 have been complied with, all with a view to revising and updating the relevant Scottish Planning Guidance, or taking other action to ensure public safety. We also wish the Scottish Government to consider halting the current industry plans to provide telecommunications masts at least once a mile in residential areas while the risks to the health of young children are fully reassessed.

Background

The increasing use of mobile phones has been accompanied by public debate about the possible adverse effects on human health. The concerns stem from the emissions of radiofrequency (RF) radiation by both the handsets and the base stations that transmit and receive the signals.

Evidence on the Health Effects of Phone Masts

In 1999, the UK Government established an independent expert group (chaired by Sir William Stewart) to examine the possible effects of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters on human health. This resulted in the publication of the 'Stewart Report' in 2000\(^1\). The report concluded that the balance of the evidence (at that time) did not suggest mobile phone technologies put the health of the UK population at risk, but proposed that a precautionary approach be adopted until 'more robust scientific information' becomes available.

\(^1\) Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (2000) Mobile Phones and Health
In 2001, the UK-wide Mobile Telecommunications and Health Research Group (MTHR) was established to take forward the research recommendations of the Stewart report. The group receives funding from the different UK Governments and from industry. In order to ensure that none of the funding bodies could influence its work, it is run by an independent ‘Programme Management Committee’. In 2007, the MTHR published a report from phase 1 of its work concluding that mobile phones have not been found to be associated with any adverse biological or health effects.

The group also looked at the effects of base stations and there were 2 studies in phase 1 that are relevant to the petition. The first was a case-control study\(^2\) looking at the incidence of early childhood cancers and proximity to mobile phone base stations. This study found no association between the risk of early childhood cancers and estimates of the mother’s exposure to mobile phone base stations during pregnancy. The second study looked at electrical hypersensitivity in relation to base station exposures and concluded that, while it could not exclude possible effects of base station signals on some individuals, it did not find compelling evidence to attribute electrical hypersensitivity symptoms in general to base station signals.

Phase 2 of the MTHR is currently underway. To date, 3 studies have been commissioned. These include:

- The COSMOS study – this aims to look at the long term health effects of mobile phone use
- The effect of TETRA radiofrequency fields on symptoms in police officers
- Hypersensitivity symptoms associated with Electromagnetic Field Exposure to TETRA base stations

The more recent Monograph report\(^3\) from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) concluded that, overall, there is limited evidence in humans and experimental animals for the carcinogenicity of Radio Frequency-Electro Magnetic Fields (RF-EMF) exposure from mobile phones. In light of the lack of evidence, the working group classified RF-EMF as ‘possibly carcinogenic to humans’. In relation to the possible association between environmental exposure to RF-EMF and cancer, the group found the available evidence insufficient to reach any conclusion\(^4\).

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\(^2\) Elliott P et al (2011) **Case Control Study of Cancer Incidence in Early Childhood and Proximity to Mobile Phone Base Stations**

\(^3\) International Agency for Research on Cancer (31 May 2011) **Press release No. 208: IARC Classifies Radio Frequency Electro Magnetic Fields as Possibly Carcinogenic to Humans.**

Planning Policy

In relation to planning issues specifically, the Stewart report concluded that the balance of evidence indicated there is no general risk to people living near base stations but that there can be indirect adverse effects on their well-being in some cases (e.g. due to insensitive siting of such masts). The Stewart report made a number of recommendations with regards to planning, including revoking permitted development rights for masts and subjecting them to the full planning process. The Scottish Executive subsequently consulted on changes to planning controls for telecommunication developments and this resulted in changes to the legislation which included (among other things) that all ground based masts required express planning permission.

Currently, planning authorities are guided in their decisions by the Scottish Planning Policy which also sets out the key issues to be addressed when considering applications for mobile phone masts. The section on Communications Infrastructure states that equipment should be designed and positioned as sensitively as possible. In addition, it says:

“The planning system should not be used to secure objectives that are more properly achieved under other legislation. Emissions of radiofrequency radiation are controlled and regulated under other legislation and it is therefore not necessary for planning authorities to treat radiofrequency radiation as a material consideration.” (para 253, Scottish Planning Policy)

It goes on to say that to demonstrate to planning authorities that the known health effects have been addressed, applications involving antennas should be accompanied by a declaration that the equipment and installation complies with the appropriate International Commission in Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) guidelines.

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Executive extended planning controls over telecommunications development with the enactment of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development)(Scotland) Amendment Order 2001 on 23 July 2001. In addition to these regulations the Scottish Executive’s policy on telecommunications development was set out in National Planning Policy Guidance Note 19: Radio Telecommunications. The regulations were also accompanied by Planning Advice Note 62 “Radio Telecommunications” and Circular 5/2001 “Development by telecommunications code system operators”.

The Scottish Executive commissioned external consultants to evaluate the effectiveness of these regulations and associated policy. The final report found “the land use planning controls have brought about a better balance
between the needs of the industry and local circumstance in terms of environmental concerns, and siting and design considerations”.

The Scottish Government has also committed funding for five years to the second phase of the MTHR programme. It has not directly commissioned any additional research on this issue.

Scottish Parliament Action

The former Transport and Environment Committee of the Scottish Parliament examined this issue on two occasions, principally in 2000, during an inquiry into proposed changes to the planning process for telecommunication developments. The Committee also took further evidence on the effect of the planning changes on 18 February 2003.

The Parliament has previously considered and closed a number of petitions relating to the siting of mobile telephone masts and their potential health effects:

PE 135 – the petition raised a number of issues relating to the siting of mobile phone masts. The petition was passed to the Transport and Environment Committee which responded to the petitioner with details of the inquiry it had conducted into telecommunication developments.

PE 425 – the petition called for the adoption of the precautionary principle in relation to the siting of antennae in densely populated areas or within 600m of schools, residential care homes or hospitals. The petition was referred to the Transport and Environment Committee who considered it as part of its examination of planning changes for telecommunications developments.

PE 769 – the petition called for a number of actions in relation to the permission process for mobile phone and TETRA installations and that the precautionary principle should be exercised when granting permission for sites adjacent to residential properties. The petition was referred to the Communities committee which investigated community involvement in the planning process during its scrutiny of the Scottish Executive’s proposals for developing the planning system.

PE 1048 – the petition was calling for the correction of an apparent anomaly in the National Planning Policy Guidance 19 which did not seem to extend the precautionary principle to pre-school children. The petition was closed following assurances from the Scottish Government that no anomaly existed.

Kathleen Robson  
Senior Research Specialist  
Health and Community Care

Alan Rehfisch  
Senior Research Specialist
Planning and Transport
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