



Airwave service

O2 Airwave submission to the All Party Parliamentary Mobile Group

Background

1. On 8 March the All Party Parliamentary Mobile Group called for written submissions from interested stakeholders as part of a public inquiry into planning law as it affects the location and siting of mobile phone masts.

O2 Airwave – Communication when and where it matters most

2. O2 Airwave is an operating company of mmO2 plc. O2 Airwave has the contract with the Home Office, via the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) to design, build, operate and maintain the national digital communications network for the police – Airwave. The PFI contract for provision of the Airwave service to the police was awarded in 2000 and the network will be fully rolled out by April 2005. The Airwave service is a public safety dedicated network and within the terms of its licence O2 Airwave may only offer Airwave to emergency services and public safety agencies who have been recognised by Government as having a demonstrable potential need to communicate directly with the emergency services at the scene of a civil incident.
3. Airwave represents a significant advance in emergency services' communications. As a national network, it is the first time that the emergency services' communications has been unconstrained by artificial, operational geographic boundaries. Advantages of Airwave include:
 - Guaranteed and resilient geographic coverage, including previous communications blackspots.
 - Digital voice quality, clarity and reduction in ambient noise to allow effective communications in traffic, crowds, etc.
 - Much faster call connection.
 - 'Talk group' facility to make the communications of emergency responders more efficient and effective.
 - Data functionality facilitating real-time access to data (e.g. Police National Computer, vehicle & person checks, transmission of vital sign information between ambulance and hospital, and automatic person and vehicle location).
 - Sophisticated encryption preventing unauthorised scanning and monitoring, ensuring the integrity and security of communications.
4. O2 Airwave is also short-listed for the national contracts to provide radio communications services to Fire and Rescue Services and Ambulance Trusts. The service will be bespoke to meet the very specific needs of each emergency service. However, operating over a single network platform, Airwave will offer the first real opportunity to ensure that communications between the emergency services are able to effectively support a co-ordinated response to a civil incident if and when required.
5. However, due to the comprehensive geographic coverage offered by the Airwave network, it is unlikely that further significant new network development will be required should O2 Airwave be chosen to provide communications services to the Fire and



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Rescue Service and Ambulance Trusts. Indeed, it is anticipated that Airwave may be able to accommodate the coverage and capacity requirements of all potential users.

O2 Airwave - network development

6. Airwave works in much the same way as a commercial mobile phone network. It requires transmitters, normally placed on masts or similar structures, to provide radio coverage in relatively small geographic areas. Users maintain contact with these transmitters through their radio handsets.
7. O2 Airwave works with each police force to determine the coverage that is required within the geographic boundary of their police force area. Typically, this extends to all metalled roads across the country and then specifically identified off-road, in building or other coverage identified on a force-by-force area.
8. In order to provide the coverage that is required by the police and other emergency services O2 Airwave requires approximately 3500 radio transmitters throughout England, Scotland and Wales. To date, O2 Airwave has planning consent for some 3100 sites, with 2300 built.
9. As a provider of mobile telecommunications services, O2 Airwave operates within the same planning regime as any other operator. While not a member of the Mobile Operators' Association, O2 Airwave subscribes to the values of the Code of Best Practice and the Ten Commitments contained therein.

Government guidelines and the regulatory regime

10. O2 Airwave believes the current guidelines and regulations, including those in England, Wales and Scotland, work well (O2 Airwave are not operational in Northern Ireland). This is evidenced by the successful status of the current roll out. The framework provides clarity of the obligations upon both operators and planning authorities in network development. Occasional issues centring on the interpretation of government guidance are resolved expeditiously and most effectively through further consultation with officers. The existing regulatory regime provides a framework for a constructive working relationship based on mutual understanding. The guidelines have ensured that government and industry are able to work together well. This applies to both central and local government and is crucial given the nature of the Airwave roll out. Regarding the specific issue of use and application of permitted development rights and the prior approval procedures, O2 Airwave feels the regulations have been a successful part of the broader planning regime and do not recommend any suggested amendments.
11. The planning guidelines are, on the whole, applied consistently. This is fundamental to the success of a national network development such as Airwave.
12. Over and above the relationship between government and industry, the current guidelines and regulatory regime encourage effective industry inter-working. Site sharing has been both possible and practical and O2 Airwave seeks to exploit existing sites where they are technically feasible and the most appropriate solution for



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the environment. O2 Airwave always seeks to work with other operators to maximise site-sharing opportunities wherever possible. Of the 2300 sites so far built, some two third are site shares or make use of other existing structures. This significant proportion should also be seen in the context of the coverage requirements of the service, whereby O2 Airwave has to provide network coverage in areas where other operators are disinclined to develop for commercial reasons, or where development is challenging due to the sensitivity of the natural environment.

13. O2 Airwave believes that planning guidance works well around sensitive sites. O2 Airwave has specific experience of these issues given it is required to deliver comprehensive coverage to the emergency services in sensitive areas, which may have been anticipated as potentially troublesome for environmental reasons. Due to the constructive nature of the planning regime, O2 Airwave has undertaken considerable consultation with representative bodies such as National Parks' authorities to ensure suitable sites can be identified and developed to the mutual satisfaction of the landlords, users and O2 Airwave.
14. Best practice examples which O2 Airwave would like to draw out include Winchester Council. Winchester district council planning committee delegate all applications received by mobile telecommunications operators to a dedicated sub-committee which enables the council to be flexible in responding to applications quickly. Furthermore, the sub-committee is able to visit each site individually to get a full and proper understanding of potential impact of masts on the local environment. This can also help to inform the community consultation process as members of the planning committee can ask the operator to undertake specific consultation with impacted residents, schools, etc.

Where such a process does not exist, community consultation is still facilitated by the current planning regime. The traffic light model contained within the Code of Best Practice gives a clear indication of what the planning authority can reasonably expect operators to undertake by way of local consultation. However, the regime is sufficiently flexible to allow planning authorities and operators to respond to the specific needs of the local community.
15. O2 Airwave believes that the introduction of the Ten Commitments has improved community consultation and co-operation between industry and government. O2 Airwave would point to the number of 'drop-in' sessions with local communities as a tangible example of the scale of consultation being undertaken.
16. O2 Airwave would point to the "Gold Star" process undertaken as part of the Airwave roll out as an example of best practice. This involves comprehensive and regular briefings offered to the full range of local stakeholders that may be impacted by network development significantly ahead of build. The process has been most successful in Scotland where roll out is ahead of schedule with few instances of localised controversy.
17. O2 Airwave believes that the UK leads the debate in Europe. Other European countries typically have fewer obligations to community consultation in network development. O2 Airwave believes that this laissez-faire approach would not be popular in the UK and would only serve for communities to feel disenfranchised.



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For further information please contact:

David Robinson
Stakeholder Relations Manager
O2 Airwave
Wellington Street
Slough
SL1 1YP

Tel: 01753 557389

Or

Josh Berle
Head of Regional Communications
O2 Airwave
Wellington Street
Slough
SL1 1YP

Tel: 01753 557388

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