

**Statement issued by Revd. Martin Cannam
on behalf of St. Lawrence's Parochial Church Council
to those gathered prior to the PCC meeting on 16th November 2009**

Background

Over a year ago St. Lawrence's Church was approached by an agent acting for Vodaphone who informed us that Vodaphone had identified Biddulph North as an area requiring additional telecommunications equipment in order to meet Government aspirations for improved mobile coverage and customer demand for G3 services. Surveys in the area had identified St. Lawrence's Church tower as a possible site for such a phone mast. They asked if the PCC we would be interested in initiating the process to enable the tower to be considered as a potential site for telecommunications equipment. In March, after careful deliberation the PCC agreed to this and confirmed our willingness to take this first step. At the same time, we were made aware another possible site was also under consideration involving a streetwork facility just down from the church on Congleton Road.

The Current Situation

Since then the entire process has been put on hold whilst Vodaphone and O2 negotiated a global agreement to share phone masts. Except for a request to re-confirm our original decision St. Lawrence's has not had any further communication with Vodaphone's agent. As things stand at the moment the ball is still in Vodaphone's court. The PCC is simply waiting to hear whether they are wanting to start up conversations with us again, or whether they have other plans for Biddulph North. Hence at the moment, a phone mast at St. Lawrence's remains only a possibility and is not an active item on the PCC's agenda. There is no specific plan being discussed. Our position simply remains as it was back in March.

The Future

We are of course mindful of the concern expressed by local residents and the St. Lawrence's Pre-school in response to any talk of a phone mast in the vicinity. We are also mindful that the vast majority of people today actually own mobile phones and therefore are presumably happy to use phone masts near to other people's homes to transmit their phone calls. Increasingly people are making use of all kinds of wireless technologies in their own homes, all of which use electromagnetic fields to transfer information. There is an obvious discrepancy between people's acceptance and use of these technologies as being safe, and the emotive responses generated by talk of a local phone mast. We appreciate this to be a significant issue with respect to finding a suitable location for any required phone mast.

We also appreciate that precautionary principles apply and that a community should have a say in where any phone masts deemed necessary are actually located. For that reason when re-confirming our own interest to Vodaphone we also asked them about other possible sites in Biddulph North and asked whether the Sewage works on Marsh Green Road or the Hirst Quarry have been considered as possible locations. We have also confirmed that should Vodaphone wish to reopen conversations with the PCC, this must include opportunity for public consultation with local residents, the Pre-school, Woodhouse School, local councilors and any other interested parties.

At this stage we therefore consider it entirely appropriate to remain engaged with the process since our involvement is the only thing that guarantees face-to-face consultation for the people of Biddulph North. If Vodaphone decide to approach us again then we ourselves as a PCC want the opportunity to hear from them directly and ask questions about any proposals. We believe that it is right and proper that any phone company should be able to make representation themselves and that they should be available for public question. Following such consultation it would then be matter for the PCC to decide whether we wished to proceed any further or not. We believe that this kind of informed debate is the most responsible, constructive and transparent way to approach this matter and hopefully reach the best solution for the area as a whole.

We respectfully point out to those protesting to us that elsewhere in Biddulph phone masts have already been erected as streetworks with little or no face-to-face consultation between phone companies and local people. Without our involvement a phone company could use the planning process to do the same here in Biddulph North and we do not want that for our local community. Whilst only two potential locations have been mooted we remain convinced that the church tower is the better of the two suggestions. If it comes to us the income earned from the rental of a phone mast is put back into the community via our maintenance of the Church Hall and employment of a Youth Worker. We therefore feel it would be unwise for us to disengage from this process at this stage if the result of doing so might mean one or more phone masts are erected, without public consultation, in close proximity to the church.

We are however quite happy to keep you informed of any developments if or when they arise, as we acknowledge your concern for this matter. In return we would ask if you would kindly keep us informed of your own discussions and in particular let us know the locations you would want to suggest as alternative sites for a phone mast.