

# Health concerns over mobile phone masts prompt review

## 'IoS' report on the dangers of electronic smog from wireless technology examined by ministers

By Marie Woolf and Geoffrey Lean

Published: 13 May 2007

Ministers are to investigate arrangements for erecting mobile phone masts in the light of growing fears that they may cause cancer and other diseases because of "electronic smog".

They will review the exceptionally favourable rules that allow mobile phone companies to escape normal planning regulations and stop councils from considering the effects of the masts on health, even when they are sited near homes and schools.

Originally promised three years ago, and then shelved, the review follows articles in *The Independent on Sunday* about possible effects of the radiation on children and bees. The Government will take account of new scientific and medical evidence, and consult experts and campaigners, as part of a wider review of planning guidelines which ministers send to local authorities.

More than 47,000 "base stations", like masts, have already been erected in Britain to service its 50 million mobile phones, often in defiance of intense local public opposition. Successive governments have made extraordinary concessions to the companies to ensure that coverage was rolled out across the country as quickly as possible.

Masts up to 45ft high do not need planning permission in the normal way. Instead, companies merely have to notify councils of their intentions and can go ahead unless they are formally stopped within 56 days.

Overworked planning authorities struggle to cope with these applications on time, and companies have frequently put up the masts against councils' opposition because news of a refusal has reached them shortly after the deadline.

Seven years ago, an official inquiry - headed by Sir William Stewart, a former government chief scientist - concluded that "the siting of all new base stations should be subject to the normal planning process".

Ministers said that they were "minded" to implement this recommendation, and then failed to do so, even though full planning permission has long been required in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The inquiry also urged that masts should not be built near schools unless parents agreed, but ministers refused to agree.

The planning rules also make it clear that councils cannot object to masts on health grounds because "the planning system is not the place for determining health safeguards". Yet studies are revealing worrying levels of symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, nausea, dizziness, difficulties in sleeping and concentrating, and learning and memory problems in people living near the masts - and there is also some suggestion that there may be an increase in cancers and heart disease.

Nevertheless, councils are instructed by the rules to "respond positively" to the phone companies' plans and, in practice, can reject a mast only on aesthetic grounds. The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, promised a review by the end of 2004. It never took place, but last week the Department for Communities and Local Government confirmed that the advice to local authorities is to be re-examined.

A spokesman for the department said: "We are examining developments in research on this issue. It is something that is going to be looked at."