# Stockton’s plan to modernise streets with BT’s smart hubs sparks local debate



Stockton Council is currently considering plans submitted by BT to replace two ageing phone boxes on Oxbridge Lane and Yarm Lane with modernised "Street Hubs." According to BT’s agent, Telent Technology Services, these hubs would provide a range of enhanced urban services including ultra-fast, encrypted public WiFi powered by renewable, carbon-free energy, free phone calls, phone charging points, and a tablet interface. The hubs also include "sound cloud" speaker systems and can incorporate sensors to monitor air quality and traffic, adding a smart city dimension to the traditional street furniture.

BT portrays these hubs as accessible and free community assets designed to upgrade local infrastructure without additional costs to taxpayers. The “state-of-the-art” units feature HD screens on both sides that display advertising alongside council and community content, which dims at night. Revenue from sponsorship would fund ongoing maintenance, including regular cleaning and 24-hour monitoring. The proposal also highlights the potential to "declutter" streets by replacing the older, bulkier phone boxes with slimmer hubs that improve the streetscape.

The company contends that the Street Hubs address contemporary connectivity needs by offering faster, more reliable internet access and integrating emergency services communication capabilities. BT claims over 950 units are already live across the UK, serving as part of a broader strategy to modernise city infrastructure, bridge the digital divide, and reduce street clutter, while promoting sustainability and safety.

Stockton’s application notes that the existing phone boxes are considered “run-down” and that the new hubs would improve community communications by delivering social, economic, and environmental benefits. These benefits include future-proofing the high street through smarter, safer, and more adaptable urban technology.

While Stockton moves forward with this plan, other local authorities have had mixed reactions to similar BT Street Hub proposals. In East Herts, for example, the council refused a hub in Bishop’s Stortford due to concerns about fostering anti-social behaviour and drug-related offences, following police advice. The presence of extensive 4G coverage and free WiFi in the area also led the council to question the necessity of the hub.

Similarly, Warrington Borough Council declined permission for four Street Hubs, citing worries over increased anti-social activities in areas already troubled by such issues, as well as objections to the hubs’ impact on local visual amenity. In contrast, Eastbourne Borough Council is currently considering a proposal for one such hub aimed at replacing underused payphone kiosks while also offering advertising opportunities and emergency messaging.

Experiences elsewhere reveal a tension between the hubs’ potential to enhance digital infrastructure and concerns about their integration into historic or sensitive urban settings. For instance, BCP Council rejected most of a set of proposed hubs in Christchurch High Street, finding them visually incongruous and unsympathetic to the local high street character, allowing just one where existing street furniture minimised the visual impact. In Brighton, a related digital advertising and WiFi hub project succeeded on appeal over initial council objections about pedestrian safety and area character, though the council retains some control over the ultimate licensing.

These varied responses illustrate the balance local authorities seek to strike between embracing technological upgrades that can combat the digital divide and improve urban environments, against managing community safety, local aesthetics, and social concerns. Stockton’s proposed Street Hubs join this wider national conversation about the future of public connectivity and urban design.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181), [[2]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181), [[2]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181), [[2]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181), [[2]](https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.bishopsstortfordindependent.co.uk/news/council-blocks-bt-street-hub-plan-for-bishop-s-stortford-aft-9419400/), [[4]](https://www.warrington-worldwide.co.uk/2023/05/31/cutting-edge-bt-street-hubs-rejected-by-planners/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://www.sussexexpress.co.uk/news/politics/council/state-of-the-art-bt-street-hub-could-be-installed-in-eastbourne-5341184)
* Paragraph 7 – [[7]](https://www.advertiserandtimes.co.uk/news/council-slams-wi-fi-hubs-planned-for-town-high-street-9294337/), [[6]](https://www.brightonandhovenews.org/2024/01/05/street-wifi-hubs-given-planning-consent-but-council-may-still-say-no/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/stockton-bt-phone-box-plan-32692181> - Stockton Council is considering replacing two old phone boxes on Oxbridge Lane and Yarm Lane with BT's 'Street Hubs', which offer public Wi-Fi and free calls. These hubs provide ultra-fast, encrypted Wi-Fi powered by renewable energy, free phone calls, a tablet interface, and environmental sensors for air quality and traffic monitoring. The hubs also feature HD screens displaying advertising and community content, with maintenance funded by sponsorship. The proposal aims to enhance local infrastructure and digital connectivity without additional costs to taxpayers.
3. <https://www.bishopsstortfordindependent.co.uk/news/council-blocks-bt-street-hub-plan-for-bishop-s-stortford-aft-9419400/> - East Herts Council has refused BT's planning application for a 'Street Hub' in Bishop's Stortford town centre, citing concerns over potential anti-social behaviour and drug-related offences. Hertfordshire Constabulary expressed fears that the free Wi-Fi could attract youths and facilitate drug dealing. The council also noted that the area already has comprehensive 4G coverage and free Wi-Fi from local businesses, questioning the necessity of the hub. The decision highlights the balance between technological advancement and community safety.
4. <https://www.warrington-worldwide.co.uk/2023/05/31/cutting-edge-bt-street-hubs-rejected-by-planners/> - Warrington Borough Council's development management committee has refused planning consent for four BT 'Street Hubs' in Bridge Street, Wilson Patten Street, Knutsford Road, and Latchford. The council cited concerns over potential increased anti-social behaviour in areas already experiencing high levels of such issues. Additionally, visual amenity grounds were raised, with objections to the hubs' impact on the street scene. BT's proposal to install 13 hubs across Warrington has faced significant opposition.
5. <https://www.sussexexpress.co.uk/news/politics/council/state-of-the-art-bt-street-hub-could-be-installed-in-eastbourne-5341184> - A planning application for a BT 'Street Hub' in Eastbourne's Terminus Road has been submitted to Eastbourne Borough Council. The hub aims to replace existing BT payphone kiosks and provide ultrafast public Wi-Fi, USB charging, and free phone calls. It will also display emergency awareness messaging and offer advertising for local businesses, including 876 hours of free council advertising per year. BT argues that the hubs address the underuse of traditional phone boxes and potential anti-social behaviour.
6. <https://www.brightonandhovenews.org/2024/01/05/street-wifi-hubs-given-planning-consent-but-council-may-still-say-no/> - JC Decaux has won a planning appeal to install four digital advertising screens in central Brighton, despite initial council objections. The screens, similar to modern bus shelters, will act as standalone 5G mobile phone masts, offering free Wi-Fi, emergency phones, and defibrillators. The council expressed concerns about pedestrian safety and the impact on the area's character. Although the planning appeal was successful, the council, as the landlord, may still refuse to grant licences for the hubs.
7. <https://www.advertiserandtimes.co.uk/news/council-slams-wi-fi-hubs-planned-for-town-high-street-9294337/> - BCP Council has rejected three out of four BT 'Street Hubs' planned for Christchurch High Street, deeming them 'incongruous, unsympathetic, and an unnecessarily prominent introduction to the high street.' The hubs, intended to provide free Wi-Fi and act as LED advertising posters, were proposed for locations outside Subway, Santander, and Milletts. The council allowed one hub in Saxon Square, stating it would not look incongruous due to existing street furniture. The decision reflects concerns over the hubs' compatibility with the area's character.