dti

26 June 2007

Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MBE MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR INDUSTRY AND THE REGIONS

Peter Luff MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Our Ref: LB/623340
Your Ref:

Dear Peter

Thank you for your letter of 20 June, enclosing correspondence from your constituent, Carolyn Morris of Bishampton and Throckmorton Parish Council, 9 Tilesford Park, Throckmorton, Pershore WR10 2LA, about mobile telephone masts.

When dealing with public concerns over health, the Government looks carefully at the available evidence. We also seek to make the fullest possible information available to the public and to correct misapprehensions if fears appear to be unfounded.

In the case of concerns over possible adverse effects on health from mobile phone masts, we rely on the Radiation Protection Division of the Health Protection Agency (formerly National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB)) for independent expert advice on protection standards for exposure to ionising and non-ionising radiation including radio frequencies from mobile phone technology. Three major reviews have been conducted on this subject and a note on their findings is attached at Annex A. As you will see, a precautionary approach has been adopted but levels recorded have invariably been well below any recommended safety level.

There is an understandable assumption that more mobile masts equals more exposure. In reality, however, the better the signal from the mast, the lower the exposure from the phone. If there is a poor signal (for instance at the edge of a cell), the mobile phone has to increase its power output and hence exposure of the user will rise. Likewise, the power levels at the base station needs to increase to talk to the phones. By contrast, in areas where there are high numbers of users, (for instance in cities), it is common for base stations to be closer together to provide increased capacity. The result is that urban base stations can usually work at far lower power levels.

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While it is not for the Government to decide how many mobile mast base stations there should be, we do decide on the safeguards necessary to protect public health and issue guidance to local planning authorities who deal with individual applications.

Demand for mobile communications services continues to grow, even more so with the introduction of 3G which provides the user with mobile multimedia and internet access. If fewer masts receive planning consent, the signal strength may have to be higher at other masts, or coverage will be reduced. In other words, stopping the erection of new mobile masts might result in higher levels of exposure from those already in operation. Exposure guidelines will still be adhered to with existing masts, but I feel it is important to underline the fact that the intuitive belief that the fewer the number of mobile masts, the lower the Radio Frequency (RF) exposure to the general population, is not necessarily true.

Although the available evidence is reassuring the Government keeps an open mind on all these issues and continues to commission further research. I set out some information about this work, at Annex B.

Furthermore, it is a matter for the relevant local planning authority to decide whether or not to approve a planning application, and central Government does not intervene in that process. If your constituents have concerns and have not done so already, they may wish to contact their local planning authority to discuss any proposed development.

Planning applications for telecommunications infrastructure are considered in line with Planning Policy Guidance Note No 8 (PPG8). PPG8 was specifically revised to take account of the findings of the Stewart Report and can be found at www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1143963. PPG8 requires all mast sites to comply with the ICNIRP guidelines. This requirement is based on sound science and follows the overwhelming scientific consensus on emissions from masts. As with all such guidance there is a need to ensure that it is kept up to date and the Government is currently reviewing the planning arrangements for mobile phone masts.

In addition, central and local Government and the five mobile network operators have an agreed Code of Best Practice on Mobile Phone Network Development. The Code aims to promote better consultation and transparency in the decision making process and incorporates the "ten commitments" made by the mobile operators under this Code. These commitments have been the subject of two independent audits by Deloitte and Touche. Both audits conclude that *"the evidence seen of the operator's processes and procedures during our review fairly reflects the operators assertion that the operators have continued to make demonstrable progress in the implementation of the ten commitments."*

I hope this information helps to clarify all the relevant issues and reassures your constituents.

Best wishes

MARGARET HODGE

Annex A

The first major review, published in May 2000, was the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones and Health, which became known as the "Stewart Report" after its chairman Sir William Stewart. The report found that *"the balance of evidence to date suggests that exposures to RF radiation below ...[exposure] guidelines do not cause adverse health effects to the general population"*, but recommended a precautionary approach. The report was based on a comprehensive review of the scientific information then available and provided a series of recommendations designed to provide much more information to the public about mobile technology and to address the public's concerns, to implement the precautionary approach. They also recommended adoption of the International Commission on Non Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) exposure guidelines. All UK mobile masts comply with these exposure guidelines. The full Stewart Report can be found at: http://www.iegmp.org.uk

The second report was an update of the scientific evidence conducted by the independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation (AGNIR) and was published on 14 January 2004. It concluded *"in aggregate the research published since the IEGMP report does not give cause for concern"*, but noted that mobile phones have only been in widespread use for a relatively short period of time. It therefore called for more research. See www.hpa.org.uk/radiation/publications/documents_of_nrpb/abstracts/absd14-2.htm

The most recent report issued by the NRPB on 11 January 2005 is entitled "Mobile Phones and Health 2004". The report provided further advice and reviewed the precautionary recommendations suggested by the Stewart report. The NRPB Board *"believes the main conclusions reached in the Stewart report still apply today and that a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phone technologies should continue to be adopted"*. They added *"since [the Stewart Report] the widespread development in the use of mobile phones world-wide has not been accompanied by associated, clearly established increases in adverse health effects. Within the UK, there is a lack of hard information showing that the mobile phone systems in use are damaging to health. It is important to emphasise this crucial point."* See: www.hpa.org.uk/radiation/publications/documents_of_nrpb/abstracts/absd15-5.htm

All three reports base conclusions and recommendations on independent scientific evidence, but the UK is not the only body to have investigated possible health effects from mobile phone masts in recent years. Research has also been conducted by the Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel (1999), the Health Council of the Netherlands (2000 and 2004), an Expert Group set up by the French Government (2001), the British Medical Association (2001) and the Swedish Radiation Protection Authority (2003). All have produced reports on this subject.

As a part of the "precautionary approach" Stewart recommended an audit of emissions at locations close to sites near schools and hospitals. The Government charged the then Radiocommunications Agency to carry out the audit (the agency is now part of Ofcom).

The study has so far examined mobile phone masts on over 400 sites across the UK, looking at school sites and hospitals. The readings showed emission levels to be significantly below the maximum exposure recommended independently by ICNIRP (in most cases well below 1% of the guideline level). More details on the audit can be found at www.ofcom.org.uk/sitefinder/audit_info. Separately, the most recent NRPB report stated that the Board's own measurements of emission levels *'demonstrate that there is no scientific basis for establishing minimal distances between base stations and areas of public occupancy, as has been suggested in some countries'*

Annex B

Research

The Government accepted the recommendations for more research and established the Mobile Telecommunications Health Research Programme. This programme includes studies to investigate possible effects from pulsed signals and on individuals who might be hypersensitive to mobile phone signals. It also describes the background and some studies funded under the MTHR Programme. For more detail on MTHR funded projects see www.mthr.org.uk.

Electromagnetic Hypersensitivity (EHS)

Questions about EHS are normally for the Department of Health and I would not want to comment on medical matters, but I am happy to provide sources of further information that describe action that the Government has taken and research which is underway.

EHS was discussed in the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB – now part of the Health Protection Agency) report on Mobile Phones and Health 2004. See pages 34-36 paragraphs 112-122: www.hpa.org.uk/radiation/publications/documents_of_nrpb/abstracts/absd15-5.htm.

The World Health Organisation also takes an interest in EHS and held a workshop on EHS in Prague during October 2004, further details see www.who.int/peh-emf/meetings/hypersens_summary_oct04.pdf.

TETRA, 3G and other new technologies

TETRA was considered in a report by the NRPB in 2001. They concluded: *"current evidence suggests that it is unlikely that the special features of the signals from TETRA mobile terminals and repeaters pose a hazard to health"*. This conclusion was endorsed by the NRPB review of the science in January 2004. Newer technologies including 3G are discussed in Mobile Phones and Health 2004. All such technologies should comply with the exposure guidelines. The report is found at: www.hpa.org.uk/radiation/publications/documents_of_nrpb/abstracts/absd12-2.htm