

Why the Harrogate Mast Decision Should Discomfort Every Parish with a Church Mast

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On 12 November, the Court of Appeal in London dismissed an appeal brought by the Government to refuse the siting of an 82ft mast within 425 yards of three Harrogate schools. Whatever the outcome, and further appeals, the fact that the case came about at all highlights crucial points in the debate about mobile phone masts, and it affects every church decision to allow its property to be used for this purpose.

It is not about confused and inadequate law. It is not about money to keep a church in repair or a mission financed. It is about your neighbour. It is about the weak and vulnerable. It is a decision between serving powerful business empires, marketing giants, and government will, or love for people who will be affected now and in the future from emissions from your towers and steeples.

Under guidelines from the Office of Deputy Prime Minister, mobile phone operators are required to consult with parents and governors if a proposed telecommunications mast is sited near a school, and its beam of maximum intensity falls on the grounds or buildings. In a report to the government in May 2000, the Stewart Committee, under Sir William Stewart – now chairman of the National Radiological protection Board (NRPB) and Health Protection Agency (HPA) – made this recommendation on grounds of precaution. In other words, there were too many gaps in the research to declare radiation from phone masts to be unquestionably safe, and children, it said, being more vulnerable than healthy adults, need better protection.

However, planning legislation declares that whilst even the perception of potential endangerment to health can be a material consideration in a planning decision, the courts should not be deciding whether any particular mast is a danger to health. And that is where the Harrogate appeal, as so many others, fell down. The courts say that the matter of safety is covered by other government guidelines, and that if a mast has a certificate of compliance to these safety guidelines, then sufficient account has been taken of risk.

So why the national uproar? Surely if masts are certified, there is no more to be said, other than that you don't like the look of a mast in a particular place?

The problem arises because hundreds of thousands of people complain of adverse effects from living with mobile masts. Studies have shown that these reports of 'diminished well-being' (let's make it innocuous) are indeed correlated to masts. While some authorities would like to attribute the effects to psychosomatic reaction, this is plainly not the case for most of these people. Statistical studies on 'microwave syndrome' from masts is fairly conclusive, and only this week, the government research programme on mobile phones and health (MTHR) has announced an

extension to one study, to address for the first time the matter of people sensitive to phone mast radiation.

Let's bring 'well-being' into focus. Imagine being told that you will never sleep properly again in your life. Imagine what your doctor would tell you about the effect on your immune system, since sleep is an essential survival process for all human beings. Without sleep your body does not produce enough melatonin. Added to this, mast radiation also directly suppresses melatonin production. Melatonin is your body's natural defence against cancerous cells, and without it you are extremely vulnerable (night shift workers experience higher rates of cancer, for example). For many people sensitive to masts, the problem is severe disturbance of sleep.

Now let's travel the scale of effects. Imagine instead being told that you will have headaches for the rest of your life (and by the way these headaches are often not treatable with a few paracetamol). Is that a socially acceptable by-product of a mobile phone mast erected near your home or place of work?

Travel to the other end of the spectrum: imagine reading research that says the frequencies employed by mobile phone technology to encode its messages are, over a long period of time, known to affect the barrier in the brain that keeps toxins out, or that they disturb the very subtle bioelectromagnetic frequencies in our bodies, by which we all live, stay healthy, and in sound mind. The research does not just exist: there is a great deal of it.

So let's look at the safety guidelines that everyone depends on for every mast planning decision and certification, and to reassure parishes like yours. Produced by the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP), these guidelines state very clearly that since high levels of microwave radiation are known to heat living tissue, and that this will be likely to cause physiological damage, exposure levels should be set such that heating does not occur. ICNIRP is equally explicit that while other health effects from chronic exposure at low levels have been shown, *we don't yet know enough to be able to set a safety level*. The guidelines therefore are simply not intended to protect anyone from these known effects.

Knowing that so many people *are* complaining of adverse effects from phone masts, what would you do? Tell all these people they must be wrong, because the operators and Government say it isn't proven? Or express compassion, love and divine care, and refuse to be part of this modern commercial mass experiment? What do you think St Paul would write to a Corinthian church debating taking the money, or caring for its neighbours?