

Review of Proposed Post Office Closures

Overview & Scrutiny 1

Partnerships, Regeneration, Community Safety & Community
Engagement



NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL

December 2007

Foreword

On 20th November 2007 Post Office Limited started a public consultation period of 6 weeks regarding proposals to close 7 Post Offices in the Borough of Northampton. This was part of the national 'Network Change Programme' agreed by Government, which would see 2,500 Post Office branches close across the country.

With the Christmas period intervening the time for consultation had already been extended but was still short with responses due back by 10th January 2008.

It was agreed that Overview & Scrutiny 1 (Partnerships, Regeneration, Community Safety & Community Engagement) would undertake a short focused enquiry into the proposed closures. This work included scrutiny of Post Office Limited's proposals and process being followed, but also it allowed evidence, facts and experiences of the public and Sub Postmasters/Mistresses from the threatened Offices to be taken into consideration.

The Committee met on 20th December 2007 to consider the evidence presented by members of the public, Ward Councillors, staff from the post offices listed for closure and Northampton Borough Councils Regeneration and Planning Departments to provide a case to keep the threatened offices open. The Committee also put a number of questions to representatives of Post Office Ltd concerning the rationale and process being followed.

The short timescale was challenging but has enabled some greater scrutiny into the impact of Post Office Limited's proposal and it also allowed the public to participate in assisting the Council in putting together a case to keep threatened offices opened.

I am very grateful to all members of Overview & Scrutiny 1, Northampton Borough Council Officers, representatives of Post Office Ltd, and of the post offices threatened, and members of the public in contributing to this review at such short notice. I would particularly like to thank Northampton Borough Council's Scrutiny Officer, Ben Bix, for arranging the meeting, and compiling the evidence together into this report.

Cllr Andrew Simpson
Chair, Overview & Scrutiny Committee
(Partnerships, Regeneration, Community Engagement & Community Safety)

Executive summary and key findings

This Council believes that Post Offices provide a unique and essential service to many communities within the Borough and supports their efforts to remain open. This council also objects to any future measures imposed by the Government that will cause further damage to the Post Office network. (Full Council motion 19th November 2007)

Northampton is part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands growth area identified for economic and population growth. The housing projections for Northampton 2001 to 2021 are 31,500. This will result in a population of 267,480 in the Northampton Conurbation, using an average household occupation of 2.32 people per household. Taking the 2006 population to be 200,100 this gives a linear growth of 4,813 people year on year.

Northampton will become city sized and as such we will develop an infrastructure that ensures that during this rapid period of growth there are enough schools, health care services, emergency services, roads, affordable quality housing and green space to support the rest of our vision. There will be excellent public services, serving healthy, skilled and prosperous residents who are proud of where they live and aspire to improve their lifestyle and opportunities.

The Local Government White Paper states that district councils have an essential role on place shaping. It states that “people want to live in pleasant and thriving places: to have good quality services, a safe and good physical environment, accessible transport links, a strong sense of community and for there to be opportunity for all.”

This report demonstrates that the proposed Post Office closures will lead to;

- Increased isolation and social exclusion especially among vulnerable groups without access to a car, plus lower disposable income, as people have to spend more on transport.
- Increased car journeys.
- Increased pressure on voluntary transport schemes such as the Volunteer Bureau Car Scheme and Northampton Door-to-Door Service. This may then lead to requests that the County Council and the Borough Council provide more funding.
- The closure of successful retail businesses that will have a negative impact on the communities served.

Post offices are, for many, a lifeline in their community and provide a highly valued service. The closure of the post offices listed in this report will be detrimental to the quality of life for those most in need of the services provided by local post offices.

Key findings

- The Post Office Ltd has to close 2,500 Post Offices nationwide – 52 in Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland
- As part of Government Strategy, it seems inevitable that some post offices must close in Northampton

- There is no evidence that those post offices proposed for closure are loss making;- on the contrary our evidence suggests that some are very profitable as businesses.
- The impact of a post office closure, particularly when in a parade of shops, will have a negative impact on other retailers in the area which could then also close
- A number of offices proposed for closure are combined with retail businesses – without the Post Office element these businesses are not viable.
- Post Office Limited has used the Indices of Multiple Deprivation for 2004 when there is a 2007 update to this available. The 2007 Indices have been included in this report.
- The distance between the post office proposed for closure and the alternative branch meets the Government's Access Criteria but does not take into account of the proximity of population to the alternate sites, which may be greater than the calculated distance.
- The Post Office have not been made fully aware of the growth agenda for Northampton, despite contacting the council in July and October 2007
- West Northamptonshire Development Corporation appears not to have been invited to comment on the proposed closures
- 9 of the Post Offices in town have not been included on the Closure list or the Alternates list and may be less sustainable in the long term than the ones earmarked for closure
- It needs to be established how much Post Watch have been engaged in plans for Northampton
- The Post Office has selected the branches for closure based on an assessment made in four key measures:
 1. *Geography*
 2. *Road Infrastructure*
 3. *Demographics*
 4. *Other factors, including economic impact*
- To prevent closure the Council will need to provide information that disproves the Post Office Limited's case based on these measures

Recommendations

1. The Council must provide the following updated information to Post Office Limited by January 10th 2008; -
 - Demographics
 - Population and proposed new settlements
 - Growth, regeneration and development plans
 - An assessment of the economic impact of closures where possible

2. Agree the evidence presented in this report as part of the councils formal submission to the Post Office Ltd

3. The Council improves its ability to respond to consultation requests from external bodies in a timely manner, and uses Overview and Scrutiny to assist in responses where appropriate.

Detailed Findings for each Post Office *(map attached as appendix a)*

Boothville Post Office, 3 Booth Lane North, Northampton, NN3 6JE

1

Currently open 41 hours a week and has one customer service position. It is a newsagents and Off-licence, has parking facilities outside the branch and a bus stop 75 yards from the office.

Super Output Area Code: E01027183 – 68.4% (2007)

Community Evidence

This area of Boothville has a very high number of elderly people and Post Office Ltd need to consider that the alternatives are over 1 mile away from the population centre. The Branch itself is in parade of shops that are in decline, if the Branch closes it will plunge shops into deeper trouble. Boothville Post Office serves a socially deprived area, in which people have little or no access to private transport. Post Office Ltd propose that Highlands is an alternative branch and observes that it is on level terrain, but as the name suggests it isn't as it is at the top of hill. People from Thorpeville & Moulton Leys also use this branch – closure would mean extended car journeys. The proposed alternative branch of Highlands at Coppice Drive has considerable problems with parking and access at peak times.

The current managers – Mr & Mrs Shah – are suffering particularly difficult personal circumstances due to illness and had asked Post Office Ltd for guidance on the future of the branch in the summer. They have stated the existing retail business will also close if the post office does.

Development and Regeneration Evidence

- 149 new homes will be built at Talavera Way
- Genesis Housing at Thorpeville/Booth Rise, 108 houses, 0.5 miles from closure branch – this is Housing Association scheme and so will be made up of less financially mobile population.
- Gate Lodge, 34 houses, 0.7 miles away from closure branch

Broadmead Avenue, Northampton, NN3 2RA

2

Currently open 46.5 hours a week and has 2 customer service positions. It also sells cards, has parking and disabled facilities. **There are no direct bus services to the alternative branches.**

Super Output Area Code: E01027173 – 23.1% (2007) **This area is within the top 25% most deprived areas in the country.**

Community Evidence

This Post Office is a key community resource for those who rely on the Post Office for access to money. People with low incomes live in this area and are likely to move into the area, due to the affordability of new homes. The existing shops in the parade where the Post office is located are already struggling and there are poor transport links to the alternatives. There has been a 3-year drive to regenerate the community in the Broadmead Avenue area. It would be ironic that after huge progress & money secured to set up a community café to enable

economic regeneration that the threat of closing the Post Office will undo all the good work of the last 3 years. This is the centre of a Managed Neighbourhood which reflects its priority as an area in need of special attention to tackle deprivation and community safety and cohesion. The Neighbourhood Co-ordinating Officer has not been involved in the proposals to close this office which will have a real detrimental impact on the community.

Development and Regeneration Evidence

- St Gregory's School, 60 houses planned, 0.8 miles away from closure branch
- St Mary's School, 86 houses, 1 mile away from closure branch.

Queens Park, Queens Park, 147 Kingsley Road, Northampton, NN2 7BT

3

Currently open 39.25 hours a week and has 2 customer service positions. It sells post office goods and cards, has parking facilities and level access.

Super Output Area Code: EO1027189 – 40% (2007)

Community Evidence

Evidence of long queues (over 45 minutes) at the Kingsthorpe proposed alternative branch. The elderly can't queue for that length of time, as standing in line waiting is worse than the walk to the Post Office. Furthermore, since the last round of closures, the facilities at Kingsthorpe have not been upgraded. There are three residential care homes/facilities for the elderly on Kingsley Road whose residents use this office and will be less able to travel to the alternative proposed branches. The other alternative branch at Kingsley Park Terrace is uphill from this branch and across a busy main road.

Development and Regeneration Evidence

- Kingsthorpe Hall may be developed and hold around 50 dwellings, around 1 mile away from the closure branch.

Lumbertubs, Brookside Centre, Lumbertubs, Northampton, NN3 8NQ

4

Currently open 37 hours a week and has 2 customer service positions. It is a Costcutter supermarket, has parking facilities nearby and level access. The bus stop is located 100 yards from the branch.

Super Output Area Code: E01027198 – 15.7% (2007) **This area is within the top 16% most deprived areas in the country.**

Community Evidence

This is one of most deprived areas of the country. The alternative identified at Weston Favell is more than a mile & hilly walk away. Customers would have to use the escalators to access the proposed alternative. Public transport is expensive and costs £2.40 return by bus to get to an alternative branch. The population centre in the far reaches of Lings is over mile away from the alternative branch. The branch is part of a *Costcutter store* and is a lifeline both for shop & social networking. Additionally, people feel safer coming to Lumbertubs Post Office.

Development and Regeneration Evidence

- Goldings School, 50 dwellings, around 1 mile from closure branch.
- Blackthorn Middle School, 128 Houses, around 1.5 miles from closure branch.

Gloucester Avenue, Delapre, Northampton, NN4 8QF

5

Currently open 46 hours a week and has 2 customer service positions. It is a Costcutter supermarket, has parking and disabled facilities. There is no direct bus service.

Super Output Area Code: E01027161 -16% (2007) **This area is within the 16% most deprived areas in the country.**

Community Evidence

Gloucester Avenue is real community asset. There is a huge amount of redevelopment going on in area, totalling almost 2300 houses. There is no direct bus service to the first alternative identified at Delapre;- residents would have to catch bus to Tesco, change and take another bus to the alternative.

According to Post Office criterion, geographical obstacles such as roads, rivers and mountains have been taken into account when proposing this closure. However, this criterion appears to have been overlooked as the A45 cuts through the route to the second proposed alternative in Hardingstone, therefore, only those with a car will have access. Coupled with the sheltered housing in the area virtually an entire community will be cut off. Closing this branch would mean asking fragile people to walk down a steep and, in winter weather, slippery hill on Towcester Road.

The alternative proposed at Hardingstone is closed 2 days a week and every lunchtime, so this will restrict usage. The Delapre alternative is too small, with no parking and is very dangerous for young families with pushchairs because of the main road. Additionally, over half Delapre Road residents are elderly & don't have internet to use as an alternative.

The sub postmaster reported that Post Office Ltd should take into consideration that 2004 data wouldn't be used for business modelling. This cannot be sound information – Post Office Ltd should be using the most up to date information, particularly in a town with rapid population growth.

This Post Office is within a Neighbourhood Managed area which reflects its priority for measures to tackle social and economic deprivation.

Development and Regeneration Evidence

- 241 dwellings under current application with WNDC off Lancaster Way.
- Nunn Mills - application with WNDC and currently pending for a mixed-use development with 1250 dwellings, community facilities. Leisure and retail centre, access and associated works.
- Ransome Road – Application with WNDC and currently pending for 800 new dwellings, community facilities and associated development.

Regent Square, 5 Campbell Street, Northampton, NN1 3DS

6

Currently open 46 hours a week and has 2 customer service positions. It sells cards and groceries.

Super Output Area Code: E01027153 – 4.2% (2007) **This area is within 5% most deprived areas in the country.** Adjacent to E01027150 – within 5% most deprived areas in the country.

Community Evidence

There is huge regeneration & investment going into Castle ward, and there is a need to protect the recovery of this area. Within the area served by this Post Office there is a night shelter, soup kitchen, and projects created to tackle drug & alcohol issues. Some people have Anti Social Behaviour Orders and are banned from accessing the town centre so proposing a town centre alternative is unworkable. All of these people have a right to existence & access to emergency payments. The post office is the key access point to the emergency payments.

Elderly residents within the 'New Life' (block of flats) building have to take themselves several stories downstairs just to get outside, and this has not been a consideration when measuring distance in the assessments of access.

It is felt that Post Office Ltd are not addressing real issues such as helping local agencies to make businesses prosper. Post Office Ltd should talk to postmasters/mistresses, who want to take business forward and not lose good business people.

The Sub postmaster reported that she has run the Post Office for 25 years, providing services to the community. Additionally, there are 32 wheelchair users coming to Branch per week, alternative Post Offices do not have this level of access. Compensation will come nowhere close to personal investment, including the investment in access. If the post office goes, retail will go & business will fold.

This Post Office is within a Neighbourhood Managed area which reflects its priority for measures to tackle social and economic deprivation.

Development and Regeneration Evidence

- Centro development on Broad Street, 258 dwellings within 200 metres
- Regent Street, 43 dwellings, around 200 yards from closure branch
- St Georges, 67 dwellings at present, 0.5 miles from closure branch
- Barrack Road, 300 dwellings with possible hotel around 1 mile from closure branch

High Street, Weston Favell, NN3 3JW

7

Currently open 41.5 hours a week and has 2 customer service positions. It is a general store and off-license with roadside parking.

Super Output Area Code: E01027260 – 87.6% (2007)

Community Evidence

We must recognise that a Post Office is a public service and should not be closed. Public money goes into providing these services, and government has share in the business. Members of public & Northampton Borough Council should have full access to information about the future of Post Offices. Whilst the closure list requires 2,500 to be closed in this phase it requires the public to think in terms not of communities but of 'Not in My Back Yard'. During recent cuts in Primary Care Trust services, it was acknowledged by Patricia Hewitt that population growth had been underestimated and the same thing seems to be happening here. The Post Office Ltd has no way of quantifying or measuring the social value of when a

widow/er meets one person during trip to the Post Office - this may be the only human contact that person has during the day.

The post office & shop in the High St of Weston Favell village is the last & vital village amenity. Over 100 residents attended a meeting to express concerns at the proposed closure. This branch meets all criteria to remain open on access, whereas we should see the proposed closure of the Tesco store branch on health & safety grounds due to dangerous roads restricting access. Some customers come from a 10-mile radius to use Weston Favell Post Office. The seriously under-manned alternative Tesco branch appears to struggle to absorb the existing level of business, and would not be able to cope with additional footfall.

The Sub postmaster has increased profits by 38% & extended the range of services offered within the branch. He is particularly helpful to vulnerable and his post office is a lifeline to many, there are simply no realistic alternative choices. The sub postmaster will lose a livelihood and the vulnerable in the community will lose a vital community service. A petition against the proposed closure signed by over 800 local residents provides evidence of the value the community places on this service. *(Petition collected by Piyush Paw – Sub postmaster, submitted to Post Office Limited)*

The sub postmaster informed the meeting that he had been running the branch for 8 years. It had been quite run down when taken on but with hard work, the business has been built up. Since telling customers that the branch was earmarked for closure, over 200 customers have wanted to get involved in working together to keep the branch open. This branch employs 2 staff, both of which will lose their jobs if the branch closes. The sub postmaster reported that half of the customers cannot walk to the alternative proposed at Tesco, nor wait in queue for over 30 minutes. It is not a level walk, and would be very difficult particularly for elderly. The sub postmaster takes time out for every single customer that walks through door – the alternative branch cannot offer this level of personal service. If the Post Office closes so will the business, and the compensation package that the Post Office will be offering will not cover the losses.

Supporting evidence of access problems to proposed alternative branch at Tesco (Piyush Paw)



Development and Regeneration Evidence

- Development of former Peugeot Garage into 50+ homes close to the closure branch
- Former Cherry Orchard Middle School site, possibly offering 170 dwellings, is situated 0.4 miles from the branch.

Appendix A - Map of Proposed Post Office Closures and Alternatives in Northampton Borough.

