

POST OFFICE CLOSURES

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

(Please note that these are only initial questions and the committee may well wish to ask further questions depending on the answers given).

Questions to Age Concern and Older Persons' Forum:

1. What are your views on the proposed closures of the Post Offices in Copeland?
2. Are you aware of any high concentrations of the elderly and very elderly in any of proposed closure areas?
3. Do any of the specific closures cause unreasonable access to the alternative branches for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups?
4. The Expenditure and Food Survey (2002-3) shows that almost half of the transport spend in rural areas is accounted for by operating costs (including fuel expenditure), while fuel expenditure has risen by an estimated 18% since 2000, a significant figure for marginalised customers in rural areas to bear.

In light of this what will be the cost implications for those people who don't drive and will have to use taxis or private transport to travel to access the alternative branches?

5. Is the local post office branch seen as a social safety net? Are they used regularly by single parents, the elderly and vulnerable groups for benefits or pensions?
6. What are your views on having outreach services to replace Post Offices?
7. Are there any issues you would like the Council and the County Council to consider following the closures?

Questions to Copeland Disability Forum:

1. What are your views on the proposed closures of the Post Offices in Copeland?
2. How regularly do the members of your Forum use the affected Post Offices and what services do they use it for?
3. In terms of the specific closures are you aware of any potential problems that people with disabilities will have accessing the alternative branches for the closures at:
 - Tangier Street
 - Moor Row
 - Bigrigg
 - Holborn Hill
 - Beckermat
 - Gosforth

- Parton
 - Lowca
- 4 Are there any issues you would like the Council and the County Council to consider following the closures?

Questions to National Federation of Sub Post Masters (NFSP):

1. The NFSP has commented nationally that there may be many more than 2,500 subpostmasters who wish to leave the network. Do you think that the Network change programme could lead to a large number of unplanned closures, or the need for an additional round of future restructuring in Cumbria?
2. Do you know how many of the Post Offices earmarked for closure in Copeland are making a profit?
3. Are there any restrictions on what existing sub-postmasters can do in the services they can provide?
4. Do you consider that the closure of the post office services within a shop often spells the end for the shop?
5. How do you think the alternative branches and the rest of the network in Copeland will be affected by the closures?
6. Are you aware of any inaccuracies in the branch access report that Post Office Ltd has produced for the closures in Copeland?
7. The NFSP has said nationally that although grants were available to enable Post Office facilities to be upgraded, it is believed “that the maximum grant amounts are too low and total funds available is inadequate.” They considered the sum was likely only to allow relatively small grants to a few hundred post offices.

Do you think that this will mean that Post Office Ltd will not be able to ensure accessibility for all in the proposed alternative branches in Copeland?

8. What consultation has there been between the Post Office Ltd and the Sub Postmasters on the closures both nationally and locally? Have you been happy with this consultation?

Questions to Postwatch Northern England:

1. Postwatch has a statutory duty to protect and promote the interests of customers of postal services. What will Postwatch do to ensure that this happens in the consultation process on the Network Change Programme?
2. In the Memorandum of Understanding between Postwatch and Post Office Ltd on the Post Public Consultation Phase it states that:

“The further review process is a method for Postwatch to nominate individual branches for further discussion.

This process will be embarked upon where Postwatch shows that, with respect to an individual branch, Post Office Ltd has not given due consideration to material evidence received during the consultation in coming to its decision, or where evidence emerges from the consultation that the proposal for that branch does not meet Government's policy requirements."

It is understood that Postwatch will not have a veto on final decisions so how will this work in practise?

3. Is it correct that the factors that Post Office Ltd would take into account for reassessing the closures are:
- The proximity of Post Office branches proposed for closure to nearby branches
 - Customer numbers
 - Size and ability of nearby branches to absorb extra customers
 - Commercial implications
 - Physical access constraints
 - Availability of public transport
 - Alternative access to key Post Office services (e.g. ATMs)
 - Local demographics
 - Impact on local economies

Are these the ones you will be using in discussions with Post Office Ltd?

4. In Postwatch's response to the Government's consultation on the Post Office Network March 2007 Postwatch stated that its research shows that some Outreach services are more successful than others. Can you provide more information on this?
5. Do you agree with The New Economics Foundation research that the closure of a post office in an urban area would lead to a loss of about £270,000 to the local economy? Furthermore, in rural economies, it is estimated that every £1 of subsidy makes between £2 and £4 for the local economy.
6. Is it also correct that £6 of every £10 withdrawn from a post office either from a Post Office card account or by people using the post office to access their bank services—will be spent in the local economy? That money will be spent elsewhere, and lost to the local economy, if the post office closes.
7. Can you give us some information about the Postwatch research that suggests that, in the event of a closure in rural areas, customers are increasingly likely to use the post office nearer to where they work or shop, not necessarily the one closest to where they live (ERM/MORI 2006)?
8. Do you consider that it would be theoretically possible to close almost all the post offices in a particular area, and still meet the national access criteria?

For example, Post Office Ltd could close two of the three urban post offices in Whitehaven and still easily meet the national criteria, as the criteria for urban deprived areas, and the 95 per cent requirement within 6 miles in each postcode district, would be met?

9. Do you accept that public confidence has been undermined in both the consultation exercise and the subsequent closure programme through the length of time given for the consultation?

Was Postwatch not able to persuade Post office Ltd to have a longer consultation period that could have been resolved this concern?

10. Is Postwatch due to be abolished?

Questions to Post Office Ltd:

1. Can you explain the reasons for the Network Change Programme?
2. How were the branches identified for closure in Copeland?
3. Alan Cook, the managing director of Post Office Ltd has stated that:

"Neither the level of profitability nor the level of saving achieved is the overriding consideration in proposing a particular branch for closure."

"Only in the most exceptional circumstances would an office profitable to Post Office Ltd would be closed under network change."

Is this correct?

4. How and when was the data in the branch access report put together?
5. In the consultation document on the closure programme the Government states that Post Office Ltd will give priority to 'protecting vulnerable communities in villages, towns and cities' when it draws up its proposals to close post offices and to set up new Outreach services.

In light of this why was it considered not to have outreach services in Copeland? How long will outreach services be guaranteed for?

6. Is it correct that the factors that Post Office Ltd would take into account for reassessing the closures are:

- The proximity of Post Office branches proposed for closure to nearby branches
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Are there any others? How are these factors defined and assessed?

7. Is there any regeneration or economic development information you would consider and if so, what type of information?
8. Are you aware that the numbers of people living with diabetes, osteoarthritis, dementia, stroke disease and cancers look likely to significantly increase over the next 15 years in this part of Cumbria? Was this factored into the closures?

(Gibson Freake Edge - North Cumbria Whole Systems Health Review (Recent review for Cumbria Primary Care Trust as part of the Closer to Home Consultation))

9. Are you aware that the over 65 in Cumbria currently comprise 25.1% of the population projected to increase to 29.3% by 2014 which compares to 21.1% and 23.4% for England? Did you factor this into the number of closures in Cumbria?
10. Where a proposed closure is withdrawn due to the local public consultation is it correct that Post Office Ltd can:
 - Replace the closure with another proposed branch closure in the area
 - Replace the withdrawn closure with a proposed outreach service; or
 - Continue with the Area Plan with one less closure?

11. The area plan proposal states that it:

“does not disproportionately affect the inhabitants of the area relative to other parts of the UK”

Are you aware that this Council has an agreement with the Government that its proposals should be West Cumbria proofed and was that considered in the Network Change Programme?

12. Are you aware that this Council introduced in April an alternative payment system that stopped payments at its cash offices to encourage people to use their Post office to make payments to the Council? If not, would you reconsider any of the closures in the light of this?
13. One of the recommendations of the House of Commons Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Committee report on the Post Office Closure Programme states that:

“We believe that there should be a presumption against closing a post office where this is the last shop in the village, or in a deprived urban area.”

Has Post Office Ltd considered this in the Network Change Programme?

14. Did the proposals for closure of the sub-post offices take into account the degree to which the office was Disability Discrimination Compliant, or otherwise accessible.

For example did you take into account the money that has been spent at Tangiers Street on disability access improvements?

15. What money will be available to enable disabled access to be made available to the alternative branches in Copeland? Will that include additional car parking spaces?
16. The Post Office Ltd website states that the Network Change Programme is just one part of an overall strategy to return Post Office Ltd to a more stable footing by 2011.

What is included in this strategy?

17. The network consisted of 21,305 post offices in 1985/6 compared to 14,376 post offices in 2006. Only 7,500 branches are required nationally to meet the minimum access criteria in the network change programme and after the current round of closures there will be a network of about approximately 11,500 branches with some outreach services.

Do you think that the closures in the Change Programme will be sufficient to create a more viable and sustainable network or will more closures be needed?

18. Is Post Office Ltd willing to engage with local authorities and other third sector organisations that may wish to step in and fund or support particular branches or introduce innovative approaches to delivering services?

Questions to Cumbria County Council:

1. What are the County Council's plans for Public Transport provision in Copeland? Will the effect of these closures be taken into account?
2. Will buses with better access for elderly and vulnerable people be available in the affected areas?
3. It is understood that the County Council has been gathering evidence on the branch access reports for the proposed closures through the Neighbourhood Forums.

Can you please take us through the evidence that has been found for each of the proposed closures in Copeland.

4. Does the County Council have any regeneration or economic development plans which could have a bearing on the closures?
5. Are there any sheltered homes or social care buildings within the areas covered in the closures?
6. It is understood that the County Council has pioneered alternative models of delivering post office services, such as combining the post office with a shop and library 'link' in Melmerby.

Will it be considering anything similar elsewhere in Cumbria?

7. How will the County Council be using its new powers under the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 to ensure the future vitality of the post office network in Cumbria?

Questions to Parish Councils/Local Communities

1. Can you please take us through the branch access report for the closure in your area.

In particular can you tell us if there any inaccuracies or errors in the report and what will be the effect of having to go to the alternative branches quoted in the following factors:-

1. The proximity of Post Office branches proposed for closure to nearby branches
2. Customer numbers
3. Size and ability of nearby branches to absorb extra customers
4. Commercial implications
5. Physical access constraints
6. Availability of public transport
7. Alternative access to key Post Office services (e.g. ATMs)
8. Local demographics
9. Impact on local economies

2. How much will the closure of the Post Office impact on your community?