

The Post Office Network

Consultation Response Form

The closing date for this consultation is 8 March 2007

You may find it helpful to set out your responses to the consultation using this response form.

Name: **Tim Coomer (Village Shops Adviser)**

Organisation's name and remit (if applicable):

Community First – Rural Community Council of Wiltshire

Community First is a charitable organisation that works at the forefront of community development to help improve the quality of life and economic well being of people and local communities throughout Wiltshire and Swindon

Community First works in close partnership with local grass roots communities, voluntary organisations, statutory agencies and funders to help develop and deliver wide ranging community programmes that bring social, economic and environmental benefits to local people in Wiltshire and Swindon.

Community First has an expert staff of 30 providing wide ranging local knowledge and professional experience in community initiatives and enterprise development. This specialist expertise includes community planning and appraisals, partnership development, rural services development, grant funding, Link schemes, village halls, **village shops**, parish councils, community transport, credit unions, rural housing, community regeneration, social enterprise and community projects development and management.

Community First is part of the national network of Rural Community Councils which support and promotes the work of the voluntary sector in rural communities and market towns.

Address: **Wyndhams
St Joseph's Place
Devizes
Wiltshire
SN10 2DD**

Email: tcoomer@communityfirst.org.uk

Return completed forms (preferably by e-mail) to:

Postal Office Network Consultation
Department of Trade and Industry
Response Centre
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0ET

Fax: 00 44 (0) 20 7215 5329

E-mail: dti.enquiries@dti.gsi.gov.uk

Please cross one box from the following list of options that best describes you.

- ☐ Individual
- ☐ Individual - Sub postmaster
- ☐ Small to Medium Enterprise
- ☐ Trade Union
- ☐ Interest Group
- ☐ Regional Organisation
- ☐ Devolved Administration
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ Central Government
- ☒ Other (please specify) _Rural Community Council - Wiltshire

Please feel free to answer as many or as few questions as you wish. It is helpful if you can explain your views as fully as possible in the comments boxes, especially where you disagree with the proposals set out in the consultation paper.

Question 1.

Do you think the Government's forward strategy for the post office network addresses all the key issues and challenges the network faces?

Yes ☐

No ☒

No view ☐

Comments

The forward strategy addresses most of the key issues the network faces but fails to tackle the associated problem of village shop closures where the Post Office is hosted in a retail outlet. The Post Office creates footfall for the shop and both businesses' viability are inextricably linked. A recent survey by Community First indicates that over 50% of village shops have a Post Office counter within the store – many shops will close as a result of a Post Office closure. This will lead in these circumstances to a community losing its only retail outlet. Where possible the risk of this happening should be assessed. These cases should be analysed independently and at a local level.

- We would like to see financial support to create and maintain local schemes supporting rural retailing across the country. Investment capital and advisory support is essential to enable village retailers to diversify if they are certain to lose the Post Office counter. The retailers need help to maintain their retail business. Unless businesses are helped to diversify or reinvent themselves many postmasters will inevitably apply for 'change of use' of the premises and the outlet will be lost forever.

The forward strategy fails to identify or explain how the network will be sustained into the future after the 2,500 closures. Merely closing Post Offices will not turn around the company's fortunes.

- If a postmaster is on the cusp of any pre determined financial threshold there should be an opportunity for these postmasters to improve their business and achieve the new level of footfall/turnover – it will need a realistic time frame and business support for Postmasters to achieve this.

We agree that it is an ideal situation if a post office earmarked for closure is also a site where the current Postmaster has indicated a willingness to retire or leave the business. It is essential that the views of postmasters are taken into account. However the closure of an office should not be driven solely by the individual's desire to leave or take a redundancy package to the detriment of the community service.

Question 2.

Are there other significant factors affecting the future of the post office network which appear to have been overlooked in the Government's proposed approach?

Yes ☒

No ☐

No view ☐

Comments

The timetable for restructuring the network should be flexible; trying to complete the restructuring within 18 months will not ensure the best outcome for customers.

At least a 12 week local consultation period is required. – Six weeks does not allow enough time for local authorities and stakeholders to input their comments and recommendations.

- Rural Community Councils, the Rural Shops Alliance and Village Retail Services Association (ViRSA) are important organisations working at the grassroots in rural communities. They are ideally placed to comment on the impact - both social and economic - potential closures will have on specific communities. Community First Wiltshire employs a full time Village Shops Adviser working with sub postmasters and retailers in Wiltshire and therefore has an intimate knowledge of the businesses and communities that will be affected. Very few counties have this level of knowledge but all Rural Community Councils should have the opportunity to be involved at the 'area proposal' stage with sub postmasters and Postwatch - pre consultation.

Government, Local Authorities and other Public Sector organisations should be encouraged to use the network more for council tax, court fines, benefit payments and other public sector payments instead of removing these services or tendering them out to other companies as with the TV licensing change to PayPoint.

The government should encourage all the major banks to make their accounts accessible through the Post Office, ensuring more customers can access their money locally.

Question 3.

Do you have comments on the national access criteria proposed?

Yes ☒

No ☐

No view ☐

Comments

It is accepted that there is a need for a set of key national access criteria based upon distance and topography; however other important social and

economic factors need to be considered. The document does recognise the social importance the Post Office plays but fails to define the social role. The PO must consider:

- Walking distance to the nearest Post Office
- Availability and cost of local transport
- Impact on the local economy
- Impact on small medium sized businesses
- Accessibility for the elderly, disabled and other vulnerable groups
- Social indicators: age, income, health
- Car ownership and usage
- Parking

The access criteria as described in the document are ambiguous, failing to define rural / urban appropriately. Clarification of which Post Offices fall into each category is required to avoid any confusion in the public consultation.

Question 4.

Do you have comments on the access criteria proposed for deprived urban and rural areas?

Yes ☒

No ☐

No view ☐

Comments

As commented in Question 3, social and economic factors are important to consider across the network but are even more important considerations for the rural network.

'As the crow flies' access criteria does not always make sense in rural areas where road and transport networks are totally different to those in urban areas – the nearest Post Office within three miles may not be:

- Easily accessible by road – customers may have to travel much further than 3 miles by road to access the nearest outlet. The resulting increased car usage/car emissions will have impact on the environment.
- Accessible by public transport - in rural areas transport is often infrequent, costly and there may be no service at all to the nearest Post Office

Village Post offices are the economic and social hub of the local community. Factors such as:

- detrimental effect on the attached retail business and services provided
- number of staff losses
- loss of part time employment opportunities in the area
- Impact on other village based businesses that rely upon the PO for

banking, postage etc...

- the social reliance on the Post Office for the most vulnerable in the community
- car ownership
- disabled access

need to be taken into account on a case by case basis working alongside the access criteria. The Rural Community Councils with Postwatch, County/District Councils the RSA and ViRSA are best placed to review and advise on the local situation.

Question 5.

Do you have any suggestions as to how services might be better delivered through the post office network?

Yes ☒

No ☐

No view ☐

Comments

New technology – Sub postmasters have suggested the current horizon system is slow and outdated and the help desk and support service needs to be improved.

Investment should be available for conversion to combi counter style units. Helping with the flexibility of staff and number of hours a site can be manned.

Other counter top units should be explored in line with similar systems like National Lottery Terminals and Paypoint terminals.

The Post Office 'Pay Station' terminal should be more widely available across the network.

Question 6.

Do you have any comments on Outreach arrangements as a means of maintaining service to small and remote communities?

Yes ☒

No ☐

No view ☐

Comments

We support the expansion of core and outreach service as long as it offers a good range of products; including access to Post Office card accounts banking facilities and bill payments.

Where a host or partner site is required, other retail units or public houses in

rural areas should be considered first; this could help keep an existing business viable. Once these options have been exhausted then an outreach should be considered in a village hall, community building or similar.

A realistic rent should be paid to sites for hosting the outreach service.

Outreach sites should be proposed on the grounds of social need not just as a means to plug gaps in the national access requirements.

There should be a continuity of service from the closure of an office and the opening of an outreach alternative.

Question 7.

Do you have comments on the practicality of community ownership of parts of the post office network, which might involve the transfer of assets to community organisations and/or the establishment of local mutual or co-operative organisations to own and run local services?

Yes ☒

No ☐

No view ☐

Comments

Community First actively promotes advocates and assists in the set up of 'community shops' in Wiltshire. We are well placed to consult with local communities and parishes at the grassroots and are practised in promoting the community shop option, organising local consultations and assisting local groups. Nationally ViRSA and ACRE are best placed to disseminate information to all the community councils throughout England.

Community ownership should be seen as a real alternative to the closure of a Post Office – As part of any decision to close a rural office the option of community ownership should be actively explored with the community.

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views.

We do not intend to acknowledge receipt of individual responses unless you tick the box below.

