

Title:	<b>Presentation of the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee</b>
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee:	<b>Cllr Osborn</b>
Reporting Officer:	<b>Paul Mountford – Policy and Performance Services Manager</b>
Key decision:	<b>No</b>

---

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to present to Cabinet the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee concerning:

- Post Office Ltd's plans to close or downgrade eight Post Offices in West Wiltshire.
- Current and outstanding Section 106 Agreements, signed for various planning permissions.

### **Background**

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 19 December 2007, members of the Committee expressed concern about two issues, namely Post Office Ltd's plans to close or downgrade Post Offices in West Wiltshire, and whether current and outstanding Section 106 Agreements have been honoured for various planning permissions granted over the years.

The Policy Officer reported on Post Office Ltd's plans to close five and downgrade three Post Offices in West Wiltshire, and the grounds on which effective challenge to such plans might be based. Strong concern was expressed by the Committee over the likely effects of these changes on many residents.

The Planning portfolio holder was invited to provide an update on a range of planning issues, including progress towards the lean fundamentals way of working, work to reduce the backlog of old applications, overall performance, and actions to ensure the monitoring both of current planning obligations, and, as staffing allows, those dating back to 2000. Concerns were raised at the Committee over the lack of a comprehensive record of Section 106 Agreements, and whether or not they have been fulfilled.

## **Main issues**

### **Post Office closures and downgrading**

Post Office Ltd announced plans on 11 December to close five Post Offices in West Wiltshire, and downgrade three to outreach services. After a seven-week consultation period, which ends on 31 January, final decisions will be made. The Offices proposed for closure are:

- Broughton Gifford, Melksham
- North Bradley, Trowbridge
- Queens Square, Westbury
- Seymour Road, Trowbridge
- The Obelisk, Warminster

Offices proposed for downgrading to outreach services are:

- High Street, Wylde, Warminster
- High Street, Heytesbury, Warminster
- Church Street, Longbridge Deverill, Warminster.

The Government has issued a set of criteria, concerning usage, accessibility of alternative Post Offices, and financial benefit to the Post Office, on which closure decisions should be based. Similarly there are criteria on which the decision to convert a Post Office into an outreach service should be based – including distance to the nearest alternative and volume of transactions.

The Policy Officer met with representatives of Post Office Ltd to explore how closures could effectively be opposed. The answer was on the basis of the criteria – that a named alternative Post Office was not credible, for instance because of access difficulties, opening times, or that it was already operating beyond capacity.

The Committee gave examples of dangerous walks, long bus journeys or no bus services to alternative Post Offices, and long queues and unsuitable facilities for wheelchairs inside them. There was strong concern about the effects on those without cars, on those with mobility problems and on those who may in future have to rely on others to access Post Office services for them, leading to greater social isolation, particularly in rural areas. There was also criticism that Post Office Ltd had not provided full information on alternatives for those branches proposed for downgrading.

### **Monitoring of Planning Obligations - Section 106 Agreements**

After being recognised as a weakness in CPA in 2004, a system to monitor the implementation of planning obligations was introduced in 2005. In 2006 a computer programme was introduced to track and record implementation of Section 106 Agreements. All new planning obligations are logged onto the system, with key dates and trigger points. The objective is to input all planning obligations dating back to 2000, as staffing allows.

The Committee was concerned that a concerted effort be made to list all current and outstanding planning obligations, along with progress on whether the obligations have been fulfilled or not. The need for this was recognised but staffing shortages and capacity issues could hamper progress.

### **Effects on strategies and codes**

The Corporate Plan vision states that the Council's role includes being a community leader and working in partnership to achieve high quality service and to improve the place in which we live and work. The closure of local post offices works against this vision.

Section 106 agreements are key to delivering some corporate objectives through the planning process

### **Risk management implications**

Post Office closures could have knock-on effects onto other public services, requiring additional support to vulnerable residents, reducing choice and access to services (including the ability to pay council tax using West Wiltshire District Council payment card), and the need for alternative provision of community facilities.

If planning obligations are not monitored and enforced, the credibility of the planning system could be undermined in the local community.

### **Finance and performance implications**

There may be some financial implications for council tax payments.

The potential loss of funding for community projects and infrastructure improvements. Some Section 106 Agreements are time-limited, whereby a sum of money has to be collected and spent on the agreed project within a certain period. When this period has expired, money that has not been collected would be lost to the community, and money collected but not spent on the agreed project, might have to be returned.

### **Legal and human rights implications**

The closure of post offices, especially in rural areas, can have a significant detrimental impact on local communities, both in terms of the loss of a community facility and social meeting place, and in respect of access to local services.

In some cases, legal action might be necessary to implement Section 106 Agreements.

## **Recommendations**

Cabinet is asked to consider the recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee as follows:

- This Council is strongly opposed to all cutbacks of Post Office services in West Wiltshire on the grounds of social inclusion, social deprivation and the environment (climate change). These cutbacks will particularly affect the most vulnerable members of society and those who live in rural communities.
- The Development Control Services Manager is requested to produce a report for this Committee by June 2008 detailing the position on all current and outstanding Section 106 Agreement obligations.

## **Background papers**

- Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee 19-12-07.
- Proposed Post Office Closures report to Scrutiny Committee 19-12-07.
- Report on meeting with Post Office Ltd about proposed Post Office closures tabled at Scrutiny Committee 19-12-07.
- Update on Issues and Challenges – Planning report to Scrutiny Committee 19-12-07.

---

**Agenda Item No. 5**

## **Announcements from the Leader Cllr Graham Payne**

---