



Cabinet 7 May 2008

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Post Office Network Changes – Proposed Closures in St Edmundsbury (May 08/08)

1. Cabinet will be aware of the Post Office Network Change process, which arose following the Government's announcement in May 2007 that 2,500 post offices must close due to falling customer numbers and declining profits. During August 2007, Clare and Cavendish post offices were assessed, and neither was proposed for closure. During January 2008, the remaining post offices in St Edmundsbury were assessed, and in March 2008 Post Office Ltd recommended seven of these post offices for closure.
2. Prior to and following the dispatch of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agenda, officers had been creating profiles for the seven post offices with a view to producing a formal response to Post Office Ltd from the Council. This response must be with Post Office Ltd by 2 June 2008.
3. On 23 April 2008 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered Report Y699 containing the information which had been put together so far. Officers were concerned with the proposed closure of three of the post offices: Chalkstone in Haverhill, Fornham All Saints and Horringer. The concerns were set out in the report. The officers recommended that the Council object to the closure of these three post offices. Assessment of the remaining four post offices: Risby, Whepstead, Honington Village and Cowlinge, led officers to recommend that the Council not object to the closure of these facilities, and again reasons were given in the report.
4. A presentation at the meeting set out a number of other issues which had arisen from officers' research, which it was proposed should be included in the response. The Committee appointed Councillor Mrs Levack to work with officers in completing the remaining analysis of the seven post offices concerned and the response to Post Office Ltd, and in the period between the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the dispatch of this Cabinet agenda, that letter has been completed and is attached as Appendix A.
5. **It is RECOMMENDED that the letter, attached as Appendix A to Report Y731, be sent as the Council's response to Post Office Ltd on their recommendation to close seven post offices in the Borough.**

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Ms Laura Tarling
Network Development Manager
Post Office Ltd
C/o National Consultation Team
FREEPOST CONSULTATION TEAM

8 May 2008

Dear Ms Tarling

**Post Office Network Change consultation
Norfolk and West Suffolk area plan**

I am writing on behalf of St Edmundsbury Borough Council concerning the proposed closure of the following post offices in the St Edmundsbury district: Chalkstone, Cowlinge, Fornham All Saints, Honington Village, Horringer, Risby and Whepstead.

St Edmundsbury Borough Council does accept that there is a need to rationalise the Post Office Network, and therefore some post offices that are not economically viable must close. We have therefore chosen not to object to the proposed closure of the following four post offices for the reasons outlined below:

Cowlinge Post Office, Newmarket, CB8 9QB:

This post office serves only 8 customers a week and is therefore not economically viable. Although you have listed the alternative branches as Wickhambrook and Thurlow, Stradishall Post Office is in fact the nearest alternative (1.8 miles) so your records need to be amended.

Honington Village Post Office, Bury St Edmunds, IP31 1RD:

The customer sessions per week are relatively low (between 100 and 199). We understand that the majority of customers travel by car and therefore the alternatives are relatively accessible for most people.

Risby Post Office, Risby Village Hall, Bury St Edmunds, IP28 6RG:

This post office is already temporarily closed. When the post office was open, it was generally not used much by residents with customer sessions per week in the 0 to 49 bracket.

Whepstead Post Office, Whepstead Community Centre, Bury St Edmunds, IP29 4SP:

The customer sessions per week are low (in the 0 to 49 bracket) and therefore this post office is not economically viable.

However, we are far from convinced about the merits of the other proposals. Therefore the Borough Council strongly objects to the proposed closure of the remaining three post offices for the reasons outlined below:

Chalkstone Post Office, Haverhill, CB9 0HR:

The customer sessions per week are significant (between 400 and 499). Post Office Ltd has stated that it wishes to support post offices within shops where possible because you understand the implications that may occur if a post office within a shop closes – Chalkstone Post Office is within a busy Londis convenience store, and the two are certainly mutually beneficial. The owner has invested a lot of his own money into his business and the post office is an integral part of it. It appears that this post office is profitable and many local businesses use this post office rather than the post office in Haverhill town centre because parking is close by and there are fewer queues. The latest indices of deprivation show that Chalkstone estate is one of the more deprived areas in Haverhill, St Edmundsbury and Suffolk as a whole. It is therefore very important that local residents have access to key services, and postal services are certainly recognised as being one of these.

If this post office were to close it would conflict with the recent local government White Paper which highlighted the importance of local services provided at a neighbourhood level. There are several old people's homes nearby and these residents will find it very difficult to use the alternative post office branches. The alternative post office branches suggested by Post Office Ltd are Clements and Haverhill High Street. Most customers to the Chalkstone Post Office come on foot, but the hilly terrain to the alternative branches would not be convenient for these people (particularly the elderly of those with pushchairs). Car ownership is relatively low in this area, but those customers with a car will be forced to drive to the alternative branch, thus increasing emissions that are contrary to the Government's green agenda. The suggested alternative in Haverhill High Street branch already experiences queues (even with all counters open) so there are concerns that it might not be able to cope with any migrating customers. Furthermore, it is not appropriate for older people to have to stand for some time in long queues.

Fornham All Saints Post Office, Bury St Edmunds, IP28 6JJ:

The customer sessions per week are significant (approximately 470). The business appears to be profitable and as with Chalkstone post office, this post office is within the only shop in the Fornhams and the two are mutually beneficial. The owner has invested a lot of his own money into his business and the post office is an integral part of it. At least seven local businesses use the Fornham All Saints shop to sell their goods. If this post office is closed, the shop may not be viable and these businesses would suffer.

Fornham is home to several rural business centres and the post office here plays an economic as well as a social role. The post office benefits from a car park and disabled access and the building is purpose-built. The population of Fornham All Saints was 930 in the 2001 Census. Fornham is actually three villages very close together (Fornham All Saints, Fornham St Genevieve and Fornham St Martin) as well as a wider rural catchment area. The population of the three combined was 2300 in the 2001 Census. Not only does this post office serve the Fornhams, but it also serves the villages of Hengrave, Flempton, Lackford and West Stow.

The post office also benefits from through traffic from Great Barton and other villages along the A143. 22% of the population of Fornham All Saints are retired and 20% do not have a car. There are two old people's homes nearby and also a number of housing association pensioner bungalows in the village - these residents would find it difficult to access the alternative branches. The alternative post offices suggested (Lake Avenue and St Olaves Precinct) are not very accessible by bus. A bus used to go down Mildenhall Road but this is no longer the case. The current bus route means that people would need to either climb a

hill or walk some distance to the alternative branch. The alternative branches are also not easily accessible by car due to the narrow service roads, the permanently parked residents vehicles and road humps. Fornham All Saints Post Office was due to close in 2005, but following great concerns from local residents it was reopened. The community support for this post office is tremendous.

Horringer Post Office, Bury St Edmunds, IP29 5RU:

The customer sessions per week are significant (between 400 and 499). The post office is significant to the local economy and serves a number of local businesses so if it were to close the local economy would suffer. The post office benefits from a car park and disabled access, and the building was purpose-built by the Parish Council. The population of Horringer was 931 in the 2001 Census and is growing, with new houses being built in the village. The post office serves a wide rural catchment area, which will be even wider if the Whepstead Post Office closes.

The alternative post offices suggested (Glastonbury Road and Ridley Road) are not very accessible. For example, there are no direct bus routes from Horringer to Glastonbury Road Post Office, and residents would be required to walk up a steep hill from Bury Road, or cross the road and wait for another bus to take them up the hill to the Glastonbury Road post office. There is also no reverse bus route so residents would need to return via Bury St Edmunds. Faced with the closure of the previous post office, the Parish Council, supported by the village and the borough council, raised sufficient money to build the existing purpose-designed extension to the community centre to accommodate this facility. This demonstrates the real community support for this post office; and, more importantly, the retention of the only retail outlet in the village.

We have some other comments for your consideration. Firstly St Edmundsbury Borough Council is concerned about the short consultation period given by Post Office Ltd, particularly since parish, town, district, and borough councils all need time to engage with their communities before representing their views. Whilst the Government has set a series of criteria to be sure that the remaining network is viable and as accessible as possible, the closures will have the biggest impact on older people, young families and those without private transport; exactly the people that local and national government are working hard to support. Local government and partners work hard to encourage access to services at a very local level, so it is disappointing that key services are being lost from our villages and neighbourhoods. All the threatened post offices provide a personal local service as well as being important for social interaction in the community; inevitably the alternative branches fall outside of these immediate communities. The provision of a local Post office enables financial inclusion. There is a need to encourage people to manage their finances, therefore local access to services to pay bills, council tax, and so on is important.

We realise that Post Office Ltd want customers to use the alternative branches (making them more viable), but this appears to ignore the real customer need. Therefore we would like Post Office Ltd to consider other options to closure. For example would it be feasible to reduce the level of subsidy to threatened Post Offices rather than closure? This would allow the shop owners to continue to provide some post office services. This approach would, of course, require the agreement of the post masters and post mistresses.

Furthermore, we understand that post masters and post mistresses will have certain restrictions placed upon their businesses for a year after receiving their redundancy package.

This is difficult to understand, seems unreasonable and we would wish to register our strong objection to this anti-competitive policy.

Finally, if any of the post offices proposed for closure are reprieved, would it be possible for the post masters and post mistresses to receive some assurance that their post office will not be reviewed for a specified number of years, so that they can plan ahead financially?

St Edmundsbury Borough Council has looked at the issues very carefully and hopes that Post Office Ltd is able to take these comments into consideration when reaching its final decisions.

Yours sincerely

To be confirmed

C.C.

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The Rt. Hon Richard Spring MP
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Haverhill Town Council and Cowlinge, Fornham All Saints, Honington Village, Horringer, Risby and Whepstead Parish Councils.