

National Consultation Team  
Post Office Limited  
FREEPOST  
CONSULTATION TEAM

Dear Mr Nickolls,

**Re: Devon Rural Network response to Post Office Ltd proposals**

The Devon Rural Network is writing to express our concerns at the proposed closures of Post Offices in Devon.

Devon Rural Network is a partnership of public, private and community sector organisations. The network has been in existence since 2003 and our principal aim is to provide a united voice for Rural Devon and to champion rural issues. We are authors of the Devon Rural Strategy and the vision of the network is to provide 'for a prosperous and vibrant Rural Devon in a sustainably managed environment securing good quality of life for all and fully valuing the diversity and distinctiveness of the county'.

We are very concerned about the closure rate of 22% for post offices in Devon, as this high number of closures disadvantages Devon residents in many more ways than in other parts of the country, especially when the sparsity of the population and the accessibility issues that this presents are taken into account. We do appreciate that the closures are inevitable but are not content with some of the solutions.

Given the restrictions imposed by the process of the Network Change Programme, we would encourage Post Office Limited to review the list for Devon taking into account the suggestions made by other partners around the county. We have received correspondence from and had discussion with partners around the County throughout the course of the consultation period as our remit covers the whole of Rural Devon from the perspective of members of the network.

The outreach solutions proposed are inadequate at best, as the hours that an outreach post office can offer are minimal in most cases and they do not offer the full range of services offered previously. We agree with the stance of Post Watch that at least 6 hours outreach per week would be acceptable, though this is no substitute for a service that previously has offered 30 hours a week, for example. The network would seek a long term commitment to such outreach services if there is no alternative to other more permanent solutions to post office service provision.

**Accessibility**

There appears to be some disparity between the distances quoted between post offices and the actual mileage and accessibility. The distances stipulated in the

evidence base are calculated on an 'as the crow flies' basis and therefore not a true representation of the physicality restrictions, for example, many of the mileages suggested are over 3 miles away, often on minor roads and very hilly, this clearly is unsuitable for those with a) No transport and b). Any physical conditions, which appears to contravene the Government's Accessibility criteria. The Devon Rural Strategy has Accessibility as one of its 5 priority issues.

### Economy

A recent report by Dr Stuart Burgess the Government's Rural Advocate states that 'Rural England is witnessing a boom in home working, healthy rates of new business start ups, high levels of entrepreneurship (where levels among women are much higher than the national average) and the growth of small firms in the new business areas'<sup>1</sup> the report then goes on to say that businesses often face hurdles such as 'planning and infrastructure and accessing services'

These businesses need access to services such as post offices to ensure that their businesses survive. While it is possible to develop electronic services there is still a need for business support from post offices especially in rural areas. The Devon Rural Strategy has Rural Business and Productivity as one of its 5 Priority issues.

### Community

For many small rural communities, the post office and shop provide a community meeting point and provide accessible services for the community. The loss of the Post Office will add further pressure on the viability of the village shop which will then potentially lead to further lack of service provision. While the network recognise the need for commercial and financial viability behind post office provision there is still a basis for community provision within the post office itself, a fact recognised by Devon County Council in it's exploration of ways forward for small village shops across the county.

Even though there is a higher than average car ownership in Devon this is partly due to the lack of accessible and affordable public transport in parts of the county. This indicator does not mean that car travel is the norm and with escalating travel costs the need to provide local services is increased.

There are many village halls, church halls, pubs, shops and community spaces in villages which may be used for a wider development of post office services. Where such outreach post offices have been developed in village halls, coffee mornings have also been developed as a meeting point for the community. This has given a sense of local pride in the development of the post office and community services offered; and provide a local point of contact with the Post Office. The Devon Rural Strategy has Community Self-Confidence as one of its 5 priority issues.

<sup>1</sup> England's rural areas: steps to release their economic potential, Advice from the Rural Advocate to the Prime Minister 2008

## Balance

The network recognise the need for balance in the provision of post office services in rural communities, as the costs involved are often greater than similar provision in urban areas where more transactions take place. However, the network believes that it is important to make provision for local services so that residents have access services in their community in both rural and urban areas.

Where post offices have been developed in local community halls etc and where they offer more than the minimum of services there is a willingness for the community to support and develop such ventures given appropriate opportunity and support.

The proposals for Devon do not seem to take into account the needs and opportunities of a widely scattered rural county which has within it many established and developing micro businesses and a developing community cohesion. The network is seeking to work with rural communities to build strong and cohesive community.

## Environmental

DRN are also concerned about the inevitable increase in car usage to visit the nearest post office. This will inevitable mean an increase in carbon emissions which goes against the Government's agenda and against the Devon Strategic Partnership vision of 'Making Devon Greener'. The Devon Rural Strategy has environment and climate change as one of its 5 priority issues.

## Summary

DRN would urge Post Office Ltd to take in to account the detailed information about specific post office closures as submitted by partners around the County. We would like to see a better range of outreach facilities. We fully endorse the joint proposal on behalf of multiple partners around Devon, submitted by Devon County Council.

Yours Sincerely

pp. 

Rev. Philip Wagstaff

Chair of Devon Rural Network

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Cc. Mr Philip Norrey, Chief Exec of Devon County Council, Cllr Brian Greenslade, Leader of Devon County Council.