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The Clerk
Business and Enterprise Select Committee
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA.

Dear Sir/Madam

**POST OFFICES – SECURING THEIR FUTURE;
Select Committee Call for Evidence**

On behalf of the Regional Affairs Forum for Yorkshire and the Humber, I am pleased to have the opportunity to present evidence to the BERR committee looking into the long term sustainability of post offices. I am attaching one side of A4 listing additional services which I would like to see Post Offices encouraged to provide, thereby helping to secure the long term sustainability of the network.

I am Chair of “Future Years”, Yorkshire & Humber Regional Forum on Ageing and the Vice Chair of the Y & H. Rural Affairs Forum. Both organisations have a tremendous interest in securing the long term provision of post office services and support opportunities to increase the availability of services to the public through the post office network. This is particularly important to the older generation and those who live in remote rural areas, where there is no public transport or alternative forms of transport are costly to use for all ages.

I co-ordinated North Yorkshire County Council’s response to the recent consultation on the Network Change Programme by gathering data information for communities to use where they wished to campaign against closure. I worked with Age Concern, Help the Aged, a representative of the W.I. the Rural Community Councils in North & East Yorkshire, Regional Development Agency and other organisations in this work. I am familiar with the research carried out by Age Concern regarding the use of the post office by older people. All those with whom I have contact were very relieved when the P.O.s were allowed to keep the POCA and renew the contract for the next few years.

Increasing the use of the post offices and increasing their financial services will contribute towards several Government initiatives, as it helps to promote financial and social inclusion. Coherent Government Policy across departments to support post offices in recognition of the part which post offices play in community cohesion in deprived urban and rural areas.

The Post Offices remain a trusted source of financial services and information. Often a post office is attached to and maintains the viability of the sole village shop; such synergy is vital where the loss of one can lead to the loss of both and Government has recognised the important role they play in a community through legislation, giving Rate Collection Authorities a statutory duty to give 50% Business Rate relief for sole post offices or shops in a village or community but where the value of the property is subject to a maximum value condition; and with the discretion for local Authorities to give up to 100%. This also applies to urban post offices if it is deemed that the post office serves a recognisable 'community'. Is it now time to review these regulations and look at an opportunity of bringing more sub post offices within the statutory 50% rate relief?

Allowing the POCA to be used for direct debits would enable older and disabled adults without bank accounts to take advantage of discount on their energy bills. Safeguards for customers would need to be written into any regulation regarding a limit on the increase energy companies can demand of their customers in any one year. Could this method be used by Government to trigger Pension Credits for older people automatically, if the definition of fuel poverty applied? (i.e. if energy costs are greater than ten per cent of income.

The Network Change Programme is intended to secure the future of the present network but if further change should take place, full consideration must be given to the knock on effects on all services in that community, the aim being to avoid any net loss in community sustainability. Should there be a duty on PO Ltd and the local authority to agree the best way of proceeding?

I hope this summary offers sufficient justification and an overview for many of the bullet points on the attached Annex. However, I am happy to provide more detailed explanation of the recommendations at the Committee's request.

Yours sincerely

Shelagh Marshall

Vice-Chair, Yorkshire and the Humber Rural Affairs Forum