

**Minutes of the Post Office meeting held on Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2008 at 2p.m., County Hall, MR4.**

**Present:** Cllr. Eric Broadbent, Richard Flinton, Cllr. Richard Hall, Cllr. Carl Les, Cllr. Shelagh Marshall, Judith Mashiter (Postwatch), Cllr. Chris Metcalfe, Jonathan Spencer, Cllr. Helen Swiers, Nick Turner (Post Office Ltd.) and Adrian Wales (Post Office Ltd.).

No.		Action
1	<p><b><u>Welcome and introductions</u></b>                      Richard Flinton introduced the meeting and explained that its purpose was to raise the County Council motion on post offices (and its concerns therein) with representatives from Post Office Ltd. and Postwatch; and to discuss options for working together to mitigate the effects of branch closure.</p>	
2	<p><b><u>County Council motion on post offices</u></b>  <b><u>Inaccuracies</u></b>                      Richard Flinton explained that the County Council wanted to express its concerns about the number of inaccuracies remaining in the Area Plan proposal for North Yorkshire, with Yorkshire East and Keighley. The Council had identified a number of inaccuracies in the Branch Access reports and listed these in its formal response to Post Office Ltd. Whilst some had been acknowledged in the Area Plan Decision Booklet a number had not.</p> <p>Examples of some of the remaining inaccuracies not acknowledged in the Area Plan Decision Booklet were raised at the meeting.</p> <p>Adrian Wales said that Post Office Ltd. had tried to reflect the concerns and challenges identified by the public but conceded that not all may have been reflected and would look at the full list of inaccuracies identified by the County Council. It was agreed that a full list of all remaining inaccuracies would be provided to the Post Office Ltd. representatives following the meeting.</p> <p>In terms of specific inaccuracies Adrian Wales conceded that Post Office Ltd's description used to describe the level of terrain between Sandsend and Lythe (alternative branch) had been an error of judgement. He noted that the Sandsend branch had been identified for closure because amongst other things the levels of car ownership in the village was relatively high. The issue of the alternative branch at Lythe being scheduled to close was raised. Adrian Wales stated that Post Office Ltd. would be making every effort to ensure that the Lythe branch did not close on a permanent basis. He went on to say that he would also investigate the inaccuracy with regards to the number of counters at the Thirsk branch.</p> <p><b><u>Outreach proposals</u></b>                      Members raised concerns about the lack of detail provided about the outreach proposals; the lack of opportunity for existing post office businesses to provide the outreach service; and the limited number of years that outreach services would receive government funding to allow them to become sustainable.</p> <p>Adrian Wales stated that a difficult balance had needed to be struck between providing the public with detailed information vs. protecting the commercial interests of Post Office Ltd. In terms of the Area Plan proposal for North Yorkshire with Yorkshire East &amp; Keighley, Post Office Ltd. had not been in a position to provide the details of the proposals because they had still been in outline form at the time of publication. However it had been a learning</p>	<p><b>J. Spencer</b></p>

process and in terms of the Cleveland with South Durham and Richmond Area Plan proposal outline details for the proposed outreach services had been able to be put into the public domain. This had been due to the consultation process with potential providers being further down the line. Post Office Ltd. was still finding it difficult to secure the public's views on the outreach proposals because the public had understandably wanted to focus their attention on campaigning against branch closure.

Judith Mashiter said that Postwatch had concerns about the terminology used by Post Office Ltd. in its Area Plan proposals to describe the type of outreach services being proposed (i.e. mobile, hosted, partner and home service). Postwatch believed that such terms were not easily understood by members of the public.

Adrian Wales mentioned that when drawing up the Area Plan outreach proposals, in some instances sub-postmasters had been approached by Post Office Ltd. to ascertain if they would want to take on the outreach service. In those instances where sub-postmasters had not been approached this had been due to a number of reasons e.g. contractual issues or where Post Office Ltd. did not feel that the existing business was in the right location.

Cllr. Shelagh Marshall cited the proposal to introduce an outreach service for Hawnby, as an example of some of the difficulties that residents would face in areas earmarked for an outreach service. She asked why the existing branch had not been considered for outreach by way of introducing a reduced hours service, particularly as residents would have to travel extensive distances to access neighbouring branches outside the hours of outreach. Adrian Wales mentioned that a reduced hours service in a branch did not constitute an outreach service. Post Office Ltd. had originally intended to introduce a mobile service for the Hawnby area but had had to abandon this proposal because a satellite signal could not be obtained in the village. The proposal was now to provide a 'home service'. The Hawnby sub-postmaster had been approached at an early stage to host an outreach service but had declined this offer.

Adrian Wales confirmed that government funding was guaranteed for outreach services for three years only (up to 2011). Beyond 2011 outreach services would be expected to be in profit. Although the levels of government funding were not known beyond 2011 there were no proposals to take outreach services away. Judith Mashiter mentioned that the sustainability of outreach services would in large part be down to the patronage of service users - i.e. a case of 'use it or lose it'. Postwatch had studied the results of pilot outreach services implemented in the last 18-24 months. Whilst outreach services had often taken some time to bed down, user surveys had recorded fairly high levels of customer satisfaction.

A brief discussion was held on the type of services provided by Post Office Ltd.'s mobile outreach service. It was noted that for the purposes of more in-depth discussions between Post Office Ltd. and NYCC it would be helpful for Post Office Ltd. to bring to a future meeting detailed information on the various types of outreach, including their service specifications, levels of security and frequency of visits that they would be expected to offer.

**A. Wales**

<p>3</p>	<p><u>Housing developments</u>  Richard Flinton asked what regard Post Office Ltd. had taken of future housing developments identified in the district councils' local development framework. He mentioned that the district councils' were at various stages of consultation on their LDF's with some having only recently identified preferred sites for housing and jobs. A number of the market towns' were being proposed for significant housing development and yet branches nearby or in these market towns had been earmarked for closure. Cllr. Richard Hall cited the example of Knaresborough, where 500 dwellings were being proposed in Harrogate Borough's Local Development Framework.</p> <p>Adrian Wales commented that for Post Office Ltd. its chief concern had been to take into account confirmed (rather than proposed) building schemes taking place up to 2011 in those areas where branches were being proposed for closure. He acknowledged that the various LDFs were at different stages of development but that Post Office Ltd. had to work to the tight timescales directed by government. Recovery plans for individual branches needed to be drawn up now: housing development that was not due to take place in the next three years would have no impact on the branch's profitability in the short term. He went on to note, however, that he would be interested to receive any further details about significant building schemes (housing and commercial) that had received planning permission in areas being proposed for branch closure.</p> <p><u>Aspin Lane branch</u>  Richard Flinton raised the County Council's request to Post Office Ltd to withdraw its proposals to close the Post Office branch on Aspin Lane in Knaresborough. Cllr. Richard Hall expressed his disappointment that the Aspin Lane branch was being considered for closure simply because another branch had been reprieved. He went on to detail the accessibility problems encountered at the alternative branch contained within the Spar shop, including parking problems. He pointed out that if the Aspin Lane branch closed the remaining branch in Knaresborough would be expected to serve a population of 15,000 – with a retired population of 22%. Cllr. Hall mentioned that he had spoken to representatives from the local Chamber of Trade and the Rotary and they had confirmed that they would need to look at other ways of sending/collecting parcels such as the use of independent carriers rather than using the High Street branch.</p> <p>Adrian Wales and Nick Turner noted that they were useful points and these, alongside any other points raised by the public, would be considered before a final decision was taken. Nick Turner went on to explain that whilst it was recognised that putting another branch on the closure list following the reprieve of another branch would always create public disquiet, for Post Office Ltd. it was important that the number of branch closures did not fall significantly below 2,500 otherwise the business case that it had been asked to put together by government would no longer be viable.</p> <p><b><u>Options for working together to mitigate the effects of branch closure.</u></b>  Richard Flinton opened the discussion. He noted that in addition to the branch closures already announced other branches could be at risk of closing due to the resignation or retirement of the sub-postmaster. He went on to ask the Post Office representatives how the County Council/other community leaders and Post Office Ltd. could work together to aggregate their efforts to protect the remaining network.</p>	<p>J. Spencer</p>
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Adrian Wales provided an overview of initiatives being considered in other areas including Essex (Essex CC as the licensed sub-postmaster) and East Riding (East Riding Council providing post office facilities in some of its public access points). He noted that the Federation of Sub-postmasters was keen to emphasise the importance of those local authorities wishing to assist Post Office branches doing so at an early stage – i.e. not waiting to make the first point of contact when a branch was due to close. Adrian Wales went on to outline the following ways that Post Office Ltd. and NYCC/other public sector providers could work together to protect the future sustainability of the network:-

- 1) To explore with Post Office Ltd. ways that the local authority (county and district) could take on more Post Office business/use of Post Office services.
- 2) Locating Post Office facilities in local authority/other public access points, especially those located in rural areas.
- 3) Local authority funding to allow branches to become sustainable for the longer term (as per Essex CC).

Judith Mashiter added that the County Council's input would also be useful in terms of identifying gaps in Post Office service delivery.

Cllr. Chris Metcalfe noted that the meeting needed to agree a set of practical actions that the County Council could take forward to assist Post Office Ltd. in mitigating the effects of branch closure and creating a sustainable network so that the current situation of being faced with large scale branch closures did not occur again. Cllr. Metcalfe said that he would welcome the opportunity for more detailed discussions to take place at a later date with representatives from Post Office Ltd.

It was noted that whilst in practical terms the County Council's support could not be based upon providing a subsidy to post offices, other ways could be looked at by linking into the work that the County Council was doing around access to services.

Cllr. Helen Swiers asked if Post Office Ltd. could look at ways to capitalise upon new technology and briefly explained about the work that the County Council was doing in this area in relation to NYNet: a company launched to install the next generation broadband network across North Yorkshire.

Richard Flinton explained about the work that the County Council and partner agencies were doing in terms of the public access agenda, in particular the roll-out of one-stop shops. He mentioned about the work of the county-wide steering group established to give a strategic lead to the Access to Services agenda, which had representation from all North Yorkshire local authorities, the National Parks, the Police and voluntary sector.

Adrian Wales said that Post Office Ltd. would welcome the opportunity to work together with the County Council and other relevant agencies, particularly in relation to utilising buildings and new technology. He mentioned that in the immediate term it would be useful to have a point of contact within the County Council to liaise with.

	<p><b>Resolved:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) That J. Spencer be the point of contact in the immediate term in relation to the current Area Plan consultation exercises/ announcements;</li> <li>b) That a meeting be convened with representatives from Post Office Ltd. via the Public Access Steering Group to discuss Post Office Ltd's. investment plans in the remaining network and to identify how public sector assets could be used to fill in gaps in Post Office service delivery.</li> </ul> <p>The meeting closed at 3.50p.m.</p>	<p><b>J. Spencer</b></p> <p><b>R. Flinton/ Assistant Chief Exec. PPP</b></p>
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