



Chief Executive
Lewes District Council
32 High Street
Lewes
East Sussex
BN7 2LX

21 January 2008

Dear Sir or Madam,

Public consultation on Sussex post office closures

Following the end of the formal public consultation period on the Sussex area plan and before Post Office Limited announces its final decisions at the end of January, I am writing to set out Postwatch South East's position on Post Office Limited's proposals. But first, I would like to make some initial points.

Throughout public consultation we have continued to analyse the closure proposals, encouraged customers and stakeholders to submit their comments to Post Office Limited, and studied all the customer and stakeholder responses we also received. Please be aware that although we have identified some closures that give us major concerns, this does not mean we do not recognise that others will also inconvenience customers – some seriously so.

All post office closures are regrettable. However, we accept the rationale for the closure programme. Furthermore, we believe that if Post Office Limited implements its programme of closures as now proposed, the network would continue to meet the minimum access criteria set out by Government. Therefore, any concerns we have on particular post offices are in connection with specific local factors.

The particular characteristic of this plan is the large number of elderly people and retirement communities residing in East and West Sussex. Both counties have a significantly higher proportion of elderly residents than the UK and SE averages. In East Sussex, 1 in every 4 people are over 65; the county has the highest proportion of very elderly residents over 75, over 85 and over 90 in all UK counties. In West Sussex around 20% of the population are aged 65+, which is higher in comparison with 16.4% in the South East region as a whole, and 15.9% in England. In addition over 60% of the closures are along the south coast which is the most densely populated and where there are a large number of post offices in close proximity. The main issue in these counties is the capacity of the remaining network and, in particular the Crown Offices to cope with the additional business. We have sought a commitment from Post Office Limited to undertake improvements at Crown Offices likely receive business from closing branches. We would wish to see these improvements in place prior to closure where possible.

Those closures where we have major concerns are listed below.

Post Offices in Hastings

Postwatch opposes the closure of Old Town Hastings because it provides a service to residents and businesses in a distinctive area of Hastings. There are a high number of elderly people (26%) and 50% do not have a car. Easy access to cash withdrawals is also an issue – although there is an ATM machine near the Post Office, it is frequently out of service. St George's Road, the nearest post office, is up a steep hill and not on a direct bus route. The capacity of the Crown Office in Hastings which is the most likely alternative is already working at maximum capacity and customers complain of long queues which have been verified by a number of visits by Postwatch. With the closure of White Rock and Old Town Hastings, we believe that the service will be unacceptable. Hastings is the most deprived local authority in the Southeast and we believe that the proposed closures will leave it with insufficient postal services.

Warnham

Postwatch opposes the closure of Warnham Post Office because we believe the closure of the post office will have a detrimental effect on the self-sufficiency of the village and the local economy. There is no other banking facility in the village. The Post Office is part of a general store and along with the adjacent butcher and baker forms a key focal point for the village. The general store is reliant on post office trade and there is concern that the shop will close. The village is relatively isolated from Horsham, separated by a busy road with no pavements or lights. Development plans for Broadbridge Heath will put increasing pressure on the post office. The closure of Warnham will also put additional pressure on Horsham Crown Office, which is already a busy office.

Landport

Postwatch opposes the closure of Landport. This post office is situated in a large, densely populated council estate isolated from the rest of Lewes. The post office is situated in the only shop on the estate which is reliant on post office trade. This is a relatively deprived population where 32% of the population do not own cars and according to a recent Lewes Economic Group Survey: 40% are pensioners, 25% claim income support and 17% claim Disability Living Allowance. There is a steep uphill walk to the main road then nearly a 1-mile walk into Lewes. The Crown Office is located up a steep hill, away from the shopping area. Access from Landport by bus requires customers to walk up the hill, take a circuitous route or take 2 buses to alight in front of the Post Office. DDA access on buses is variable and there is limited on-street parking. Although the Lewes Crown Office has sufficient counters to deal with the additional business, it is a very small building, which cannot contain large numbers of customers. Customers report that queues are frequently out the door. Postwatch believes that the residents of Landport will be exceptionally disadvantaged if the Post Office closes.

Post Offices in the Bexhill Area.

Postwatch opposes the proposed closure of Collington Mansions Post Office because of the population profile of the area. Bexhill has the second highest elderly population in the country. Over 31% of the constituency's population is of pensionable age and about 70% above the national average. Over 50% of residents of Collington ward are drawing a pension and 27% have a limiting long term illness. 28% do not have a car. Although the Crown Office in Bexhill is approximately half a mile away, few of the buses are DDA accessible and most of the customers would not be able to walk the distance. Community transport is either costly or circuitous. Parking near the main post office is problematic. There are no designated parking places and most of the general parking places are taken by shoppers. Collington

Mansions Post Office is situated in a parade of shops which includes Tesco Express, a pharmacy and a doctor's surgery. This is a self-contained parade of shops which serves a densely populated area. The branch is also a newsagent and delivers newspapers. The shop is reliant on post office trade and many customers and stakeholders are concerned that a very important service to the community will be lost. Given the age profile and location of alternative post offices, Postwatch believes that customers will go to the Crown Office in Bexhill. With the closure of London Road Postwatch are concerned with the ability of the Crown Office to cope satisfactorily with the anticipated significant increase in customer sessions (over 2,000). We believe that the demographics of the area requires that there is more than one post office serving the town. Postwatch recommends that Collington Mansions remains as it is further from the town centre, is situated in a self-contained shopping area and is the busiest office.

Post Offices in the Lancing Area:

Postwatch opposes the closure of North Lancing Post Office because of its location and the difficulty that elderly and disabled people will have crossing the very busy A27 to Lancing and the impact on the Crown Office in Lancing. With the proposed closure of 3 post offices around Lancing with an average of over 2,000 sessions a week, there is concern from customers and stakeholders that the Crown Office will not cope satisfactorily with the additional business. Postwatch believes that customers would like reassurances that sufficient adjustments will be made to enable the Crown Office to deal with an increase of customers.

Post Offices in Eastbourne:

Postwatch opposes the closure of Marine Parade until customers and stakeholders are reassured that the improvements that are planned for Terminus Road will provide the people of Eastbourne with a satisfactory service.

Postwatch is also continuing to discuss other proposed closures with Post Office Limited. I set out those where we are continuing to seek assurances that the concerns of the different communities are being considered:-

Post Offices in the Horsham Area:

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customer and stakeholder concerns about the capacity of Horsham Crown Office to cope satisfactorily with the closure of four of the seven branches in the town the business of which is expected to move to the town centre. Postwatch believes customers would welcome a firm commitment to any improvements that need to be made.

Post Offices in Brighton:

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customer and stakeholder concerns about

- the sustainability of the remaining network in Brighton in particular the future of the London Road branch.
- The capacity of the remaining network.
- Regeneration.
- Postwatch would also like Post Office Limited to state the improvements that will be made to the remaining network in order to ensure DDA compliance.

Willingdon Post Office

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account the large number of customer and stakeholder concerns about the closure of Willingdon post office, in particular the following issues:

- Ease of access to alternative branches for those without their own transport.
- The comparable standard of service as the Willingdon Post Office has recently been refurbished.
- New residential developments planned for the village.
- Effect on the village shop if closures go ahead.

Tilling Green Post Office

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customer and stakeholders concerns about the closure of Tilling Green Post Office in relation to the capacity of the Crown Office in Rye to cope satisfactorily with the additional business and access to alternative services for the elderly and disabled.

Claremont Road Post Office

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customer and stakeholders concerns about the closure of Claremont Road Post Office in relation to the capacity of Seaford Crown Office to cope with the anticipated increased business.

Upper Dicker Post Office

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customer and stakeholders concerns about the closure of Upper Dicker Post Office in relation to the impact this will have on the only shop in the village and the lack of public transport to alternative branches.

Plaistow

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customers and stakeholder concerns about the limited outreach hours which may make the post office unsustainable.

Mount Pleasant

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customer and stakeholder concerns about the closure of Mount Pleasant Post Office in relation to the impact it will have on a large industrial estate which reports heavy usage of the service.

Church Road

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account the large number of customer and stakeholder concerns about the closure of this very busy post office and the capacity of Burgess Hill to cope with the additional business.

Hailsham Road

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account the large number of customer and stakeholder concerns about the closure of this popular post office in relation to access to the post office in Heathfield for elderly and disabled people requiring public transport and the capacity of the post office located in Budgens supermarket to cope with the additional business. There are also concerns about the future of the service as Budgens is now under new management.

Post Offices in the Haywards Heath area:

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited setting out how it has taken into account customer and stakeholder concerns about the capacity of Haywards Heath Crown Office to cope satisfactorily with the additional business when it is already a very busy office.

Washington

Postwatch looks forward to Post Office Limited's response to customer and stakeholder requests to develop a community led facility.

In conclusion

This letter summarises the concerns that Postwatch South East has with some of Post Office Limited's proposals for Sussex. These concerns come from our own evaluations and the feedback we received before and during public consultation. But I must stress once more, because we have identified some closures that give us major concerns, it does not mean that we do not recognise that some others will seriously inconvenience customers. Many customer concerns relate to the difficulties they would have in accessing alternative branches. Should some of these closures go ahead, Postwatch urges local authorities and other stakeholders to review customer concerns in relation to the inconsistency of DDA accessible buses on many bus routes, the lack of bus shelters on many exposed roads, inadequate pedestrian crossing points for elderly and disabled people and parents with young children and the lack of dedicated disabled parking bays close to many town centre post offices.

We trust that Post Office Limited is even now carefully considering Postwatch South East's comments on its proposals for Sussex and is planning the necessary steps to ensure customer inconvenience is kept to a minimum. Post Office Limited will announce the outcome of the consultation on 29th January and which proposals it intends to pursue. We look forward to Post Office Limited explaining how they have taken account of customers concerns in this Decision Document.

Yours sincerely,



Sheila Button
Chair
Postwatch South East