

Agenda Item No: 5

Democratic Services
Lewes House
32 High Street
Lewes
East Sussex BN7 2LX
01273 471600
01273 484146 fax
01273 484488 Minicom
DX No. 3118 Lewes-1

Mr Gary Herbert
Network Development Manager
c/o National Consultation Team
FREEPOST CONSULTATION TEAM

direct dial 01273 484174 Mr Batty

my ref AJB/jae

your ref

date 20 December 2007

Dear Mr Herbert

**Post Office Ltd – Network Change Programme – Area Plan
Proposal for Sussex**

I am writing on behalf of Lewes District Council in response to the Post Office Area Plan Proposal for Sussex.

General Comments

May I say first of all that the Council is totally opposed to the closure programme and has passed the Notice of Motion set out in Appendix A to this letter which has been sent to Mr Pat McFadden, MP, the Minister of State for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs.

The Council has also noted that in asking the Post Office for information regarding usage and turnover, the Post Office have replied that the four criteria for closure are proximity to other branches, customer usage, relevant size compared to other branches and financial benefit of closure to Post Office Ltd and that these are taken into account alongside the Government criteria. With regard to figures and financial information (loss etc) the Post Office have said that they cannot provide such information although Post Watch have provided details of 'customer sessions'. The Council is extremely disappointed that the Post Office has not been able to provide the financial information which would have enabled the Council to better assess the situation regarding the viability of individual Post Office Branches.

For the reasons given below, the Council is unable to accept the justifications put forward by the Post Office for the closure of any of the Post Office Branches in the Lewes District. All of them provide a vital service to local residents, many of whom are elderly or disabled and for whom travelling further distances to an alternative Post Office presents considerable and often insurmountable problems.

The Council also wishes to make the point that in making its case for the retention of particular Post Office Branches it does not expect any that are saved to be replaced by any currently earmarked to remain open.

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Head of Democratic Services
Alan Batty

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The Council's comments in relation to the specific closures are as follows:

Claremont Road Branch, 23 Claremont Road, Seaford

The Council is extremely concerned about the proposed closure of the Claremont Road Branch at 23 Claremont Road, Seaford.

This particular Branch services 5,000 + residents. It is a busy, accessible, friendly and helpful Post Office which has a very large proportion of elderly customers, 55% of whom are over the age of 60 years.

Seaford Town Council has undertaken a resident survey of people using this particular Branch and their analysis (Appendix B attached) shows that 31% of people using the Branch have mobility difficulties, 52% have no public/private transport and 64% have no access to the Internet. There is a cluster of 15 sheltered residential homes housing 550 residents within half a mile of the Branch.

If the Claremont Road Branch was closed, the elderly would be forced to travel to the main Post Office in Seaford where they would need to wait in queues. More than 50% of local residents do not have access to cars.

The Council does not feel that the environmental impact of the additional journeys by car or bus which this proposal will require has been properly taken into account.

In addition, the survey analysis gives many user suggestions as to how to increase business for the Post Office.

Fairways Estate Branch, Fairways Estate, 4 Newick Close, Seaford

The Fairways Estate Branch serves an area of Seaford separate from the rest. Its closure would probably result in the closure of its associated general store. The result of that will be that many current customers will have to travel into town by whatever means they have. There is no daily bus service which runs past the Post Office or in its vicinity. The nearest is some distance away on the A259. Pressure on the main Post Office will increase. It will also increase the isolation of its customers who cannot get about easily. It has all the problems of the others but added to that is the vitally important absence of a bus service.

Landport Branch, 34 Lee Road, Landport, Lewes

The Council is also extremely concerned about the proposed closure of the Landport Branch at 34 Lee Road, Landport, Lewes. Councillor David Gray, one of the Councillors for the Ward in which the Landport Post Office is situated and the Council's Lead Councillor for Community, wrote to you on 11 December 2007 with a detailed case which challenged the proposed closure. The Council fully supports the case made by Councillor Gray which is repeated here as follows:

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"Accuracy of information – Branch access report:

a) Population:

The present population of Lewes, confirmed by Lewes District Council on 4/12/07, was 15,988 whereas you state a figure of 13,464.

b) Parking Facilities:

The Branch access Report states:

"there are parking facilities available directly outside the Branch" (ie the High Street Post Office).

This is not correct. As you will see from the recent aerial survey map, supplied by East Sussex County Council, there is NO permitted parking outside the High Street Post Office, from Watergate Lane to St Martins Lane (approx 35 yards). You will also note the bus stop which is almost directly outside the Post Office. Apart from 4 parking spaces, including one for the disabled just past St Martins Lane there is no further Metered Parking available along the High Street in this direction until Westgate Street car park which is a small short-term car park.

(c) Bus Service:

No 127 does not go up the High Street of Lewes. A passenger would have to either cross a busy and dangerous road from Waitrose to the Bus Station to get the 128 bus, or change at Tesco's.

Bus Journey Length: An example of the first bus which would connect with the Post Office opening times is as follows:

<i>Depart Waldshut Road, Landport</i>	<i>0920</i>
<i>Arrive Waitrose</i>	<i>0928</i>
<i>Depart Bus Station On No 128</i>	<i>0935</i>
<i>Arrive High Street Post Office</i>	<i>0940</i>

This is a journey of 20 minutes which would become increasingly unrealistic if the High Street Post Office became the only Post Office in the TOWN! In any case, the journey by two buses exceeds the 16 MINUTE journey length that you state. The travelling situation is further complicated because the 127 Service operates every 30 minutes (Mon – Fri) between 1020 – 1450 hours and every 30 minutes (Saturday) from 0950 – 1720 hours. Therefore, your description of Bus Service Frequency as 20 minutes is also wrong. (Please see the bus timetable forwarded to you by Councillor Gray).

There are no plans to change these bus services which serve two different estates in Lewes.

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d) Road distance

Although the direct road distance is 1 mile between the two Post Offices this is only correct for a pedestrian journey. ANY vehicular journey would have to follow the one-way system into the Town Centre and would therefore be well over 1 mile. You correctly state that:

"the route between the two branches is hilly and the office (High Street) is situated at the top of a steep hill away from the main shopping area".

This fact alone would prevent many people from walking to the High Street Post Office from Landport.

e) There is now a Cash Dispensing Machine in the Landport Store

A journey by foot, car or buses from Landport to the High Street Post Office takes 1 hour, at the best of times. And that is the present situation! The High Street Post Office already has long queues (see photo forwarded to you by Councillor Gray). The closure of Landport Post Office would result in a greater volume of traffic entering the town, more pollution and further parking problems.

Other Overlooked Facts

There is only one vehicular entrance and exit to the Landport Estate, over a bridge from the A2029. In the event of an accident/emergency or severe weather the estate is isolated.

The County Council's road gritting schedule does not cover the bus route in Landport. It often happens in the winter months that 127 service has to amend its Landport route missing out Stansfield Road and Newton Road where there are 25 bungalows in a sheltered housing scheme. The people in the bungalows rely exclusively on the bus service.

The Local Economy

Landport Post Office has run in tandem with the provision store for 27 years and the two services complement each other. There is no doubt that without the Post Office there would be a considerable loss of business for Landport Store. Many people come from as far away as Kingston Village to use the Post Office and while they are there they often buy some provisions.

Landport Surveys

A recent Lewes Economic Group Survey shows that approximately 40% of people living on Landport estate are pensioners, 25% are claiming Income Support and 17% claim Disability Living Allowance. A further current survey conducted throughout Landport is indicative of the number of difficulties people would have in getting to Lewes High Street Post Office if the Landport Branch closes.

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Analysis of Survey Forms (121) returned (as at – 10/12/07)

(Note: Some forms include comments from more than one person at the same address).

Age Group:

<i>Under 25</i>	-	6
<i>26 – 45</i>	-	17
<i>46-64</i>	-	48
<i>65+</i>	-	56

Specific problems - (include)

- *bad eyesight – danger in crossing main roads*
- *serious disablements (14 comments)*
- *long queues at Lewes High Street Post Office – Cold and wet in winter months (26 comments)*
- *mothers with very young children*

Degree of difficulty in getting to Lewes High Street Post Office by bus or foot:

<i>Easy</i>	-	15
<i>Difficult</i>	-	42
<i>Very difficult</i>	-	46
<i>Impossible</i>	-	12"

Your report states that "we pay attention to the needs of all our customers including the elderly and less mobile" and "one of our considerations is our ability to serve our customers and to be accessible to as many people as possible".

The Council would respectfully suggest that you have not paid enough attention to the needs of customers who use the Landport Branch. The ability to serve customers and to be accessible to as many people as possible would be severely restricted if the Landport Branch closes bearing in mind the facts described in this letter. The Council therefore urges you to reconsider the proposal to close the Landport Branch which is of immense benefit to the community in Landport as well as many other people in the town of Lewes and its outlying areas.

The Council believes that the retention of the Landport Branch is so vital to residents that it is prepared to consider meeting the cost of the provision of the space within the building where the Post Office is currently located if that would ensure its long-term retention as a Post Office.

Mount Pleasant Branch, 2 Avis Parade Shops, Avis Road, Newhaven

The Post Office Branches on East Side, Newhaven and South Highton have been closed in the last few years. At the time it was suggested that these were temporary closures but given the current closure review, it is now unlikely they will be reopened.

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It is clear to those living in South Heighton that it is part of the urban area of Newhaven. However, its residents are now faced with a journey of at least a mile to get to the next nearest post office ie, Mount Pleasant. South Heighton is not served by the regular 15 minute bus services that run along the A259. Without the Mount Pleasant Branch, these residents will either have to walk nearly 3 miles into Newhaven Town Centre or get a taxi adding an additional and unreasonable cost to visiting a post office.

It is not clear why the Post Office think that the main Seaford Post Office is a reasonable alternative. It is 3 to 4 miles distance from Mount Pleasant and also an extremely busy Post Office.

It is unlikely that the residents of the Searchlight Centre at Denton and the Guinness Trust houses on the South Heighton/Denton border would be able to get to the town centre whereas the Mount Pleasant Branch is accessible.

If the Mount Pleasant Branch closed, residents who would be forced to walk to the town centre would have to negotiate crossing the busy A26 and A259 (twice) roads, a level crossing and the swing bridge over the River Ouse, not to mention the incline of the town centre high street. This proposed closure is seen by the Council as being an unreasonable imposition on most residents, and indeed, businesses.

Finally

The Council looks forward to receiving a favourable response to its concerns regarding the closure of the Post Office Branches within the Lewes District.

Because of the Christmas post delays, I am emailing this letter to you and posting a hard copy with the enclosures.

Yours sincerely

Alan Batty
Head of Democratic Services

Enclosures

Copies to: Norman Baker MP
Mr T Leggo, SALC
Teresa Gittins, Action in Rural Sussex
Postwatch
All Lewes District Councillors
Corporate Management Team
Town Clerks of Lewes, Newhaven and Seaford Town Councils
Clerks of Chailey, Kingston and South Heighton Parish Councils