

FUTURE OF POST OFFICE SERVICES IN RURAL HEREFORDSHIRE

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE STRATEGY AND FINANCE

CABINET

22ND MARCH, 2007

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To update Cabinet on the DTI consultation on the Post Office network and the progress being made on an initiative to develop sustainable options for the delivery of post office services to rural communities in Herefordshire.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision.

Recommendation(s)

THAT the course of action proposed, be approved.

Reasons

Following on from the announcement in December 2006 by the Government on the closure of up to 2,500 post offices nationally, the DTI issued a consultation document on its future proposals for the post office network. Herefordshire Council has co-ordinated a response to this consultation and has used the opportunity to examine sustainable models for delivering post office services in the County. The State of Herefordshire Report indicates that 84% of residents found it easy to access post office services in 2005. The Council has a commitment to at least maintain this level of access.

Considerations

1. In December 2006 the Government announced the closure of a maximum of 2500 Post Offices that were deemed to be unprofitable. It is likely that the vast majority of Post offices that will be closed will be in rural locations and thus it is predicted that Herefordshire will be adversely affected. The Leader followed this announcement with a letter to the Government minister responsible (enclosed) arguing that before closures are contemplated the Government should "look at pilot projects and properly evaluate them and undertake a rigorous process of "rural proofing". This letter has been supported by a number of parish councils (15 to date), all eager to protect services in their communities.
2. This latest Government announcement highlights a problem that has been occurring over the last thirty years, that is the closure of village shops and post offices due to changing shopping patterns and other external factors. Many of the remaining rural

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Anthony Bush, Parish Liaison and Rural Services Officer on (01432) 260611

retail outlets are struggling with some being unprofitable such that when the owner/manager retires no one is willing to take on the enterprise. This is the case with Hope under Dinmore Post Office that has remained closed since the sub-postmaster retired despite efforts by the parish council and others to find a replacement.

3. Many reports have illustrated that there is a need in rural areas for the services provided by the post office and village shop. The recent report from the Commission for Rural Communities entitled "Rural Disadvantage" has identified the elderly, disabled, carers, low income groups, the unemployed and the immobile as those in need of these rural services and particularly at risk when services are removed. In addition the thirty-nine Parish plans that have been completed in Herefordshire provide some evidence of community need.
4. Against this background, it is proposed to develop and evaluate sustainable models for use in Herefordshire to deliver these services. Within this, it is proposed to establish the critical conditions needed to achieve the development framework (e.g. transitional investment packages from Central Government).
5. These models will address needs in communities that currently have a post office but they can also meet those latent needs in communities that currently do not have any service post office provision (e.g. Tillington).
6. A Development Workshop was held on 27th February in Hereford. This was run by the Community Regeneration team with invited participants drawn from those relevant organisations such as ACRE, ViRSA, RSA, Community First, PostWatch, CRC and HALC*.
7. The outcomes of the Workshop included:-
 - i. Sustainable Models were presented to be considered by communities.
 - ii. Identification of some critical conditions for achieving the models
 - iii. Information to respond to the DTI Consultation.
8. Since the Workshop Herefordshire Council's response to the DTI consultation has been submitted (see attached).
9. Future Steps
 - To make communities and businesses aware of the various development options and signpost them to the relevant support organisations.
 - To work with the Post Office and Government to ensure enough time is made available to communities to enable them to assess options for change and develop forward plans.

Risk Management

Failure to be proactive in co-ordinating proposals for the future delivery of key services in the County, may affect the credibility of the Council in terms of its community leadership role.

It will be important to ensure that expectations are not raised for communities and that only sustainable models for delivery of post office services are promoted to rural communities.

Alternative Options

Do nothing – with consequences as laid out in risk management.

Consultees

*ACRE – Action with Communities in Rural England

ViRSA – Village Retail Services Association

CRC – Commission for Rural Communities

HALC – Herefordshire Association of Local Councils

RSA – Rural Shops Alliance

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Letter To Jim Fitzpatrick, Mp From Leader Of The Council

Appendix 2 - Response to the DTI consultation

Background Papers

None identified