



Herefordshire Council

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Response to DTI “The Post Office Network” a consultation

March 2007.

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Summary

Herefordshire Council welcomes the Government's intention to improve access to the Post Office network nationally. It believes that, if (and only if) the proposals are implemented in full partnership with local authorities, communities and other local organisations; they offer a unique opportunity to help sustain rural communities and improve the quality of life of vulnerable people.

Herefordshire is a predominately rural county of 840 square miles. It has a higher proportion of its population (25.3%) living in very sparsely populated areas (with 0.5 or fewer residents per hectare) than any other county in England.

The Herefordshire population has a significantly older age profile than England and Wales, with 20% over 65 years of age (compared with 16% nationally). The number of people over 65 is forecast to increase by 50% to 2020. Most important, the increase in the number of people over 85 is forecast to be 79%.

The quality of life of this highly vulnerable and growing population of frail, older people, who are the heaviest users of post office services, would be seriously damaged were their access to these services to deteriorate as would other disadvantaged groups, those on low income, the disabled, the immobile and migrant workers, a growing minority in Herefordshire.

Currently, DEFRA data shows that 98.3% of rural households in Herefordshire are within 4 kilometres of a post office and 100% are within 6 kilometres. (Note: DEFRA data does not measure 3 miles access). Thus the proposal to introduce an access criterion based on 95% of households being within 3 miles (4.82 kilometres) would result in a significant diminution in access to post office services in Herefordshire.

This would fly in the face of the Government's stated objective in the consultation paper (paragraph 3.4) that, “A *national network is*

required which provides for those in need....and which ensures convenient access for communities with real social need”.

However, the announcement that the Government intends to meet such challenges by a more flexible approach to the provision of post office services is welcomed. This greater flexibility is seen by Herefordshire Council as an opportunity to improve access to sustainable services across the county.

Herefordshire Council welcomes the continuation of “*substantial further funding*” to support the changes necessary to ensure access to post office services in rural areas but urges the Government immediately to work in partnership with the Post Office, local councils and communities to deliver these improved services and **not wait until 2011 for this to happen.**

This would make a reality of the Government's vision in the “Strong and prosperous communities” Local Government White Paper of October 2006. As the Prime Minister says in the introduction:

“It is therefore essential for us to do everything we can to help local government do its job....and to enable communities to have a say in the issues that matter most to them”.

And as the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government added:

“This means a stronger role for Councils to lead their communities, shape neighbourhoods and bring local public services together”.

DTI Consultation questions/response

Do you think the government's forward strategy for the post office network addresses all the key issues and challenges the network faces?

The forward strategy should recognise that it is Government policy to strengthen communities, including those in rural areas, and that all its policies should be in harmony with this approach, not work against it.

The Government proposals address many of the issues and challenges the network faces. However the forward strategy does not address adequately:-

- the key issue of how to meet the future needs of those communities that stand to lose their access to post office services by closure.
- the importance of recognising the impact of closures on community life in terms of loss of a place to meet and interact socially

and

- the provision of alternative sustainable scenarios and support to mitigate the deleterious effects of closure.

Further, the forward strategy, in seeking to develop plans to manage change in communities, should consider the delivery of post office services as part of a wider approach to sustainable communities, which requires close partnership between Government, local councils and the Post Office from the outset.

The forward strategy recognises that there can be no “one size fits all” solution; in order to ensure sustainable solutions, communities must be involved in all developments. It should be recognised that such a solution will require capital and revenue investment.

- Therefore investment during this period of change should be an essential part of the forward strategy, with its use determined in partnership with local councils, not just between the Government and the Post Office.

Finally it is argued that rather than the focussing on post office closures, the emphasis should be on integrating currently non-viable post office services with other service providers such as village shops, village halls and churches. This strategy would protect vital services and lead to more sustainable services overall.

Are there other significant factors affecting the future of the post office network which appear to have been overlooked in the government's proposed approach?

Services (whether private, public or community) should be developed in the round and all viewed as community assets with the potential to enhance the quality of life and protect the vulnerable. For instance, a village hall or pub could be used for the delivery of several services. Capital investment will sometimes be needed to adapt such community buildings to ensure they are fit for purpose.

The importance of post office services to the rural economy and to thriving communities is under recognised. Where services are threatened by closure, for whatever reason, an impact assessment

should be carried out to assess the effect the closure will have on the community. This impact assessment needs to be followed up with a development plan to ensure that the future needs of the local community are met on a sustainable basis.

A similar approach should be carried out where a post office is hosted by an existing outlet such as a village shop or village hall. In these cases the closure of the post office can start a domino effect, with the host's financial viability being compromised leading to the closure of the host as well and community being severely disadvantaged. Again, when closure is threatened, the impact on all services in the community should be considered.

Do you have comments on the access criteria proposed for deprived urban and rural areas?

Currently, Defra data shows that 98.3% of rural households in Herefordshire are within 4 kilometres of a post office and 100% are within 6 kilometres of a post office (note: DEFRA data does not measure 3 miles access). Thus a proposal to introduce access criteria based on 95% of households within 3 miles (4.82 kilometres) would result in a significant diminution of access to post office services in Herefordshire. This would fly in the face of the Government's stated objective in the consultation paper (paragraph 3.4) that, "*A national network is required which provides for those in need....and which ensures convenient access for communities with real social need*".

It is our view, therefore, that this single criterion is not fit for purpose and therefore should not be applied.

Any proposal for closure needs to be communicated fully and managed effectively in partnership with local councils and communities to ensure that there is no deterioration in access to post office services.

In order for a community-led solution to evolve, enough time has to be allowed. A consultation period of six weeks is far too short a timeframe to prepare these plans and will effectively ruin the business; 12 months would be more realistic. Thus, until such time as fully satisfactory alternative arrangements, ensuring at least equal access to services, can be put into place, existing services should remain open, so as to effect a seamless transfer of the business and ensure that customers are not disadvantaged.

Herefordshire Council welcomes the continuation of "substantial further funding" to support the changes involved in continuing the provision of post office services in rural Herefordshire but urges the Government

immediately to work in partnership with the Post Office, local councils , the voluntary sector and communities to deliver these improved services, not waiting until 2011.

Do you have any suggestions as to how services might be better delivered through the post office network?

The focus of activity should be the sustainable delivery of core post office services, which is likely to be achieved by an integrated approach to service delivery (for instance by transferring the post office from a private house to the community hall, as has happened successfully in Pencombe Herefordshire). By sharing resources the various services will be more cost-efficient and thus more sustainable.

In this context Herefordshire Council welcomes the continuation of the post office card account, which it sees as crucial to the ongoing financial viability of any enterprise. It is recommended that the Government does not allow the withdrawal of any more services from post office counters that would worsen their financial viability.

One of the key services is access to cash. Herefordshire Council supports the roll out of free to use ATMs and suggests that the placement of these services should be prioritised for rural areas. The opportunity to combine access to cash provision with the activities of the Credit Unions should be explored.

Do you have any comments on the Outreach arrangements as a means of maintaining service to small and remote communities?

Herefordshire Council supports efforts to find alternative ways of delivering post office services on a sustainable basis particularly if it results in increasing the financial viability of existing assets and an increase in the availability of services for communities.

In fact, Herefordshire Council sees the distinct possibility to **improve** access to services to more people by the creative use of outreach arrangements, meeting defined rural community needs, many of which have been identified through the Parish Plan consultation process in the County.

On the specific outreach options that have been trialled, Herefordshire Council would support all options as it is accepted that individual communities should be allowed to come up with their own creative solutions that meet their individual needs, there being no "one size fits all" solution.

Do you have any comments on the practicality of community ownership of parts of the post office network, which might involve the transfer of assets to community organisations and/or the establishment of local mutual or co-operative organisations to own and run local services?

Herefordshire Council believes that all business models should be investigated to ensure the continuation and enhancement of postal services. Models should include social enterprise, which combines the benefits of community involvement with cost containment. There are many examples where social enterprises have developed viable businesses to the benefit of communities in the wider sense. For instance, in Yarpole in Herefordshire, a community shop and post office has in 2 years developed successfully into the hub of the community and is now set to expand into the Parish church, developing further the multi-use concept of community buildings.

The Post Office will need to demonstrate considerable operational flexibility in its approach to these changes in service provision and provide support investment (by using the subsidy creatively) to enable enterprises to achieve financial sustainability. This should be worked out in partnership between the Post Office, local councils and communities.

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