

CAB1557
FOR DECISION

WARD(S): OWSLEBURY AND CURDRIDGE; LITTLETON AND HARESTOCK; BISHOPS
WALTHAM; COMPTON AND OTTERBOURNE

CABINET

14 November 2007

POST OFFICE CLOSURES

REPORT OF CORPORATE DIRECTOR (POLICY)

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Post Office has started a six week consultation on proposals for post office closures in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight as part of a national initiative. The initial study has recommended closing five branches in the City Council's area although a replacement outreach service in two areas of the district is also proposed.

There is a general opposition to the closures because of the impacts on the communities directly affected as well as the wider economic development concerns. The responses from local members are still being obtained and the report recommends responding to the consultation taking account of their views.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That a response to the Post Office consultation be compiled taking account of local members and their communities views as well as those of the Hampshire Association (HIOW), that consideration be given to the particular question of outreach services and authority be delegated to the Corporate Director (Policy) in consultation with the Leader of the Council to finalise the representation on behalf of the Council.

CABINET14 November 2007POST OFFICE CLOSURESREPORT OF CORPORATE DIRECTOR (POLICY)DETAIL:1 Introduction

1.1 The Government believes that fewer people are using post office branches to access their services and in December last year initiated a consultation on the re-shaping of the post office network with a view to closing branches. The DTI reported in May and the Government expect the Post Office Ltd to implement the recommendations subject to public consultation. The Post Office Network Change Programme recommends the closure, nationally, of up to 2,500 post offices. The report for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight has just been published and recommends, amongst other things, to close 62 existing branches. The consultation process is underway and ends on the 26 November.

2 General Issues for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

2.1 The population of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight is currently served by 362 post office branches. Usage has been shown to be falling in line with national trends as customers access services at other places, use internet services or have benefits paid directly into bank accounts. The Post Office report recommends, therefore, that the access to post office criteria that has been set by the Government can be met if the area has 300 branches, 62 less than currently available.

2.2 It is reasonable to say that the Hampshire and Isle of Wight (HIOW) local authorities are concerned that the changes could have a significant impact on the most vulnerable groups in our communities as well as affecting the economic viability of the communities themselves. The rural towns and villages are already affected by the reducing public transport network and their social deprivation indices reflect the access difficulties experienced by many residents. The Post Office proposals have the potential to exacerbate those very real problems. In many places throughout the County, the minimum access standards outlined by the DTI in its concluding report will be inadequate and it is essential that the Post Office recognises the need to improve on those standards by taking account of local needs.

2.3 The National Access Standards devised by the Government are as follows:

- 99% of the UK population to be within 3 miles and 90% to be within 1 mile of their nearest post office.
- 99% of the total population in deprived urban areas to be within 1 mile of their nearest branch.
- 95% of the total urban population to be within 1 mile of their nearest branch.
- 95% of the total rural population to be within 3 miles of their nearest branch.

In addition to the above, for each post code district:

- 95% of the population of the postcode district to be within 6 miles of their nearest branch.

2.4 Many of settlements in the district already fail the access standards before the closure proposals are put in place. The HIOW Association Chief Executive group recommended that this proposed standard be improved so that 95% of the urban and rural populations should be within one half and one and a half miles of their nearest branch respectively and Cabinet may wish to adopt this as a standard for Winchester.

3 Detailed Proposals for Winchester

3.1 The Post Office is proposing to retain 300 branches in the HIOW area, of which 146 will be in urban areas and 154 in rural areas. The Post Office believes that all the deprived communities in the HIOW area are in urban areas but this misses the communities in Winchester which have significant deprivation issues because of their rural isolation, lack of alternative provision and the general access issues that this causes. It has been said before that the issues of deprivation in places like Winchester are larger than first imagined but are largely hidden and our communities suffer in exercises such as this.

3.2 For Winchester the Post Office proposes closing five branches:

- The Memorial Hall, Durley Street, Durley.
- The Hall Way, Littleton.
- Newsmart, Newtown, Bishops Waltham.
- The Shawford Parish Hall, Pearson Road, Shawford.
- The P.O. Gordon Road, Upper Curdridge.

3.3 In an effort to continue to provide some sort of service in some of the areas affected by closures, the Post Office proposes to instigate what it calls 'Outreach' services. There are four types of outreach being proposed:

- Hosted Service – a restricted hours service for certain products/services in a fixed site such as a shop.
- Partner Service – a service for certain products/services at a fixed site where the hours are those of the partner's business.
- Home Service – for very small communities where limited services are largely ordered by telephone and delivered. No physical premises in the community.
- Mobile Service – a van to visit small communities at set times and days to deliver certain services/products.

3.3 No details are provided of the type of outreach that is proposed for Winchester. Indeed the consultation seeks comments on the type of outreach that might be appropriate for the areas concerned. However, although five branches are closing only two outreach services are being proposed, at Church Street, Micheldever and High Street, West Meon. The Post Office assumes that the communities in the south west of the district will access services in Twyford, Otterbourne, Bishops Waltham, Waltham Chase and Upham or in the Eastleigh Borough Council area at Horton Heath, Fair Oak and Botley.

- 3.4 Particular concerns have been raised about the closure of the West Meon post office. The recently re-invigorated local shop and post office, supported and owned in part by the residents, is worthy of mention. The enterprise has only recently started and its impact and importance to the remote communities around West Meon may well have escaped the research being undertaken by the Post Office before their proposals were published. The Post Office report indicates that it will maintain 14 branches in the HLOW area that support the only essential retailer in their community and although it does not indicate where those branches are, it may be that a case can be made for the Winchester branches. Whether the proposed West Meon branch closure represents a different case, notwithstanding the proposal to recommend outreach for that area, also needs to be reviewed.
- 3.5 The Post Office Ltd proposals also recommend outreach provision for East Meon which could benefit the rural communities in the West Meon area
- 3.6 The post office and shop received Post Office Ltd as well Winchester City Council grant aid which enabled its re-launch. It's not certain, if the proposals were confirmed, whether the Post Office Ltd would seek to recover its investment, but the Council's funding which amounted to a combined amount of £25,000 from LABGI and a capital community grant award would have to be considered as being at risk, if the shop is unable to continue to trade.

4 Future Development

- 4.1 The future development of new communities in Winchester needs to be taken into account to ensure that they are sustainable. The Inspector's Report on the draft South East Plan adds to the growth pressure with significant numbers of houses proposed to be built each year to 2026. The Post Office report acknowledges the responses from a number of the district councils in Hampshire and purports to take account of the regeneration proposals and will keep provision under review should demand increase. Any response to the consultation should emphasise the impact of growth on the Winchester district and seek to ensure the proposed new and enlarged communities that are outlined in the SE Plan Inspectors report are fully recognised in any post office plan.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

5 CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

- 5.1 In promoting economic prosperity, the Council recognises the value of the post office for many of communities in meeting the challenges of the 21st century. The Corporate Strategy includes aims to support vibrant town and village centres and supporting the retention of post offices, where that's appropriate, would help meet this aim.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 6.1 There are no resource implications resulting from this report, but please see the comment at paragraph 3.6 on the grant support to the West Meon shop and post office.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

The Post Office Ltd Network Change Programme – Area Plan Proposal Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

Special Delivery: The role of local authorities in the future of post office services – LGA response to the DTI's consultation on the post office network

The Post Office Network: Government response to public consultation - DTI

APPENDICES:

None