



**Breckland Council**

**Consultation Response to Post Office Ltd**

**Post Office Network Change Programme**

**Area Plan Proposal Norfolk & West Suffolk**

**Overview & Scrutiny Commission**

**May 2008**

Ms Tarling  
Network Development Manager  
c/o National Consultation Team  
Post Office Ltd

**Re: Post Office Network Change Programme – Area Plan Proposal Norfolk 7  
West Suffolk**

Dear Ms Tarling

This is the formal response from Breckland District Council to the above Area Plan Proposal for Norfolk & West Suffolk. It has been produced following consultation with Norfolk County Council, Breckland Parish Councils, all Breckland District Ward Members and through the Breckland Local Strategic Partnership which is a multi-agency forum of interested parties (including Breckland Market Town Area Partnerships, Learning & Skills Councils, Norfolk Constabulary, Norfolk Rural Community Council, Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services and the Norfolk Primary Care Trust).

Breckland Council recognises the commercial need for a review of the Post Office network, however at the same time is concerned that the proposed closures in Breckland - in the form of an outright closure or limited hours replacement outreach service - will have a severe impact on the most vulnerable in society. We are gravely concerned about the proposals as they would see a significant down-grading of the network across the district, thus hitting our rural communities extremely hard and denying access to a range of service provision. We are deeply concerned that out of 14 proposed closures there is only 1 proposed outreach service. Breckland Council is constantly striving to tackle social exclusion, in particular social isolation through rural isolation and difficulties faced in accessing services. The Area Plan proposals conflict with these policy objectives.

Breckland Council's overall concerns on the proposals (which are explored in further detail below) are:

- Impact of the closures on the vitality of our rural communities especially the elderly and disabled.
- Access to and availability of alternative Post Offices.

- Population access criteria.
- Ageing population need more, not less accessible services.
- Limited number of outreach services proposed.
- Threat of additional closures.
- Post Office Ltd's approach to the consultation.
- Future development (housing growth).
- Lack of innovation or flexibility to find solutions.

Without doubt the closure of any Post Office has an adverse effect on the communities they serve in terms of accessibility and the removal of a community resource. Breckland Council is concerned that the Government has not adequately addressed this issue. However it is clear that the Government has decided that some Post Offices will close and therefore some will fall within this area. The Council recognises that some Post Offices need to close and we realise that in some circumstances this is the case. However this does not justify the position on closing Post Offices that are vitally needed.

Overall Breckland Council opposes the proposed 14 Post Office closures in Breckland and believes it has a duty to draw the attention of Post Office Ltd to the effect of particular closures on communities within the district.

Breckland Council clearly set out its views on the future of the Post Office at its meeting on 12 February 2008 when the following motion was agreed: *'Breckland Council formally invites the Post Office to work with the Council to provide services to residents in the most viable way in the future. This Council notes the invaluable service provided by our Local Post Offices to the local community which relies heavily on their post office branches. This Council deplores the Government's current programme of 2,500 closures across the country. This Council notes the strength of public opinion in favour of saving local post offices. This Council recognises the needs of the elderly, disabled and the most disadvantaged who rely on local post offices the most'*.

This consultation response includes two appendices. Appendix A are comments in relation to the generality of the proposals, and Appendix B are detailed comments in

relating to individual proposals based on fact. All of the comments contained in this response relate to the closures within the Breckland District Council boundary.

We would like to further reinforce the Council commitment and wish to work with Post Office Ltd to provide services to the residents of Breckland in the most viable way for the future. We are open to exploring the potential to jointly provide mobile/outreach service provision either of your behalf or in partnership.

Finally, we would like to reiterate the overwhelming concern that has been expressed across the district at the scale of the proposed closures. Breckland is a largely rural area with a growing population and is in fact one of the fastest growing districts in the UK. It has a proportionately higher concentration of older people within its communities. Post Offices are one of a range of key services upon which communities depend. We would be grateful for your consideration of the issues raised in this response. If you require clarification of any issue then please do not hesitate to contact us. This response has been copied to Postwatch and our local Members of Parliament.

Yours sincerely

Mark Stokes  
**Strategic Director**  
**Breckland Council**

CC Christopher Fraser MP, House of Commons  
Keith Andrew, Deputy Chair, Postwatch  
Trevor Holden, Chief Executive Officer, Breckland Council

## **Appendix A) Generic Comments**

### **Access and Availability of Alternative Post Offices**

The impact of closure or a reduced limited hours outreach service will be especially serious for older people especially in our rural communities where there are a number of issues involving access to alternative post offices. The lack of nearby parking at some of the alternative branches is a concern, as is the access to and availability of public transport. Breckland has an ageing population that is anticipated to continue to rise. It has significantly large areas of rural terrain that are only accessed by a limited network of country roads many without pavements posing particular challenges for those without access to private transportation. The current proposals will further isolate those groups that are already vulnerable such as the elderly or disabled.

### **Outreach Services**

Breckland Council is concerned that the rationale and target for establishing outreach services may not be targeting available resources at areas of most need but at areas of geographical remoteness.

Insufficient information has been made available on the arrangements for the planned outreach services. It is not clear for instance whether anyone would be willing to provide an outreach service. In Breckland the only proposed outreach service is that for Beachamwell. It is not clear whether the existing post office has been considered as the location for an outreach service. Judged on the basis of the start-up costs of an outreach service and the safeguards that would need to be taken with regards to security it would make sense to use the existing branch infrastructure. We would like to suggest that where outreach services are introduced, thorough local consultation is undertaken and that clear communication with resident populations ensures they understand the new service so that the customer base is not further diminished.

Outreach services need to be regular and reliable. The proposals for Beachamwell provide five hours per week. Such limited provision would be unacceptable in view of the access problems that residents would be faced with at all other times - be it in terms of physical barriers, poor or non-existent public transport links to a

neighbouring branch, and the sheer distance that they would have to travel to access Post Office services.

### **Population Access Criteria**

The mileage criteria radius used to calculate the population age profiles is in many instances misleading. In our district individual post offices often serve a wider area than this, particularly in rural areas and areas that already act as 'receiving branches' for neighbouring branches that have closed. Hence the proportion of retired people using a branch will be much higher than the figures listed in the Branch Access Reports. Due to the fact that many of our post offices serve a wide geographic area, surrounding villages will in many cases be further than three miles to the alternative branch if their nearest post office should close - and so will be outside the Government's access criteria.

### **Economic Impact**

Breckland Council does not feel that the likely impact on local economies has been taken into account in the Area Plan, particularly in those instances where a branch is connected to an adjoining business such as a shop. Branch closure will impact on the sustainability of the associated business. It will also detrimentally affect businesses that rely on their local post office network to deliver and receive parcels. Neighbouring shops are also likely to see a reduction in trade. At least eight branches being proposed for closure in Breckland have dependent associated retail outlets which are profitable businesses. The central overheads apportioned to individual branches by Post Office Ltd are outside the control of individual sub-postmasters. Consequently we feel that the Post Office should be looking at how it can reduce its own overheads rather than close branches.

The possible knock-on effect of these closures is that the convenience store is likely to close as a result of Post Office closure.

### **Innovative Alternatives**

The issue of low footfall in some branches could be addressed through means other than closure/introduction of an outreach service – flexibility in the hours that the post office can open would encourage residents to use their post office (for example many residents would like to see evening opening hours but currently postmasters cannot

be paid for evening opening). This is particularly important where the post office is incorporated within the sole shop in a community.

Breckland Council believes that there is a lack of innovation in the framework (put forward by the Government) and in the proposals put forward by Post Office Ltd, particularly with looking at the partnering of services offered by Post Offices with some form of mobile retail facility. Although Laura Tarling stated at a public meeting on 07 April 2008 that the Post Office is working with local authorities following two written and additional verbal requests to work with Post Office Ltd on mitigating closures through the offer to partner on alternative service provision such as a partnered mobile provision, no reply has been received.

Breckland Council would like to suggest to Post Office Ltd that it adopts various strategies to mitigate closures such as undertaking a feasibility on the scope for community owned shops, thinking of alternative ways of meeting service needs, i.e. 'One Stop Shops' and working with other organisations that also have an interest in delivering community services,

### **Voluntary Closures**

Breckland Council does not support omitting the inclusion of unplanned closures in the total number of Post Offices recommended for closure and believes that voluntary closures should have been requested, consulted on and where appropriate agreed in order to reduce the total number of closures required.

### **Contradiction to Government Policy (Carbon Footprint Reduction)**

The economic and social value of the local Post Office within the community has not been taken into account. The government standpoint on these closures is contrary to their national policies such as improving the carbon footprint, improving sustainable communities. Neither of these high priority policies has been considered within the planned proposals. According to the 13 Branch Access reports taking the mileage to the next nearest Post Office times two for a journey there and back multiplied by the number of customer sessions (assuming each session is per customer) the total number of miles that will additionally be travelled is 6,636 per week or 345,072 per annum. The increased use of a vehicle to access alternative Post Offices will increase CO2 emissions.

### **Alternative Branches Access via Public Transport**

The Area Plan has only looked at whether there is a bus service or not and does not allow for the absence of low floor/wheelchair access on bus routes travelling to alternative branches. In addition branch closures are located in areas where there are no direct bus services to the first or second alternative branch. In one case; Beeston it has been calculated that a trip to the alternative branch in the Access Report, i.e. Litcham will take 3 days.

### **Pressure on Alternative Branches**

The pressure of additional custom leading to longer queues/transaction times at the alternative branches, specifically the town centre branches in Swaffham, Watton, Dereham and Thetford. The Watton office has four Post Office's closing within 5 miles. Also due to the throughput of customers there is likely to be a lower level of customer service currently experienced in those Post Office's where staff have time to assist customers, especially the elderly as much as possible.

### **Last Shop in the Village**

It is accepted that Post Office Ltd's principal concern is ensuring the economic viability of a national network and that it has no responsibility with regard to other local service provision. Concerns in this area relate to where the Post Office is located within the last remaining shop in a community and in Breckland this is in Beeston, and New Buckenham. This is particularly acute where that shop provides services that are required by the local community e.g. groceries, bread, milk etc and where it is likely to become unviable without the income derived from Post Office activities, therefore causing deprivation in terms of access to services.

The Council endorses the concerns raised by the Commission for Rural Communities that there should be a 'presumption against the closure of a post office with an attached shop where this is the last remaining outlet in a community'. The House of Commons Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Committee Post Office Closure Programme Report (published February 2008) suggests this should be extended to a presumption against closing a post office where this is the last shop in the village or in a deprived urban area. A number of Post Officers in this Area Plan relate to the last shop in the village and one to a deprived urban area.

### **Future Development**

A number of the branch closures in Breckland are in or near to areas proposed for housing development (mainly Swaffham, Watton, Thetford, Dereham and Attleborough). The Area Plan has not fully taken this into consideration when planning the closures specifically for the following branches, London St, Swaffham and Norwich Road, Watton both of which service towns programmed for additional housing growth.

### **Elderly & Disabled**

The impact of closures will be especially serious for older people, the infirm, carers and the disabled especially within remote communities significantly where there are a number of issues involving access to alternative Post Offices. In particular the lack of nearby parking at some of the alternative branches is a notable concern.

The impact / affect on the local community will be much greater than has been taken into account within these closure proposals. A sufficient degree of 'value' has not been considered or placed on the significance of the Post Office to a community. The disadvantaged and most vulnerable members within these communities are therefore most likely to suffer.

The key concerns associated with the above are that some elderly and less able people will no longer be able to walk to their local Post Office which has become a key part of the structure of their lives.

### **Deprivation & Access to Services**

The following statistics provide a factual snapshot of the situation in Breckland which demonstrate the difficulties Breckland residents face in this rural area when accessing local services. Post Office Ltd needs to consider these statistics carefully and understand how Post Office closures will further enhance the deprivation of this rural district.

Breckland is one of the largest district council areas in England at 1,305 square kilometres. It is also one of the most sparsely populated. The population density in 2002 averaged 94 people per square kilometre, compared with an average of 284 for the Eastern region and 380 people per square kilometre for England overall. Much of the area is rural, given over to agriculture and heathland.

49% of the population lives in the five market towns of Attleborough, Dereham, Swaffham, Thetford and Watton. The other 51% is spread across 107 rural parishes, varying in size from 20 to over 3,000 residents.

Overall, Breckland is not amongst the most deprived local authority areas as per the national statistics, but this does not take into consideration the many isolated pockets of rural deprivation in the area. Breckland scores poorly on 'connectivity' and geographical barriers to services. 31 of Breckland's 78 Super Output Areas are in the 10% most deprived for the geographical barriers deprivation score. A Local Futures report in 2006 ranked Breckland the 16<sup>th</sup> worst local authority area in the UK in terms of 'connectivity'.

Breckland has a diverse community of over 120,000 people which is forecast to increase to 155,200 by 2026. Generally, quality of life is good with official crime rates being low and generally decreasing. However there are pockets of health, poverty and disability related deprivation, notably in some of the Thetford and rural wards. Recently, migrant workers from the European Union have become established as a significant new community with numbers estimated between 6,000 and 15,000.

51% of the population lives in the rural areas of Breckland where there has been a decline in service provision linked to increasing mobility for car owners and a rationalisation of service and retail provision. Significant areas of the District are now without key service provision and allied with very limited public transport provision.

In Breckland:

- 46% of households have access to only 1 car or van\*
- 17% of households do not have access to a car or a van\*
- 39% of people travel to work by car, with only 1% using the bus\*
- Approximately 8,000 households are in fuel poverty\*
- Over 5,000 households are over 4 kilometres from the nearest cash point\*\*
- Nearly 7,000 households are over 4 kilometres from the nearest doctors' surgery\*\*

- Over 4,000 households are over 2 kilometres from the nearest primary school\*\*
- Over 6,000 households are over 6 kilometres from the nearest high school\*\*
- Over 6,000 households are over 6 kilometres from the nearest supermarket and library\*\*
- Over 4,000 households are over 8 kilometres from the nearest bank\*\*
- 25% of the population are over 60 years of age\*
- The average gross weekly pay is £372 reflecting an hourly pay of £8.78. Compared to Great Britain as a whole where the hourly pay average is £450 and hourly rate is £11.26.\*\*\*
- 24% of the adult population have poor literacy skills and 17% have no qualifications at all.\*\*\*
- In 2004/5 only 11% of new houses were completed as affordable dwellings.\*\*\*
- The average house price in 2005 was £165,237.\*\*\*
- The number of people killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions was 490 in 2007, 39 were children under the age of 16.\*\*\*

The complete picture of the area is one of rapid population growth, poor connectivity and access to services, low pay but low rates of unemployment, localised hotspots of multiple deprivation, along with an increasing migrant population.

\*Census 2001

\*\*Rural Services Survey 2002

\*\*\* ONS Annual Population Survey 2006

## Survey Responses

In November 2007 Breckland Council issued a questionnaire to all its ward members and local parish council's inviting them to take part in a survey to provide feedback on the post office delivery situation in their area. The following outlines the headline responses from this survey:

- 75% of Post Office services are delivered in another or existing business.

- 93% of Breckland Members believe residents would be unable to access an alternative Post Office service if their local Post Office closed.
- 88% of Breckland Members believe Breckland residents' quality of life would be affected for the worse.
- 73% of Breckland Members believe Post Offices in Breckland have experienced increasing customer numbers in the last 3 years.
- 73% of residents in Breckland walk to access their Post Office service.

### **Consultation Period**

The period of time given for the consultation process is far too short for any local community group or organisation to put forward a response to the proposals. Post Office Ltd has had several more weeks than this and resources to pull together its plans; it should provide the same to those who wish to present evidence and a case. It is also deeply concerning that there appears to be no 'appeal' mechanism or method of requiring the Post Office to reconsider their decision regarding the closures. Also Parish Councils are not part of the statutory consultation, however, Parish Councillors are the representatives of the communities that the proposals are concerned with and therefore it is immoral that they should have been sidelined.

### **Future**

The current Post Office subsidy expires in just 3 years time – what happens then and what is Post Office Ltd doing and learning in this process to mitigate a further cut on the network?

Post Office Ltd has to address its current loss situation and that the rate of use of Post Offices has been in decline. However the removal of products and services over the years has increased radically and the new products introduced by the Post Office are not necessarily appropriate for rural requirements. We recommend that the Post Office Ltd should change how it sells its products and services and to completely rethink its long term business plan. It should also look to find ways of providing a more viable service by working in partnership with other willing organisations demonstrating that it has the ability to contribute towards the government's requirement to create greater community cohesion and stronger social inclusion.

## Appendix B) Specific Branch Comments

<p><b>BEACHAMWELL</b> Post Office 24-25 The Street, Beachamwell, Swaffham, PE37 8BD</p>	<p>Associate shop is likely to close also.</p> <p>No community car scheme available in Beachamwell to enable access to alternative service centres.</p> <p>Nearest Post Offices, Fincham is 4.8 miles and Narborough is over 5 miles.</p> <p>Unable to access alternative Post unless have private transport.</p> <p>Outreach service via Accesspoint will be delivered from Upwell – long way to travel with large amounts of cash.</p>
<p><b>BEESTON</b> Post Office Village Stores, Chapel Lane, Beeston, PE32 3NG</p>	<p>Existing grocery shop business would close – is the last shop in the village.</p> <p>Nearest alternative branch is Litcham, but takes 3 days to get there and back via public transport.</p> <p>Terrain is not mainly level, there are no pavements with steep hills and high roadside banks and is liable to flooding.</p>
<p><b>CLINT GREEN</b> Post Office Norwich Road, Yaxham, NR19 1AB</p>	<p>Alternative nearest Post Office at Mattishall has limited parking and access.</p> <p>St Peter's Care Home in Yaxham where approx. 40 residents draw pensions from this Post Office.</p> <p>Customer sessions per week is at least 100 not 0-49 as per Branch Access report.</p>
<p><b>LONGHAM</b> Post Office Chapel Road, Longham, NR19 2AJ</p>	<p>Customer sessions per week is at least 100 not 0-49 as per Branch Access report.</p> <p>Routes to suggested nearest Post Offices are dangerous country lanes with no pavements.</p> <p>2 buses to Dereham per week, but only stay in Dereham for 2 hours.</p>
<p><b>NEW BUCKENHAM</b> Post Office, Lovells, Market Place, New Buckenham, NR16 2AN</p>	<p>Transport to alternative branches is incorrect. There is no public transport to Old Buckenham, Banham, and Kenninghall. The bus to Bunwell is at 10.20 but doesn't come back until 13.40.</p>

<p><b>SWAFFHAM LONDON ST</b> Post Office, London St, Swaffham, PE37 7DX</p>	<p>Additional housing being built in Swaffham not being taken into account.</p> <p>Sheltered accommodation being built and two other care homes within close vicinity.</p> <p>Customer sessions per week are at least 300-400 not 200-299 as per Branch Access report.</p>
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