

BRECKLAND COUNCIL POST OFFICE SURVEY & PETITION (NOVEMBER 2007)

RESULTS & EVIDENCE

1. INTRODUCTION

In November 2007 Breckland Council issued a questionnaire to all its ward members and local parish council's inviting them to take part in an online survey to provide feedback on the post office delivery situation in their area. The aim of the survey was to gather a district wide evidence base on which could be used to support any communication with Post Office Ltd during their forthcoming consultation on the national Network Change Programme, and specifically the situation in Breckland, Norfolk. A total of 159 surveys were issued.

Breckland Council also issued a petition on its website and in its community magazine asking local residents to support the campaign to call on the government to stop post office closures in Breckland and to safeguard local post office services. The petition was open for approximately eight weeks and was only advertised twice in the Breckland Council local community magazine. There was an online petition that could be signed and a coupon that could be signed and sent in to the Council.

The following represents the results that can be determined from the survey and the results of the petition.

2. SUMMARY

Clearly the closure of any post office will be a loss to that community, and this will be felt even harder in rural communities. In addition to the economic impact of a local business closing and the loss of jobs, there is the greater loss of a community service. In rural areas, such as Breckland the post office income usually supplements a retail income such as a grocery or newsagent. It is possible that without the post office the remaining business is not viable and could close. The knock on impact of the loss of not just a post office but also the local shop would be severe in rural areas. Without these basic facilities and services in our villages there is a severe risk that younger people will not be attracted to these communities and therefore village schools could ultimately suffer and close.

3. PETITION

The petition asked local residents if they could afford to lose their local Post Office service? It asked residents to sign the petition to support the campaign to call on the government to stop post office closures and specifically in Breckland.

198 signatures were received via the online method and a total of 418 signatures were received in writing making a total of 616 signatures.

4. SURVEY

4.1 HEADLINE RESULTS

- 25% response rate (40 responses were received from a total of 159 issued surveys).
- 43% of post office service entities were commented on (24 out of 56 separate entities).
- 75% of post office services are delivered in another or existing business.
- 93% of residents would be unable to access an alternative post office service if their local post office closed.
- 88% of Breckland resident's quality of life would be affected for the worse.
- 73% of 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.

4.2.1 POST OFFICE SURVEY DELIVERY

There are 56 separate entities delivering post office services in Breckland and 75% of post office services are delivered within another or existing business i.e. a village shop. With such a large number of post office services being delivered within another business the viability of the other business is likely to be threatened by the closure of the post office service due to the loss of income for delivering those post office services. Consequently the closure of a post office could affect not only one but two or more vital services for the community. The remaining post office services are delivered as Sub-post offices or main post offices.

There are a very limited number of post office services that are delivered in an alternative method such as an outreach service or by volunteers etc.

Case Study: One notable example is in the village of Mileham where at the beginning of 2006 the local shop and post office was on the verge of closing due to the original owner's personal circumstances. The local villagers, with support from the Norfolk Rural Community Council succeeded in setting up one of the first retail Community Interest Companies in the country and took over running the shop and post office within a record six weeks. The shop is now thriving and the business is looking to employ more staff, sell more local produce and refurbish the premises. The closure of this Post Office would set back the hard work of the community over the last year and have severe consequences on the customers it serves.

This demonstrates that local rural communities will rise to the challenge of finding alternative ways of providing services in their areas but with only a limited number of actual cases it is difficult to understand how an alternative network through an 'outreach' service can be implemented. Difficulties arise with obtaining the community support, finding suitable secure premises and a main post office that will run the outreach service, if it is viable.

4.2.2 CLOSURE CONSEQUENCES

The survey discovered that 92.5% of local users would be unable to access any postal or banking services if their local post office closed. In addition 90.0% would be unable to access any other post office service at all. Breckland is a very rural area which is sparsely populated and there are pockets of rural and urban deprivation. Low incomes and a public transport service that is difficult to deliver (making it severely inadequate) consequently makes the post office service in rural communities a vital lifeline and a primary service for many. The survey also found that 87.5% of people's quality of life would be affected for the worse. A majority also stated that people would be unable to obtain important information and advice.

4.2.3 CUSTOMER NUMBERS

Although it is known that Post Office Ltd is losing £200 million per year (2006/7 figures) and that there are four million fewer customer visits every week compared with two years ago the local trend is very different. In Breckland 57.5% of post offices have more than 300 customers a week. This was by far the greatest majority. In fact 70.0% stated that their local post office received over 200 visits per week and 82.5% stated that their local post office received over 100 visits per week. 72.5% of respondents also commented that the numbers were increasing with only 10% stating they had decreased. These results go against the national trend and further demonstrate the vital need for these services specifically in rural areas.

4.2.4 TRAVEL & SUSTAINABILITY

With over 72.5% of respondents stating that residents in their local areas walk to their post office service it is very difficult to understand how the Post Office Ltd standard minimum access of criteria of 95% of the rural population will be within 3 miles of their nearest branch will be applied. If the nearest post office is 3 miles away with so many people currently accessing the service by foot it is clear that these criteria should not be used rigidly under any circumstances during the Post Office Ltd's considerations. Further post office closures will therefore ultimately cause people to rely on motorised transport which goes against the national policy of reducing carbon footprints to ensure there is a sustainable environment for future generations.

4.2.5 CLOSURE IMPLICATIONS

The survey discovered that in 70.0% of cases there would be a loss of employment in the area if the post office closed. Also 75.0% stated that there would be a loss of a retail outlet, and 60.0% stated that it would be difficult to find alternative locations for a post office service. 77.5% stated that their postmaster/postmistress would continue delivering the existing business if the post office closed and 17.5% would have to find alternative employment or would retire. Post Office closures in rural areas would result in the following:

- The lost of an important and integral role in the fabric of village life.
- The elderly population would be unable to access any post office services.
- Increasing the deprivation score as those on low incomes would be further incapacitated to access a local service.
- Many local businesses depend on their local post office service.
- A Post Office is seen to be an integral part of another business such as a village shop which is likely to be threatened.
- The closure of any Post Office in Breckland would cause hardship.

End