

Impact of Post Office Closures: Area 1

This case study is a snapshot of the key impacts of the Post Office closure on a local community, six and a half months after the Post Office closed. It begins by briefly introducing the village and the surrounding area and then discusses the specific impacts the closure has had on the local community, vulnerable groups within the community and businesses.

Introduction to the local community

The village is rural and remote, with approximately 1,000 residents. It has an Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score of 18,595 out of 32,482, placing it close to the English midpoint. Employment in the area is varied and includes local agriculture and industrial work.

Over the last thirty years, the village amenities of area 1 have reduced considerably. Once the site of approximately 15 shops, the village now has two pubs and one local store. In addition, there is a Church of England church, a Methodist Chapel and a village hall. At the end of March 2008 the Post Office, located in the local store, closed and was replaced by a part-time, hosted Outreach Service at one of the local pubs.

In order to access more retail and leisure facilities, there are three towns which residents can travel approximately five to ten miles to go to. Further afield (14 to 25 miles), greater choice is offered in three small cities.

Until recently, the village had a weekly local authority bus service to a market town some six miles away. This service has been replaced by two small 'dial-a-ride' services and a weekly bus service, provided by Tesco. This service calls at numerous stops on the way to the market town, resulting in a journey time of approximately one hour.

The rural nature of the village is seen as both a positive and negative point by residents. The peace of the area, the sense of community and the perceived sense of personal safety are cherished by residents, but the isolation from facilities and services is seen as a growing problem.

The closure of the Post Office

The Post Office was run in an annex of the village's local store. Seven years ago, with a combination of her own money and Post Office Ltd grants, the owner of the store renovated an adjoining garage to accommodate the Post Office. This included installing a security system, safe, fire escape and glass-fronted counter. The Post Office was offering a comprehensive range of services, including travel money and car tax.

Following the announcement of the closure, there was a vigorous local campaign aimed at overturning the decision. The former postmistress and local vicar were instrumental in coordinating the campaign which included a petition of local residents, public protests and media coverage. The majority of the concerns raised by residents and businesses during the consultation process related to elderly customers, the distance to the alternative locations and the limited public transport facilities. Local residents and businesses said that the change would have an adverse impact on the community and pointed out that this branch also served a number of other local villages. Businesses within the village also expressed concern about potential environmental issues such as greater fuel use to travel to Post Offices in surrounding towns.

Following the public consultation, Post Office Ltd decided to provide a Hosted service of 12 hours per week in the village pub, retaining most of the services previously available. This decision was made despite a number of other locations being suggested, such as the Village Hall or keeping the service at the local store.

Impact on the local community

The Post Office closure has impacted on village residents in a number of ways. For the majority of local residents the closure has been an inconvenience. Having had access to a breadth of services throughout the week in a local and convenient location for so long, there are residents for whom having to *think* about accessing postal services is something new. While many do not use the services regularly, they call for their interaction with the Post Office to be seamlessly interwoven with their daily lives. Purchasing road tax was frequently mentioned as a convenient local service. While this is only likely to be a yearly or twice yearly event, it is nonetheless a frequently cited example of a minor inconvenience to local residents as a result of the Post Office closure.

The car tax was wonderful because when you've got to queue up in these big post offices... That was great.

Local Resident

Local residents talked about the inconvenience incurred by using other Post Offices: parking restrictions, queues or simply having to change their *usual* routines. Some say they now do not use the Outreach Service simply because they do not know the opening times and do not want to have to try to remember them.

I tend to use the PO when I go and do my weekly shop, it's more convenient.

Local Resident

It's an added inconvenience. You have to memorise other times. You knew the shop times...

Local Resident

Local residents talk fondly of the village's community spirit. While the Post Office did play a minor role as a community hub, however, there are also other places providing this function within the village. Most residents move in wider social circles and socialise elsewhere within the village, for example at church or the Women's Institute, as well as further afield. Their daily lives also tend to take them beyond the village, whether for work or to visit other local amenities, where they are able to use other Post Offices.

For some vulnerable local residents - the elderly, parents of young children and those without access to private transport - the closure has had a more profound effect. For these groups, life is centred more around the village which means that any reduction in service inevitably has a more significant impact on them than on other groups. Going to the Post Office was an integral part of their weekly, or in some cases daily, routine, which gave them the opportunity to get out of their homes and interact with others from the community. Arranging to go to another Post Office or service provider at times when the Outreach service is not open can be challenging for each of these groups. For parents of young children there are often issues surrounding routine and the extent to which the provision of the Outreach service fits into this. Those without access to private transport are often reliant upon local public transport, while those elderly residents who are less physically mobile have to rely on the goodwill of others to help them access Post Office services.

Access to the Outreach Service, in contrast to the former Post Office, is via a step. Those with mobility difficulties, principally the elderly, are finding this an obstacle to accessing postal services. For a small minority of elderly residents, the closure of the Post Office and their inability to access the Outreach Service has meant that they become increasingly housebound. However, for most in these groups, there is no reason why the Outreach Service cannot continue to be an important part of their routine and interaction with others in the community.

There's nothing for disabled people. There just isn't any way they can get in there. They haven't got a ramp; they haven't got anything like that so people can get in.

Local Stakeholder

Those who are unable to access the Outreach Service, whether due to the increased walking distance, crossing the busy road on a difficult bend or the step within the pub, rely on family, friends or neighbours to use Post Office services on their behalf. At present this mechanism appears to be working well; the change in provision is still fresh in the minds of the community and local people do appear to be mindful of the needs of elderly residents.

They could do with [the Post Office] here because of the inconvenience for people, especially old people. It's mainly for them, mainly the old people that miss it more, because they haven't got the ways and means of getting anywhere else.

Local Business

I think a lot of people in the village are going and doing what they [older residents] want. They'll go and ask them and they'll go and get it for them.

Local Resident

The decision to locate the Outreach Service within a local pub has caused some problems for a small number of residents. There are older members of the Methodist Chapel within the village that have never entered, and say they will never enter, a pub. The choice of location for the Outreach Service acts as a major barrier for this element of the community, meaning that they have to travel to use alternative Post Offices in nearby towns.

There's a lot of older people won't go in to the pub because of their religion. There's some who've never ever been in a pub. So of course they won't go in.

Local Stakeholder

There are also other members of the community who see a pub as a less than ideal choice for the Outreach service, such as the elderly and some female residents who say they do not feel comfortable in the pub, especially when wanting to carry out personal or perhaps sensitive transactions.

No I don't like going in pubs on my own. I don't think women do, not a lot of women.

Local Resident

But as I say you don't have privacy, there's no privacy there for people. There's people in the bar, they can see through into the Post Office.

Local Stakeholder

Impact on local businesses

The closure of the Post Office has had and continues to have an impact on the small business community of the village. The effects have been particularly significant for the local store. Since the closure of the Post Office, customer numbers in the store have fallen. The owner suspects that people from surrounding villages are no longer being drawn to the local store by the Post Office. The remaining business alone appears to be insufficient to attract the same numbers of customers it had prior to the closure and takings have fallen as a result. The owner, partly due to the timing and partly due to experience, ascribes this decline solely to the loss of the Post Office.

Following the closure, the shop owner set the business a six month review period after which she would review the financial viability of her business. Although not yet complete, she is aware that the fall in takings may well signal the closure of the business.

They did often have people who went in, got their pension, then go into the shop and spend some money. Where now they have to go into [town] and they'll spend their money in the supermarket instead.

Local Stakeholder

The owner of the local store points out that she was asked by Post Office Ltd to host, but not work in, an Outreach Service. She declined this offer as she felt it was inappropriate for them to be asking her and could not understand why the Post Office would be replaced with a reduced service which she would not be involved in delivering.

I just don't understand why they couldn't say, right, we'll make it part time and have it say like Monday to Friday morning and leave it at that, but they wouldn't even entertain that.

Local Stakeholder

The pub that agreed to host the Outreach Service has also lost business as a result of the closure. There is evidence to suggest that some residents no longer go to the local pub on principle as they believe the landlord was instrumental in the closure of the Post Office. Not only has this affected his takings, but the landlord claimed to have received nuisance phone calls that he believes are related to this incident.

Because you see people in the village, they really stick together. They won't go. They won't go on principle.

Local Stakeholder

There are several further small businesses in the village that are experiencing some inconvenience to their work. They now have to plan to use the Post Office, whereas previously it had been a local service that was integrated into their working routines. Since the closure, businesses are either making fewer trips to the post office, which potentially reduces how quickly items are sent, or travelling further to visit a Post Office and increasing their fuel costs.

Well when it were round there, I'd go when I needed, but when I've got to go now to [local town] I wait until I've got a few and then go down there, because it's all fuel, the price of fuel's too expensive.

Local Business

Conclusions

For most in the local community, the closure of the Post Office and subsequent opening of an Outreach Service in the village has caused them only minor inconvenience. The shorter opening hours of the Outreach Service mean that they now have to make plans to use Post Office facilities whereas Post Office services were previously easily and conveniently accessible as part of their daily routines.

However, there are vulnerable groups for whom the move to an Outreach Service has meant that they now either find it more difficult or are no longer able to access Post Office services themselves, in particular the elderly residents of the village. For them, the change has led to more reliance on others to handle their Post Office transactions for them, and less time out of their homes. Access to the Outreach Service is via a step, which acts as a barrier to accessing postal services for those with mobility difficulties, principally the elderly. Furthermore, selecting a pub as the location for the Outreach Service has meant that local Methodists no longer use the service in the village and there is evidence to suggest that some female residents and elderly people feel less comfortable going into the pub to use the Outreach service than they did when the service was hosted in the local shop.

Among the local business community, the store has seen a significant fall in customer numbers and the pub has also seen a drop in custom. For other businesses in the village, the closure has simply been a minor inconvenience. Some are making fewer visits to the post offices in order to minimise time and fuel costs, which impacts to a small extent on the speed at which they do business.