

# Impact of Post Office Closures: Area 2

This case study is a snapshot of the key impacts of a Post Office closure on a local community, six 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 a rural and remote community of approximately 700 residents, with a spread of families, working couples and retired people. It has an Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score of 16,758 out of 32,482, placing it around the English midpoint. Work in agriculture has declined in the area and people now work across a variety of sectors. Some people travel between 25 and 50 miles to commute into the surrounding big cities.

The number of local shops in the village has fallen since the 1960s and the introduction of the first supermarkets. It now has just one shop, a convenience store, which recently reopened after a six month period of closure. There are two or three mobile retailers that visit the village selling bread, meat and fish. The village also has a fish and chip shop, two pubs and two churches.

In order to access more retail and leisure facilities, residents can travel approximately five miles to the nearest town. Greater choice can be found in surrounding towns and cities, but this means travelling between 16 and 25 miles.

Twice a week, there are two bus services a day into the nearest town. The five mile journey takes approximately 45 minutes due to the number of stops it makes on the way. The nearest city can be reached by two bus journeys. To supplement these services, local residents used to have access to a dial-a-ride bus service, but this service has ceased to operate. Some local residents use a taxi to get to the nearest town. This costs £16 to £20 return.

Reasons local people give for choosing to live in this village relate to the strength of the local community and its rural location. Some are attracted by the peace and quiet, while others say they are here for the hill walking and proximity to the coast. The location is not without its drawbacks however; with the most frequently cited disadvantage of living in the area being the lack of public transport.

## The closure of the Post Office

The Post Office was run in an annex of a local resident's house. It only offered the minimum of postal services and did not offer any additional, non-postal products or services. It also served some of the smaller surrounding villages that have no post office of their own. Despite approaching retirement age, the postmistress took the decision to close the Post Office badly and local residents report that she became very depressed as a direct result.

During the closure consultation period, there was a public petition and a village meeting with a representative of Post Office Ltd present. There was very little confidence in the consultation process among residents however. Residents report that although they thought that the decision would not be changed, they felt compelled to at least make their voices heard.

*We got petitions... but it was a foregone conclusion.*

### **Local Resident**

The main issues raised by local residents during the public consultation related to vulnerable customer groups and the perceived difficulties involved in accessing the alternative branches. In particular, issues related to the perceived inadequacy of public transport. Residents mentioned the distance to the proposed alternative branches and the effect the closure would have on the community. There was also concern about the rationale used to select Post Offices for closure.

*It's obvious they've taken a map and picked people at random. There's a place with only 10 houses where the Post Office is still open!*

### **Local Resident**

Following the public consultation, Post Office Ltd decided to proceed with the proposed closure and replaced the Post Office with a Hosted Outreach service in the village hall, open two days a week for a total of six hours.

## Impact on the local community

Despite general acknowledgement that the Post Office did not provide a great breadth of services, its closure and subsequent relocation to an Outreach Service is viewed as an inconvenience by most residents. The Post Office was valued for the convenience

it offered. People knew it was there and that they could visit at a time that suited them. The move to a six hour per week Outreach Service has led to residents having to think about and plan how they will access postal services.

*Both sessions are in the morning, so for me, it's not possible.*

#### **Local Resident**

Despite the inconvenience, there is wide recognition that the new Outreach Service offers a superior range of services. The increased level of service means that, assuming people can attend during the reduced hours of the Outreach service, there are now more occasions when tasks can be undertaken within the village.

*You see, this was another problem. You couldn't get your car tax. There were a lot of things she couldn't do.*

#### **Local Business**

There is also some concern about the possible environmental impact and increased reliance on cars that the closure decision has had. Residents express the view that the closure and the increased reliance on cars are contradictory with wider Government environmental messages. In reality, in a village with so few amenities, most residents leave the village regularly and if they are not using the Outreach Service, they can use an alternative Post Office on those occasions. It appears that it is rare for people to make journeys solely to use another Post Office. When they do however, they are experiencing increased costs from paying for petrol and parking.

*[Going to another Post Office] costs a lot of money in petrol. It's not green.*

#### **Local Resident**

For the more vulnerable members of the community - the elderly, disabled and parents of young children – the loss of the Post Office has had greater impact. The lives of residents in these groups are focused more within the village and changes to any service hold more potential to affect them. The common theme linking these three groups is their limited access to private transport and their increased reliance on village based services.

However, the closure has also brought with it positive impacts. A not-for-profit coffee morning has been set up by a local resident, to coincide with the Outreach Service on a Tuesday Morning. This has been introduced with the aim of fostering and encouraging greater community cohesion. This move, although unconnected with Post Office Ltd, has been very much welcomed. Despite valuing the community spirit of the former post mistress as well as the good advice she offered, this development has been welcomed by the more village based individuals, particularly, but not exclusively, the elderly population.

*I would reiterate the meeting place, not only for the elderly but people like me with kids, so you can have a conversation with an adult! It's just that five minutes that makes all the difference.*

**Local Resident**

The timing of the Outreach Service has raised some concerns, particularly amongst the less time rich parents or whom convenience and routine are vital. They have busy schedules, dominated by the needs of their children and running their homes and they do not want to have make plans around using the Post Office. However, Outreach Service hours will inevitably not be convenient for all local residents.

*I've been to it when I've had to. It's completely ruined my day. You have to juggle everything around it, especially with a young baby.*

**Local resident**

Given the rural location of the village, access to private transport is almost essential. There are some that manage without, by relying on others, on the limited public transport, using taxis or using a combination of all three.

*When the Post Office closed I found it most inconvenient because I can't drive, so I couldn't collect my pension for a couple of weeks.*

**Local Resident**

*If I didn't get lifts I couldn't go.*

**Local Resident**

A further complication for residents without their own transport was the closure of the local shop around the same time as the Post Office. For a six month period, the village had no shop and no Post Office. This was a difficult period for many of these residents, with greater dependency on others and more personal travel expenses incurred. With the shop having just reopened, there is a tangible sense of relief amongst residents.

*You had to stock up when you did go. You had to rely on other people to go and get stuff for you.*

**Local Resident**

The relocation of the Post Office from one end of the village (the former Post Office) to the other (the village hall and Outreach service) has impacted on the lives of some of the most frail elderly and disabled residents. While the move has enabled some to access the Outreach Service more easily, there are also those that due to the increased distance have become increasingly reliant on friends, family and neighbours to access postal services for them.

*Now it's here, it's very handy for me. As I'm disabled, it's near for me.*

**Local Resident**

*The older people have been hurt the most.*

**Local Resident**

## Impact on local businesses

Businesses in the village have shown themselves to be adaptable to the new circumstances they find themselves in. With daily postal facilities no longer available, the businesses that were using them daily have had to make alternative arrangements. For some this has meant negotiating a collection service directly with the Post Office.

*There was a woman who had parcels everyday. Now a van comes instead. They don't use the Post Office.*

**Local Resident**

Others, such as those running slightly smaller operations, have had to be more flexible, utilising a combination of the Outreach Service and surrounding Post Offices. The changes to postal services do not appear to have had a marked impact on the operations of these businesses. One minor impact is that some items are being sent with a slight delay.

*I was using [the post office] every day for my website. I now use [the Post Office in the nearest town]. I don't go every day though. But it's not as efficient - I would usually post my stuff off in the afternoon.*

### **Local Business**

Due to the small number and nature of businesses with footfall in the village, there has been no reported impact on local businesses from a reduction in people coming to the village to use the Post office.

## **Conclusions**

The Post Office closure has had a range of impacts on the local community. Whilst they valued the advice and community outlook of the former post mistress, an unintended effect of the opening of the new Outreach service, entirely independent of Post Office Limited, has been for a local resident to meet the social needs of the community by deciding to set up a coffee morning. The Outreach service also offers a greater breadth of services than the previous Post Office and residents perceive it to have a more pleasant environment.

The enduring drawback of the new Outreach service is the reduction in opening hours. Some residents have been able to cope with the changes whilst others have struggled and have as a result, been further marginalised. The frailest elderly and disabled residents, due to a lack of mobility and parents of young children, due to their busy schedules, have been the most seriously impacted. Broadly speaking, it is these groups of the community that are also least likely to have access to private transport and as a result struggle most to access postal services beyond the Outreach service. Those with private transport expressed concerns about their increased reliance on their cars and the potential environmental impact of this.

Finding themselves in new circumstances, small businesses in the village have had to adapt. Whether this is negotiating new services directly with Post Office Ltd or utilising

the new Outreach Service, businesses appear to have successfully taken the changes in their stride, albeit while experiencing slight delays in sending mail.