

Impact of Post Office Closures: Area 3

This report is a snapshot in time of the impact of a Post Office closure on a community, six months and a half months after the closure. It begins by briefly introducing the street 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 street where the Post Office was located is in an urban location approximately two miles north of the city centre. It has an Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score of 630 out of 32,482, which highlights the severely deprived nature of the area. The area is home to a combination of older residents who have lived there for a long time and a new influx of younger residents, housed by the council in most cases.

The local ward has 11,000 residents and contains the two remaining neighbouring Post Offices and the site of the former Post Office.

Local residents describe the street as having been a far more vibrant area until about ten years ago. However, in the last seven to ten years, various shops, including a butcher's, a chemist's and a fruit and vegetable shop have been shut down. In part, this can be attributed to the rapid growth of services on a main road which runs adjacent to the street in question, approximately 200 metres away.

Residents reminisced that the area had seen better days. There was a widely held view amongst residents and businesses alike that the area was in a steady state of decline, particularly from those who had been in the area for relatively longer periods. The closure of the Post Office is seen within this context of decline and is perceived by many to be a final, decisive blow in the fortunes of the area.

The Post Office going is the final nail in the coffin.

Local Resident

The street now has very few amenities; those remaining include a small convenience store, a barber and a dry cleaner. There are however a large number of facilities on the adjacent main road, including two small supermarkets.

The closure of the Post Office

There was active protest against the closure of the Post Office, involving local residents and the local councillor. This included a public meeting with Post Office Ltd and a petition of residents. However, the idea that expressing opposition to the closure would have been able to have an impact on the decision is now widely perceived with cynicism.

Everyone knew that signing the petition was useless.

Local Resident

The main concerns raised during the consultation related to the vulnerable customer groups and the distance to the alternative branches. Following the consultation, Post Office Ltd decided that two alternative branches are available within half a mile, both on the main road. Both branches are considered by Post Office Ltd to have nearby street parking available and suitable walking routes, on level ground with appropriate crossings.

Impact on the local community

Local residents make a strong association between the Government and Post Office services. The closing down of a Post Office is seen as part of the apathy of the government towards the area and its residents. On another level, the services of a Post Office are taken for granted, and expected in a similar way to the way one expects basic amenities from the government. While some recognise that the Post Office is essentially a business concern, others assume that it is the Government's role to absorb any financial losses.

The street lights don't work, the police don't come, nobody cares. The Post Office was the last good thing about this street.

Local Resident

Everyone should have a Post Office nearby. Why do we pay our taxes?

Local Resident

The Post Office is essentially seen as a 'small shop', despite being part of a larger institution. In part, this has to do with the fact that this particular Post Office has been around for more than 25 years, and there appeared to be significant interaction with the staff. The closure of the Post Office is seen within the context of the economic decline of the area. In particular, it is linked to the introduction of large stores in the close vicinity. In this context, the Post Office is seen as the victim of the changing retail landscape, dominated by large discount stores.

A key concern expressed by local residents was the inconvenience caused by the loss of a Post Office that was within a close walking distance of people's homes. As the alternative Post Offices are further away, a trip now requires planning and in some cases, a bus ride. The alternative Post Offices are situated in busier areas, with fewer parking facilities.

*It's a big loss. For convenience, for every one of us.
Even if you drive down [to the remaining Post Office],
there is no parking.*

Local Resident

The staff in the Post Office are remembered as having been friendly and familiar with the needs of regular individual customers. The loss of this personal relationship with the Post Office is seen within the context of the declining community spirit. There is shared memory of there having been a stronger sense of community in the area in the past. However, the loss of community spirit has been felt more acutely by those who are more confined to the local area, for reasons such as being unemployed or being on a low income.

Those with jobs or a steady source of income are more socially mobile and rely less on the community. For this group, typically younger residents, the loss of the Post Office is not associated with the loss of community cohesion, rather with a loss of convenience.

The staff were great. It was a meeting place. It was a local place where you could find out about your neighbours. It's not just closed down; you can feel the community spirit dissipating bit by bit. The area is definitely not the same.

Local Resident

The Post Office appears to have served as one of the meeting points in the community, which is otherwise devoid of spaces where local residents meet. Particularly for the elderly, it seems to have been an important part of residents' routines, as it offered a space to meet others and engage with the community. As the alternative Post Offices are located on different streets, routines have had to change and residents do not now necessarily need to walk along the original street where previously they would have met people they knew.

There's no place for people to meet. There's nothing here. And now the Post Office is gone too. Not like I used to meet too many people there, but the little that I did, that's gone now.

Local Resident

Apart from providing access to postal services, the Post Office provided other services like a cashpoint, access to pensions and the ability to send parcels. The elderly are considered the group most affected by the closure, as they used the Post Office regularly to collect their pension. The lack of a Post Office within close walking distance has meant that there are some vulnerable elderly residents that now have to rely on family and friends to withdraw their pensions for them.

Pensioners particularly, because they could get their pensions from the post office obviously and meet people... what are they going to do in the winter when the weather's bad? Depend on relatives to go and get their pensions and stuff, it's a hardship for them isn't it?

Local Business

Since one of the alternative Post Offices is on a main road with heavy traffic, local residents perceived that the elderly may now be less confident about accessing the facilities. Parents of young children also expressed concern at having to visit the main road more often.

Familiarity and routine is also an issue for some residents. The change in location, although not a great distance, has been too much for some vulnerable residents to cope with. This group have increasingly become confined to their homes and even more reliant on the care of others.

My granddad has dementia, and the Post Office was the only place we could let him go to alone. He knew the place, but he doesn't know the new one. So he's at home all day now.

Local Resident

Impact on local businesses

As stated previously, the Post Office closure has impacted on local businesses, which had already been finding conditions challenging as a result of the area's general decline. The proximity to larger stores on the main road has meant that fewer people are likely to shop along the street. The presence of a Post Office attracted more people and local residents report that they then made detours to the nearby shops in the street. With the Post Office closing, residents have less reason to go to the local shops. Residents expressed a strong sense that businesses are suffering, as people no longer frequent them as part of their daily routine.

I have no reason to go down [the street] anymore. Why would I go to the shops?

Local Resident

Local businesses indicate that revenues have dropped as a result of the Post Office closure, although no other shops have been closed.

Business has definitely gone quieter. Monday and Tuesday for instance, it's definitely quieter now.

Local Business

Takings wise now, since the Post Office has closed, I'm perhaps £150 a week worse off.

Local Business

In addition to this reduced footfall, the closure has caused inconvenience for businesses that banked with the Post Office. Because of the proximity of the Post Office, it was possible for businesses to deposit their takings frequently. Without this option available, they are forced to either keep cash in their premises for longer periods of time, or to close the shop while they go and deposit the money elsewhere.

Well it's just a matter of taking more cash home with you to pay in on the Wednesday when I'm off, whereas if I'd the cash here I could just nip across the road with it, it was only across there and it was so convenient.

Local Business

It is important to note that the decline of businesses on the street was a phenomenon already taking place, prior to the closure of the Post Office. While businesses are definitely struggling financially, it is impossible to ascertain the exact role that the closure of the Post Office has played in this.

Conclusions

While the distance to the alternative Post Offices is only about two hundred metres further for most residents, the location on the main road poses an access problem for parents with young children and elderly residents. The loss of the Post Office has been a contributing factor in the reduction of local community spirit and cohesion. The staff are no longer able to play a role in safeguarding more vulnerable local residents by noticing any changes in routine or well-being, and it means that the community has lost a valued meeting place where it could interact. Given the urban and deprived nature of the area, residents do not perceive there to be any other spaces that fulfil that role.

While the closure has been a manageable inconvenience for most residents, vulnerable groups have been more affected and it appears to have had a negative impact on their independence and their ability to go about their daily routines. There are also those for whom the change has prevented them accessing the Post Office as they are unable to cope with a change in routine, such as those with dementia. These groups have become increasingly reliant on those around them such as friends and family to access services on their behalf.

Businesses in the area were already in decline, but the closure of the Post Office means that they have even fewer customers. This has led to a fall in income for businesses. There has also been some inconvenience to local businesses that banked with the Post Office, which now need either to keep cash on their premises for longer periods of time or to close their business briefly while they deposit takings at one of the alternative Post Offices.