

# Impact of Post Office Closures: Area 4

This report represents a snapshot in time of the impact of the post office closure on a community, eight months after the closure. It begins by briefly introducing the area and the surrounding neighbourhood 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

Compared to national figures, this seaside resort town of approximately 40,000 residents has a relatively higher number of workers in construction, tourism and health and social care services than average. In recent years, it has declined in popularity as a tourist destination which has contributed to unemployment, the closure of shops and services in the town centre and the physical degeneration of the area. This is clearly seen by the number of boarded-up shops in the town centre.

The Post Office branch was located in a quiet neighbourhood on the outskirts of the town. According to Mosaic data, the neighbourhood is characterised as an established, rather old-fashioned community, with strong social support networks. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score of 8,395 out of 32,482 places the neighbourhood amongst the 25% most deprived areas in England. It is surrounded by several deprived estates. Although local residents value the peacefulness of the area, there is concern about antisocial behaviour and a lack of respect among young people, especially amongst older residents.

The Post Office was located at the heart of the village-like community. Other facilities in the immediate area include a bakery, chemist, electrical store, newsagent, hairdresser, several Chinese restaurants, a laundrette, pet shop and a pub. Within walking distance there is a Church with a community centre, a children's playground, a primary school and a Sure Start centre with a café.

In order to access more retail and leisure facilities, residents can travel to a shopping centre (50 minutes by bus), Tesco (10 minutes by car), the town centre (40 minute walk) or the bigger neighbouring towns. There is an hourly bus service to the nearest alternative Post Office branch. This is an indirect service that takes approximately half an hour.

Apart from the Post Office closure, the life of the community in recent years has been affected by other factors. The decline of shops and businesses in the town centre evokes general pessimism among residents. They associate the many closures with the impact of a large new shopping centre opening just a few miles out of town in June 2005. In addition, new entertainment facilities such as a multiplex cinema and restaurants have opened in close proximity to the shopping centre, and new housing is also planned for the surrounding area.

## **The closure of the Post Office**

The local Post Office was situated between a bakery and a pharmacy, at the heart of the local area. It offered a broad variety of services including banking, payment services (pensions and child benefits, giro's, TV licence and bills), cash withdrawal and the sale of stationery, sweets and children's toys. As local residents noted, some of these services were no longer provided prior to the closure. Younger residents also pointed out that the majority of these services, such as paying bills or the transaction of benefits, are increasingly being provided elsewhere, such as at banks or online.

During the consultation, concerns were raised about the impact of the closure on the elderly and disabled populations and the lack of public transport facilities to alternative branches. However, there are two alternative branches within less than a mile, both of which are considered to provide better access for the elderly and wheelchair users. The remaining branches also offer longer opening hours and nearby parking (with free parking for disabled badge-holders near to one of the alternative branches).

## **Impact on the local community**

With a comprehensive range of products, local residents saw the Post Office as more than simply a place to access standard postal services, but also as a local convenience store. As well as these standard postal services, local residents liked the idea of having a local store just around the corner. Not only was the Post Office used to buy stamps, it was also frequently used to buy sweets, toys for children, birthday cards and stationery, to pay bills or withdraw cash on the way to other nearby local amenities, such as the pharmacy.

*You can get the gas and electricity and stuff and obviously that's got to weigh on people's minds now that we can't just go round the corner if you happen to quickly run out of something.*

#### **Local Stakeholder**

For many, especially for elderly people or young mothers with children, the Post Office was one of the few stores a short walk away. For some elderly residents, visiting the Post Office was one of only a few reasons regularly to leave their homes. Moreover, it served as an informal meeting point for the elderly or middle aged residents who gathered and chatted with their neighbours while queuing in the Post Office. Although there are other social facilities in the area (Church community, Sure Start, primary school and pub), they are situated further away from the centre of the local area and are not as widely accessed by the community.

*But they'd [old people] see the same people each week and it gives them the chance to talk to different people because they need to get out and if there is somewhere to get out and obviously if they haven't got the money to go out then that's their breaking point. And a lot of them they can't obviously go very far either.*

#### **Local Stakeholder**

The Post Office was also described as a key local source of information and advice. Elderly residents valued the time that staff would spend with them, providing advice on a range of issues, including how to pay their bills or which birthday cards to buy in case of visually impaired residents. It was also a source of local gossip and information and acted as a check on the health of local elderly people who frequently visited the branch.

*The couple in the Post Office were lovely people. They knew everybody here. They would notice if somebody was feeling bad.*

#### **Local Resident**

The impact of the Post Office closure can be seen on two different levels: for individuals and for the community as a whole. Amongst individuals, the greatest loss appears to be the convenience and personal style that the Post Office offered. Local

residents point to the absence of the 'corner store' and subsequently the longer queues in alternative branches, travelling to withdraw cash and having to plan to use the Post Office as important issues more so than the related increased costs of parking or transport. Also, local residents miss the familiar faces of their neighbours. They no longer meet all in one place and at a predictable time.

*It's just the inconvenience. You do have to go elsewhere. It was nice that it was right next door and I could just bring the bills in with me and know that, oh, I've only got to go next door.*

**Local Resident**

*I'm trying to schedule myself out that I know I've got to go to the bank and I've got to go to the Post Office which for me are in two different directions.*

**Local Resident**

The loss of the Post Office appears to have changed the frequency with which most residents are accessing postal services. They can no longer simply use the Post Office whenever they need something from the local branch. Instead, there are those especially among younger residents who have found alternative means and providers of most services (e.g. online or telephone services) and say they go to the surrounding Post Office branches only once or twice per month.

*Only when I need it and definitely need it. Just every now and again. It's whenever you'd need to get down there because I'm not going to make a personal trip to go down town just to use the Post Office.*

**Local Stakeholder**

It is the elderly and young parents with children that have been most affected by the Post Office closure. Barriers to accessing the services they regularly used and the absence of a space for social interaction are perceived to be the most significant effects of the closure. The elderly claimed to be frequent customers of Post Offices, mainly because they are less likely to use bank accounts or online services and because they often live in relative isolation and hence seek easily accessible spaces for social interaction. For parents of young children, a short walk to the Post Office was

a part of their weekly routine and gave them an opportunity to get out of home regularly to mingle with others from the community.

Elderly people report that there is no direct bus link connecting the area with the alternative branches and that they are not now recognised by staff in the alternative branches. What is more, staff in the largest alternative branch are perceived as being too busy to give advice or hold a personal conversation. There was anecdotal evidence to suggest that, where some elderly residents had been able to walk to the Post Office, they are now not getting out of their homes due to mobility issues, making the increased distance or inability to physically get onto a bus a barrier. This is also the case for residents with physical disabilities, although one of the alternative branches was reported to have improved facilities for disabled customers compared to the old Post Office.

*The Post Office I did know helped them, it did. A familiar face, a friendly face could be the only person they talked to all day type of thing and now that's taken away.*

#### **Local Stakeholder**

*My granddad lives over there and he, and if he's not very well and it takes a lot for him to get on the bus and go down town to the Post Office and everything else and he spends his life indoors. In bad weather unless someone does it for him, so it makes it harder for them*

#### **Local Stakeholder**

For the community, there is concern about declining cohesion and spirit. As more and more local businesses close down, residents have less reason to visit the area and no longer meet and spontaneously interact at the Post Office. The local area was described as having once been a lively village-like community. Some residents now accept that their neighbourhood is in decline.

*I think it's sad really because, the Post Office community within a community in itself is lost because everything is closing down, so it is making people feel really not welcome I suppose, and you think there's nothing for them where they are.*

#### **Local Stakeholder**

Some elderly residents feel that no one really cares about them. They feel that the newly opened shopping centre is unsuitable for the needs of their generation and that a petition about the Post Office closure was ignored by the local authorities. Furthermore, the Post Office played an important role as a focal point in the area. After its closure, there is less of a sense that someone is aware of people's physical condition and wellbeing, particularly amongst disadvantaged residents. In the context of the general decline of Margate and widespread pessimism, vulnerable residents see the closure as just another element contributing to the erosion of community spirit.

*You do lose that I suppose, that close one-to-one with your local shops...because you're going into a bigger branch where they just see you as a number, there's not that, so how are you today, you lose that.*

### **Local Stakeholder**

## **Impact on local businesses**

Businesses used the local Post Office for a variety of reasons, such as paying the bills, getting change, using the delivery services, buying stamps or sending letters. Although there is some inconvenience surrounding the closure, businesses are much more concerned with their decreasing customer numbers, which they tend to attribute to the Post Office closure. Even when challenged about other possible factors, such as the opening of the new shopping centre or general economic insecurity, local businesses insist that the closure is the main determinant of their declining turnover.

*They closed, the Post Office closed and things weren't normal any more, there was no people coming in, the money that was going round was nearly zero. And it's still the same, it's getting worse and worse, now I'm lucky to sell one or two things a day, before I was selling ten, twenty a week.*

### **Local Business**

For example, the owner of the bakery noted that her turnover cycles were related to customers visiting the Post Office on benefits and pension days. After the closure, she had to reduce her opening hours and adjust her business to attract business from the nearby primary school instead. The local Post Office also attracted customers from

neighbouring areas where branches had previously been closed. These potential customers no longer have a reason to visit the area.

*We found that our turnover would be fortnightly. It would be slightly quieter one week and then it would be very busy the next week and it was always on the day that Giro's were being changed. So they would change their Giro's, come in here and buy their goods, go over the road and get what they needed*

### **Local Business**

As there were a number of businesses in close proximity, they tended to generate business for each other. On their way to collect their pension, elderly people would sometimes visit the bakery, newsagent and pharmacy. Nine months after the closure, local residents have noticed that several local businesses are short of customers and that a few, such as the electrical shop and bakery, are now for sale. Some local residents fear a potential domino effect, whereby reduced amenities lead to reduced customer numbers and further shop closures.

*Yeah, people don't come to the road any more. It was like a magnet, and now there's nothing to come to the road for, there's no reason to come here unless you come special. People used to go and get their money and they didn't come to go to the bakers special, but they'd get their money in the Post Office and they'd think oh, I fancy a cake, they'd see the bakers next door.*

### **Local Business**

Although the fears and pessimism in the local area are real, there are some doubts about the real main determinant of local business decline. There have been other important economic changes affecting the area in recent times. The new shopping centre attracting customers from a wider area and long-term economic decline in Margate as a whole can both be assumed to have played some part. Indeed, one local business, attempting to attribute his imminent bankruptcy to the Post Office closure, perceived that the closure occurred in the summer of 2008, instead of the January 2008. Moreover, the local bakery has been for sale for over two years so the reported decline in customers may be at least in part an exacerbating factor in hard times.

*You can talk about recessions and people not having money, but no, for me, I mean I felt the impact of this instantly. They closed about three months ago I think it was three, four months.*

### **Local Business**

Local residents chose to use a variety of different branches (at the shopping centre, in the town centre or in neighbouring areas), all accessible by car, bus or 20-30 minute walk. Generally, residents appreciate the quality and range of services in the new branches. Although they are often crowded and the queues are longer than in the old Post Office, the service is quick and waiting times are deemed acceptable. As already mentioned, the use of the Post Office has changed over time. Local residents do not now tend to use it for day-to-day shopping. Instead many residents have found alternative methods by which to make payments or to communicate, and visit the Post Office less frequently.

### **Conclusions**

Residents of the local area see the impacts of the Post Office closure primarily as the loss of convenience and a focal point of the neighbourhood. The absence of the key 'corner store', longer queues in alternative branches, or the need to plan and travel to withdraw cash or pay bills are the prevalent concerns amongst local residents.

However, the disadvantaged groups such as the elderly or parents with young families, who were particularly frequent Post Office users, become even more vulnerable and reliant on others, as a result of the closure. With the need to take an indirect bus for some, the increased time and cost barriers, and the loss of a space for social interaction, information and advice, elderly residents feel even more neglected. They have also lost the informal welfare check that the Post Office staff provided. Furthermore, residents fear that the closure will continue to contribute to the general decline of the area. As more shops are closing down in the heart of the neighbourhood, the once village-like community is now perceived as an area in decline with little attraction for present or future residents.

Local businesses are mostly concerned with their decreasing customer numbers, which they tend to attribute to the Post Office closure. It is feared that the closure of the Post Office, as well as a few other businesses that were dependent on Post Office



customers for their trade, will have a knock on effect on local business conditions and contribute to the general economic and social decline of the area.