

Impact of Post Office Closures: Area 5

This case study is a snapshot of the key impacts of the Post Office closure on a local community, five months after the Post Office closed. 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

The local area is a district and suburb of a large city. It is located along the main road between this and another city and the highway serves as an informal boundary between what has become known as the old part of the village (the original village around the church on the north side) and the new part of the village (a more recent development which was established to the south of the road).

The Post Office was located in the old part of the village. It was also the site of a pharmacy and general stores serving as both a grocer's and newsagent. The old part of the village has around 1,000 residents and, besides the Post Office, is also home to a garage, another convenience store, a hairdresser and four pubs. Since the Post Office closure, the owner of the site has closed the shop altogether, bought the only other shop in the old part of the village and moved his pharmacy and grocers there. The relatively large number of pubs in the area still attract a lot of passing trade and act as a social centre for the surrounding areas.

The new part of the village is the location of the area's largest retail centre which is based around a large Tesco supermarket, with other businesses including a newsagent (the site of another Post Office), a beauty salon, a pharmacy and some other small businesses.

The local residents enjoy the sense of community that exists in the old part of the village and a lot of work is done by the local community council to maintain the sense of it being 'a village', even if it is increasingly being absorbed into the main city. It is currently seen as enjoying the advantages of access to both the city and the country. However, one of the recurring problems of the area is vandalism and other anti-social behaviour perpetrated by younger people in the area. An example of this is that the vicarage, having had its windows smashed by local youths, now has large metal gates outside which are operated from the house.

The closure of the Post Office

Having a Post Office, pharmacist, grocer and newsagent in one shop meant that the building acted as a hub for the local area, with, for example, businesses regularly dropping in to bank money and residents stopping by to post letters and parcels, withdraw money or collect their pensions. The Post Office also served as an informal social space for the community of the old part of the area, as people were able to keep up with local news when talking to the staff or seeing other residents during their visit.

Post Office Ltd decided to proceed with the proposal to close the branch as the nearest two Post Office branches are less than a mile away, with direct public transport to both branches. One has a journey time of approximately four minutes and the other between two and four minutes depending on which bus is used. The area also has a high level of car ownership and one of the nearby Post Offices has a large car park while the other has a smaller car park. Post Office Ltd were satisfied that the other Post Offices had the capability to absorb the extra customers from the closure and that this extra business would help increase their longer term sustainability.

Impact on the local community

The most significant impact on the local population appears to be the inconvenience of simply having to go elsewhere to access services formerly provided by the Post Office. Villagers no longer feel that they can just 'pop' out to the local Post Office as they now have to either walk for 20 minutes or more or get in their car and drive. Given the range of services in the shop they would also go in to get their prescriptions or a newspaper, so convenience was very much a feature of the Post Office. However, given that many of the local residents work outside of the village, other Post Offices are more convenient for some and even one of the old Post Office's most strident supporters did not always use it.

The convenience of having somewhere to post a letter and buy some stamps and do Post Office business. Even though, as I say, I did do most of mine closer to work.

Local Stakeholder

There is anecdotal evidence that despite the relative proximity of other Post Offices, neither of them is attractive to local residents. The areas around the two Post Offices are seen as relatively rundown compared to the former site, with young people

gathering in and around the shops. In addition, the most direct walking route to one of the Post Offices involves going along a secluded footpath which some older people were said to be wary of. In some cases, residents said they felt uncomfortable walking on these routes after having drawn out their pensions, due to the perceived threat of groups of young people.

Residents miss the warmer, more personalised service that they received at the former Post Office and perceive that the service at the other Post Offices they now use is generally less personal and less knowledgeable.

They never smile. They're, not warm or welcoming, nobody knows you and there's always a slow queue. It's different people all the time.

Local Resident

Post Office staff were also aware when local, vulnerable residents failed to visit or when they deviated from their normal routine. This meant that the Post Office played a role in looking after more vulnerable residents' welfare by helping to spot any changes in residents' health or routine. There is a sense of sadness amongst residents that this friendly, local facility has closed.

They did a similar job over there to what I do here because I always say in the pub trade, you're not only serving their drinks, you're basically listening to their problems as well.

Local Business

The former Post Office is seen by residents as having played an important role in the life of the community beyond simply providing services. For example, the Post Office staff used to participate in local community events and groups such as the fete, the theatrical society and Neighbourhood Watch. It also provided a neutral social space for people to talk to others within the community. While other local associations still exist where people meet socially, such as the Women's Institute or the theatrical group, these are seen as bringing together people with specific interests rather than being spaces that anyone in the community might use.

Local residents feel that it is the older people in the village that have suffered the most from the closure as they have lost somewhere they could socialise with other people, catch up on the local news and generally pass the time of day. Despite there being

other community groups and activities in the local area, the Post Office was seen as an inclusive social meeting place that did not require any sort of membership or belief, in contrast to the Women's Institute or the Church for example. As a result of the closure, there are some more vulnerable residents that, due to issues of personal mobility and the increased distance, have become increasingly reliant on friends, family and neighbours for help in getting to alternative Post Offices.

The Post Office also provided certain services that local residents suspect the elderly and other vulnerable groups may now find it difficult to access as a result of the closure. For example, a local businesswoman had been asked a number of times by elderly people where they would be able to buy tokens for their electricity or gas meters now that the Post office had closed. Local residents pointed out that while they themselves simply paid utility bills by direct debit, older residents were less likely to do this.

They'd pay every bill in there... they don't do anything direct debit because they're very much old-fashioned, they like to feel their money before they give it back out and they don't really understand direct debits, do they? So that's why I feel sorry for them [now that the PO has closed]

Local Business

Impact on local businesses

As with the local community, the direct impact of the Post Office closure on local businesses has been largely one of inconvenience, for example in regard to their banking. The pubs that once used the Post Office's banking services have had to alter their daily routines to accommodate the change.

One of the local businesses said that they had stopped using Post Offices for anything other than postage, and even then tried to avoid this by sending their letters in smaller envelopes, using stamps from the local shop, rather than go to the alternative Post Offices. They had also switched to telephone banking as this again was more convenient.

I think eventually people will just disregard the Post Offices and just go with the banks.

Local Business

Another businesswoman mentioned that she had preferred doing her banking and general postal business at the closed Post Office despite her business being located closer to one of the nearby alternative branches. She said that she felt that the service at the smaller Post Office was more friendly and personalised, and was in a more attractive environment than the alternative.

It was just a nice little atmosphere in there. And like I say, you could get whatever you needed to get in there really.

Local Business

She also believed that the area was likely to suffer another reduction in postal services in the near future as the site of one of the alternative Post Offices, located at Tesco, is due to be temporarily closed for redevelopment.

As a result of the Post Office closure, she felt that her business had actually benefited due its location near to one of the alternative Post Offices locations. As more people were now coming to the new location, more people were using her business as well.

In general, the closure does not appear to have had a major impact on the future sustainability of businesses in the village, although it has affected the way they organise their business routines and procedures.

Conclusions

In general, the closure of the Post Office is viewed with sadness by residents in the local area who feel it has lost one of the few places where people could mingle freely with each other during the day and catch up on local news. The Post Office was felt to have played an important role in the local community, both by providing services and by acting as a community hub where residents could meet each other by chance and socialise. Residents miss the high quality, friendly service they received and perceive that the social and community role that the Post Office staff played, for example by checking on the welfare of vulnerable residents, has also been lost. The shop and pharmacy remain in the village, but having somewhere where you could withdraw money, collect your pension and pay your bills was an important convenience for

people. The closure of the Post Office has led to residents being less likely to 'pop' out to use local facilities, which is likely to have some impact on other local businesses.

However, people's lives do not seem to have been unduly troubled by the closure, and residents and businesses seem able to alter their routines to overcome the inconvenience of the closure. There is some concern about access to the neighbouring Post Offices, including the perceived safety of older people walking along secluded footpaths, and the less personal standard of service people feel they are receiving. However, the majority of residents are managing the change in circumstances, albeit with the help of friends, family or neighbours to access Post Office services at alternative locations in the cases of some more vulnerable residents.