

# Impact of Post Office Closures: Area 6

This case study is a snapshot of the key impacts of the Post Office closure on a local community, seven 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 community with an Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score of 21,818 out of 32,482, placing it some way above the English midpoint. It is about four miles to the nearest village which has a Post Office. Public transport links to the village are poor with only one bus a week to the nearest city and no bus at all to the nearest village with a Post Office. In 2001 the village lost its primary school due to a lack of young people in the area. More recently however, there has been an influx of younger families and the village is now growing in size.

The loss of the school combined with the loss of the Post Office means that while the village is growing, local amenities have recently reduced slightly. The village's remaining facilities comprise a village hall, a pub, a church, a local shop and a garage. The village hall is well used by community and social groups such as Brownies and the Women's Institute. Other than the numerous farms in the area, there are only four businesses in the village: a local shop (which used to house the Post Office), a garage, a local pub and a shoe factory.

## The closure of the Post Office

The Post Office was run as part of the local shop and delivered all of the usual postal services, excluding road tax and insurance payments. Following the announcement of the closure, the main concerns expressed by local residents related to the impact of change on vulnerable customer groups, the impact on local businesses, the availability of public transport, the distance and difficult nature of the routes to other branches for people with mobility problems and the impact on the future of the local shop. The excellent service provided by the staff at the Post Office was also highlighted.

Following the public consultation, Post Office Ltd decided to proceed with the closure of the branch and replace it with a hosted Outreach service, three days a week for a total of nine hours. The Outreach service is provided in the village hall and sometimes runs at the same time as some other groups using the hall. The closest Post Office four miles away is also expected to serve the village's postal needs.

## Impact on the local community

Local residents point to a range of impacts that the replacement of the Post Office with a hosted Outreach service has had on the local community. Residents feel they get a good level of service from the individual running the Outreach and appreciate the breadth of service provided, in comparison with the previous Post Office where some services such as foreign currency on demand and paying road tax had not been available. For example, one resident said that he used the Outreach service more than he had used the original Post Office as the Outreach service now provides a greater breadth of services.

*I shouldn't say this, but I actually use the Outreach more than I used the Post Office because I can tax my vehicles there now.*

### **Local Resident**

There are however some reservations from residents about the Outreach service. The service's limited opening hours means that those residents in the village that work during the day are inconvenienced as they are unable to use the facility and have to rely on other Post Offices in surrounding villages. The limited opening hours also mean that those that are able to make use of the service can only do so three days a week, at specific times.

Residents also report that security and privacy is an issue at the Outreach service. Cash is described as simply being put on a large trestle table in the hall with no form of security or protection for either the individual running the Outreach service or local residents. The service is also said often to be run in conjunction with other events at the hall which residents feel raises issues of data protection and privacy.

*It's not safe down there. If someone wanted to, they could clear that place out in 30 seconds. I won't use the Post Office because I don't want to be in there when it gets done.*

**Local Resident**

Residents also put forward the perception that the provision of the Outreach service may be a step towards full closure of Post Office services in the village. They feel that full closure would have serious implications for the community, especially for older residents and those without private transport, who they believe would effectively be cut off from accessing Post Office services as a result given the limited public transport available in the area.

*I don't see how they can maintain it [the Outreach service]. It feels like they are weaning us off the Post Office.*

**Local Resident**

Residents also point out that there is little space to queue for the Outreach service at the village hall and that from time to time those queuing have to stand outside as a consequence.

There is concern among local residents that the Post Office closure has had a negative impact on community spirit and togetherness. The Post Office is described as having been a village hub, where people would meet and talk to each other when they went there to use Post Office services. Residents feel that the reduced opening hours of the Outreach service mean that there are now fewer occasions when they can 'bump into' each other socially. Older and more vulnerable residents, such as those with disabilities or without their own transport, expressed particular concern about this, some saying it was the only time they saw certain friends from the community.

*It has taken the life away from the village... it has taken the soul out. There's nowhere to have a chat anymore. It is not the same.*

**Local Stakeholder**

Residents also appreciated the role the former post mistress had played in supporting the elderly and vulnerable residents in the local community, by keeping an eye out for them and noticing when they did not come in.

Local people speculate about the future impacts of the closure, such as the impact on local businesses. There is a perception that the local shop could close due to the loss of income from both the Post Office and the passing trade that this brought to the shop, and that the shop's closure would have further negative impacts on the sense of community in the village.

*The greater worry is that the shop will close. She has to try new things over there. I think as a community we have to support her a bit more, if that shop goes then that is it*

**Local Resident**

### Impact on local businesses

Of the local businesses the closure of the Post Office is seen to have had most impact on the local shop that used to run it. Local residents perceive that the closure has led to a significant drop in income for the owner, both in terms of the income from the Post Office and passing trade for the shop from those coming in to use Post Office services. However, they also say that some members of the community appear to be making a conscious effort to use the shop more given their concerns that it might close if they do not support it.

The main impact on the remaining local businesses is one of inconvenience. While the Outreach Service is seen as a valuable tool by some local residents, business owners are largely unable to use it as it only operates during business hours. For example, the local pub used to use the Post Office to pay bills and invoice clients, and for getting notes changed in an emergency. While the closure of the Post Office has had no negative impact on customer numbers, they have had to start holding more cash on the premises as they can no longer use the Post Office for their banking. Also, due to the closure of the village sorting office, post now arrives during business hours. While none of these factors have any real financial implications for the business they recognise them as inconveniences that they now have to work around.

*Because there is no sorting office here now the post generally arrives at about one in the afternoon. It is a bit of an inconvenience as the post now arrives when there are customers in the bar so any average Joe can know our business*

### **Local Business**

There are residents who regularly used EBay to buy and sell goods. The closure of the Post Office has had an impact on their ability to post their goods quickly and efficiently. This is seen as an inconvenience and has led to a reduction in their trading.

*I personally used to send quite a few things on EBay, just because they had the envelopes, paper and stamps over there. It is now much more of an inconvenience so I don't send nearly as much anymore.*

### **Local Stakeholder**

## **Conclusions**

The closure of the Post Office is largely seen as an inconvenience, with residents of the village now having to travel at least four miles to the nearest Post Office if they wish to use services at times when the Outreach service is not open. There is no bus service for this journey, so it has to be taken by car. The more vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and those that do not drive, have to rely on the Outreach Service which does not run every day and does not provide the same level of security for their money and personal privacy as the previous Post Office did. They have also lost the informal welfare monitoring of vulnerable residents that Post Office staff undertook. Despite the losses, residents do acknowledge the high quality of the staff and the breadth of services offered by the Outreach Service.

Residents of the village expressed concern about the loss of community spirit since the Post Office closure. However, while the Post Office was important to the social life of the village there are other facilities that continue to act as community hubs, such as the village hall, pub and local church. The closure has also shown signs of bringing the community together in some respects such as the active support of the local shop.

Residents are concerned that the Outreach service has just been put in place as a stop gap and that ultimately this too will stop, leaving the village without Post Office

services. There is also concern that the reduction in customer footfall and takings resulting from the closure of the Post Office will eventually lead to the closure of the village shop where the Post Office used to be. They feel that if both the Outreach facilities and the local shop were to be lost, there would be a major impact on the community in regard to residents' ability to access services locally, village self-sufficiency and community spirit.

In addition to the former host of the Post Office, the closure has impacted on other businesses in the village. The Outreach Service is not widely used by businesses due to the opening hours and the loss of the service has therefore been an inconvenience. Some businesses have adapted their behaviour, for example by keeping greater levels of cash on the premises.