



COUNCIL

8 NOVEMBER 2004

PROPOSED POST OFFICE CLOSURES IN WALSALL BOROUGH

Summary Of Report:

This report has been prepared as background information for the Council meeting, in view of the notice of motion relating to the programme proposed by the Post Office for ten branch closures across the Borough. It provides information on the proposed closures, the justification advanced by the Post Office and the consultation process that is being undertaken.

Background Papers:

Letters from Post Office Limited, dated 6 October 2004, to the Chief Executive of the Council, in respect of

- Walsall North constituency
- Aldridge/Brownhills constituency
- Walsall South constituency.

Copies of the letters can be obtained by e-mail (see the contact officer details for this report), whilst the letters and accompanying information supplied by the Post Office will be displayed in the foyer of the Council House, from Monday 1st November.

Recommendations

Report for information.

Signed

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Date:

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REPORT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Britain has an extensive network of Post Offices, but in urban areas this network is required to remain commercially viable, notwithstanding the importance of the services provided to many people. Various trends, including automation of services, changes in benefit payments, lack of replacement staff and changes in shopping patterns have meant that the Post Office considers its current urban network is “too vast” for the amount of custom it receives, despite efforts to increase its business. Members will be aware of individual Post Office closures in the past, most recently at Palfrey in January 2004.
- 1.2 To ensure the future viability of its network, whilst still leaving a significant urban network offering “unrivalled” access for customers, the Post Office has announced an ‘Urban Reinvention Programme’, now described as a ‘Network Reinvention Programme’, that might mean the closure of 3,000 urban branches nationally. Under this programme, closures have recently been proposed in Birmingham, Dudley and Wolverhampton.

2.0 CORRESPONDENCE FROM THE POST OFFICE

- 2.1 Post Office proposals to close various branches have been reported in the local press. The Council has received letters from the Post Office proposing the closure of several branches, and some improvements to remaining branches, in each of the Parliamentary constituencies that make up the Borough: Walsall North, Aldridge/Brownhills and Walsall South.
- 2.2 The letters received refer to other correspondence, namely an update on the Network Re-Invention Programme and a letter providing the opportunity for the Council to advise the Post Office of development / regeneration plans. Unfortunately, we do not appear to have received this correspondence. Nevertheless, there should be an opportunity to respond to the issues raised through the consultation process.

3.0 THE POST OFFICE’S PROPOSALS

- 3.1 The Post Office correspondence is accompanied by plans showing the provision of local branches. The correspondence also includes schedules describing those offices that are proposed for closure and the possible improvements to those branches that might receive displaced customers as a result. The letters refer to the demographic profiles of different areas of the Borough (described as “varied” in respect of each constituency) and to areas of deprivation, particularly in Walsall North and Walsall South. It is stated that the Post Office has taken account of issues such as the availability of public transport, car parking, topography and the ease of access to the branches themselves when considering proposals for the closure of particular post offices in the context of other nearby branches. It has also sought to take account of regeneration (e.g. New Deal, Neighbourhood Renewal and Single Regeneration Budget) and development (e.g. for additional housing) proposals that are known to it, and it is implied such considerations have been relevant in other branches not being proposed for closure. In addition, it is apparent

that the Post Office has considered the amounts of custom at, and the condition of, the branches that are being proposed for closure.

3.2 A total of ten branches are proposed for closure, at the following locations.

Walsall North

- Harden branch, 166 Harden Road, Bloxwich
- Little Bloxwich branch, 161 Stoney Lane, Bloxwich
- Short Heath branch, 120 Coltham Road, Willenhall
- St Anne's Road branch, 60 St Anne's Road, Willenhall
- Walsall Street branch, 112 Clarkes Lane, Willenhall

Aldridge/Brownhills

- Myatt Avenue branch, 22 Myatt Avenue, Aldridge
- Paul's Coppice branch, 119 Lindon Road, Brownhills

Walsall South

- Ablewell Street branch, 93 Ablewell Street, Walsall
- Kings Hill branch, 185 Darlaston Road, Wednesbury
- The Manor branch, 296 Pleck Road, Walsall

3.3 The reasons for the proposed closures of the particular branches are discussed in the letters received. Briefly, it is stated that most of the branches have suffered a marked decline in custom over recent years, have suffered from under-investment or are too small to offer a full range of services. Also, it is stated that there are alternative facilities either a short distance away or connected by a direct bus service. It is recognised that the branches at Harden and Ablewell Street are in areas that are classified as deprived (Index of Multiple Deprivation). Five other branches at Little Bloxwich, St Anne's Road, Walsall Street, Kings Hill and The Manor are in areas that are said to have been previously identified as deprived but are now longer classified as such using the latest statistics.

3.4 Where branches are proposed for closure it is stated that the existing post boxes will remain, except at Paul's Coppice (where there is a post box within 800m) and Kings Hill (where there is a post box within 400m).

3.5 It is stated that where branches are to be closed, the Post Office wants to make clear that customers know they would be able to visit any other branch. However, customer advisors would be employed at branches that would be about to close, to tell customers of the nearest alternative Post Office.

3.6 The correspondence also refers to improvements to the existing network of Post Offices, particularly those that would be likely to receive customers from closed branches. The proposals are intended to:

- improve facilities for those with limited mobility
- improve customer services, with more staff, more counter space, longer opening hours, etc., and
- provide physical and presentational improvements, such as access and signage.

3.7 In the Walsall North area it is anticipated that, in partnership with remaining sub-postmasters and using grant aid, £43,200 would be invested in selected branches.

The selected improvements would primarily be at Blakenall, Leamore, Coalpool and Lane Head. In Aldridge/Brownhills, the equivalent investment would be around £70,000, at Brownhills, Walsall Wood, and Barns Lane in Rushall. In Walsall South, it is stated that the closure of the Palfrey branch supported investment in remaining branches. It is also stated that the proposed closures should lead to further investment of around £38,000, especially in Darlaston and Wednesbury. In several cases, it is indicated that the post masters and mistresses at remaining branches would not have the confidence to go ahead with new investment if the proposed closures were not to proceed.

4.0 NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 The letters from the Post Office are part of a consultation process that is running from 7th October to 17th November 2004. This will involve MPs, the consumer group 'Postwatch', members of the public, etc., as well as the Council.
- 4.2 It is stated the Post Office will consider all of the feedback received before making decisions on whether or not individual branches should close. If closures are decided, these are anticipated to start during January 2005.
- 4.3 The Council is invited to write to the Post Office with any points it wishes to make, with the advice that it could be useful to copy this to 'Postwatch'. The Post Office is also offering the opportunity for a meeting with Council representatives.
- 4.4 The addresses for responses to the consultations as referred to in the correspondence from the Post Office are:
 - Paul Maisley,
Head of Area,
Post Office Ltd,
C/O National Consultation Team,
PO Box 2060,
Watford WD18 8ZW
(telephone 0191 512 3494)
 - Postwatch
28 Grosvenor Gardens
London
SW1W 0TT
- 4.5 Comments and observations arising from the Council meeting can help to inform a response to the Post Office consultation on behalf of Walsall Council.