



CRC 3/07

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Rural communities must be properly consulted on the future of their post offices says rural watchdog

The Government must give people and local businesses in rural areas adequate time to respond to local proposals to restructure the post office network says the Commission for Rural Communities in its response to the consultation on the future of the post office. Local consultation is key to the restructuring and it is important that the views of rural people are taken into account. The six-week period proposed is too short and won't allow local people sufficient time to have their say.

The Government launched the national consultation on the future of the Post Office in December 2006 and committed itself to continued funding rural post offices after 2008, when the current arrangement runs out. During the consultation period, the CRC met key national and regional stakeholders and held four focus groups across rural England to gather the views of rural people, which informs the CRC's response.

Dr Stuart Burgess chairman of the CRC and Rural Advocate said, "We accept the need for some post office restructuring. The present position is not sustainable in the long term. But local communities have told us that the proposals for a six week local consultation around changes to the local network, which might include the closure of existing post offices and the introduction of more outreach access points, is too short. People want a real and open consultation and to be involved in developing solutions that meet their needs. In the meetings I chaired around the country, a deep concern was the threat to village shops if the local post offices closed. Around seventy eight per cent of sub postmasters run an associated business, usually a shop, alongside their post office and these could be threatened in the future reducing still further local services."

Dr Burgess continued, "All is not gloomy however. Properly planned, the proposed changes could lead to an improved service for some communities, who do not currently have access to a post office or the services it provides. There are already many successful examples of co-location and outreach services being provided in pubs, hotels, bed and breakfasts, village and church halls, as well as in village shops, and we must ensure that these local solutions can continue and be expanded."

The CRC's response calls for any reorganisation and reduction in the number of post office outlets to have built in safeguards for the most vulnerable people and for rural businesses. Alternative ways of providing post office services, such as, mobile provision, delivering postal services directly to people's homes and hosting post offices in other businesses, such as pubs, community centres and village halls, need to be supported. But, whilst these solutions are developed, it is essential that the commitment to prevent avoidable closures continues until an agreed and workable local strategy is in place.

In its response, the CRC has emphasised its serious concern about the impact of the likely level of closures on rural communities and rural business and, in particular, the effects on the most vulnerable people. Without taking account of more than geography or distance, the new access criteria which will replace the current commitment to no avoidable closures of rural post offices, could result, in time, in many more than the 2500 closures being talked about now.

ENDS

For further information please contact Nick McClelland, Commission for Rural Communities, on 020 7932 5814 or 07900 608 045.

Note to Editors:

Contact:

1. The full response to the DTI's consultation on the future of the Post Office network is available for the CRC website at <http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications/postofficerresponse>
2. The four workshops were held in Stowmarket, Suffolk; Church Stretton, Shropshire; Sydling St Nicholas, Dorset and Penrith, Cumbria.
3. The Commission for Rural Communities was established initially as an operating division of the Countryside Agency in April 2005, and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the NERC (The Natural Environment and Rural Communities) Act 2006. Our role is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage.

We have three key functions:

- Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, businesses and communities
- Expert adviser: giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally

Further information about the Commission for Rural Communities and it's work can be found at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk