



CRC 12/06

14th December 2006

Rural disadvantaged must not lose out from changes to post office network

In response to the Government announcement today on the future of the post office network, the Commission for Rural Communities has emphasised that any changes must not further marginalise the 1 in 5 rural people living in poverty. Vulnerable groups in rural areas, such as older people, low-income families and those without access to a car, rely disproportionately on post office services. They will be most affected by any further closures.

Dr Stuart Burgess, chairman of the Commission and the Rural Advocate, said, "Despite the Government's continuing commitment to maintaining the rural post office network, we are seriously concerned 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 - the elderly, disabled and low-income families. Over one third of post office users in rural areas are from a household with children and over a quarter of customers are from households with people aged 60 or over. In addition, many shops and other services are linked with the post office in rural areas and we do not want changes to the post office business undermining other crucial rural services."

The CRC welcomes the announcement by the Government of a consultation on the future of the rural post office network and has called for any programme of change to be properly planned and funded and should allow sufficient time for local consultation on the services to be provided. The CRC will play a leading role in ensuring that the consultation takes full account of the needs of rural communities and identifies real solutions to providing a sustainable future for post office services in rural areas. The CRC will be seeking views of rural people to ensure that their voice is heard and listened to during the consultation.

Dr Burgess added "We are pleased to see that the Social Network Payment is to remain in place after 2008. However, as we have heard, this will still not be enough for the network to be maintained along present lines. But the reorganisation and reduction in the number of post office outlets outlined today must build in safeguards for the most vulnerable people and identify other, creative ways of delivering postal services in rural areas. The commitment to look at different ways of providing services is welcome; more mobile provision is one option, but there are other solutions which need to be supported, for example post offices in pubs and village halls or outreach services. While these solutions are developed, we believe it is essential that the commitment to prevent avoidable closures must continue until an agreed and workable strategy is in place."

Research commissioned by the CRC and Postwatch has shown that over half (58%) of people in rural areas use the post office to access other services. According to recent research carried out by the Federation of Small Businesses, 82% of small businesses thought the closure of their local post office would have a significant impact on local business, including increased travel time, increased queuing time and even potential closure of a business.

“Proper consideration must be given to the effect on local businesses and general stores, particularly where the shop and post office is the last remaining outlet in a village. Seventy eight per cent of sub postmasters run an associated business, usually a shop, alongside their post office and these could be threatened. 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 can continue and be expanded. Properly planned, the 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. We shall look to the Government and the Post Office to ensure the needs of rural customers are properly addressed now and in the future,” added Dr Burgess.

ENDS

For further information please contact, Nick McClelland, Commission for Rural Communities on 020 7932 5814 or 07900 608 045 or Nick Milton on 07900 608 349.

Notes to editors

1. CRC and Postwatch research: The Future of the UK's Rural and Deprived Urban Post Office Network
http://www.postwatch.co.uk/pdf/Research/1.6.06Future_social_network_ERM_exec.pdf

Federation of Small Businesses: Small Business and the UK Postal Market
<http://www.fsb.org.uk/documentstore/filedetails.asp?ID=368>

2. Examples of different approaches taken by communities in providing Post Office services include:

Parton Village Hall, Cumbria - Three former Cumbrian pit villages of Lowca, Moresby and Parton which form the Howgate Ward, teamed up to create a joint Parish Plan. Following the closure of Parton's post office, arrangements were made for the Lowca postmaster to use the Parton Village Hall for post office services two mornings a week. (Tues & Thurs, 9-12am) This provision serves a core group of regular customers and has proved sustainable so far. Some business was lost to nearby town following the closure of Parton Post Office and before the Village Hall service was started.

Tealby Multi-use Centre, Lincolnshire - Tealby Multi Use Centre, opened on June 28th 2004, with a medium term view to develop into a thriving community hub at the heart of the village. The previous village shop was simply not making enough profit to sustain its proprietor and family. The village had always had a Post Office, and by November 2003 it was operating from the lobby of the Village Hall, but under imminent threat of closure. The project was to construct and open a Multi Use Centre incorporating

- o village shop,
- o Post Office,
- o information point and
- o doctor's surgery.

A Multi Use Centre committee was set up to bring the project in to being and the shop opened in June 2004.

The Post Office operates three mornings a week (Mon, Tues & Thurs, 9-2).

Sheepy Magna Church, Leicestershire - Villagers of Sheepy Magna, in south west Leicestershire, managed to save two of their important village services. The shop closed in March 2003 and the post office quickly needed to find alternative accommodation. At the same time the medieval parish church was facing huge repair bills for its 16th century bell tower. The vicar and her parishioners came up with an unusual proposal to run a post office service from the church vestry in the tower base. The £45,500 cost was met by public and organisational contributions and the first stamp was sold on Dec 8th 2003.

The Post Office service has been offered two mornings a week, co-incident with an open house coffee morning, providing a social meeting point but also providing additional security for the Postmaster. At present the Postmaster is off sick and so no service is being offered. She will be replaced should she not be able to return to work.

The Master Robert Inn, Buriton, Hampshire - In Oct 2004, whilst researching the business potential of The Master Robert Inn, Pauline Davey engaged with the Village Association who indicated the need for a village shop and Post Office to replace that which had closed 18 months earlier. An underused function room at the inn seemed a possible solution for the mutual benefit of the new business and the community.

By October 2005 the new shop and post office began trading. Pauline is the Postmaster and Post Office services are offered on a full-time basis. The business is marketed locally with "locals" discount on some products and the business donates part of its profits back to the community to "thank" the village for its continuing support.

Yarpole Community Shop, Herefordshire - The village shop and Post Office in Yarpole were previously integral to a resident's house, and were therefore not available to be re-used. A public meeting was attended by 110 people with support from a further 15 non-attendees. Twelve people initially volunteered to form a steering group. The parish is spread over four communities, none of which has a shop, and the population has a high number of older people, some of whom had limited access to other shops because of the poor public transport.

After talks with the pub landlord and the brewery, it was agreed to place a temporary portable building at the end of the pub car park. The cabin was built to specification and planning permission granted for two years. The shop opened in April 2005 and the Post Office opened in June 2005.

It is staffed by a part-time manager and a team of volunteers. The Post Office operates from 9-12 Mon to Sat. As planning consent runs out in April two options are being investigated. Erecting a purpose built building or creating a partnership with the local church with its plans for a community outreach project.

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 its work can be found at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk