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POST OFFICE NETWORK CONSULTATION

The Commission for Rural Communities is an independent statutory body with three main roles:

- Rural advocate - the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.
- Expert adviser - giving evidence-based, objective advice to government (central, regional and local) and others in taking account of rural needs.
- Independent watchdog - monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Access to services for rural people and businesses is critical to the future sustainability of rural communities. Many local services are currently provided through the network of rural post offices and they play a particularly important social and economic role in rural areas, especially for the more vulnerable members of the community. We have been closely involved for several years in discussions about the future role of rural post offices and the rural network as a whole. We have helped to identify and promote solutions to the delivery of post offices and associated services, through research and good practice.

We have welcomed the Government's commitment to consult on the future shape and extent of the rural network and we are pleased at the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the future of the post office network. In our view, there are some positive aspects to the consultation's proposals. For example, we are pleased to see that both the social and economic roles of post offices have been recognised; that the Post Office Card Account will continue with a new account after 2010, available nationally to customers on the same basis as it is now; and that the Social Network Payment is to remain until 2011, with a commitment to provide further subsidy of the social network beyond that date. We also believe that the restructuring offers an opportunity to improve the service to many rural communities, particularly those people currently without access to them, through lack of a post office or limited mobility.

However, we do have some serious concerns about the proposals, which are set out briefly below:

- We accept the need for restructuring of the network, but, in doing so, it is vital that the needs of vulnerable groups and small businesses are fully recognised and that change is properly planned and funded. Any changes resulting from the restructuring should build in safeguards for the most vulnerable people and for rural businesses. Any changes must not marginalise the one in five rural people currently

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 and they will be most affected by closures or restructuring.

- We would urge the Government to maintain the commitment to prevent avoidable closures until an agreed, and workable, local strategy has been implemented, to prevent gaps in provision while solutions are being developed
- Although, as we said above, Government has recognised the social and economic roles of post offices, further clarification is needed as to what this means in practice
- Greater clarity is also required about what services the new Post Office Card Account will provide. When it becomes available, transfer arrangements should be simple and transparent, with little bureaucracy e.g. no requirement to change PIN numbers or complete unnecessary forms.
- Proper consideration must be given to the effect on attached businesses, especially shops and general stores, particularly where the shop and post office is the last remaining outlet in a village. We recommend that the Government should consider establishing a presumption against closure of such post offices, unless other arrangements can be put in place to deliver such services.
- Access criteria must include other factors as well as geography and distance, such as walking distance; socio-economic indicators; accessibility by public transport; impact on the local economy; and opening hours and range of products available.
- Outreach provision should be flexible and sensitive to the needs of local communities, drawing on the experience of existing examples of co-location and partnership working.
- Consultation on local area plans must be inclusive and comprehensive, to take full account of the needs of rural communities. The six weeks proposed for such consultations do not allow sufficient time for full engagement (for example it could fall between local parish council meetings) and should be increased to at least 12 weeks.
- In our opinion, while recognising the need for decisions to be made to minimise uncertainty for communities and the sub post offices themselves, the proposed overall programme timetable of 18 months is too ambitious and allows little time to adapt the process in the light of experience.
- Whilst some continuing change is probably unavoidable, we believe the proposed restructuring should lead to some stability for the network and a commitment by government and the Post Office to its future. The services provided in rural communities have been under threat for several years and further changes should be avoided as far as possible

Our detailed response is set out in the attached note. In drawing this up, we have consulted other stakeholders and held meetings in four different parts of the country to hear the views and concerns of local rural communities and businesses. We have also invited comments on our website. A report on the four focus groups held will be available shortly and we will send you copies of this when it is available. Meanwhile, our response highlights the feedback we have received.

The end of the consultation period marks the beginning of detailed work at local level which will be crucial in determining the nature and shape of the post office network. We should welcome the opportunity to work with you, and others, including Post Office Limited, Postwatch, local authorities, Rural Community Councils and parish councils to ensure that the detailed needs and views of rural communities are considered and taken into account, before decisions are made and irrevocable changes are made to the network. We would be pleased to help in the early stages by identifying and disseminating best practice examples as local reviews are being carried out.

Should you require any further information on our response, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Clark
Deputy Chief Executive



The Post Office Network: response to the consultation

1. Awareness of the consultation

The four focus groups we held in different parts of the country (in Suffolk, Dorset, Shropshire and Cumbria) revealed that there is a considerable lack of awareness among rural communities that the national consultation on the future of the post office network is currently taking place. It is vital, therefore, that the local consultation stage is much more inclusive and widely publicised to ensure that those who are most affected by any change to the network can have their say.

Underlying this is a general misconception about the status of post offices. They are seen as providers of a public, rather than a commercial, service, and, as such should not be required to make a profit. There is confusion about whether they are a government service or not. They are regarded as a highly valued service and were described as “the most local branch of the welfare state”. If post offices are responsible for meeting broader social needs, then subpostmasters should receive the necessary funding, training and support.

2. Restructuring the network

We accept the need to restructure the network, but this must be done in a planned and properly funded way that recognises the needs of rural communities, particularly vulnerable people, and small businesses. Although the figures show that the current network is loss-making, the drive to reverse this must not outweigh the needs of rural communities. Because rural post offices have a smaller customer base, providing essential services can never be possible on a purely commercial basis. Many post offices will only ever break even and some will continue to lose money. In 2006, just under half (48%) of rural England subpostmasters could not cover their post office staff costs, overheads and personal drawings from their post office pay, and are therefore operating at a loss. In rural areas, post offices provide a vital service with few alternative sources of such services. In our view, there will be a need for ongoing subsidy for the social network after 2011, and the consultation recognises this, but it must be at a level sufficient to enable the provision of what is commonly regarded as a public rather than a commercial or privately provided service. Government should help in this by taking a more co-ordinated approach and considering the post office first as a means of providing its services.

The restructuring of the network must build in safeguards for the most vulnerable people and for rural businesses. The commitment to prevent avoidable closures should be maintained until an agreed and workable local strategy has been implemented. This will help to prevent gaps in provision of services developing while solutions are being developed.

The consultation covers urban and rural areas and it is likely that market towns will also be

affected by any restructuring of the network. Evidence confirms that most market towns remain a key location for the provision of essential services to a wider hinterland. Any closures are likely to have a more widespread effect.

In terms of impact of change and restructuring, participants in the focus groups felt that not enough consideration had been given to the wider socio-economic impact on everyone in the community - businesses and individuals - and not just older and more vulnerable people. Businesses were being encouraged to move to rural areas at the same time as vital services were being removed and cutting costs in one area of service provision could lead to increased cost in others.

Subpostmasters run small businesses and over three quarters have an attached shop. Many will need support to work in a new and more entrepreneurial way. Successfully developing and running outreach provision with an associated shop depends very much on the initiative and enthusiasm of the individual involved across their business, and not only on the outreach model. We do not believe that Post Office Limited is best placed to provide this more wide-ranging advice and support, and recommend that funding should be allocated by Dti to Regional Development Agencies who should ensure that subpostmasters and would-be/replacement subpostmasters are provided with business advice and training through their new regional organization, delivering Business Link services by working jointly with the Rural Shops Alliance - the specialist organisation representing small rural shopkeepers.

3. Use and role of post offices

We are pleased to see the recognition of the important social and economic role of the post office and that the Social Network Payment will continue up to current levels until 2011. However, the exact nature of the social role needs to be clarified.

i) Use of post offices

All our research reveals the vital role that post offices play in the community, not just by providing valued services, but by acting as the hub of the village, where people can obtain advice and meet others. In particular, they provide a source of contact for older people who can easily become isolated.

- Typically, vulnerable groups in rural areas (those on low incomes, disabled people and older people over 65) use post offices more frequently than in deprived areas. A significant proportion of users in rural areas (22%) are aged 65 years and over compared to 17% in deprived urban areas.
- 55% of rural customers in England use the post office every week
- 81% had used the post office within the last month.
- Over a third of post office users in rural England are from a household with children, and over a quarter (28%) of customers are from a household with people aged 60 or over, compared to just 19% in the deprived urban areas of England.
- 75% of post office customers used the post office nearest to where they live.
- Postal services (purchase of stamps/ mailing, posted something in postbox, parcel post, special delivery, licensing services [before TV licensing was transferred to

Pay Point]) are the most highly accessed services for 96% of people in rural areas, followed by bills and other payments (87%). Bills and other payments include bill payment or budgeting towards bills, buying mobile phone pre-pay vouchers, paying car tax, applying for a passport, travel insurance, foreign currency exchange or travellers cheques, cards/stationery, lottery tickets/scratch cards.

- Over a quarter of people (29%) use the post office for banking services, significantly higher than in deprived urban areas in England (14%). This includes withdrawals from a current account, depositing cash or cheques and national savings transactions.
- 24% of people in rural areas use the post office to withdraw cash, compared with 7% in deprived urban areas.

Evidence from our online questionnaire during the consultation period shows that nearly all respondents used the post office for postal services and paying bills, with about half using the post office for banking, and a quarter for collection of pensions/benefits. Nearly all used the post office for other services, particularly socialising, meeting people and picking up forms.

Over three quarters of respondents used the post office weekly or more often and just under half travelled less than a mile to the post office, with one third travelling between 1 to 2 miles and just under a fifth travelling more than 2 miles. If their post office closed, three quarters would use another post office. A fifth would use replacement outreach provision and a significant minority would use the Internet as an alternative to access services.

ii) Social role of post offices

People attach a high importance to post offices, with more frequent users attaching higher importance to access to a wide range of community and financial services.

Post offices provide information and access to a range of government services and benefits. In some areas, local authorities use them to disseminate information and for payment of council tax and rents.

- Almost a quarter of customers in rural England obtain information from the post office (20% in deprived urban areas) and 50% pick up forms (35% in deprived urban areas).
- 58% of people use the post office for other services such as obtaining information and advice, socialising or meeting people.
- Post offices are important in supporting vulnerable groups. In rural England, 17% of users are within the lower income bracket, 22% are aged 65 years and over and 4% are unemployed.
- Some 14% of post office users have some form of disability.
- Nearly four fifths (78%) of subpostmasters in rural England run their post office alongside another business, and over two thirds of people use a post office with a shop compared to 20% in deprived urban areas.

Evidence from the four focus groups confirms the importance of the social role, particularly to older people. The concern surrounding post office closures is as much about the impact on the village more generally, eg losing the heart of the village, the possibility of losing accompanying shops and the knock-on effect on other services and the viability of the community, as it is about losing post office services directly.

Older people value the role of the post office or local shop beyond their shopping value. For them the importance of the post office rated both for collecting pensions (12%) and being a meeting place (11%).

iii) Economic role of post offices

a) *Impact on small businesses, home-based workers¹ and self-employed people*

Home based working is significantly more common in rural than in urban areas. More than two million people (2,056,000) in England work at or mainly from home (Census 2001), representing 9% of the working population. The figures for urban districts outside London are 8% (1,000,000). The percentage of the workforce working from home in the 125 rural districts is even higher at 12% - over half a million people (637,700).

Over one million (1,053,100) self-employed people in England work from home. Self-employment is also more common in rural areas: 17% (1,070,000 people) compared to 11% (1,410,000) in urban districts. In rural districts, almost 7% of those in employment are both self-employed and working from home. In some rural districts this rate rises to over 20%, or one in five.

Rural home-based workers and self-employed people argue that they rely heavily on village shops and post offices, and will be affected by changes in the post office network. Across the UK, home working has been rising rapidly over the last five years from about 2.9 million in 1999 to almost 3.3 million in the spring of 2004. Numbers are rising faster in rural England and will increase further for the foreseeable future. Indeed, many regional and local Enterprise Agencies are proactively marketing their rural areas to attract new entrepreneurs, often working from home. This also contributes to sustainability and reducing the effects of climate change.

In 2005 there were at least 476,500 firms in rural areas, excluding market towns with above 10,000 population (the number registered for VAT or PAYE and using the rural definition). They, too, will be affected by restructuring of the network. Recent research carried out by the Federation of Small Businesses found that 82% of small businesses thought the closure of their local post office would have a significant impact on local businesses, including increased travel time, increased queuing time and, potentially, even the closure of the business itself. This was reinforced in our focus groups when people running a small business from home said that timely and convenient access to postal services, often on a daily basis, was critical to their business.

Small businesses need post office services themselves, and also have the potential to provide much needed business for the post office, which should not be overlooked. In our focus groups, we heard from subpostmasters who had developed creative solutions to delivering services tailored to business needs. In Aldeburgh, the core subpostmistress collects and delivers mail to two businesses, by arrangement, as part of a range of outreach services she provides and, in Glastonbury, the core subpostmaster visits two local businesses daily, providing the full range of postal services.

It will be important that both Post Office Limited and individual subpostmasters recognise the full potential of more flexible services, not only to meet the needs of customers, but also to derive maximum benefit for their own business.

¹ The term home based worker covers all categories of people who work from home, either as home-based businesses, employees, or a combination of the two.

b) *Shop/post office relationship*

We know from previous research that 78% of subpostmasters in rural England run an associated business, usually a shop, alongside their post office. In order to examine the relationship of the post office and its associated shop in more detail, in August and September 2006, we commissioned customer and subpostmaster surveys. These were carried out in 19 post offices with an attached general store in villages with a population of less than 1,000 where there were no other similar shops in the village.

The research showed a high degree of co-dependency between the post office and the village shop. Without the post office, the shop would not survive. The loss of 2,500 post offices could lead to the loss of between 560 and 900 village shops, and with them access to a broader range of services, at a time when on average 300 village shops are lost each year.

All customers thought it was important to keep the post office and village shop. Of these, almost three quarters thought it was extremely important and over a quarter thought it very important to retain the post office and village shop.

For this reason we think the access criteria (see 5. below) should include a presumption against closure of a post office with an attached shop where it is the last outlet in a community.

Rural subpostmasters thought that the post office provided an anchor for an attached village shop. They are heavily dependent on the fixed element of their income and the continuance of the Social Network Payment is crucial to their future existence.

Although outreach provision may be a cost-effective alternative to post office provision, it cannot provide an alternative to the village shop and is best suited to ensuring that remote and isolated communities continue to be able to access post office services where stand-alone post offices have closed.

Our focus group work also revealed the strength of communities' attachment to their village shop/post office. Many feel that the closure of a rural post office could be the "nail in the coffin" for the village if the shop were to close too.

Government should consider granting 100% mandatory business rate relief to such shops as a way of helping to ensure their future viability.

4. Post Office Card Account

We welcome the commitment to continue the Post Office Card Account (POCA) after 2010 but greater clarity is needed about what services it will offer and, as the new contract will need to be tendered, it is possible that the post office will not secure the business. This adds further uncertainty to the future viability of the network.

In the interim, we need to be sure that people continue to be able to use the POCA so that the business is not undermined. New customers should continue to be able to apply for a POCA should they wish to do so. When the new POCA becomes available, transfer arrangements should be simple and transparent, with no requirement to change PIN numbers or complete unnecessary or complicated forms.

5. Access Criteria

Fair and effective access criteria are critical to the future sustainability of the network as they will not only replace the commitment to avoidable closures as the criteria by which Post Office Limited can organise the network once the review process is complete, but also will determine the future shape of the network in the long term.

The access criteria proposed are based solely on distance and geography. They are difficult to interpret and need both to be better defined and to incorporate additional factors. There is the added complication that Post Office Limited do not use the agreed ONS definition of urban and rural areas that is used by government in England and Wales, but not in Scotland. There is no clear definition of 'remote'. It would have been helpful to have included examples illustrating how the national and local criteria are intended to work in practice.

Other factors which should be considered as additional criteria are:

- walking distance to the nearest alternative post office
- travelling time - by public and private transport
- socio-economic indicators of the community such as age, health and income
- accessibility by public transport
- an assessment of the impact on the local economy.
- opening hours and range of products available. These should include: access to all postal products; access to the Post Office Card Account and its successor; banking facilities (basic bank accounts and current accounts); bill payments.

Our focus group research confirmed that the key groups who need easy access to rural post offices are older people, and others, without cars, disabled people, and local businesses. The use of distance as a criterion was considered to be mechanistic and formulaic. Three miles was considered to be "a long way, especially when there's no transport", and three miles means a six-mile round trip. The key factor was considered to be access rather than distance. In large and sparsely populated counties like Cumbria, topography and local weather conditions should also be accounted for.

The need for government to take a holistic approach was stressed. Other factors, which should be taken into account, include bus routes and frequency of the service; whether there was a bus shelter; the fact that rural roads have no pavements and are unlit (this was of particular concern to those who use Motability vehicles); increased petrol costs and cost to the environment of travelling further to the nearest post office.

Respondents to our online questionnaire suggested that opening hours, range of services, and availability of public transport were key factors to be taken into account in developing access criteria.

The consultation is based on the assumption of 2,500 funded closures across the UK (both urban and rural), but the basic access criteria set out in the consultation could still be met if more than this number was to close. No supporting evidence has been provided to justify the 2,500 closures proposed or to clarify the relationship between the access criteria and the proposed number of closures

We strongly recommend that the Government consider establishing a presumption against closure of a post office with an attached shop where it is the last remaining outlet in a community to recognise its importance as a provider of essential services, unless other

satisfactory arrangements to deliver the services provided are in place.

6. Outreach provision

We accept the rationale for access points in some communities rather than fixed provision, as this has the potential to increase provision in some communities that do not currently have a service. However, our focus group participants felt that outreach services were good as a "last resort" but that other impacts needed to be considered, such as the future of village shops. The main points made about outreach provision were:

- It had the potential to provide a social hub if combined with other activities at a village hall, or was available at weekly farmer's markets where community transport to them is already in place.
- It should be flexible and the setting chosen carefully. Not everyone would be comfortable going to a post office in a pub.
- Mobile provision had the potential to take post office services to areas that were currently without them or where there were no suitable premises. There were concerns about security and theft once routes became well-known, as well as the duration of the visit, whether the location, even within a community, was accessible, and how it would be scheduled, particularly to correspond with the payment of pensions and benefits.
- The home service was considered to be a good option for the most vulnerable people, but its drawback was the limited range of services on offer, and the fact that there was little social contact.
- Reduced opening hours were a concern, for individuals as well as for small businesses or voluntary groups who used the post office more than once or twice a week. Mail order businesses, who used their post office daily, felt this particularly keenly.
- It was suggested that local authorities providing statutory services, particularly peripatetic services, could offer basic post office services to the most needy and immobile in their own homes.

Fifty per cent of respondents to our on-line questionnaire felt that outreach provision could not fulfil the social role currently played by the post office. Nearly half felt that it would go some way towards doing so, but that nevertheless it was still not adequate. Only 1% felt that it would fulfil the social role.

Both the focus groups and the on-line survey demonstrated little interest in web-based services. It should also be borne in mind that although basic broadband services through the telephone are generally available in rural areas, bandwidth decreases with distance from the telephone exchange and more remote areas will have a limited service. On-line services need to reflect the limited bandwidth available in rural areas.

7. Consultation at local level

Our focus group work revealed that there is a considerable lack of awareness among rural communities that the national consultation is currently taking place. This reinforces the need for local consultation to be much more widely publicised.

Local consultation is key to the restructuring process but we do not believe that this can be done effectively in the proposed 6-week period. We recommend a period of at least 12 weeks (also recommended by the Trade and Industry Select Committee) for local consultation to allow full engagement of communities and key stakeholders. The overall timetable of 18 months is also very ambitious and leaves little time for effective local consultation or adapting procedures in the light of experience.

Key principles for local consultation are:

- Local input at an early stage in drawing up and developing proposals, including the opportunity to propose alternative solutions based on local knowledge. This included county and district councils; parish councils; rural community councils; local stakeholders, such as businesses, community groups, village hall committees, transport providers. Respondents to our online questionnaire also felt that local authorities, parish councils and members of the public should be involved, with local groups and subpostmasters also mentioned.
- Keeping people fully informed by
 - Publicising area consultations as early as possible
 - Providing facts and figures which explained the background to the process and the nature of any alternative provision proposed, presented in an accessible way
- Providing feedback throughout the consultation process so that people were assured that decisions were being taken in a fair and open manner, and that their views had been considered. Full reports of the overall results of local consultation should be made available and disseminated widely.
- Although everyone should have the opportunity to respond, current users in particular should be targeted by basing the consultation around post offices to capture their views. More vulnerable groups could be reached through local community groups, and others through advertising in the media.
- Balancing views. All views should be taken into consideration. For example, the lobbying power of supermarkets should not outweigh those of village shops.

Suggested methods of consultation included questionnaires, focus groups, and open meetings. Questionnaires should be easy to understand, with no leading questions. It was clear that people placed great value on face-to-face contact.

It was also suggested that a "pre-consultation period", or pilot, to test the mechanism for area consultation in advance of the restructuring programme, should be carried out. We would be happy to work with you to develop a model for effective local consultation. An example is attached at Annex B.

We are concerned that the review is being taken forward on the basis of parliamentary constituencies rather than on the more usual basis of regional or local authority boundaries. This could mean that in some cases the review process could cover as much as half a county and would be at too large a scale to be effective in assessing the situation at a very local level or for local engagement.

It is also worrying that the timetable for Postwatch to be disbanded and become part of a new consumer organisation, together with Energywatch and the National Consumer Council, with the potential loss of its regional structure, coincides with the restructuring programme, at a time when a Postwatch regional presence is crucial. We would like to be assured that this will not compromise Postwatch's role at area consultation stage.

8. Role of local authorities

Government intends to investigate what role local authorities might play in influencing and developing new approaches to delivering postal services in the future.

Local authorities are well-placed to facilitate community consultation and cross-agency working, through Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements. Many local authorities are already working with local businesses and community organisations using approaches such as

- Multi-purpose centres, which provide a range of services
- Promoting the use of community buildings such as churches, to house post office services
- Partnerships between councils and local businesses to transfer the post office into the businesses' premises
- Parish councils taking ownership of the post office, supported by funds from other sources.

Some local authorities have already begun to map provision of rural services in general, as well as post office services, against demographics, socio-economic factors, public transport provision to help in carrying out impact assessments before any closures occur.

At our stakeholder meeting in January, organised to share views on the consultation and to discuss common concerns, it was felt that local authorities should be involved in the development of local access criteria, which could be set within a national framework. Local authorities could also have a role in funding post offices either by raising funds through a precept or by offering concessions on business rates for premises including a post office access point.

9. Community Ownership

There are many successful examples of community-owned shops and post offices but they are reliant on the presence of community activists and entrepreneurs. They are also reliant on funding, often from a range of sources such as county, district and parish councils, which is not necessarily secure in the long term. We should like to see greater clarification of the status of community shops/post offices in terms of restructuring the network. Will they be considered as part of the review process and be provided with funding and support to help them improve their business?

Our response is informed by research and activity we have carried out before and during the consultation period. References are included at Annex A.

March 2007

Annex A

Research and other activity carried out by the Commission for Rural Communities

1. **The future of rural post offices**
A report of two workshops, which took place in Dorset and Cumbria in March 2006, to gain an insight into how rural communities wished to put forward their views in future public consultation.
<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/frampton%20and%20shap%20workshop%20findings.pdf>
2. **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
3. NFSP third wave survey rural analysis (unpublished)
4. Co-dependency of combined post office and shops (unpublished)
5. **Stakeholder meeting, 25 January 2007**
The Commission brought together representatives from regional Rural Affairs Fora, the churches, the Scottish and Welsh devolved administrations, businesses and the voluntary sector and Postcomm and Postwatch. Its aim was to share views on the consultation and discuss common concerns.
6. **The future of the rural post office network**
During the consultation period the Commission organised four focus groups in Suffolk, Dorset, Shropshire and Cumbria to raise awareness and discuss the issues in the consultation document with rural communities, subpostmasters and local stakeholders. The meeting in Cumbria sought the views of small businesses and self-employed people and in Shropshire, the view of older people. These two groups had been identified in our earlier research as key users of local post office services. Final summary report available in April.
7. We sponsored UK Villages to promote the consultation through their website and to provide a facility for on-line responses.
8. The Commission's website provided a link to the DTI consultation document and to the UK Villages website. We also ran a short, online questionnaire to help us get views to contribute to our own response, with case study examples of current outreach services.
9. **Under the Radar Tracking and supporting rural home based business**
<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC17-UndertheRadar.pdf>
10. **Rural Disadvantage – Reviewing the Evidence**
<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications/crc31review>
11. **Rural Insights**
http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/ruralinsight_mb_v5.pdf
12. **Federation of Small Businesses: Small Business and the UK Postal Market**
<http://www.fsb.org.uk/documentstore/filedetails.asp?ID=368>

Annex B

Example of Community Consultation: Shropshire Rural Pathfinder Parish Cluster Events

Shropshire County Council's Rural Pathfinder team consulted with communities and service providers to address access issues across the county. Their approach was to consult with clusters of parishes that had completed parish plans as this gave them a direct route to working with local communities where a significant proportion of the community had already been actively engaged in considering how they would like their parishes to develop in the future (parish plan response rates are generally over 70%).

These Parish Cluster Events:

- enabled local people to talk directly with service providers to voice their concerns regarding current service provision
- gave service providers an opportunity to listen to the issues of the community and to enable them to inform local people of the constraints within their service
- provided an opportunity for both service providers and local people to try and address some of the issues by agreeing joint actions
- gave a chance for neighbouring parishes to network and identify joint activities to address similar concerns

The approach

Neighbouring parishes that had completed a parish plan or had common links were identified with the help of the Community Council of Shropshire.

Parish Plan Committee Members, Parish Council Clerks, Chairmen and County and District Councillors were contacted and asked if they wanted to be involved. The details of the evening were then discussed with key community members before the invitations were sent out.

The event was held in the evening to allow wide attendance by the community. They found that attendance was best in the summer months, although they had to avoid peak holiday times and the World Cup!

The event was split into workshops and relevant service providers and an independent facilitator manned the discussion tables. Community members chose the workshop most relevant to their concerns. The facilitators guided the discussions, making sure that concrete actions were identified as well as concerns raised.

After an hour the facilitators fed back to the whole room about their discussions and actions, allowing time for further discussion with all present. The second part of the evening was a networking opportunity for the parishes over tea and cake.

The Rural Pathfinder team were responsible for following up the actions and communicating progress back to service providers and the community.

For further information contact the Commission for Rural Communities.