

Serving communities
across Bedfordshire
and Luton



Post Office Closures in Bedfordshire: A Briefing for Town and Parish Councils

Why Post Offices will close – what this review is all about

1. Under the Post Office Network Changes programme, the Post Office will close up to 2500 Post Offices across the UK from both urban and rural areas. 500 of these will become Outreach services.
2. The existing Post Office Network of 14,500 branches is considered to be unsustainable. The Network as a whole is losing almost £4million per week. Over 80% of the rural network is unprofitable. More than half of the rural network has fewer than 500 customers each week.
3. DTI published 'The Post Office Network: A Consultation Document' in December 2006, and accepted responses until March 2007. In May 2007, DTI confirmed that:
 - a. 2,500 Post Offices will be closed by December 2008 (estimated 1,250 in rural areas)
 - b. The closures proposed will be based primarily on financial viability and number of customers
 - c. Post Office Limited will introduce access criteria (further details below)
 - d. New Outreach facilities will be introduced to sustain access to Post Office services in rural areas (further details below)
 - e. All proposed closures will be subject to a local consultation, lasting six weeks
4. The programme also includes the setting up of 500 new outreach Post Office outlets for smaller communities e.g. mobile post offices, hosted services, partner services, home delivery services. It has recently been announced that outreach services may also now be provided in urban areas. The frequency of these services will be dependent on individual situations, but Outreach services are likely to operate on a part-time basis.

How will the consultation process be carried out?

5. Post Office Ltd is conducting a programme of consultation on the post offices earmarked for closure. The UK has been divided up into about 50 areas and each will be included in an Area Plan detailing what changes are proposed for that area.
6. The public consultation on the Area Plan that includes Bedfordshire commenced on 8 July. The consultation will be publicised at the relevant Post Offices within the area. Various organisations will be consulted formally. The public consultation immediately follows a 9-10 week pre-consultation carried out by Post Office Ltd. While pre-consultation proposals are not published, this period allows Postwatch (the Postal Services Watchdog) to scrutinise proposals, and individual sub-postmasters to be informed of the plans.
7. The number of Post Offices to be closed has been set at a fixed level (2,500 nationally). Therefore it is not expected that the consultations will result in a fall in the number of closures. There is, however, an opportunity for the public to influence the location of the closures, to ensure that the most appropriate Post Offices are affected by this closure programme.

What are the assessment criteria

8. The DTI has set 'access criteria', which will be the main factor in deciding which Post Offices will remain and which will be closed. There are as follows.

Nationally:

- 99% of the UK population to be within 3 miles and 90% of the population to be within 1 mile of their nearest Post Office outlet
- 99% of the total population in deprived urban areas across the UK to be within 1 mile
- 95% of the total urban population across the UK to be within 1 mile
- 95% of the total rural population across the UK to be within 3 miles

In addition, for each individual post code district:

- 95% of the population of the postcode district to be within 6 miles.

Outreach services – what they are/how they will be provided

9. 500 new 'outreach' locations will be established nationally. These will be new bases for Post Office Services to be delivered from. These will be based at different locations to the branches that have been closed, and managed by sub-postmasters running branches not scheduled for closure. The frequency of these services will be dependent on individual situations, but Outreach services are likely to operate on a part-time basis.

There are 4 types of outreach facility. The type most likely in Bedfordshire is the Mobile Post Office.

- Mobile Post Office - a travelling Post Office situated within a van operated by the subpostmaster that will visit small communities at set times and days each week, to deliver core Post Office products and services to customers.
- Hosted service - a fixed site Post Office branch from which the subpostmaster or his assistants will transact core Post Office products and services during restricted hours each week. The premises are owned by a third party, for example, a shop or community centre.
- Partner service - a fixed site Post Office branch where a local partner (such as a pub landlord) transacts a reduced range of Post Office products and services from the partner's own premises.
- Home Delivery service - a service for very small communities whereby the subpostmaster delivers a reduced range of Post Office products and services which are ordered over the telephone by customers.

What you (Town/ Parish Council, Small Business, Community Group or Individual) can do to influence the process.

A. If you wish to oppose a closure:

Areas you might want to consider in compiling your response

10. The advice we have received is that responses must make a strong argument against closure, based on factual evidence. Bedfordshire partners have been collating local area dossiers to provide more detailed information to support responses to the consultation. As soon as these are completed, they will be made available to you through the BRAF website www.braf.org.uk

11. Refer to the Branch Access Report made by Post Office Limited, regarding access to the nearest alternative Post Office to your community – is this a fair assessment? You can obtain the

Branch Access Report from the Post Office Ltd website www.postoffice.co.uk and follow the links to 'Network Change' and 'Current consultation'

12. Ask yourself the following questions: (do the answers support your cause to keep your Post Office/s open?)

- What are the opening hours of the nearest alternative Post Office/s?
- How frequently does the bus service operate?
- At what times of day does the bus service operate? How does this fit with local school hours?
- Does the bus stop close-by to the Post Office?
- Is there adequate parking near to the Post Office?
- If walking routes are included, is there a safe footpath? Would this accommodate pushchairs and wheelchairs? Are there uneven, narrow or steep sections of footpath?
- Do the suggested alternative Post Offices offer the same or greater range of services available at your local Office?
- Is the nearest alternative branch capable of serving the anticipated influx of new customers in addition to its existing customers? Does it have enough parking, counter positions, staff, etc?
- Is single car ownership a factor in your area? If a household has one car it may be used by the main income earner during Post Office opening hours, leaving other household members reliant on public transport / walking access.
- Are there other services near to or on the same premises as the closing branch which are not available near to the alternative branch? (e.g. ATM, general stores, butcher, bakery, dry cleaners, Parish Council office?)

13. Ask your Post-master/mistress if they have identified any reasons which may help to support the argument to retain the branch.

14. Encourage others to submit letters, stating the reasons for opposing the closure. It is important to note that individual letters setting out reasons for opposing the specific closure/s will have a much greater impact than petitions - write individual letters showing local knowledge and personal experience.

15. Please ensure that your letter reaches Post Office Limited **by 26 August 2008** . See Section C below.

16. The BRAF website www.braf.org.uk has a dedicated page on the post office closure programme, including links to Post Office Limited, Postwatch and to websites for Help the Aged and Communities Against Post Office Closures, both of which have further advice on mounting campaigns.

B. If you feel that your community could use an outreach solution

17. As set out above, there are 500 outreach facilities proposed for the UK. If you think one would be appropriate for your community, write to Post Office Limited at the address shown in section C below and suggest this as a course of action. Your answers to the questions in paragraph 14 above can be used to campaign for a suitable replacement, for example, a mobile post office service.

18. If Post Office Limited is already proposing that your Post Office will be replaced by an outreach service, we would urge the importance of trying to influence the provision of a suitable outreach service **alongside** any campaign to save the post office. Again, experience elsewhere is that refusal to consider an outreach option has not prevented closure of the post office itself.

C. Making representations

19. Send your representations to Post Office Ltd as follows:

By letter:

National Consultation Team
Post Office Ltd
FREEPOST CONSULTATION TEAM
(no stamp is required)

By email: consultation@postoffice.co.uk

By phone: 08457 22 33 44

The deadline for representations is 26 August 2008.

20. It is also recommended you copy your letter to the appropriate local authority contact shown below. *We will then use this information (in anonymised form) to compile evidence on your behalf to send to:*

- Your MP
- Your County and District/Borough Councillors
- Postwatch. Postwatch is the watchdog for postal services and it is independent of Post Office Ltd and the government. Whilst Postwatch does not have the power to overrule the Post Office, its views on a closure have to be taken into account.

This will assist understanding of the local implications. If you wish to use this service, it would be helpful to receive your copy by 22 August. Please copy your letter to:

If you are in Bedford Borough:

Dan Hickman, Bedford Borough Council, Town Hall, St Paul's Square, Bedford MK40 1SJ
Email: dhickman@bedford.gov.uk

If you are in Mid or South Bedfordshire:

Allan Witherick, South Beds District Council, District Office, High Street North, Dunstable LU6 1LF or Email

21. Postwatch can be contacted directly (and copied in to responses going to Post Office Ltd) at FREEPOST Postwatch, by e-mailing to info@postwatch.co.uk, or by calling 08456 013265.

We ask that you circulate a copy of this briefing to all members of your Council.

We also confirm that, if you wish, copies may be displayed on your notice boards and/or websites. The consultation period is short. It is imperative, therefore, that as many people, organisations and businesses as possible are aware of the plans of Post Office Limited.