

Please reply to: David Incoll, Chief Executive  
Direct telephone: 01803 861363 Direct fax: 01803 866669  
E-Mail: chief.exec@southhams.gov.uk

National Consultation Team  
Post Office Limited  
FREEPOST  
CONSULTATION TEAM

Our Ref: CE/DJI/NR

2 July 2008

Dear Sirs

### **Post Office Network Change Programme**

Please consider this letter as South Hams District Council's formal representation to Post Office Limited's consultation on the Network Change Programme.

This Council has consistently held the firm view that it wishes to oppose all proposals for the closure of rural Post Office outlets, in principle. The Council believes that any closure will have a detrimental social and economic impact in town and village communities. We are especially concerned about any proposals where closure of the Post Office affects the viability of a co-existent village shop offering critical retail services to the communities currently served.

There are nine proposed closures in this district; you have identified three of these for replacement by an Outreach service. Therefore, your proposal represents a cut of 15% of the total Post Office services in South Hams. We also note, in the wider context, that the number of proposed closures in Devon is disproportionately high compared to other POL areas in the country and that the number of proposed Outreach services is similarly disproportionate.

I refer you to this Council's letter to Sue Huggins on 12 September 2007. This explained the geographical and demographic nature of the South Hams and drew particular attention to the probable impact that Post Office closures would wreak on a sparsely populated district with existing, self-evident pockets of deprivation and the exacerbation of social exclusion in the remoter reaches of the district. Moreover, we expressed alarm about the economic impact on those communities and the small business enterprises that exist within them. Our concern for the future well-being of all local residents was paramount then as it is today.

Despite these assertions, you present us with a number of PO closures that only serve to worsen the distance of rural communities from essential services. These proposals have been met with consistent public concern in the affected communities.

(Cont/d ...)

Further concerns now arise in relation to the published distances to alternative Post Office outlets and the capacity of those identified offices that are expected to accommodate trade displaced by closures. In September 2007, POL appeared to recognise that particular physical barriers existed in rural areas due to diverse topography and generally weak transport infrastructure that combine to frustrate ease of access to services generally. We now note that, latterly, POL has calculated distances “as the crow flies” and our Members see this as a cynical rule change that allows POL to meet its access criteria more easily with an apparent disregard for the realities of rural travel. POL’s statement in Sue Huggins’s letter to local authority Chief Executives in July 2007 that “no particular group of people should be significantly more adversely affected than any other” was greeted in this Council’s September response with what now appears to have been all too well-founded scepticism.

However, the specific closure proposals with which we are now faced are:

Avonwick  
Blackawton\*  
Dartmouth (Townstal)  
Dittisham\*  
Ermington  
Kellaton  
Rattery\*  
Totnes (High Street)  
West Charleton

Three of these (asterisked) are proposed for an Outreach replacement. This Council is very concerned to note that the proposed replacement services appear barely adequate, neither do they offer the range of services the affected communities need. In these instances, our Members wish to see a properly resourced mobile service installed that offers a full range of services with much extended opening hours beyond those that are proposed at least. Moreover, it appears that the terms and conditions offered to mobile service operators should be for a longer period than 12 months; we believe that 36 months is a more realistic timescale to support a viable business plan. This assertion recognises that the extant 3 month period extended to 12 months is a move in the right direction; however, it is nowhere near the period that any business or its funders are likely to consider in terms of financial sustainability.

There is, as yet, a distinct lack of clarity about what ‘Outreach’ means in practical/ consumer terms; thus, we believe there is further dialogue required to achieve a mutual understanding and we request a further and adequate period for consultation and negotiation as being essential.

Under these uncomfortable circumstances, this Council wishes to specifically oppose three of the closure proposals, as follows:

### **Dartmouth (Townstal)**

Rationale: There is convincing evidence that suggests this closure disregards the vast majority of available statistical data. It promises to negatively affect a large proportion of residents in this relatively concentrated population in a poor part of Dartmouth. This rationale is attached as Appendix 1.

### **Ermington**

Rationale: The viability of a co-existent village shop is seriously compromised by this closure. Public transport to Ivybridge, Modbury, and Yealmpton is not as you state; it is particularly infrequent or non-existent (there is no service to Modbury), thereby adversely affecting a predominantly elderly population in the village without access to personal private transport.

### **Blackawton**

Rationale: The viability of the co-existent village shop is seriously threatened by this closure and the proposed Outreach service is a poor substitute with questionable sustainability credentials. There is no direct public transport access to the first alternative branch.

With particular reference to the attached supporting information, I trust that this response to the POL consultation will be respected as the formal representation from South Hams District Council and seen in the light of a Devon county-wide response submitted simultaneously to which this Council has been an active party.

Yours faithfully



David Incoll  
Chief Executive

cc: Postwatch  
Cllr John Tucker (Leader of the Council)  
Cllr Bill Hitchins (Deputy Leader of the Council)  
Cllr Hilary Bastone (Dartmouth & Kingswear/Executive Member for Community)  
Cllr Jonathan Hawkins (Dartmouth & Kingswear)  
Cllr Melvyn Stone (Dartmouth & Kingswear)  
Cllr Francis Hawke (Dartmouth Townstal)  
Cllr Cathie Pannell (Chair of Scrutiny)  
Alan Robinson (Strategic Director (Community))  
Vaughan Lindsay (Chair of South Hams Strategic Partnership)  
Anthony Steen MP  
Gary Streeter MP

## Dartmouth (Townstal)

Rationale (in detail):

Dartmouth (in terms of access to wider services) serves the following parishes in its catchment – Blackawton, Dittisham, Kingswear, Stoke Fleming, Strete. These parishes are captured within the wards of – Dartmouth & Kingswear, Dartmouth Townstal, Skerries, and West Dart.

Dartmouth itself comprises two distinct communities – Lower Town and Townstal, the latter having the larger population - 2,330 as at Census 2001. Of this population, just 60% (1,388) is of working age. Over 25% of the population is classed as economically inactive, a greater proportion than nationally and elsewhere in the South Hams district.

Dartmouth Townstal falls within the most deprived 25% of UK areas (according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2004. This index measures deprivation in an area of about 1,500 people and comprises seven deprivation domains:

- income deprivation
- employment deprivation
- health deprivation
- education, skills, and training deprivation
- barriers to housing and services
- living environment deprivation
- crime

There are two supplementary indices affecting:

- income deprivation affecting children
- income deprivation affecting older people

Incomes in Dartmouth are generally well below national averages; there are 904 households amongst 2,144 that enjoy an annual income under £20K (42.1%).

In terms of housing, the number of owner-occupied dwellings in Dartmouth Townstal is noticeably lower than district and county averages. There is also a higher percentage of properties rented from a housing association compared to the Devon county average.

Unemployment is well above the rate for the rest of the district – at 4.0% but rising.

Economic activity rates in Dartmouth Townstal at 57.9% are less than any other measurable area in Devon. 37.7% are employed full-time, 19.4% are employed part-time, and 36% are self-employed; the balance is unknown.

Benefit claimant rates in Dartmouth Townstal are greater than at district and county level at 5.6%.

The percentage of people living with a limiting long-term illness is noticeably higher than in the wider South Hams, the Devon County and national averages (about 21% compared to 19% countywide and 18% nationally). Lone pensioners occupy around 20% of households, noticeably above county and national averages.

Statistically, 28.9% of all Townstal households are more likely to pay their bills at a Post Office – a higher percentage than elsewhere in the district (Experian Mosaic Groups D, F, G, H and I).

Over a quarter of Townstal households do not have access to a car – significantly higher than the district and county averages; similar statistics indicate that foot or bicycle is an essential mode of transport. The percentage of households with access to services by public transport within 30 minutes reduces exponentially into Dartmouth's surrounding hinterland. Dartmouth Townstal itself has access but this is inconducive to the elderly, infirm, young families (with an incidence of single-parent families), and those with care for very young children given its relative infrequency and the total journey time (door-to-door) that far exceeds POL's claim about the mere bus journey length which is itself understated.

The approximate cost of public transport from the Townstal area is £2.65 for a day return (£1.75 for a child); this means a typical parent with two children face an additional cost of £6.15 to access Post Office services from the nearest alternative branch. A typical elderly couple's cost is £5.30 – a significant extra expense that further erodes inevitable tight disposable incomes.

Townstal is further distanced from services in the Lower Town by a steep hill (1:12) and a distance by road that exceeds the stated 0.6 miles stated in the BAR. The distance is 1 mile in a vehicle from the existing Post Office. However, a more realistic measure would be from the furthest perimeter of the Townstal area where both residential and industrial premises are located from which the road distance to the alternative Post Office in the Lower Town is not much under 2 miles.

The Townstal area is predominantly the focus of employment activity for the town; the efficiency and productivity of local businesses will be adversely affected by additional time and cost of accessing services should the Townstal Post Office be closed.

There are issues around the capacity of the first alternative branch in lower Dartmouth to accommodate trade displaced by the closure of Townstal; space is already limited with very little scope for expansion.

In the face of the proposed closure of the existing outlet, consideration should be given to relocating the Townstal Post Office more locally within an existing outlet (a Spar, Co-op, well-used service station, and two supermarkets are obvious options). POL must bear in mind that any future development in greater Dartmouth is likely to occur in this broad vicinity of Townstal.