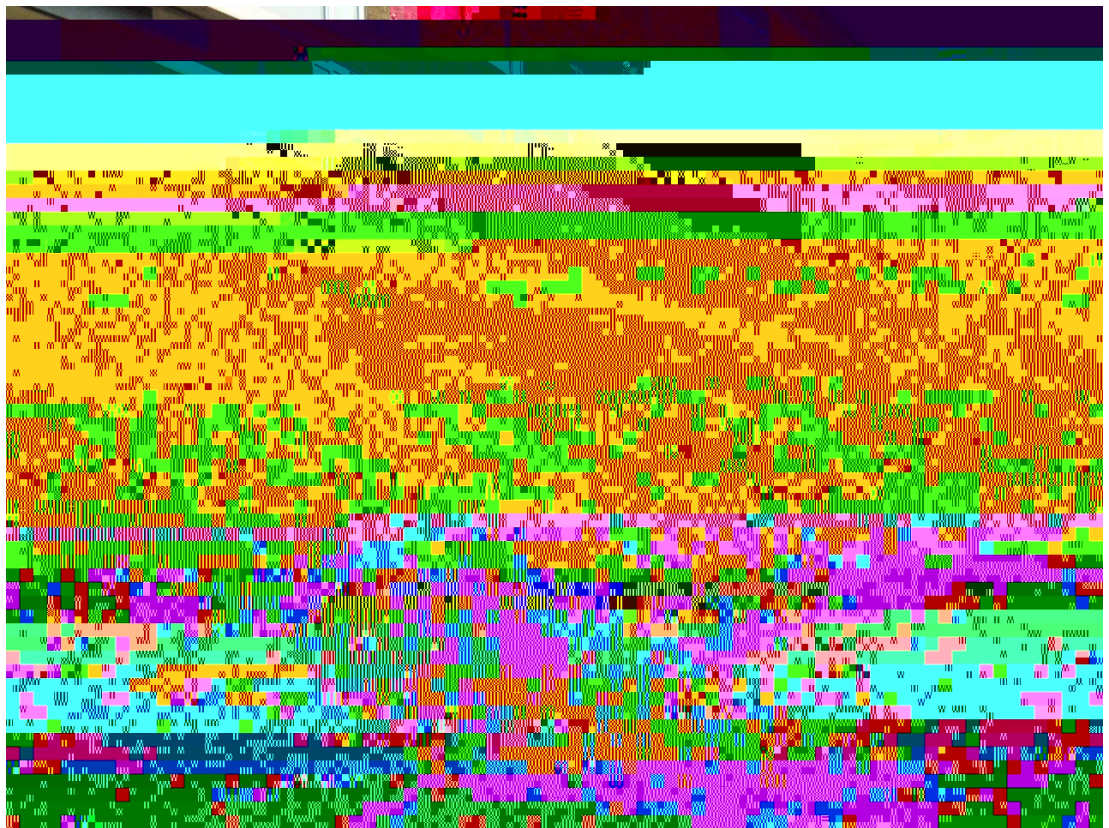




2nd November 2004

Report to the City Council

Local Post Office Closures



Further copies of this report can be obtained from:

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Preface

By Councillor Mark Hill

Chair of the Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee
October 2004



I would like to express my thanks to the Members of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group, who have had to work to very tight deadlines to complete this Review. Me



1: Summary

- 1.1.1 Following the announcement of Post Office Limited's public consultation on its proposals to close 12 post office branches in North Birmingham, a Joint Regeneration and Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee has undertaken a review of post office closures to consider in particular the consultation process used by Post Office Limited for its Urban Reinvention Programme, and the impact that closures have had on local centres and communities in South Birmingham.
- 1.1.2 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee understands that the Urban Reinvention Programme is being driven by the need to modernise and increase the efficiency of the network in the face of a changing retail environment and increased competition. It is understood that the move towards direct payments in particular will significantly affect branch turnover and that the Urban Reinvention Programme is attempting to ensure that closures are undertaken in a managed rather than ad hoc process.
- 1.1.3 However the Scrutiny Working Group has strong concerns over the way branches are selected for closure proposals and consulted upon. Proposals are heavily influenced by whether individual sub-postmasters wish to close and the compensation package offered to sub-postmasters leaving the network. The Review recognises the rights of sub-postmasters to volunteer to close, but believes that Post Office Limited has a responsibility to ensure an adequate network coverage for the whole country.
- 1.1.4 Post Office Limited's consultation failed to engage the City Council early enough in the process, despite an earlier commitment to doing so. The Scrutiny Working Group believes that alongside MPs, other locally elected representatives, including local councillors, should have had prior notice of proposals and that a longer public consultation period is needed to ensure all relevant stakeholders have sufficient time to comment on the proposals. Evidence presented has raised questions about the reliability of some of the information in the consultation packs and concerns over poor consultation with local people.
- 1.1.5 Final decisions are still awaited for two South Birmingham branches. Evidence presented to the Review suggests some reluctance amongst receiving branches in South Birmingham to commit match-funding to allow physical improvements to branches. There are also concerns about the combined effect of a number of closures on key receiving branches which already appear to have reached their capacity.
- 1.1.6 Evidence received has highlighted the significant impact closures have on neighbouring businesses, with custom falling as much as 40-50%. The Scrutiny Working Group has concerns that closures will





2: Introduction

2.1 Reason for Review

- 2.1.1 Building on the earlier Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee Review of proposed local post office closures in South Birmingham, this Review seeks to consider the impact of these closures on the City's local communities and feed into the consultation process for the proposed closure of branches in North Birmingham.

2.2 Terms of Reference

- 2.2.1 This review seeks to:
- § explore and comment upon the consultation process used by Post Office Limited (POL) on 6ffin on 6ffin on 6ffin on 6ffin on 6ffin



- § Cllr Keith Barton (Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
- § Cllr Timothy Huxtable (Chair of the Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
- § Cllr Barbara Jackson (Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
- § Cllr Arjan Singh (Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
- § Cllr Sybil Spence (Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
- § Cllr Ian Ward (Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee)

2.4 Methodology

- 2.4.1 At an initial meeting on 16th September 2004 officers from Economic Development and Legal Services presented background information on the Urban Reinvention Programme and the experiences of its implementation within South Birmingham. At this meeting the Members of the Scrutiny Working Group (Members drawn from the Regeneration and Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committees) agreed to undertake a review of the post office closures across the City.
- 2.4.2 The Scrutiny Review encompassed four committee sessions and one field trip.
 - § Thursday 16th September – Scrutiny Working Group agreed to take forward Review
 - § Tuesday 28th September – post office site field trip
 - § Tuesday 5th



- 2.4.4 During the field trip Members of the Scrutiny Working Group and Officers visited four post offices within Birmingham. These included a branch closed under the Urban Reinvention Programme in South Birmingham (Wychall Road in King's Norton ward), two 'receiving' branches within South Birmingham (Cotteridge in Bournville ward and Sparkhill in Springfield ward); and a branch proposed for closure in North Birmingham (Ward End in Washwood Heath ward). During the visits, Members of the Scrutiny Working Group and Officers spoke with branch customers, local people and neighbouring businesses to gather their experiences of and comments on branch closures.



3: Background

3.1 Urban Reinvention Programme

- 3.1.1 In 2000 the Government's Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit published recommendations to modernise the UK's post office network in its report 'Counter Revolutions: Modernising the Post Office Network'. This report recognised the need to rationalise the number of sub-post office branches within some urban areas due to falling custom. Following this report Post Office Ltd (POL) announced plans to restructure its urban network through the closure of around a third of sub-post office branches (approx. 3,000 branches). POL's plans also included investment in the remaining (POL) 67Je12m7ngL) 67J4n7Je1c 2091nalseb46 1(8-pogt's C-0.003un)TJ

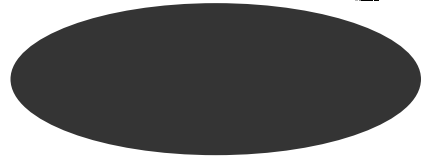


Urban Reinvention Programme receive the equivalent of 28 months' income as compensation. This figure was established at the start of the Urban Reinvention Programme in 2002 on the basis of the value an average post office business at that time. This average branch value has since fallen and the compensation package currently compares with a total of around 24 months' income if the business were to be sold on the open market.

- 3.1.5 The Urban Reinvention Programme was initially expected to last for three years, with the first closure proposals made in November 2002 and first closures coming into effect in February 2003. However in 2003 the Programme was accelerated to complete within two years. The Urban Reinvention Programme is now due to come to an end in December 2004. The proposals for North Birmingham are some of the last to be implemented nationally.

3.2 Consultation Process

- 3.2.1 In the case of the closure of a branch 'thought to be no longer needed in the general locality' POL agreed a Code of Practice with Postwatch (an independent consumer council for postal services) in 2002. This sets out a series of requirements for POL in proposing the



§ any known plans to develop the area

3.2.5 During the implementation of the Urban Reinvention Programme, POL has been wi .6(on of theTf7iely)TJEcrit



This response drew on the findings of an earlier Scrutiny Review of post office closures led by Cllr Reg Corns in March 2004, a copy of which is included as an appendix to this report.

- 3.3.2 Following its public consultation, POL retracted three of its 29 closure proposals, greatly reflecting the concerns which had been raised by BCC. The final decisions on two of the proposed branches (R Ddlebarn Roi



4: Findings

4.1 Urban Reinvention Programme

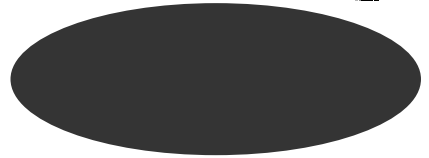
- 4.1.1 Whilst presenting their evidence to the Scrutiny Working Group, POL emphasised that the need to rationalise the post office branch network has arisen from increasing competition for some products; 5e10.000



would be subject to ad hoc, unmanaged closures as branches simply go bankrupt, which could entail greater losses for customers. They believe that the Urban Reinvention Programme is a means of ensuring that such a reduction in branch numbers is undertaken in a managed and strategic way.

4.2 Selection of Branches for Closure

- 4.2.1 Evidence received from POL in relation to the process they follow to identify branches for closure has confirmed that they select branches from amongst those stating a preference to leave the network, with those sub-postmasters wishing to stay in the network not considered for closure. This evidence has led the Scrutiny Working Group to believe that there has been a severe lack of objectivity in the identification of branches for closure proposals under the Urban Reinvention Programme, with the preferences of individual sub-postmasters given priority over key factors such as service coverage and business viability. The automatic exclusion from closure proposals of those businesses wishing to remain in the network may in some cases have precluded the closure of the most appropriate branch(es) within a local area, whilst the preferences of sub-postmasters may have resulted in the closure of more viable or strategically located branches.
- 4.2.2 During their evidence session Postwatch stated that they would be surprised if closure proposals included branches which are thriving. Nevertheless POL stated that nationally there are some 800 branches that, even had their sub-postmasters stated their preference to leave the network, would not have been included in closure proposals under the Urban Reinvention Programme due to their strategic locations. Furthermore POL said that of the proposals which have been made the vast majority are branches in which there has been little investment and which currently do not meet the expectations of customers in terms of a retail environment.
- 4.2.3 Closure proposals under the Urban Reinvention Programme appear to have been heavily influenced by the considerable financial incentives offered to sub-postmasters rather than by a strong assessment of the economic viability and local need. Moreover it would be realistic to believe that the financial stakes involved have resulted in a large number of expressions of interest from those branches which it would otherwise have been more difficult to sell on the open market, due to







poster was displayed detailing the public consultation and the suggested alternative branches should the branch close. This poster was however poorly displayed, with some of the shop's stock placed in front of it, making it very difficult for customers to notice and read the information provided. Of those local people who were aware of the proposal, the majority had been made aware of it through the local newspaper and friends rather than directly from the post office.

- 4.3.9 It was noted during the site visits that the consultation posters displayed in branches do not present all of the information in ethnic minority languages, although the posters did state that this information could be provided on request. Given the high population of ethnic minority groups within some parts of the City where proposals have been made, it would have been appropriate for POL to present this information in other key languages in order to improve awareness of the proposals. This would be particularly important within some of the City's co





South Birmingham and is proposed as an alternative branch for the North Birmingham proposals.

- 4.6.7 Postwatch explained that as part of their watchdog role they complete assessments of queuing times within post office branches, visiting branches over a 2-3 day period to gain an overall view of both peak and quiet times.
- 4.6.8 During their evidence session Postwatch highlighted that once a branch was proposed for closure it was not unusual for their custom to fall by around 25%, regardless of whether this closure is finalised following consultation or not.
- 4.6.9 In setting out a number of factors under which they might oppose a closure proposal, Postwatch highlighted concern they may have where a closure would have knock-on effect on local regeneration activities. This has been a key factor in their opposition to the Shenley Lane and Bournville Green branches in South Birmingham, where they felt that the closure had the potential to affect investment by Birmingham City Council and the Bournville Village Trust.
- 4.6.10 Members of the Scrutiny Working Group raised significant concerns with regards to the impact that branch closures might have for social exclusion. Vulnerable groups such as the elderly, those with mobility difficulties, parents with young children and those without access to a car will have additional difficulties and costs in accessing alternative branches and will potentially depend more on others, including carers, to undertake such visits on their behalf. It was evident during



13 report which highlights the key role of post offices in local centres and urban deprived areas.

- 6. Transportation links, in particular bus routes, are far more significant than actual physical distances in the eventual migration of customers from a closing branch to an alternative.*
- 7. Post Office Limited has failed to understand the implications of limited parking facilities serving receiving branches and the impact that this may have on those with mobility difficulties.*
- 8. The closures of local branches 6. than actual physical distances in*





Appendix



Scrutiny Review of Local Post Office Closures

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report makes recommendations to the Cabinet based on the conclusions of a Scrutiny Review of local Post Office closures. The review was undertaken in March 2004 in response to the Post Office Ltd's consultation on 29 proposed Post Office closures across South Birmingham issued on the 24th February 2004. There has been a short response time provided by the Post office of six weeks and this has, inevitably, limited the scope of the review and the available time to take evidence from a full range of parties affected by or with an interest in the proposals. Despite this the Scrutiny Working Group has been able to take evidence either in oral reports, conduct a visit to an urban area which has already undergone the process of Post office closures and take written responses.

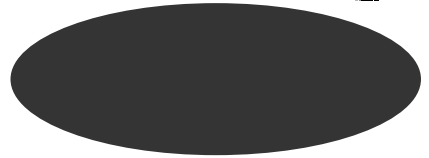
2. Conclusions of the Scrutiny Working Group

2.1 Consultation

- 2.1.1 The consultation carried out by Post Office Ltd falls9.68 44 8p5rried6096







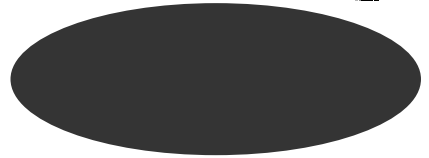
2.3.2 The Council's response to the closures illustrates how the proposed 29 Post Office branch closures will (closu)-d-0.31(v-2.89e)1(s a)-3.8(c)1(sgt,



and 20 per cent over a mile.

2.4.2 One of the Scrutiny Working Group members outlined that in his patch in Selly Oak it is a 1.3 mile walk from the Ten Acres Post Office to the two nearest other branches. In the case of Bournville and Stirchley the walks to the receiving branches were not easy walks and the Post Office Ltd's description of these as undulating was an understatement. The Council's submission to Post Office Ltd also highlights the accessibility issues around these two branches as well as Longbridge and Frankley sites. Neighbourhood Wardens from Northfield District had checked the routes between Longbridge and Rubery and Longbridge and Holly Hill and reported that the routes were difficult. One contributor at the Northfield District Committee pointed out that, in an area of high pensioner households, the expectation of pensioners accessing the receiving branch at Rubery was unfair as their Bus Passes would not be valid for this journey as Rubery was not within the boundaries of Birmingham City Council.

2.4.3 The representative of Post Office Ltd confirmed at the second session of the Scrutiny Working Group that the basis of the calculation of distances that the general public would travel to access their nearest Post office was on the basis of "as the crows fly". He confirmed that an average





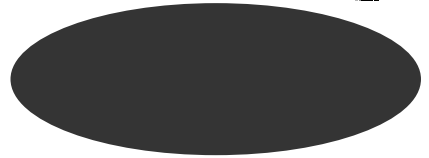
geographical assessment, where there is an overwhelming commercial case for closure.

3 Recommendations of the Scrutiny Working Group

3.1 That Cabinet considers the findings of the investigation into proposed Post Office closures including its conclusions and recommendations.

3.2 That Post Office Ltd consider in particular:

- The high number of proposed receiving Post Office branches over the target distance of one mile between the proposed closing and proposed receiving branches;
- The number of proposed receiving branches in most deprived areas over a half mile from residents;
- The Post Office branches proposed for closure in areas of planned regeneration and redevelopment as

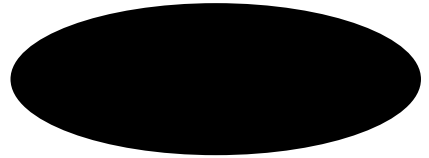
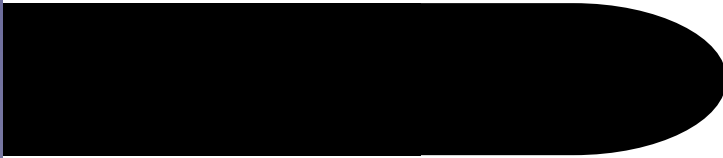


- a partnership approach to be developed with a number of relevant



4: Terms of Reference

A	Subject of review	Review of proposed local Post Office Closures
	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Regeneration
B	Reason for review	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To understand the rationale for the proposed programme of local Post Office closures.• To explore what consultation has been carried out and what preparations have been made.• To consider the impact of this action on the



I Anticipated date of report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- Businesses
- Postwatch

To be confirmed

J Estimated Number of Working Days to Conduct Review
Per Member

Three meetings of



5: Findings – The Context

The Network Reinvention Programme

The context set out below, para 51-5.3 is derived from the Council's response:

- 5.1 In 2000 the Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit published recommendations to modernise the ne





As well as:

- Bromsgrove – Julie Kirkbride

6: Findings – The Inquiry

6.1 Scope, work programme and terms of reference of the review

6.1.1 A Scrutiny Review Working Group was set up from the City Council's Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee following the consultation document on 29 proposed Post Office branch closures in Birmingham. Given the tight timetable, dictated by the short consultation period between 25th February 2004 and 7th April 2004, there has only been a limited opportunity for the Working Group to meet and consider evidence from relevant agencies. However, it has been able, despite this time constraint, to meet on three occasions and consider a wide variety of inputs from a number of parties and also to arrange and undertake a visit to Bolton where a similar Network Review and closure programme has been experienced in the recent past. This includes:

- **Session one** – Working Group meeting of 10 March 2004. This developed terms of reference, membership of the Working Group and an outline programme.
- **Session two** – Working Group meeting of 15 March 2004. This scrutinised oral presentations from Post Office Ltd, The National Federation of Post Office Masters.
- **Session three** – Working Group site visit to Bolton of 19 March 2004. This included interviews with the Bolton Evening News, Post Office Masters, retail managers and the Metropolitan Council.
- **Session four** – Working Group meeting of 22 March 2004. This scrutinised oral presentations by Post Watch, the Coalition of Disabled People, the Federation of Small Businesses and representatives from Neighbourhood Forums from within Birmingham City.
- **Session five** – Meeting of the Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee of 25 March 2004. This received a verbal update on the Working Group review programme and agreed its terms of reference.



- **Session six** – Working Group meeting of 1 April. This meeting agreed the draft report and recommendations and the submission of a unified response from the City Council to Post Office Ltd.

6.2 Summary of the deliberation and evidence considered by the– Scrutiny Working Group.

- 6.2.1 The terms of reference agreed are at paragraph 4.
- 6.2.2 The notes of the main sessions of the Inquiry are in the appendix.

6.3 Executive report

- 6.3.1 The Executive report has been used to inform and shape the review around economic development and regeneration issues, context, accessibility, flourishing neighbourhoods and deprive communities. Both executive and scrutiny reports present a seamless presentation of the implications of the closures and recommendations for greater partnership and dialogue with Post Office Ltd.

6.3.2 District Committees

The new district committee affected by the post office closure include, Northfield, Sparkbrook and Small Heath, Yardley Selly Oak, and Hall Green

We know that some of these committee have been able to consider the proposals and develop their own resolutions in response to these, for



7 Appendices

7.1 Notes of Scrutiny Working Group Sessions.

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY
REVIEW
WORKING
GROUP -
PROPOSED
CLOSURE OF
LOCAL POST
OFFICES
10 MARCH
2004

NOTES OF MEETING OF THE
SCRUTINY REVIEW WORKING
GROUP HELD ON WEDNESDAY 10
MARCH 2004 AT 1400 HOURS IN
COMMITTEE ROOM 1 COUNCIL
HOUSE, BIRMINGHAM

PRESENT: - Councillor Reg Corns (Chairman)

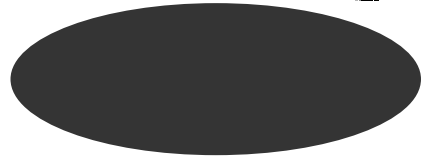
Councillors John Clancy, Alistair Dow, James Hutchings and Timothy Huxtable.

APOLOGIES

1. No apologies for absence were received.

1.1 PROPOSED CLOSURE OF LOCAL POST OFFICES

Councillor Reg. Corns made reference to the programme submitted by Royal Mail Plc to consider the closure of a number of local post offices within the City. He indicated that a consultation exercise on these proposals would be undertaken. However, he expressed the view that it was essential that the Scrutiny Review Group should ascertain as to whether the consultation exercise



was genuine or as to whether the decision had already been taken to close the various local post o



He emphasised that these would be present at the meeting scheduled to take place on 15 March, 2004. He explained to members, however, that they would not be prepared to comment on the proposed closure of specific Post Offices. He also indicated that he was hoping that a representative from Age Concern would be present and a representative from the National Federation of Sub-Masters. He also indicated that there would be merit in contacting a consumer group to come along.

Having regard to the time available he considered that there would not be time to hold more than two additional meetings. It was also suggested that a map should be provided showing the number of Post Offices to be closed within the specific areas of Urban





The first representatives to provide information were the following:

Mr. Mike Dalton Head of Group Communications and Ms. Angela King - External Relations Manager - Post Office Limited

Councillor Corns sought clarification regarding the interrelationship between the Royal Mail and the Post Office Charter. It was explained that the operation was under licence and regulated. Post Office Services operated in 2 ways. For example the Government subsidised the rural network whereas the urban network was required to operate on an economically viable basis.

It was explained to Members that there were now too few customers to merit the retention of all of the post offices in the City. It was emphasised however that the Post Office were endeavouring to ensure that 95% of the public would have access to a Post Office within 1 mile.

Councillor Corns then asked the representatives as to what their definition was of consultation. He expressed concerns that the consultation was merely an exercise with the final decision to close the offices having already been made.

In response it was explained that there had been a lot of misrepresentation regarding consultation. It was emphasised by the representatives present that they were looking forward to receiving quality feedback and that they would take into account such issues as:-

- Distance
- Availability of Public Transport
- Implications of re-development and new development of areas placing a demand on the need for new Post Office branches etc.

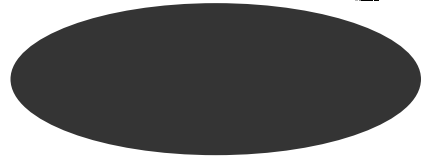
Members were re-assured that they would consider changing their proposals if evidence was provided to support these kind of issues.

Councillor Keith Linnecor sought clarification as to what extent



this would have on: -

- Capacity placed on those Post Offices that were to remain open,
- The disabled,
- Safety for those users who would be having to walk a greater





representatives re-assured members that they would and indicated that the key role for elected members and other bodies would be to identify issues and concerns such as these.

Councillor John Clancy made reference to the situation whereby Tesco's had bought out the One Stop Shops and were opting to close the various Post Offices within these premises by serving the requisite Notice to terminate the Agreements.

He sought clarification as to whether there would be further closures.

It was explained by the representatives that where One Stop Shop Post Offices were closed in the rural areas they would ensure that a replacement Post Office would be provided, however, in the Urban Areas there would be no duty to undertake this. It was emphasised that the Tesco's were a financial concern and in many cases the Post Offices within the One Stop Shops were not generating sufficient income.



Mrs. Carol Butler - Business Manager - Age Concern

Mrs. Butler reported that, on behalf of the National Branch of Age Concern, the organisation wanted a viable Post Office network and had reluctantly accepted what was in the "Performance and Innovation Unit report" that there needed to be a reduction in Post Offices in urban areas to enable the network to flourish. She reported that the organisation acknowledged that in some areas there would be too many Post Offices which would not be viable. She also acknowledged that many old people were concerned about the implications that this would have. She then explained the inter-relationship between the various local branches which had financial autonomy but in terms of policy had to adhere to National directives.

Councillor James Hutchings expressed some surprise at the fact the local branches could not express their own views bearing in mind the impact of closures that these could have on the local areas.

Councillor Corns expressed the view that he would have thought it possible to express concerns about the implications at local level but clearly this was not possible.

Councillor Corns sought confirmation as to whether her branch of Age Concern had been invited to comment rather than just one letter having been sent to the Central Office in London. He was of the opinion that the Post Office should have undertaken local consultation.

Councillor Reginald Corns then thanked Mrs. Butler for giving evidence to the Group.

Mr J Choudry – Representing the National Federation of Postmasters

Mr. Choudry indicated that no Post Office had been forced to close. All officers who would cease to be employed by the Post Office had indicated that they had accepted the proposals on a voluntary basis. He explained that with the change in the market in terms of the demand for Post Office services many offices were no longer financially viable.

In response to this the Chairman indicated that whilst they were going voluntarily they were accepting an attractive compensation package.



Mr. Choudry confirmed this but emphasised in many cases Postmasters had had to accept a down turn in trade of up to 40% which many considered to be unacceptable.

Councillor Corns sought clarification as to what representations were made regarding the proposed closures. In response to this the union representative indicated in many cases the proposals were supported in view of the way in which many sub-office managers were paid.

For example it was emphasised that they were paid only 4p for every transaction irrespective of the size of the transaction. Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit were now being paid into bank accounts. As a result of this there had been a reduction in trade and as a consequence Post Office masters were making efforts to secure the greater use of Post Offices.

Councillor Timothy Huxtable, whilst acknowledging the concern that level of service had reduced, expressed concern every effort should be made to provide a first class service. He was also concerned that a reduction in the number of offices would impact on the following:-

- Disabled Groups
- Mothers with children having to carry shopping etc
- Travel arrangements

Mr. Choudry explained that some



for a considerable period of time they had had limited services to offer. However they were now exploring areas including: -

- Currency
- Car tax
- Availability of Euros

It was explained that Sub-Post masters were under the impression that closures and redundancies were inevitable, however, it was emphasised that whilst the staff had been informed of these and volunteers sought it had been emphasised that there was no guarantee that they would all be allowed to receive this.

Councillor John Clancy made further reference to Tesco's taking over the One Stop Shops in rural areas and asked who would be funding the compensation packages. It was explained that these were effectively subsidised by the Government which led to an imbalance between Rural and Urban Post Offices. He was of the opinion that the rural areas were effectively receiving an improved deal.

In response to this it was explained that there were several categories of Post Office. These included the following:

- Crown Offices
- Modified Offices which had been sold off
- Franchise Offices
- Major Chain Offices

The representative explained that £150 million had previously been provided over a three year period during which Urban Post Offices had benefited. Now, however, the balance had been reversed in favour of rural areas.

The Chairman then made reference to the card system and sought clarification as to how many clients would be able to obtain the card system. It was explained that all efforts would be made to provide additional services however he was concerned that in some cases the amount of trade within the premises which were open six days of the week was as little as four hours/week in trade. This was clearly not viable.

Councillor Talib Hussain expressed considerable concern at the proposals and how these could impact on the Post Office at Sparkbrook which was already extremely busy. He argued the case that there was no room for additional capacity to accommodate other customers and that there was already sufficient demand to put forward a case for another office in this area.

It was emphasised that Post Offices played a fundamental role in



securing vibrant communities and that their closures could undermine these. It was considered that both banks and post offices had a fundamental role to play in this respect.

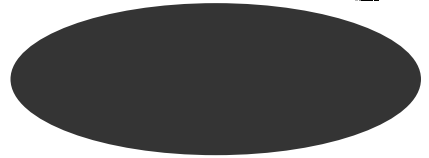
Reference was made to the Queslett Road ASDA where a Lloyds bank had been located within the store. However, notice had been served on the bank and because of this it was considered that there would be a migration of customers back to the local Post Office.

Councillor James Hutchings indicated that one of the problems appeared to be too many branches with not enough customers and as a consequence it was not viable to retain them all.

In response it was emphasised that the surfeit in the number of Post Offices was primarily a product of the Government's proposals.

It was emphasised by the representative that when the Government chose to amend the arrangements for payment of benefit a substantial amount of trade had been lost. He emphasised that the payment for some transactions was only 10p. As a consequence, there had been a significant drop in profits (of £2.75) substantial to

Councillor John Clancy sought clarification as to the level of take up of



Group should question the need for the closure Programme. He also expressed some concern at the policy whereby a replacement Post Office

would be provided when Notice wa





from the visit he reported the following: -

- (i) He needed to seek clarification as to why the criteria for the number of Post Offices within one mile of residents was 90-95% in Bolton but only 85% in Birmingham.
- (ii) He noted that a number of small businesses used Post Offices to bank and as a consequence their closure increased the risk in terms of safety and accessibility and had an adverse impact on efficiency.
- (iii) The closure of the Post Offices had resulted in a loss of a facility which provided an arena for social inclusion. Their closure would undermine any Flourishing Neighbourhood Policy that this City Council would have. It was considered that the Post Offices played an integral part in terms of local neighbourhoods.

In view of the above it was felt the Government should reflect on the policy in view of the impact of the closures could have on the elderly and hard to reach social groups. It was noted that, contrary to popular belief, many of the elderly were reluctant to use public transport to access other facilities. It was considered, therefore, that the Government should re-examine its proposals. It was explained by







Postwatch reassured Members that when they examined the proposed closure of a Post Office they took into account the number of users, the location, safety implications etc for all those concerned.



(vii) Environment,

(viii) Adding to disadvantage.

Other issues addressed in the sa

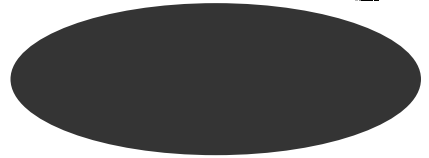


negate the Council's proposals for Flourishing Neighbourhoods. In this respect the answer was emphatically yes. Furthermore, Councillor Huxtable emphasised that it would not be possible to support the concept of Flourishing Neighbourhoods without integrated services, including Post Offices.

Councillor Reginald Corns also made reference to the spin off effects for enterprises such as the local chemist. Often in the Flourishing Neighbourhood Chemists and Post Offices were on the same High Street. It was considered that their closure would have a serious impact on all the key facilities in these locations.

Councillor James Hutchings thanked Martin Tolman for the excellent paper and sought clarification as to what he meant by seeking judicial review. In response to this, Martin Tolman emphasised that there was a lack of clarity as to whether the Post Office was a private/public service. He was under the impression that if it was a public service then there was a possibility to seek a judicial review regarding the proposed closure.

The Chairman sought clarification as to how many forms were used within a Post Office. It was explained that there were 126 and whilst it was acknowledged that no one was asking the Post Office to pay for these it was considered that there



**REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF SMALL
BUSINESSES**



The meeting closed at 1230 hours

7.2 Resolutions from Ward and District Committees

Hall Green

"The Hall Green District Committee recognises the vital role of Post Offices in the local community and calls for a thorough reconsideration of the closure programme so as to ensure continuity of postal services in the Hall Green Constituency."

Northfield

"RESOLVED: -

- (i) That it be noted that the Northfield Constituency Member of Parliament has already requested the Post Office Limited to extend the consultation period from 4 to 6 weeks;
- (ii) that it be noted that the Post Office Limited were invited to attend today's meeting but given their inability to attend, this Committee fundamentally questions the Post Office's commitment to engage in meaningful consultation;
- (iii) that the Post Office Limited be asked to work alongside elected representatives, community representatives, other stakeholders and Postwatch to ensure an adequate provision of Post Offices across the Northfield Constituency and to limit the impact of these proposals on vulnerable groups in order to meet the City Council's ob



offices which would be some distance away. Ladypool Road post office was well used with queues at certain times and businesses would be affected as there were no banking facilities in that area. While the Post Office had leafleted residents, they had assumed that if people did not respond they were happy with the proposals and this was not the case.

Sparkbrook and Small Heath Constituency Committee unanimously passed a resolution (moved by Cllr Jerry Evans and seconded by Cllr Talib Hussain) as follows: -

"This Constituency Committee deprecates the decision to close 6 post offices in this area and asks that all existing post offices remain open".

Members also agreed to consult the communities affected individually and, where appropriate, to make separate representations based on the individual circumstances pertaining to each of the post offices."



7.2.1 Letters from Wards

Longbridge

Dear Mr Maisey

The District Committee for Northfield considered the proposed Post Office closures at its meeting on 13 March 2004.

The proposed closure programme of post offices will have a major impact across Northfield District, comprising the wards of Longbridge, Northfield and Weoley. In particular, Longbridge ward faces the prospect of a loss of four branches, with Weoley facing the loss of one branch. These include

Edgewood Road (Longbridge)
Farren Road (Longbridge)
Longbridge (Longbridge)
Sunbury Road (Longbridge)
Shenley Lane (Weoley)

The Committee, as well as agreeing a number of recommendations, raised several observations in relation to the closure programme and charged the District Director to capture these and include these in the Committee's response to the consultation.

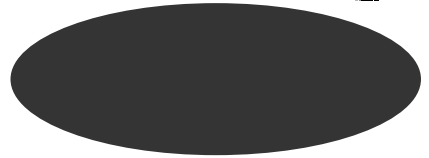
1 Consultation

The consultation approach is not in keeping with the standards set out in the government's Code of Practice for Consultation. A six-week consultation period with no prior notice is woefully inadequate for committees at a District or Ward level to arrange adequate consultations and to develop a local response. For example, as the consultation was issued on 24 February this gave the Committee Chair and Director a few days to get the item on to the agenda, prepare a briefing and seek to get relevant speakers to the Committee. Whilst this was achieved, in all likelihood, this would be the exception rather than the rule as it would depend where each Committee – and there are five affected by the proposed closures – was in relation to its meeting cycle.

For example, If Northfield had not been able to move 'heaven and earth' to put the item on the agenda on 13 March it would not have been possible to consider the matter until 10 April, three days after the end of the consultation period. It was also noted that Post Office Ltd had not written to the local ward Councillors on the proposed closures.

2 Accessibility

It was noted that the Post Office Ltd's target is for 95% of people living in urban areas to live within one mile of a Post Office branch and the majority within half a mile. The Council's response to the proposed closures has included a detailed analysis of the distances people would have to travel following closure of branches to the nearest 'receiving' branch. This analysis noted that "Areas of poor accessibility are particularly striking around Longbridge/Frankley and



(iv) That the Post Office Networ





a shopping area. This also means that the non post office services offered by the Reddings Lane branch are particularly valuable as alternative shops for these services are a significant distance away.

Yours sincerely
Cllr Jerry Evans"

Longbridge

"Dear Mr Maisey,

Post Office Closures – Longbridge Ward

I am writing to voice the serious concerns of all those that are likely to be effected by the threatened closure of four Post Offices in the electoral Ward of Longbridge. The sheer number of proposed closures will have a very significant impact on the community, many of which are elderly, less mobile, and more vulnerable then residents in more affluent areas.

I believe that this consultation is both inadequate and weak and will not allow



high numbers of elderly people and young mothers and will make up a large proportion of the trade over the post office counter, and to the neighbouring shops. They are dependent on the post office being at the heart of their local community. I fear that these areas will decline in the same way that other similar areas have declined since local post offices have been closed and I urge you to give some consideration to this serious issue.

In terms of considering the distance from closing branches to receiving branches I do not feel that due consideration has been given to the terrain in Longbridge which is very hilly and in some cases the distance is as good as doubled because of this. For less



I write to advise you that the Members of the Weoley Ward Committee (Councillors Peter Douglas Osbourn - Chairperson, Ray Holtom and Fiona Williams) at the meeting held on 30 March 2004 expressed their full support for residents in the Ward who were objecting to the proposed closure of post offices in Farren Road, Hillwood Road, Shenley Lane and Weoley Avenue.

Yours faithfully

Paul Holden
Committee Services
0121 303 2013"





- The scale of closures – for example most of Longbridge will lose all sub post office provision.
- Sketchy and in some cases inaccurate assessment by POL of the demographics of the area, and failures to take sufficient account either of pockets of deprivation in the areas affected or the business opportunities presented by a number of planned regeneration projects.
- These problems have been exacerbated by POL's reluctance to involve local people and representatives at an early stage in drawing up the area plan.
- Post Office Ltd has adopted an overly restrictive view about appropriate uses of government of POL investment and of the impact of EU State Aid rules, which has limited POL's horizons in tackling the Urban Network Reinvention programme.

The pattern of local Post Office trade has changed dramatically in recent years and not all local post offices are viable. Post Office Ltd has to respond to that reality. But the Urban Network Reinvention programme agreed with the government was not intended to simply



Julie Kirkbride - Bromsgrove

"No real consideration is being given to the difficulties this creates for the elderly and the inform, or the impact on the wider community."

Stephen McCabe – Hall Green (Letter to Mr Maisey)

"Dear Mr Maisey

Proposed Closures of Urban Post Offices in South Birmingham

Thank you for the information concerning the proposed closures of Yarningale Rd and Highfield Rd urban sub post offices in my Hall Green constituency. The proposal as you point out would mean a loss of two post offices out of a network of 14 in Hall Green although as your letter omits a total of 29 out of a network of 90 across South Birmingham. Your letter refers to an earlier letter (dated 11 Feb 04) from David Mills advising of the nature of the consultation. My office doesn't appear to have received this letter.

I have received no formal complaints as regards the proposals for Highfield Road branch. I should want to point out that there is quite a significant elderly population living in this area but I acknowledge that there are a number of other branches nearby.

I think the situation with Yarningale Rd is quite different. I have received numerous complaints from local constituents concerned at the loss of this service. This area has a large elderly population. There are dedicated pensioner flats nearby. There is also a hostel for people with Learning Difficulties and a number of wheelchair bound residents in the area, some of whom have contacted me about their concerns. A new housing development is being built about 200 metres from this post office and another one at Lindsworth which may well put pressure on one of your 'receiving' offices. No one from your organisation can possibly have attempted to follow the travel routes you recommend; otherwise you would have noticed the very steep hills can be extremely difficult in winter weather.

Yarningale Rd Post Office is located within Brandwood local government Ward, which is identified as one of the worst in the 10-20% category in the National Index of Multiple Deprivation. Some constituents have claimed that the local post master indicated that he doesn't wish to see the service close. Your letter states that the sub postmasters concerned have agreed. Can you confirm these discussions have taken place and that a compensation package has been agreed with each sub postmaster concerned?

I have been surprised at the number of constituents who have contacted me at a rather late stage in the consultation because they say they were not advised of your intentions. This may also account for the lack of formal complaints about Highfield Rd,. I am advised that there has been no consultation with Birmingham City Council.

Do you regard your consultation exercise as being consistent with the



Government's "Revised Code of Practice on Consultation" published January 2004? I note key elements of the guidance recommend a 12 week period for written consultation, not 6 weeks and that the guidance also recommends that groups affected by proposals 'should be contacted and engaged in discussion as early as possible in the process'.

I accept that there are urban post offices which may need to close and that much can be done to modernise and improve the remaining network. However I do wonder at the selection process which includes Yarningale Rd and how much the 'agreement' of the existing post master has been a factor. I cannot accept that the travel routes to 'receiving' post offices take account of the real condition of many of my constituents. I don't consider that my constituents have had an adequate opportunity to take part in the consultation. I am also concerned that no attempt has been made to formally consult with Birmingham City Council or to take account of deprivation factors, and redevelopment plans.

I trust that you will give full consideration to my response on behalf of constituents and particularly bear in mind the difficult these plans will pose for, and concerns for elderly and disabled residents who currently use the Yarningale Post Office.



residents are anxious about travelling so far carrying large amounts of money

- The local post Office provides a range of services and focal point for the local community
- The local Post Office in Stechford is the only point where people can access a cash withdrawal service. There are no banks or building society outlets in Stechford. The two shops that have cash points charge for the service."

Evening Mail

"The Evening Mail launched a campaign to save the threatened post offices on the day they were announced.

We have been amazed at the amount of support for the campaign and have collected thousands of names on a petition opposing the closures.

We have also spotlighted a different post office each day and canvassed the opinions of people in that area.

Almost unanimously the people on the streets have opposed the closure plans."

Petitions

One petition was submitted to the Working Group from residents around the Bournville Village Post Office calling on "Birmingham Council to put our views in the strongest possible way to Senior Management and Board Members of the POST Office, and to make it clear that in a modern city it is essential that every resident should be able to walk to a post office in 10 minutes."

There were 840 signatories attached.