

EAST DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL

SCRUTINY AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Meeting held on 31st July, 2008 at 7.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor M. G. Simper - Vice-Chairman (in the Chair)

Present: Councillors P. G. Bennett, Mrs T. B. Coombs, R. C. Dudman, P. Holden, D. Morgan, B. E. Mortimer, Mrs M. B. Osner, P. W. Richardson and N. Smith.

Also in attendance: Councillors M. C. Birr, Mrs Q. N. D. Comfort, M. R. Dyer, Mrs G. S. Elliot, S. G. Flower and D. G. L. Packer, Mr. H. Abuzaid, (Network Advisor, Postwatch Dorset), Ms C. Baron (Chair, Postwatch South and West), Mr C. Cooper (Sub-Postmaster, Holt Post Office), Councillor T. Gibb (Eastern Area Representative, Dorset Association of Parish and Town Council's), Mr G. Moore (Sub-Postmaster, Longham Post Office), Mr K. Poulton (Economic Generation Manager), Mr S. Thompson (Community Fieldworker Team Leader, Dorset Community Action) and Ms L. Ellis (Committee Officer).

151. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors T. J. Palmer (Chairman), S. S. Tong (Vice-Chairman), D. J. Cozier, P. G. Cuckston, R. E. Daw, Mrs J. M. Hazel, J. P. Holland and Mrs A. Warman.

152. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made on this occasion.

DELEGATED BUSINESS

153. Post Office Area Network Change Programme

The Chief Executive submitted a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'A' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

Members were requested to consider the implications of the Post Office's Area Plan Proposal for Dorset and to agree the Council's response to the local, public, consultation on the Post Office Area Network Change Programme.

The Chairman introduced the speakers to the Committee and requested that they provide an overview on the potential Post Office closures in East Dorset.

Mr G. Moore stated that the Longham Post Office had been classed as a rural; however he disagreed with this classification due to the amount of traffic and the number of businesses in Longham. There had been a Post Office in Longham since 1859 and Mr Moore intended to improve the services, as a benefit to the Post Office. Parking facilities were excellent, with concern raised that there was no bus route to the alternative suggested Post Offices at Bear Wood or Kinson. Parley Cross Post Office had not been stated as a first or second alternative due to the walk

between the two Post Offices being undulating. Mr Moore felt that the Post Office at Penny's Walk, Ferndown would be inundated following the closure of 550 Wimborne Road East and that Longham Post Office should absorb the surplus from the closure of that Post Office, providing an alternative Post Office to the one at Penny's Walk. It was suggested that Longham Post Office could then be re-classed as the Ferndown South Post Office.

Councillor T. Gibb raised concern on the linkage, which had recently become apparent, between the closures in Dorset and Cornwall; as those Post Offices saved from closure in Cornwall could result in additional closures needed in Dorset. The closure of Holt Post Office had ramifications in particular for the rural communities of the Crane Valley. The distance by road from Witchampton, to the Post Offices at Wimborne St Giles or Furzehill was 6.5 miles, which was outside the Post Office's criteria. The figures produced by Post Office Ltd for the population did not take in to account the Parishes in-between and it was believed that the process was slightly flawed. Finally, concern had been raised regarding the aged population in East Dorset and how Post Office closures would affect them; however the needs of Post Office services for young people, living in rural areas, also need to be considered.

Mr S. Thompson stated that East Dorset was already starting from a low base in the number of Post Offices that there were and Post Office Ltd had struggled to find any Post Offices they could justifiably close, due to their locations being very scattered. If Holt Post Office were to close it would be a great loss, however it was not a realistic prospect to successfully campaign to keep Holt Post Office as the requirements and wishes of the local Postmaster needed to be taken into account. However, the option of an outreach service needed to be explored and had already been proposed in other areas of Dorset. One of the proposed areas was Chettle and although geographically it was in North Dorset, it would serve some of the villages in East Dorset, such as Gussage St Michael. In regard to Longham, Dorset Community Action supported Mr Moore's wish to continue running the Longham Post Office and in addition believed that three closures in Ferndown was excessive and should be reduced to two.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee then drew the Committee's attention to a letter from Mr P. Waghorn, Sub-Postmaster of the Post Office at 550 Wimborne Road East, Ferndown. This letter had previously been circulated to Members and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'B' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

A PowerPoint presentation was then provided by the Economic Generation Manager, a copy of which appears as Appendix 'C' to these Minutes in the Minute Book, covering the criteria for closure, consultation period, the plan area and its linkages with Cornwall. Members were advised that the Post Office had made it clear that the purpose of consultation was to look for clear evidence that their proposals were based on evidence which was flawed or partial in some way.

Ms C. Baron provided an overview on the role of Postwatch in the Network Closure Programme and advised the Committee that if Members had very strong reasons to argue for not closing a Post Office then it was possible it

could remain open. If a Post Office was successfully removed from the Network Change Programme any Post Office which then replaced it on the list would then go through the same six week consultation exercise. Campaigns were most effective when individual people wrote individual letters to explain why the closure of a particular Post Office would be an issue. Ms Baron also confirmed that Postwatch was monitoring the queues in the Penny's Walk Post Office to provide evidence that as an alternative Post Office it would not be able to cope with the increase in footfall.

Members were reminded that this was their only opportunity to provide a collective response to the Network Change Programme on behalf of East Dorset District Council.

Comprehensive discussion then followed with Members raising the following concerns:-

- Longham was not a rural area, as within the Regional Spatial Strategy it was considered to be part of the Bournemouth and Poole conurbation;
- Accessibility to alternative Post Offices;
- Due to the lack of space in the Penny's Walk, Ferndown, Post Office any additional footfall would put it under severe pressure;
- There were no proposals for an outreach service for Witchampton, which would be severely affected by the closure of the Holt Post Office.
- Introduction of electronic transactions and the repercussions for Post Offices;
- Linkage between Dorset and Cornwall; and
- The needed to strongly defend the defensible.

A copy of the Branch Access Report was also circulated to Members, a copy of which is appears as Appendix 'D' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

Members then took each proposed Post Office closure in turn and discussed the merits of supporting each:-

550 Wimborne Road East, Ferndown

Members raised concern that Post Office Ltd had stipulated that to make a Post Office viable the number of weekly transactions should be around 1200. The Post Office at 550 Wimborne Road East had a footfall of between 1000-1499 per week, this then fitted the Post Office Ltd's criteria of a viable Post Office. The first alternative Post Office at Penny's Walk would not be able to accommodate the additional footfall, as already there were queues of up to 30 minutes to be served. In addition, there was no parking at the Penny's Walk Post Office. Members were unsure as to whether the Sub-Postmaster wished to continue with his Post Office or not.

Holt Lane, Holt

It was felt that there was no rational argument for keeping the Post Office open due to the low footfall and there being an alternative Post Office at Furzehill. However, Post Office Ltd needed to look at expanding its

outreach service to Witchampton and north of Holt. It was requested that the outreach area for Chettle be extended to cover those areas.

197 Wimborne Road West, Stapehill

Members felt that not only was the footfall for this Post Office low but as it was only open for three days per week, the business was not viable.

130 Ringwood Road, Longham

Members felt that the closure of this Post Office would be a great loss to the community and suggested that if it were retained it would be able to absorb the excess footfall for Penny's Walk, Ferndown. Good parking facilities were provided at Longham, however one of the alternative offices at Kinson did not have parking close by and involved the crossing of a very busy road. Within 100 yards of the Longham Post Office were East Dorset Housing Association properties whose tenants would feel the loss, as they did not necessarily have cars. In addition, contained within the Post Office was also the only general store in Longham. If the Post Office closed, so would the general store which would be a loss to the community. Concern was also raised that the volume of business at the Post Office was calculated as footfall across the door, whereas in reality there were lots of multiple business transactions and this had not been included in Post Office Ltd's calculations. Mr Moore confirmed that the building of an extra counter had been planned to cover additional trade at the Post Office. Longham Post Office had applied for and was happy to offer additional services such as DVLA, currency on demand, etc but Post Office Ltd had not agreed to it. Members were disappointed that Post Office Ltd had not enabled the Longham Post Office to offer additional services or develop their business and believed that they should be helping small businesses to thrive not stifling them. Discussion then followed on the criteria for offering services such as DVLA, foreign currency, etc. It was suggested that if the 550 Wimborne Road East Post Office were to close and the Longham Post Office remained open the provision of DVLA could be transferred from one to the other, especially as there were two car dealerships in Longham, which would use the service.

The Economic Generation Manager confirmed that he had spoken to Post Office Ltd recently and had raised the issues of capacity at the Penny's Walk Post Office, which they had agreed to look at. It was possible Post Office Ltd might consider the possibility of a second office in Ferndown if they found that proposed Post Office closures would be detrimental to the capacity of Penny's Mead.

Members raised concern that if a Post Office was closed, an area may also lose its post box. It was requested that assurances be given by Post Office Ltd that post boxes would be retained wherever possible or alternative boxes placed where convenient.

It was requested by the Members that the Economic Generation Manager provide a written response to Post Office Ltd, on behalf of East Dorset District Council, as part of the Post Office Network Change programme consultation and that the following be raised:-

- The cumulative impact of three Post Office closures in the Ferndown

area and the potential increased footfall, as a result of this, on the Penny's Walk Post Office.

- The ability of the Penny's Walk Post Office to accommodate the increase;
- Due to this the Post Office at Longham should be retained, with the DVLA facility being transferred from the 550 Wimborne Road East, Post Office;
- That the outreach service from Chettle be extended to cover Witchampton and the area North of Holt.
- External posting facilities should be retained wherever possible or alternative boxes placed, where convenient, in the event of a Post Office being closed.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Post Office Ltd be advised that East Dorset District Council deplores the closure of the offices identified in the Dorset Area Plan; and**
- (b) The Council was very concerned about the implications for the networks future if existing services are to be further eroded when the result of the Card Account is known and it requests that further consideration be given to retaining a second office in the Ferndown area and believe that office should be Longham.**

Voting: (a) Nem. Con. (3 abstentions) and (b) Unanimous

The meeting ended at 9.19 p.m.

CHAIRMAN