



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	CONSULTATION – POST OFFICE NETWORK CHANGE PROGRAMME NORTHERN IRELAND
Date:	Monday 7th April 2008
Reporting Officer:	Gerry Millar, Director of Improvement, ext 6217
Contact Officer:	Patricia Flynn, Strategic Planning and Policy Officer, ext 6204

Relevant Background Information

Purpose

To bring to the attention of the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee details of a consultation by Post Office Ltd on its Network Change Programme – Area Plan Proposal Northern Ireland. This programme is to implement measures proposed by the Government to modernise and reshape the network of Post Office branches. The consultation runs from 1st April 2008 to 12th May 2008.

Background

On 14th December 2006, the Government initiated a 12 week public consultation on a range of proposed measures to modernise and reshape the Post Office branch network and put it on a stable footing.

- The Government committed to providing funding to support the necessary changes to the network and provide continuing support for the social network, including a funding package of £1.7bn;
- Introduced a new framework of minimum access criteria to maintain a national network of Post Offices and to protect vulnerable consumers in deprived urban, rural and remote areas;
- Post Office Ltd is required to take into consideration obstacles such as rivers, mountains and valleys, motorways and sea crossings to islands to avoid undue hardship;
- Post Office Ltd is required to ensure in every postcode district without exception that 95% of the population will be within 6 miles of their nearest post office outlet.

The Network Change Programme has evolved as a result of falling customer numbers, changing customer habits and traditional post office services now being available elsewhere. The original consultation by the Government requested comments from thirteen Northern Ireland based organisations including NILGA.

Summary of the Consultation

The consultation document is not about the policy decisions underpinning the Change Programme but rather is seeking local feedback on the Northern Ireland implementation plan. It can be summarised as follows:

- The minimum access criteria set down by the Government in the Response Document.
- The rationale for the changes proposed is falling customer numbers, changing customer habits, many of the traditional Post Office services are available elsewhere, mounting financial losses and the fact that change is needed to ensure the Network has a sustainable future.
- Postwatch have a role in ensuring local consultations is meaningful and to scrutinise the processes undertaken by Post Office Ltd.
- The types of Outreach Services being suggested:
 - Mobile Service – Travelling Post Office within a mobile vehicle.
 - Hosted Service – Provision of post office services at a fixed site during specified hours & days from the premises of a local business or a community building.
 - Partner Service – Provision of post office services at a fixed site through a third party retailer.

- Home Service – Customers can order post office services and have them delivered direct to their home or collect from a Drop In site.
- A summary of Post Office branches to be closed and replaced with an Outreach Service, including details of that service, facilities at the Outreach Service and nearby Post Office branches that will provide services and products outside the times proposed by the Outreach Service.
- Post Office branches proposed for closure.
- Post Office branches remaining within the Network.

The Post Office Regional Plan Proposal for Northern Ireland has been developed in consultation with the independent consumer watchdog on postal services, Postwatch and Post Office Ltd asked all local authorities within Northern Ireland to provide information and views on relevant factors for consideration. The Plan proposes:

- To retain a total of 492 Post Offices
- To close 42 existing branches
- To install 54 Outreach services

Comments are sought by Post Office Ltd in particular on:

- The proposal to close the Post Office Branch concerned and replace it with an Outreach Service;
- The type of Outreach Service to be provided;
- The current Outreach Service proposal;
- Whether the extent of the Outreach Service proposed is suitable for the area and community
- Suitable locations for the Outreach Service in the community;
- All other potential Outreach Services for the area and communities concerned;
- Comments on the availability of public transport, alternative access to key Post Office services, local demographics and the impact on customers and the local economy.

Key Issues

Implications for Belfast

- Of the 54 current Post Office branches to be replaced by Outreach services, none are in the Belfast City Council area.
- There are 42 Post Office branches proposed for closure, 10 of which are in the Belfast City Council area (24% of planned closures). The criteria used to select Post Office branches for closure is:
 - Size of branch – based on the number of customer sessions;
 - Proximity – to other Post Office branches based on road distance between branches;
 - Financial Benefit to Post Office Ltd – net Sub-postmaster pay costs saved, including any business that is predicted to be lost;
 - Relative Size – based on size of branches in the surrounding area.
- The branches to close in the Belfast City Council area are:
 - Belmont, 1 Campbell Park Avenue, Belfast BT4 3FH, Victoria Electoral Area.
 - Blacks Road, 120 Blacks Road, Belfast BT10 0NF, Upper Falls Electoral Area.
 - Carlisle Circus, 14 Antrim Road, Belfast BT15 2AA, Oldpark Electoral Area.
 - Cave Hill, 634 Antrim Road, Belfast BT15 5GP, Castle Electoral Area.
 - Grosvenor Street, 263 Grosvenor Road, Belfast BT12 4LL, Lower Falls Electoral Area.
 - Lisburn Road, 217 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 7EJ, Balmoral Electoral Area.
 - Orangefield, 276 Castlereagh Road, Belfast BT5 6AD, Pottinger Electoral Area.
 - Ormeau Road, 160 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 2ED, Laganbank Electoral Area.

- Summerhill, 3 Summerhill Avenue, Belfast BT5 7HD, Victoria Electoral Area.
- The Throne, The Throne Centre, Whitewell Road, Belfast BT36 7EX, Castle Electoral Area.
- All of the Post Office branches where changes have been proposed have been visited independently by members of staff from Post Office Ltd and Postwatch to undertake separate detailed assessments and to make sure that all local factors had been considered first hand prior to developing the Regional Proposal.
- Within the Belfast City Council area, 52 Post Office branches will remain in the Network, this equates to 10.6% of the total number branches within the Northern Ireland Network, and almost 34.4% of the proposed future Network available within urban towns and cities across the province.
- Across Northern Ireland, 5.9% of the 1.7 million residents currently use a branch that will close. In considering the relative convenience of alternative branches for these customers, 2% will be within a quarter of one mile of their nearest alternative branch as measured by road distance, 3.1% will have access within half of a mile and one mile and 0.3% will be within one and three miles.
- As Belfast is an urban area the minimum access criteria that the Post Office have applied so that residents will have the best possible service is that (i) 99% of the total population in deprived urban areas (based on Indices of Multiple Deprivation) across the UK to be within 1 mile of their nearest Post Office branch and (ii) 95% of the total urban population across the UK to be within 1 mile of their nearest Post Office branch.
- Across Northern Ireland, 30.3% of the region's total population live in deprived communities, 20.4% of them in urban areas and 9.9% in rural areas. The Network Change Programme set out in this consultation document, provides for 68 branches being located in urban deprived communities across the province.
- Whilst ten Post Office branches will be closed in the Belfast area, according to the consultation document, these closures are within the minimum criteria prescribed by the Government in the Response Document and affected customers meet the access criteria set down. It is unlikely that the branches facing closure in the Belfast area will have this decision overturned as implementation plans meet the needs of residents while delivering modernisation and efficiency.
- A detailed impact assessment has been undertaken by Post Office Ltd and copies of the analysis of Post Office branches from the Belfast area will be sent to party group leaders for them to review and respond with individual comments.
- There are aspects of the current proposal that Postwatch have raised concerns about which should be reiterated, specifically:
 - The ability for disabled, low income and elderly customers to continue accessing postal services in certain areas if the proposal to close their local post office goes ahead,
 - Closing nearby branches in busy urban areas, leaving unacceptable gaps in the remaining network,
 - The potential impact on customer service at remaining branches, for example increased queuing times,
 - The quality of disabled access at a number of receiving branches,
 - Local historical community boundaries.
- The Outreach Service will not apply in the Belfast City area.

Further Details

The original public consultation document carried out by the Post Office on the Network (December 2006) and the Government's subsequent response to the consultation (May 2007) that has led to the Network Change Programme can be found on the Department for Business Enterprise & Regulatory Reform website in the consultations section, **www.berr.gov.uk/consultations**. Post Office Ltd welcome all views & comments regarding future access to Post Office services by the following methods:

Freepost Address: Sheila McCann, Network Development Officer, C/O National Consultation Team, FREEPOST CONSULTATION TEAM

Email: **consultation@postoffice.co.uk**

Customer Helpline: 08457 22 33 44

All responses should be forwarded to Post Office Ltd by 12 May 2008.

Resource Implications

n/a

Recommendations

Members are asked to approve the attached draft response letter from Belfast City Council. Postwatch have requested that they also be sent a copy of the Council's response to help inform their final view on the proposals.

It is recommended that the consultation document and the details of the 10 Post offices to close in the BCC area be referred to the Party Groups on the Council for individual consideration and comment to enable Members representing those areas affected by a closure to respond with any additional local circumstances or issues which should be taken into account by Post Office Ltd. Local members may also wish to contact Postwatch for more information or concerning any queries they might have on the consultation process.

Key to Abbreviations

Documents Attached

APPENDIX 1: Draft copy of response letter to Post Office Ltd

APPENDIX 1

Dear Ms McCann,

Re: Post Office Ltd Network Change Programme – Area Plan Proposal Northern Ireland

Thank you for your letter of March 31st regarding the Regional Plan Proposal for Northern Ireland that is part of the Network Change Programme to reshape and modernise the Post Office Network.

With respect to the proposed closures in the Belfast area, the Council is concerned that a number of the closures are in constituencies with a high concentration of areas of deprivation. Care should be taken that closures do not impact adversely on those most in need in our city.

Much of the media focus has been on rural communities and the associated impact of closures; however Belfast City Council would suggest that the Post Office would be mindful of the fact that urban communities are equally affected by access, particularly groups such as the elderly, those with mobility issues and residents in deprived areas. In addition taking into account the divided nature of parts of the city, this can have amplified implications on the socially excluded groups already mentioned.

Belfast City Council acknowledges the economic considerations behind the proposed closures to support and reshape the Network for the future and ensure the Network's continued viability, however Belfast City Council seeks assurances that residents requirements will continue to be met by the Post Office Network, especially the most vulnerable and socially excluded sections of the community so that these groups are not adversely affected.

The detailed impact assessment undertaken by Post Office Ltd and copies of the analysis of Post Office branches from the Belfast area has been sent to individual party groups on the Council for them to review and respond with comments in line with their local knowledge and familiarity with the needs of local people.

As the Outreach Service will not apply in the Belfast City area however, we feel it would not be appropriate for us to comment on its applicability.

Thank you for keeping Belfast City Council informed of the current position.

