Friends of Rippingale Post Office

Closure plan ill-conceived, dishonest, based on inaccurate out-of-date information, contradicts Government & Post Office policy and ignores County development plans

- Action group uncovers litany of errors
- Post Office Ltd already made its mind up to close Rippingale PO
- PO Ltd ignores consultation period and its own Government-set criteria
- Serious inconsistencies in how criteria applied in Bourne area
- Closure plan condemns many villagers to 6 mile walk along dangerous A15
- Rippingale Post Office NOT a loss maker
- Closure plan makes no business sense
- Rippingale action group demands PO Ltd open their books
- Closure plan ignores County housing development plans

Post Office Ltd. plans to close the PO branch in the village of Rippingale in Lincolnshire have been attacked by a residents' group set up to fight the proposal.

The announcement was made on October 1 and leaflets left for residents made it clear a final decision would be made only after a six week consultation period.

But it's been revealed that a month earlier, PO Ltd. managers told the Rippingale sub-postmaster that his branch would definitely close, in spite of the consultation exercise and introduced him to two potential "Partners" under their new "Outreach Service" – the suggested means of providing limited PO services after closure.

One potential partner made what can only be described as an insulting offer for the present sub-postmaster to operate a part-time counter in his own shop.

The same leaflets informed local residents that they could also use another nearby branch in Folkingham if Rippingale were to close. The trouble is that Folkingham branch is on the same closure list. Similar leaflets left at Folkingham branch told their residents that Rippingale would be an alternative branch for them.

Phil Rippingale (correct) from the Friends group said "If Post Office Ltd got that sort of basic information so badly wrong, we had to ask ourselves what else was wrong. As we started checking various documents, it only got worse."

In December last year the Government launched a national public consultation on changes to the Post Office network. The Department of Business' own response to that consultation introduced minimum access criteria "in particular to protect vulnerable consumers in deprived urban, rural and remote areas."

Criteria included "Nationally, 99% of the UK population to be within 3 miles of their nearest PO outlet," "95% of the total rural population to be within 3 miles of their nearest Post Office outlet," and "the availability of public transport."

The PO local closure leaflet for Rippingale gave the next nearest outlet as Pointon, a village 3.8 miles away. That's wrong – the nearest is the village of Morton. The Post Office say Morton is 2.5 miles from Rippingale – wrong again – it's over three miles. And it's almost impossible to reach either Morton or Pointon by available public transport – one service runs once a week, the other runs every day but would mean a three hour wait to return.

The real alternative for the elderly, disabled, the young, family carers and those without a car, is a more than six-mile round trip walking down the busy A15.

Without any ill-will to those who live in Pointon or Morton, Rippingale residents can only wonder about those "clear cut access criteria" when they look at a map – Pointon is just a mile from their next nearest branch at Billingborough and Morton is only two miles from the main Post Office in Bourne - they're keeping their Post Offices.

Both the DTI response and the PO closure notice emphasize that the programme was introduced against a backdrop of "falling customer numbers." Rippingale Post Office may be one of the few branches recording increasing business.

The store and its PO counter were refurbished last year and have seen a 20% increase in business since the present sub-postmaster Simon Deane took over 4 months ago.

He cannot access PO counter sales – they're all electronic - but has asked PO Ltd to open their books to him. The PO say fewer than 400 customers a week used the counter between March 06 and March 07.

But Simon has recorded the numbers of customers coming to the store since he took over and reckons the number is far in excess of 400. Both he and Rippingale residents want to know whether, or by how much, their PO is losing money. The Post Office also only records "customer sessions," whether they are buying a single stamp or multiple items.

As a condition of his taking over the branch, Post Office Ltd. removed Simon's "Payzone," service by which local residents recharged electricity meter cards.

This cut his potential turnover by 10%, on the grounds that it competed with the PO's own service – though they offer no such similar system. Those customers now have to recharge their cards elsewhere or go without lighting, heating and cooking..

The Rippingale group is also aware of recent Lincolnshire County Council and South Kesteven District Council discussions about selected housing development areas. They've defined areas with what they call "essential services," including a full time Post Office, as priority areas for future development. Rippingale is one of only 15 villages listed.

Phil Rippingale said "The scale of incorrect information, contempt for the public consultation process, manipulation of their own, Government-set criteria, lack of enterprise when they need to increase business, not cut it back and lack of appreciation of future development, beggars belief.

This mess is what Rippingale will suffer for. There's a high level of elderly, infirm and those with no personal transport in our village. The PO counter supplements the store and if it closes, the future of the store will be in doubt. If we lose that, the heart of the village will be gone, leaving many isolated in their homes or burning fossil fuels to reach the services they want and need. We deserve to be given the information PO Ltd used to reach this decision – we want to know if Rippingale is a loss-maker for PO Ltd and how it compares with other POs in the immediate area."

On Friday October 5, Simon Deane had a preview of the closure on the first full day of the postal workers' strike. "Most people assumed we were closed too and it's been dead – if this is what it'll be like, then our store couldn't survive."

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