

IDEA case study
Bath & North East Somerset Council
Bath & North East Somerset Post Office Response

Bath & North East Somerset Council shares its success in using the Overview & Scrutiny process to save two Post Offices from closure. The case study demonstrates how the O&S Panel formulated its investigation of fact and local opinion to reach a co-ordinated response to Post Office Ltd's Proposals.

Summary

In February 2008, Post Office Limited published proposals to close 10 Post Offices in the Bath & North East Somerset Council area, and opened a six-week local public consultation period, which ended on the 9th April 2008.

The Council's Enterprise and Economic Development Overview & Scrutiny Panel used this period to take the lead in planning and running their own consultation on the proposals. Media relations activity was used to make the local community aware of the plans and engage interest. Letters were sent to all Parish Councils, Town Clerks and other appropriate organisations to try to build a collective response of views to the proposals.

The Panel then organised a well publicised Public Contributor session, inviting representatives from Post Office Ltd (Network Change programme) and the governing body Postwatch to present. Members of the public shared their concerns about specific issues during the meeting. Local residents' views were also captured via an on-line questionnaire, and the results of this were presented at the session whilst council officers from the Adult Care, Housing and Health (Housing and Supported Living Services Department) also highlighted weaknesses and threats to the local community, especially the disadvantaged, the disabled and the young.

The aim was to build up a response in two parts – the first based on the general proposals and the second outlining detailed concerns about individual proposals. The Panel formulated its final response through a combination of wide-ranging consultation with the public, Councillor representatives and a multi-agency forum of interested parties (Council Members/Officers responsible for Adult Care, Community Action, and Federation of Small Businesses etc).

Key learning's for other councils

1. Choose the time of your public contributor session carefully, as meetings in the middle of the day are not easy for the public to attend. However, with time constraints for the consultation process, and limited availability for public meetings, a balance should be drawn between the demands of the deadline and the strength of interest of the press and the public.
2. Plan and invite speakers well in advance, particularly with national initiatives as local area representatives are often busy liaising with other local councils/organisations.
3. Prepare well in advance for different types of public response. We had many individual letters and phone calls to the office, which all needed to be responded to

and acknowledged. Key issues within the letters were analysed and drawn out into a spreadsheet which picked out both the general and key issues.

4. Engage the press early, together with the Panel Chairman as spearhead, so that as much exposure of the issues is gained as possible.

Background and involvement

The work involved Cllr Martin Veal, Chairman Enterprise & Economic Development Overview & Scrutiny Panel, Bath & North East Somerset Council and Officers from the legal and democratic services team

Problems and how we tackled them

The Panel had concerns about the consultation and decision-making process, identifying faults in the way the consultation was conducted by Post Office Ltd Network Change Programme. There appeared to be no appeal mechanism or method of requiring Post Office Ltd to reconsider any decisions. The Panel made this clear in its final response and requested an answer.

The Panel was concerned that Parish Councils, which represent local communities, were not part of the statutory consultation. We therefore involved them at an early stage and asked for their engagement in the debate and their later feedback.

Outcomes and impact

Through the O&S process we were easily able to identify the main concerns of our local residents and summarise them into a final response, for consideration by Post Office Ltd's Network Change Programme team.

The main concerns broadly broke down into the following areas:

- 1) Impact on the elderly & disabled
- 2) Effects on local business
- 3) The value of the local Post Office within the community
- 4) Concern about increase in the carbon footprint
- 5) Increasing deprivation
- 6) Concerns specific to individual areas/Post Offices
- 7) Strategies for coping with closure
- 8) Lack of strategic awareness i.e. history of an area
- 9) No allowance for scheduled residential & business growth in an area
- 10) No recognition by Post Office Ltd of Councils plans for growth.

As well as addressing the general needs of the local community, the Panel put together some suggested strategies for dealing with post office closures and included these with the final response in the hope that they would be considered.

During the consultation it became apparent that the impact of a major new residential and business development in Bath at Western Riverside had not taken into account when proposals had been developed for closure of the local offices.

Bath & North East Somerset was threatened with the closure of 10 branches, predominately in rural areas, which would affect a large number of elderly and disabled people. After the O&S work, Post Office Limited decided to retain two of the ten of the post offices planned for closure within B&NES. These branches were

both in Bath, at Bear Flat, (impact upon the elderly) and Lower Weston (impact of the Western Riverside development).

Unfortunately, a later consultation on another branch in the Southgate area of the city was not successful when following the same process, despite the potential of the major new shopping and transport interchange of the Southgate development, to open in 2009.

What could we have done better?

Although the media was used, the process could have benefited from a planned campaign to inform the public through use of the media: newspapers, radio and TV. A gentle drip feed of information on a regular basis with supplied photographs and photo opportunities would have kept the public informed of the amount of interest being generated and what the potential effect of closure would be.

More pro-active use of our email news updates would also have been a good vehicle to inform both the public and the private sector, as well as higher visibility of members on the panel voicing their concerns on behalf of the Council O&S panel so that the message was coming from an all party base.

Rather than a single public large meeting, varying times and locations may have been more effective to include at least one meeting in the early evening close to the areas affected most, allowing those who work to attend and to voice their concerns.

Next steps

The Council has now written to Post Office Ltd asking it to consider the impact of the new multi-million pound Southgate Development on the Southgate branch. We are currently awaiting a final response

Working on this collective response has helped establish how best to use the Overview & Scrutiny process to manage and co-ordinate responses to national government initiatives. It has provided the Council with a best practice approach to respond to any similar proposals in future.

Further information:

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