

POST OFFICE NETWORK CHANGE PROGRAMME,
 AREA PLAN PROPOSAL FOR CLEVELAND WITH SOUTH DURHAM AND
 RICHMOND:
THE RESPONSE OF DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

National and Area Context

1. The Government announced in May 2007 its support for strategic changes to the post office network, with up to 2,500 closures out of the total of 14,300 branches - equivalent to 17% of the network, or more than one in every six. It set Post Office Ltd (POL) specific minimum access criteria. Account must be taken of obstacles (rivers, etc) and the availability of public transport and alternative access to key services, local demographics and the impact on local economies.
2. The area proposal affecting the Borough of Darlington - 'Cleveland with South Durham and Richmond' - was published by POL on 12 February 2008, with a closing date for responses of 26 March. Under this 37 post offices in the area are proposed to be closed out of a total of 233 - equivalent to 16% of the network.

The Proposals for Darlington Borough

3. Within Darlington Borough five post offices are being proposed for compulsory closure and 16 others are listed as 'to remain in the network' (see *Table 1* and *Appendix 1 Map*). This constitutes a closure rate of 24%, or almost one in every four. This is a significantly higher proportion than in the area as a whole or nationally.

Table 1 - Post Offices in Darlington Borough

Proposed for Closure (5)	To Remain in the Network (16)
<i>Town branches (3):</i>	<i>Town branches (12):</i>
Cleveland Terrace	Albert Road
Hopetown (Brinkburn Rd)	Blackwell
Milbank (Pierremont Crescent)	Branksome
	Cockerton
<i>Village branches (2):</i>	Darlington (Crown Street)
Croft (Hurworth Place)	Geneva Road
Heighington (village hall)	Harrowgate Hill
	Haughton-le-Skerne
	Mowden Park
	Skerne Park
	Springfield
	Yarm Road
	<i>Village branches (4):</i>
	Hurworth
	Middleton St George
	Piercebridge
	Sadberge

Impact of Additional Voluntary Closures

4. On closer examination, POL's list of post offices 'to remain' is clearly aspirational rather than a reflection of the current situation, as it includes three branches whose future is, at best, uncertain. Those at Springfield and Piercebridge are both closed at the present time and have been since autumn 2007. And Sadberge post office is scheduled to close on 10 April due to the resignation of the postmaster and closure of the associated shop.
5. Unlike the present programme these closures are voluntary by the shop proprietors concerned and the Council is aware that POL is trying to make alternative provision. However, the delay in replacing the facilities at Springfield and Piercebridge and a lack of alternative options in Sadberge indicates a strong probability that they may not, or not all, be successfully replaced. Clearly the Council gives the strongest encouragement to POL to restore these branches at the earliest opportunity but the likelihood is that by mid-April the Borough will have only 18 operational post offices, of which five are being proposed now for compulsory closure. In this case the present proposals would constitute a closure rate of 28% - very much higher again than both nationally and in the wider area. If one of the closed branches reopened the closure rate would be 26%; if two, it would be 25%.
6. Even if the three are replaced, the new premises might be some distance from the present locations which could affect the assessment against the government's access criteria. The Council put the following questions to POL in emails on 3rd March 2008 but received no response*:

“Do you realistically expect these branches to reopen, and if so in what locations? Our concern is that unless there are firm proposals for them to reopen by summer 2008 then they could significantly distort your assessment for Darlington Borough. Even if they are replaced, if that is in different premises then the access and other criteria might still be differ significantly from the present situation, which could also have implications for branches proposed for closure.

Furthermore, if you are aware of uncertainty - unrelated to the area proposal - over the future of any other branches within Darlington Borough then please supply as much information as you can in order that this Council's response to consultation will be as well-informed as possible.”

(*Council officers attempted to obtain this information from the Network Change Consultation Team in order to inform the Council's comments on the network change programme, but with no success. The Customer Helpline telephone number cited in the consultation letter was a standard Post Office helpdesk number and the operator answering it would not provide a specific number for the team. Officers then tried a number given in earlier correspondence for the Almeida Street office: the person answering advised them to write or email, saying there would be a response in “two or three days”. None has been received to date. Darlington Borough Council regards this as quite unacceptable service by POL.)

Assessment of the Currently Proposed Compulsory Closures

7. POL's proposals are accompanied by detailed data on the branches to be closed, together with matching data on the nearest alternative branches. They include opening hours, average number of customers, facilities, a potted profile of the population living within one mile (total, age and car ownership only), ease of accessibility to the premises (e.g. steps), and a range of access criteria such as distance to next branch, parking provision, bus services, terrain between branches. The information appears to be up-to-date and accurate so far as it goes but the demographic data provided is very limited and in the Council's opinion inadequately addresses the key issues of deprivation, vulnerability and local economies identified by the Government.
8. Press reports have included comments by some affected postmasters, locally and elsewhere, stating that their post businesses are economically viable, not loss-making. It is clear, therefore that, in line with the Government's access criteria, branches have been chosen for closure principally on grounds of location, taking into account the presence of alternative branches. Within Darlington urban area the Crown post office in the town centre (Crown Street) is obviously (and rightly) considered sacrosanct by POL, offering as it does the greatest range of facilities in the most accessible location. The most vulnerable sub-post offices in the town seem to be those within a mile radius of it, especially if there is also at least one suburban post office within a mile of the affected office.
9. Thus, three of the four sub-post offices nearest to Crown Street have been proposed for closure: Cleveland Terrace (0.6 mile), Hopetown (0.8 mile) and Milbank (one mile). The surviving exception is Albert Road (actually sited on North Road; 0.7 mile).
10. It is appreciated that the distance of one mile used by POL in drawing up its closure proposals for urban areas stems from the Government's minimum access criteria. However, this is a distance well in excess of that normally adopted in planning policy for defining an accessible local service (a distance of 0.5 mile or 800m is more normal) and would take able adults up to 20 minutes to walk in each direction on level terrain, i.e. a round trip of around 40 minutes. Less able pedestrians could obviously take a lot longer.
11. **Cleveland Terrace** branch post office is said by POL to have an average of 500-749 customers per week. Given its proximity to Crown Street (0.6 mile or about 12 minutes walking time one-way) this seems to the Council to be quite a high level of patronage. Crown Street (which has 6,500-6,999 cpw) is named by POL as being the first alternative post office for displaced customers, with Blackwell (0.97 mile away; 500-749 cpw) a remote second alternative. Part of the popularity of Cleveland Terrace probably stems from its fairly central location, with some customers choosing to use it instead of the notoriously congested main office in Crown Street (see below).
12. **Hopetown** branch is the busiest post office proposed for closure in the Borough with what would appear to be a healthy level of patronage of 1,000-1,499 cpw. The named alternatives are Albert Road (also 1,000-1,499 cpw; 0.53 mile or 11 minutes walk away) and Cockerton (more remote at 0.83 mile; 2,000-2,499 cpw). Although not a great distance removed, POL's description of the terrain between the Hopetown and Albert Road branches as being 'predominantly level' with 'some small inclines' understates the nature of the walking route which involves negotiating the dark, narrow and noisy 'Cut'

beneath the Darlington-Bishop Auckland branch railway line and crossing busy roads including the A167 North Road.

13. Undoubtedly, one of the main reasons for the popularity of Hopetown post office, despite its relative closeness to the Albert Road branch, is the circumstances of the local population. As Postwatch pointed out in their initial response to consultation, the branch serves some of the most vulnerable populations in the town, with extensive parts of the adjacent Northgate, North Road and Central wards falling within the threshold specified by the Government as identifying urban deprived area - the most deprived 15% of areas in England (*see Map 'ISD2007 - LSOAs Within Most Deprived 15%'*). The nearest parts of Pierremont ward are not far behind in the index of multiple deprivation. As mentioned above, the Council is concerned that POL's published demographic data singularly fails to highlight indicators of deprivation despite the brief from Government.
14. The use of a one mile radius by POL and the Government also masks the full extent of nearby deprivation in that such a wide extent (with a population of over 29,000 in the case of Hopetown) takes in more affluent residential areas as well as extensive deprived ones. Even so, the Hopetown area can be shown to have, for example, a high proportion of lone parents (19.4% against a Darlington average of 17.3% and a UK figure of 16.4%) and a greater number of adults without a bank or building society account (4.1% against 3.6% and 2.5%) (*Sources: Census 2001 and Experian Ltd for Darlington Borough Council, March 2008*).
15. **Milbank** post office has similar usage to Cleveland Terrace (500-749 cpw). The named alternatives are Cockerton (0.6 mile, about 12 minutes walk; 2,000-2,499 cpw) and Crown Street (one mile). The postmaster is one of those to state publicly that his post office business is viable. Despite the greater distance from the town centre it is likely that this office also draws some of its trade from customers avoiding the congestion and discomfort of Crown Street. It benefits in particular from an availability of unrestricted on-street parking.
16. The Government considers a threshold of three miles to be more appropriate for rural populations. **Croft** post office has an average of 300-399 customers per week and doubles as the village shop, the only one in Hurworth Place and nearby Croft village. The alternative remaining branches named by POL are Hurworth (0.9 mile; 750-999 cpw) and Blackwell (2.44 mile; 500-749 cpw). The terrain between the Croft and Hurworth branches is described by POL as 'varied' with 'slight gradients', but few people are likely to attempt the walk between the two because of the distance and local demographics - a high proportion of people living within a mile of the branch are vulnerable or potentially vulnerable on grounds of age, with 25% identified as being retired.
17. **Heighington** post office relocated to the village hall in 2004 when the original shop-based premises closed. It operates on weekday mornings and has the lowest patronage of the five Darlington Borough branches proposed for closure, with 100-199 customers per week. The named alternatives (both outside the Borough) are at Shildon (2.55 mile) and Aycliffe village (2.6 mile) but the bus services to each are only hourly.

18. Although POL names the two nearest post offices to each of the five proposed closures the displaced trade will not necessarily migrate to these simply because they are the nearest. Much will go instead to offices which are convenient in other ways, especially those in town centres which can be visited when carrying out other tasks. In Darlington Borough's case a sizeable amount of custom is certain to be diverted to the main post office in Crown Street, as appears to have happened in recent years when other branches have closed under the Urban Reinvention and other programmes.
19. Regular users of Crown Street have witnessed how the premises have become increasingly more congested as branch offices elsewhere in the area have closed. Long queues for the main counter of 30 or more people are present on a daily basis and at busiest times the line has been known to reach the front door, with probably 50 or 60 people waiting. Despite the best efforts of the over-stretched staff delays in service of tens of minutes are now routine, particularly as transactions are often complex (simple postage stamp purchases are made at a separate counter and at machines). The frustrations for customers and pressure on staff would be unacceptable today in any other modern town centre service business.
20. The compulsory closures now proposed (including three of the four branches nearest to Crown Street) would put significant additional demand on the main post office. The Council has attempted to estimate the likely increase in customer numbers at Crown Street. If two-thirds of the customers displaced from Cleveland Terrace and half of those from the other four branches were to migrate to Crown Street then they would constitute an additional 1300 to 1900 customers per week there - equating to increases of between 20% and 27%. (These are not excessive assumptions; the Council would be interested to learn of POL's projections.) The further congestion and diminished standard of service that would inevitably result would be unacceptable to residents of the Borough, and should surely be to the management of Post Office Ltd.

Summary of the Council's Objections

21. The Council believes there strong grounds for over-turning the post office closure proposals affecting Darlington Borough, summarised as follows:
 - The Borough is being subjected to a disproportionately higher rate of branch closures (24%) than both the area as a whole (16%) and the national average (17%). This is manifestly unfair to Darlington residents.
 - Moreover, the published proposals present a potentially false picture of the number and spread of branches to remain in the network, as three of those post offices will not be operational from 10 April and there is no certainty that all, or any, will be restored.
 - If these do not reopen, the five planned compulsory closures will constitute an even greater rate of branch closures - 28% - adding further to the inequity.
 - The demographic data used by POL inadequately addresses the key issues of deprivation, vulnerability and local economies specified by the Government. In particular it gives insufficient weight to the role of Hoptown post office in serving residents in the deprived urban area identified by the index of multiple deprivation. The Council believes

that this role, allied to the relatively high patronage of the branch, justifies the retention of Hopetown branch.

- POL's proposals appear to pay no heed to the current and future levels of congestion at the post office to which much of the displaced trade will migrate, that is, Crown Street in Darlington town centre. Customers there already suffer delay, discomfort and frustration to a degree that would be unacceptable to any other kind of modern service business, and the Council's projections suggest that the situation would become considerably worse under the proposals.
- The Council believes that these severe congestion problems at Crown Street also justify the retention of the branches at Cleveland Terrace and Milbank, particularly as the postmasters at these consider that the branches are viable.
- The closure of Croft post office would seriously undermine the viability of the last shop in Hurworth Place and Croft village and the alternative branches are a considerable distance away, beyond reasonable walking distance of the relatively elderly population. Closure should be rejected on these grounds.
- The sizeable village of Heighington has already lost its post office once and the proposed closure now, after just four years, of the part-time replacement in the village hall would send out the wrong signals to rural communities which have worked with POL to retain and promote their local facilities. The alternative branches are each a considerable distance away and journeys other than by car would be extremely time-consuming for the most vulnerable residents. For these reasons this closure too should be rejected.

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