



# **POST OFFICE CLOSURE PROGRAMME**

## **Harrow Council's Response**

## Executive Summary

Harrow Council regards local post offices as an important part of the services available to our residents and local businesses. They are an essential part of the glue that holds our local community together. We therefore have grave concerns about the likely effects of closures.

In order to put together a response, the Council has sought the views of a wide variety of local community and voluntary organisations.

Our responses from the community are based on comments received:

- The Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee conducted a scrutiny review prior to the release of the specific proposals.
- A public meeting was held by the Council on 23 September 2004. Around fifty members of the public, including representatives of voluntary and residents associations, attended.<sup>1</sup>
- The Harrow Strategic Partnership<sup>2</sup> passed a resolution at its meeting held on 4 October, expressing serious concern regarding the proposal to close nine post offices in Harrow.<sup>3</sup>
- Letters and email correspondence received by the Council. 28 emails and letters have been received.<sup>4</sup>
- Petitions. One is organized by the Pinner Association on the Marsh Road branch (at the time of writing we understand that there are 600 signatures on it); another has been organised by the Harrow East Labour Party.<sup>5</sup> Woodlands Community Association have organised a campaign against the closure of the Harrow Weald branch (107 Uxbridge Road) – also known as Brockhurst Corner – and the Council has received 64 responses as a result of this action.<sup>6</sup>

A motion is to be put to the next meeting of full Council on 21 October, in support of the resolution passed by the Harrow Strategic Partnership.<sup>7</sup>

A copy of the Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee's scrutiny review of the Post Office Reconfiguration is included with this response.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Document 1

<sup>2</sup> The Partnership consists of representatives of Harrow Council, Harrow Association of Voluntary Service, Harrow Primary Care Trust, Metroline plc, Kodak, Metropolitan Police Authority, Harrow Citizens' Advice Bureau, Community Linkup, MIND in Harrow, Harrow in Business, Harrow Police, Harrow College, ABI, Stanmore College, The Lodge and University of Westminster.

<sup>3</sup> Document 2

<sup>4</sup> Document 3

<sup>5</sup> Document 4

<sup>6</sup> Document 5

<sup>7</sup> Document 6

<sup>8</sup> Document 7

## **Overview of Harrow**

Harrow is one of London's most economically, culturally and ethnically attractive suburbs located some 12 miles from central London. It is primarily residential in character, but also has a significant retail and employment base, with a network of Local and District Centres across the borough, and commercial areas which vary in size and character from small industrial estates to large world class businesses.

The population of Harrow has been increasing over the last ten years, standing at 206,814 in 2001, and is forecast to rise steadily in the period to 2016, putting pressure on the environment and the need for housing and local services. Harrow is culturally diverse, with over 41% of residents of non-white ethnic origin. In four of the borough's wards, over 50% of residents are from minority ethnic groups.

Over 37% of the population are aged 45 and over and 14.5% are aged over 65. This is balanced by the fact that 23% of residents are 17 and under. One parent households with dependent children make up 5.6% of all households in the borough.

Harrow's local economy is heavily dependent on small business activity. It has been one of the key areas of London for new business start up, business development and entrepreneurial activity for well over a decade. This trend towards small business development and self employment remains strong and shows little sign of abating in the future.

Although relatively affluent, there are significant social and economic differences across the borough and some areas display levels of deprivation more commonly found in inner city boroughs.

### **Impact on users**

Post offices are favoured for a wide range of reasons, from ease of access (particularly by older people, disabled people, young families) and the view that they are a social leveller (services are needed by all members of the community regardless of status). Sub post offices are also favoured for the 'softer' services that they provide to the community, such as form filling assistance for people whose first language was not English. This is particularly important in Harrow given its diverse ethnic make up and the high proportion of residents who belong to ethnic minority groups. Post offices act as a focal point for their community. Sub postmasters often know their customers well enough to keep an eye on the well being of more vulnerable users. Approximately half of the rental income that Harrow receives from tenants comes by way of giro transactions (approximately £4.5m in 02/03).

The Council notes that the Post Office Ltd will lose income as a result of the decision made by the Government to pay benefits electronically by 2005. However, a number of responses that we have received indicate that some

users, particularly pensioners, choose to access their money via the Post Office branches. As noted above, Harrow has a high number of elderly people and to remove such a facility would cause these users considerable inconvenience. Many people feel more comfortable accessing their money from inside a Post Office rather than outside in the street from an ATM. There may be an increase the number of people using Post Offices to access cash. This suggests that although the role of the Post Office is changing it will continue to represent an important means of accessing services. This contention is supported by comments we have received from the public who are affected by branch closures.

### **Impact on access to services**

As part of the New Harrow Project, the Council is moving to area-based provision of services. This is entirely consistent with the Governments' s commitment to the creation of Sustainable Communities and the promotion of greater social cohesion and social inclusion. Sustainable Communities require a range of local services to meet the diverse needs of residents, improve their quality of life and strengthen economic prosperity. Planning Policy Guidance Note 6: "Town Centre and Retail Developments" reflects this objective, encouraging local planning authorities to seek to retain post offices in local and district centres. Our view is that the proposals go in the opposite direction to established Government planning policy and the developments of the Council and other partner agencies. The Council is taking services into local communities – using venues where the public already visit – and will be providing services that respond to the needs of different communities.

The Post Office proposals centralise provision and force the public to travel beyond their community shops, an approach that is entirely counter to the Sustainable Communities agenda. The Council is therefore of the view that consideration should be given to the possibility of locating branch post offices (or their services) within other sites such as schools, health centres, leisure centres, libraries, Civic Centre and so on.

The proposed closures will severely restrict access to Post Office facilities in the central/north-east part of the borough and have a significant cumulative effect on users in this area. The combined loss of the Harrow Weald, High Road, Belmont, and Honeypot Lane branches would leave a large area without a Post Office, creating a "doughnut effect" with branches on the periphery but no facilities in the centre.

### **Impact on local businesses**

Local business representatives have indicated that the Post Office provides local facilities to small businesses that may not otherwise have sufficient volumes of post to warrant the use of franking machines and suchlike. Evidence received by our scrutiny review suggested that independent retail businesses give business opportunities for people (particularly new and emerging communities such as people settling from other countries) to find their way into small businesses, to expand and to become integrated into communities. As indicated above, the

small business base is of particular importance to Harrow's local economy. Business Link for London confirms that the borough is one of the top ten entrepreneurial hotspots in the UK and is ranked second in London. Survival rates are above the London average at 75% with, on average, 150 new firms starting up per year.

The scrutiny review group also discussed innovative means to retain post offices. Harrow in Business offers business support to independent estate-based retailers, including post offices. We have already referred to the possibility of situating post office facilities within other services.

### **Impact on the environment and transport**

Living Streets has indicated to the Council that they are opposed to closures proposals because they will adversely and disproportionately affect elderly and non-car owning residents as well as tending to increase the use of cars for short journeys. It will also contribute to the decrease in vibrancy of local retail areas.

Harrow Council is concerned with the loss of important neighbourhood services and the social and environmental impacts associated with an increased need to travel. Harrow Council is committed to the principles of sustainable communities and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Planning Policy Guidance 13 (PPG13) on sustainable transport. PPG13 seeks to promote an increased sustainable transport choice; accessible jobs, shopping and services by public transport, walking and cycling and the reduction in the need to travel, especially by car. More specifically PPG13 seeks to locate day-to-day facilities that need to be near customers in local centres so that they are accessible by walking and cycling. Therefore, Harrow Council considers the PO closure programme to be inconsistent with National Planning Policy guidance on sustainable transport.

### **Impact on remaining branches**

A number of residents have expressed concern about the capacity of remaining branches to cope with the additional custom after the closures have taken place. In particular this concern related to Bridge Street, Pinner in the event of the closure of Marsh Road, Pinner. The Council is also concerned about the adequacy of the Stanmore post office and its ability to cope with increased demand arising from the closure of three branches in the immediate vicinity.

We would encourage you to work with Postwatch in relation to increasing capacity at the receiving branches, where appropriate, in addition to directing some of the £30m available for the regeneration of branches and to consider extending opening hours.

## **Impact of individual closures**

### **Harrow Weald: 107 Uxbridge Road, Harrow Weald**

- The PO is located within a chemist, in a small retail parade providing a limited range of services and no alternative banking facilities.
- Pensioner households comprise 35% of all households in the immediate vicinity of the branch. There is an elderly nursing home in close proximity.
- Uxbridge Road is a busy London Distributor Road and presents a considerable barrier to residential property to the north.
- Off street parking in the area is limited.
- Stanmore is a receiving PO for 3 closures, and already has a high proportion of residents over 60. PO Limited does not propose any additional improvements to cater for the increase capacity, specifically from elderly users.
- The 3 receiving PO's from Harrow Weald are situated more than 0.9 miles away, with the furthest being Wealdstone, 1.3 miles away.
- There are no alternative means for accessing cash within walking distance.

#### Consultation comments:

- o 62 residents of the Woodlands Estate responded to the Council to express their concern.
- o Small businesses use Harrow Weald, and would need a courier service, as Wealdstone receiving branch is not viable due to parking and traffic.
- o General concerns relating to capacity at alternatives and transport issues for people reliant on buses.

*Harrow Council recommends PO Ltd reconsider the closure of Harrow Weald PO as it serves a large number of elderly residents and the suggested receiving PO's are far apart.*

### **Honeypot Lane: 907 Honeypot Lane, Canons Park**

- Honeypot Lane PO is located within a small parade of independent shops and services. However, there are no alternative banking facilities in the immediate vicinity.
- The surrounding area has a mixed land use character, and there are several industrial estates to the east of Honeypot Lane. Whitchurch first and middle school lies immediately north of the branch.
- A planning application has recently been submitted for a mixed use development of the former Government offices site in Honeypot Lane, some 200m from the branch. The proposed development includes 655 new dwellings (including 281 affordable homes), plus 4000m<sup>2</sup> of retail/business floorspace and other local service/community facilities. The proposals also provide for a new pedestrian access from the site to Whitchurch Lane. A further 2.4ha of land immediately north of the application site is expected to be vacated in the near future and could form a latter phase of development.

- There is no receiving PO located nearer than 0.8 miles.
- Stanmore is a receiving PO for 3 closures, and already has a high proportion of residents over 60. PO Limited does not propose any additional improvements to cater for the increase capacity, specifically from elderly users.
- Stanmore receiving PO is located approximately 0.9 mile north of Honeypot Lane and served by 4 buses an hour

Consultation comment:

- o The PO provides a personal service that complements care services for elderly, infirm and isolated people. The access road at Honeypot Lane makes access easier for those without transport.

*Harrow Council **strongly** recommends that Post Office Limited re-consider this closure due to the potential significant increase in demand arising from the proposed development of the former Government office in Honeypot Lane.*

#### **High Road: 332 High Road, Harrow Weald**

High Road PO is located in a health food shop within a designated Local Centre. However, the health food shop shelves are presently empty.

- The Local centre offers a range of convenience retail and service uses, including a Waitrose foodstore and Homebase as well as smaller shops and services. Alternative banking facilities are also available.
- There are parking facilities nearby, both on and off the street
- There is a large scale bus garage within close proximity to the PO increasing the amount of employment in the centre
- There is currently 1 small new residential development close to PO under construction
- Stanmore is a receiving PO for 3 closures, and already has a high proportion of residents over 60. PO Limited does not propose any additional improvements to cater for the increase capacity, specifically from elderly users.

*Harrow Council recommends PO Ltd to reconsider the closure of High Road PO as it provides an important community service. Together with the Belmont and Harrow Weald sites, the closure of this branch would severely reduce access to Post Offices facilities over an extended part of the borough.*

#### **Belmont: 148 Kenton Road, Kenton**

- Belmont PO is located in a designated Local Centre comprising some 50 retail and service units but no alternative banking facilities.
- Kenton Park receiving PO is approximately 0.5 miles from Belmont and served by only 2 buses an hour
- Wealdstone receiving PO is 0.9 miles from Belmont and served by only 3 bus serves an hour
- Harrow receiving branch is 1.6 miles away and access is restricted by the west coast railway which has limited crossing points between east and

west. Direct buses to Harrow run 3 times an hour, and slower services to Harrow via Kenton would run twice an hour.

Consultation comments:

- Bus H18 (to reach 217 Kenton Lane) is a half hourly service that could involve long waits. 186 bus route stops and seats need to be assessed and improved.
- Loss of banking facilities, such as individual pension paid into a bank account but still accesses cash via the PO.

*Harrow Council recommends reconsidering the closure of Belmont Circle PO as it would be the loss of an important community facility. The Harrow and Wealdstone district centre alternatives are a considerable distance apart with very infrequent bus services.*

**Kenton Park: 5 Kenton Park Parade**

- Kenton Park is located within a predominantly residential area, with a good range of shops and services. There is a small number of offices in the area and a religious temple nearby
- The three surrounding wards, Kenton East, Kenton West and Queensbury have the highest concentration of ethnic minority groups in the borough (53.6%, 48% and 51.9% respectively of all residents in these wards are of Asian or Asian British origin) The proportion of Asian or Asian British residents increases to over 65% in two Super Output Areas in Kenton East.
- Kenton Park Parade is the largest local parade in the Borough and on the borough boundary with LB Brent
- Kenton Road is a busy London Distributor Road linking the area with Kenton and Harrow Town Centre to the west and Kingsbury to the east.
- The area to the east of the branch rises sharply making pedestrian access difficult for anyone with mobility problems.

Consultation comments

- Car parking at alternatives are difficult and requires 'pay and display'. Difficulty of reaching alternatives without a car. Inconvenience to elderly and those with young children.

*Harrow London recommends reconsidering the closure of Kenton Park PO as it would result in the loss of an important community facility, serving a large number of residents for whom English may not be their first language. Pedestrian access to receiving branches would be difficult for people with mobility problems.*

**Marsh Road: 139 Marsh Road, Pinner**

- Marsh Road PO is located in a newsagent; in a small predominantly service orientated parade of shops and other local services. There are also community facilities such as a Library, Clinic & Synagogue nearby.
- The PO is situated on the southern edge of Pinner District Centre, which offers a full range of local services including three foodstores and a choice of high street banks



- The surrounding area is relatively affluent and contains a high proportion of commuters
- The PO has relatively good off-street car parking, with some on-street car parking nearby

Consultation comments:

- o Parking more difficult at main Pinner branch and Cannons Lane branch for elderly disable driver.
- o Mile radius is unreasonable causing a loss of choice.
- o There are already queues out the door at Bridge Street Pinner receiving branch on Saturdays, added concerns relating to capacity when Marsh Road closes.

*Harrow Council recommends reconsidering the closure of Marsh Road PO as it would result in the loss of an important community service.*

**Pinner Road: 178 Pinner Road, West Harrow**

- Pinner Road PO is located within a linear parade consisting of a limited range of retail shops and services
- The surrounding area is predominantly residential comprising inter war terraced housing, with a small scale residential development currently on site nearby
- Harrow Town Centre and North Harrow are in close proximity
- Car parking is difficult, however the PO is close to bus stops
- There are no alternatives south of Pinner Road, apart from Shaftesbury Avenue and Roxeth, which are also proposed to close.

Consultation comments:

- o Convenience; prefers to collect pension for father from Post Office.
- o Neighbourhood shops will all gradually die. The garage has gone already and the area will become even more rundown and dead. Convenience - particularly for old people - who might not bother to venture out on the bus or walk to central Harrow.

*Harrow Council recommends reconsidering the closure of Pinner Road PO as it would result in the loss of an important community service and the area south would have no alternatives apart from Rayners Lane and South Harrow, more than 1 mile away with very poor bus routes.*

**Shaftesbury Avenue: 37 Shaftesbury Circle, Shaftesbury Avenue**

- The area around Shaftesbury PO is predominantly residential with a major car showroom, school and supporting uses, such as medical centre, grocers, newsagents and fast food outlet.
- This PO is well accessed within walking distance from the surrounding residential area on all four sides, and has good bus links into Harrow Town Centre.
- The surrounding area has a mixed social and economic character and includes an area of predominantly Local Authority housing some 0.5m to

- the west characterised by relatively high levels of unemployment, elderly people, lone parents and people claiming benefit.
- There is good car parking facilities off street in front of the Shaftesbury PO
  - Receiving PO, North Harrow, is situated over a mile to the north. However, there is no direct bus service and access on foot is restricted by the Metropolitan Line which creates a significant physical barrier between the two parts of the district.
  - Receiving PO, The Hill, is 0.6 miles up Harrow Hill and extremely difficult to access via public transport and on foot.

*Harrow Council recommends Post Office Limited to **strongly** re-consider the closure of this post office as it, together with Roxeth PO, serves a large residential area that includes some of the highest deprivation characteristics in the Borough.*

*We note that the consultation period for this branch has been extended. Should the Council receive further responses in relation to this branch after submission of this response we will pass these on to Post Office Ltd.*

### **Roxeth: 3 Northolt Road, South Harrow**

- The catchment area for Roxeth PO is predominantly residential, with a few office buildings used by the Metropolitan Police and other companies. There are supporting land uses, such as pub, community centre and a newsagent within the area. There is also a Salvation Army community facility nearby.
- The PO is located within a newsagent and fronts a busy road, parking is relatively easily found nearby.
- The surrounding area has a mixed social and economic character and includes an area of predominantly Local Authority housing some 0.5m to the east characterised by relatively high levels of unemployment, elderly people, lone parents and people claiming benefit.
- Regeneration of the area includes many new residential developments currently under construction, including the former Harrow Hospital site with more than 100 dwellings and a new hostel.
- There are more than 3 vacant sites close to the PO awaiting regeneration opportunities.
- Should Shaftesbury PO close, Roxeth would make a better alternative receiving PO than the 'The Hill'. Roxeth is much more accessible via walking and bus (approximately 11 per hour) and has more demand due to its location and demographic profile.

*Harrow Council strongly recommends that Roxeth PO remain open to continue to provide the services needed in close proximity to an area with some of the highest levels of deprivation in Harrow. Additionally, given all the new developments planned and currently on site in the area, the Council recommends that this PO stay open to anticipate the increase in demand for the services. Roxeth PO also serves a large office use area, including the Metropolitan Police*

*and other offices in the intermediate area. Additionally, Roxeth would offer a more suitable alternative to The Hill, should Shaftesbury Avenue close.*

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, taking account of its own assessment and the response to consultation with residents and other stakeholders, Harrow Council:

- Does not support the closure programme
- Opposes, in particular, the loss of branches at Shaftesbury Avenue and/or Roxeth in view of the impact on vulnerable groups in the area
- Considers that the level of provision over a significant area within the central/north east part of the borough would be inadequate
- Recommends that Post Office Ltd recognise the increased demand for services at Honeypot Lane arising from the development of the former Government office site, only 200m from the closing branch
- Urges Post Office Ltd to consider alternative means of improving the post office service in the borough and
- Considers that receiving branches at Stanmore and Pinner would not provide sufficient capacity to meet increased demand arising from the closure programme and strongly advises Post Office Ltd to make appropriate additional investment at these branches.

Supporting documents:

- Document 1 – Minutes of the Public Meeting held on 23 September 2004
- Document 2 – Resolution agreed by the Harrow Strategic Partnership on 4 October 2004
- Document 3 – Correspondence Log
- Document 4 – Example of Petition organised by Harrow East Labour Party (sent to Post Office Ltd but not included here – contains individual addresses)
- Document 5 – Example of campaign organised by Woodlands Community Association
- Document 6 – Motion for full Council, 21 October 2004
- Document 7 – Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee – Review of Post Office Reconfiguration (available electronically on the Council's website)