These closure plans are flawed

A response to consultation on post office closures in Sutton and Cheam.

By **Paul Burstow MP**
Member of Parliament
for Sutton and Cheam

INTRODUCTION

Post Office Limited has made proposals to close six out of the thirteen sub-post offices in the Parliamentary Constituency of Sutton and Cheam. The plan is to close the post offices in Angel Hill, Belmont village, Cheam village, Church Hill Road, Stonecot Hill and Oldfields Road.

These proposals form part of a larger national closure programme which is euphemistically called the 'Network Reinvention Programme'.

I believe that there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate to Post Office Limited that they have based their decisions on a flawed and incomplete assessment.

This submission is based on my own local knowledge, face to face talks with local businesses, letters from constituents and meetings with the local authority and PostWatch.

A PLAN WITHOUT A STRATEGY

When Post Office Area Development Manager Nick Gittens took part in Sutton Council's scrutiny of the closure plans on the 12th October he described the process as a strategic one. He suggested that the Area Plan for Sutton and Cheam was the product of a process intended to design a post office network fit for purpose now and in the future.

However, through questioning it became clear that **the Area Plan is not strategic it is little more than a drawing together of a series of piecemeal closures into a single consultation.** The fact that the sub-postmasters of the branches nominated for closure are volunteers suggests that the closures were self-selecting. When asked if other branches had volunteered to close Mr Gittens refuse to confirm this in even the most general of terms.

Mr Gittens suggested that the Area Plan was the result of a detailed consideration of current and project retail patterns, where people shop, etc. **Yet it is hard to see how this 'strategic' assessment could have been applied to each of the branches proposed for closure.** It is hard to escape the view that the line of least resistence has been taken in drawing up the Area Plan even if this does not give

a good long term fit or deliver a network that is readily assessible to its customers.

A PLAN WITHOUT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Well ahead of the Post Office undertaking its fieldwork and formulating its closure proposals the Council, Members of Parliament and PostWatch offered to meet with the Network Reinvention Team. The aim of such a meeting would have been to offer the Team a clear picture of the local planning, transportation, social and economic considerations. It was very disappointing that this offer was declined.

In conducting their fieldwork the Reinvention Team appear not to have noticed the extent to which the A217, the A24 and the Sutton to Dorking Railway line act as both physical obstacles and community boundaries. Several of the receiving branches are located on the other side of these community severance lines.

HOLES IN THE NETWORK

The closure of Cheam, Church Hill, Stonecot and Oldfields branches will leave the Cheam part of my constituency very poorly served. It will create a hole in the network. Only one of the proposed receiving branches, Sutton Common Road, is not affected by the community severance point made above.

ABOVE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE NUMBER OF CLOSURES

Sutton and Cheam appears to have been singled out for an above average number of closures. I understand that approximately one in three branches have been closed to date. If all of the branches proposed for closure are taken out of the network Sutton and Cheam would lose 46 percent of its current network.

CONSULTATION OR INFORMATION?

Is the Network Reinvention Programme a real consultation? Given that all of the branches designated for closure have volunteered and have signed contracts agreeing to close there is clearly a very strong

presumption that these branches will close. The fact that fewer than 10 per cent of closures have been withdrawn reinforces this feeling.

When I asked Nick Gittens why Post Office Limited would not share activity data with the Council I was told that this was because the information is not shared with third parties. This is not true. PostWatch are privy to this information. Again it points to a reluctance on the part of Post Office Limited to engage seriously with representative organisations like local authorities.

THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL BUSINESS

I have received over 400 letters from constituents who are affected by one or more of the closures. I enclose with this paper those letters that appear only to have been sent to me.

From reading all of these letters and from face to face meetings with constituents and local business people it is clear to me that the closure of any one of the six branches in Sutton and Cheam will adversely affect some of my constituents.

Elderly and disabled people will have to travel further to use post office services. Local businesses will incur extra costs and inconvenience. The vitality and viability of the shopping parades in which the branches are situated will be harmed by their closure.

The *Angel Hill branch* was only reopened a few years ago. I have received a number of letters from elderly and disabled constituents who will find getting to the proposed receiving branches at Rose Hill or Sutton Town Centre difficult.

Having spent time visiting all of the businesses in *Belmont village* I am in no doubt that the closure of the branch will have a serious impact on its future viability.

At present the village has a butchers, bakers, chemist, florist, hairdressers, barber and newsagent as well as a number of other specialist shops and businesses. **Many of these businesses are themselves customers of the local post office; they also benefit from custom attracted to the village by the post office.**

The residential area around Belmont village has a large concentration of older people. There are several private sector sheltered housing schemes in the immediate vicinity.

Of all the proposed closures Belmont's closure would result in residents having to travel more than a mile to the 'receiving' branches. Neither of the receiving branches offers a logical destination for Belmont residents and my earlier comments about community severance apply.

The proposal to close the *Cheam branch* in Ewell Road has all the hallmarks of an opportunistic closure. With the postmaster faced with a rent review there was considerable pressure on him to 'volunteer' to close.

There are over 150 local retail and service based businesses located within a quarter of a mile of the branch. **From my own door to door canvassing of these businesses it is clear that many of them will be greatly inconvenienced by the closure and will not readily transfer their business to either of the nominated receiving branches.** A careful analysis of the business responses to your consultation will confirm this.

At present Cheam village has a butchers, bakers, greengrocers, chemist, florist, hairdressers, barber, newsagent, jewellers, toyshop, shoe shop, locksmith, shoe repair, hardware, stationers, health food shop, Budgen's food store, WH Smith, Boots and dry cleaners as well as a number of other specialist shops and businesses. **This is a vibrant retail centre and it is hard to understand why Post Office Limited would not want to be represented in it.**

Within a short distance of the village live a large number of elderly and disabled people. There are a number of public and private sheltered housing schemes as well as private and public rented accommodation. I am sure that the local authority will be able to confirm this and that a more detailed analysis of the census data would also reveal the high concentration of elderly people in the area. There are also plans for a major new housing development on the former Dairy Crest site in the Ewell Road.

The idea that many of the businesses or residents will transfer their custom to the receiving branch in Upper Mulgrave Road

overlooks the accessibility constraints. First, the railway line acts as a significant obstacle. There is an underpass which has steep steps and is not wheel-chair friendly. The alternative is to use the footpath under the railway bridge. This would necessitate crossing two busy roads as well as negotiating some hilly terrain. Second, the parking at both the receiving branches is poor.

Taken together the proposals to close *Church Hill Road* and *Oldfields Road branches* punches a significant gap in the network which is not likely to be adequately filled by either of the receiving branches. When the Post Office in Collingwood Road was closed Oldfields Road was nominated as the receiving branch. What has changed? **From talking to businesses in Church Hill Road I have no doubt that the closure of the Post Office will prove a major blow, further reducing passing trade.**

It is hard to understand how *Stonecot Hill* was selected for closure. At present the shopping parade has a butchers, greengrocers, florist, chemist, Co-op food store, furniture store, carpet shop, plumbing supply business, newsagent, and stationers as well as a number of other specialist shops and businesses. Many of these businesses are themselves customers of the local post office; they also benefit from custom attracted to the parade by the post office. Having visited the premises of the current postmaster I note it is in need of investment to make it more attractive. Also I feel sure that combined with other retail activity a post office in this parade could do very well.

I have received a great many letters from local residents objecting to the closure. Neither of the receiving branches represents a practical alternative, particularly the branch in Grand Drive which would necessitate crossing the London Road (A24). Furthermore, the receiving branch in Sutton Common Road does not look well placed to absorb the extra business.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe that the plans to close six sub-post offices in my constituency are poorly thought out and show a lack of knowledge of the area.

The Area Plan for Sutton and Cheam is not based on a strategic assessment of the network rather it represents the line of least resistance, closing the volunteer branches rather than looking for longer term sustainability.

Having visited all of the branches nominated for closure, they all suffer from a lack of investment. I feel sure that the viability of these businesses could be enhanced by such investment.

From the letters I have received and the strong support both residents and local business have shown by organising local petitions it is clear that there is a huge reservoir of goodwill towards the post office. Nick Gittens pointed out the post office was one of the nations most trusted institutions, that trust and goodwill is being put at great risk by these proposals and now hangs on the outcome of this consultation.

Paul Burstow MP
Member of Parliament for Sutton and Cheam

19th October 2004