

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL

CABINET

17 APRIL 2008

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO LEADER: ENVIRONMENT

POST OFFICE CLOSURE PROPOSAL: ST. AIDAN'S

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To consider the proposal by Post Office Ltd to close St Aidan's post office at 207 Pye Green Road. The consultation deadline is 9<sup>th</sup> June 2008.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Deputy Chief Executive (or anyone duly authorised by him) as part of the consultation process lodges objections ( as set out in section 2 of the report) on behalf of the Council to the proposed closure of St. Aidan's Post Office, Pye Green Road.
- 2.2 That the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Portfolio Leader for Environment, be authorised to make such amendments to the objections as set out in Section 2 as are considered appropriate (which shall include the inclusion of further objections) so as to give effect to the purpose and intention of the objections set out in Section 2.

3. Key Issues

- 3.1 St. Aidan's Post Office, at 207 Pye Green Road, has been selected as one of the Post Offices for closure under the Post office's Network Change programme. This Post Office, which is also linked to a small grocery and newsagents, is located in Cannock North ward, the most deprived ward in Cannock Chase district. In this ward, over a third of households have no car, 37.5% of the population have health which is either 'not good' or else have a limiting long term illness, and 23.4% claim benefits.
- 3.2 The Post Office is proposing to close its facility at St Aidan's, proposing instead that residents access alternative Post Offices in Chadsmoor or Cannock Town Centre. The Post Office has a national set of minimum access criteria which it is applying to ensure that residents of an area still 'continue to have the best possible access to Post office services'. These criteria are:
- 99% of the UK population to be within 3 miles and 90% of the population to be within 1 mile of their nearest Post Office branch.
  - 99% of the total population in deprived\* urban areas across the UK to be within 1 mile of their nearest Post Office branch.
  - 95% of the total urban population across the UK to be within 1 mile of their nearest Post Office branch.

- 95% of the total rural population across the UK to be within 3 miles of their nearest Post Office branch.

\* Deprived urban relates to 'the most disadvantaged parts of the UK based on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (top 15% Super Output Areas in England)'.

- 3.3 The Post Office has used a variety of methods in the assessment used to make the recommendation relating to St Aidan's Post Office. These are listed in Section 2 of this report. The figures printed in the original consultation document (Branch Access Report) are incorrect in terms of local population details. This matter has been raised with the Post Office and an amended version is due to be forwarded. However, we have been assured the assessment itself was conducted using the correct figures.
- 3.4 The period for making representations is from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 to 9<sup>th</sup> June 2008, with public consultation being suspended between 10 April and 1<sup>st</sup> May due to local elections.

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Section 1

Background

The Post Office network has been scheduled for a phased restructure as it is facing increased financial losses and falling customer numbers, largely due to the majority of Post Office services being offered elsewhere. This restructure will involve the closure of up to 2,500 post offices throughout the UK. In many cases the impact will be mitigated through the provision of alternative 'outreach' services, however this does not apply to St. Aidan's post office as it is considered that there are suitable alternative facilities nearby to enable the national minimum access criteria listed in paragraph 3.2 to be met. These facilities are based in Chadsmoor and Cannock town centre.

Postwatch Ltd is the independent 'watchdog' for postal services. It is working to ensure that those affected by the Post Office restructuring programme are treated fairly and openly. Postwatch states that it will 'work to ensure consultations take full account of customer needs [and] will be working with Post Office Limited to help secure the best possible outcome for every area'. It also emphasises that 'Postwatch, like the Government, does not have the power to veto proposals'.

Section 2

Details of Matters to be Considered

Cannock Chase District has fared relatively well compared to other parts of Staffordshire and Shropshire, having only one branch targeted for closure. However, this branch is in Cannock North ward, the most deprived ward in the district which clearly is of major concern as many people affected by its closure are likely to have difficulty accessing alternative facilities.

In making its proposals, Post Office Ltd has analysed a wide variety of data. This includes: opening hours, (48 per week) customer serving positions (2), average number of customer sessions per week (750 – 999), additional products (St Aidans has an on line national lottery facility), retail type (a small grocery and newsagent), ease of access (suitable for wheelchair access with a ramp and wide doors, and a low level serving counter), proximity to ATM (there is one outside the branch), parking facilities (available), location of nearest bus stop (100 yards) and external posting facilities (post box outside the branch). Details of alternative Post Office branches are also included - Chadsmoor which is 0.7 miles away but with no direct bus access, other than via Cannock Town Centre, and across hilly terrain and a busy road, and Cannock Town Centre, a four minute bus ride which is served by six buses an hour. The data also includes an assessment of the local population, but is printed wrongly in the details which have been forwarded to date: the matter has been raised with PostWatch and the Post Office and amended details will be forwarded: we have been assured the assessment has been made using the correct data. However, this mistake also applies to ten other Post Offices in Staffordshire and Shropshire.

The key problems that will arise as a result of the loss of the St Aidan's Post Office facility are as follows:

- Cannock North is the most deprived ward in the district . Within this ward are four Lower Super Output Areas (smaller concentrations of population, around 1,500 people in each) which actually rank in the worst quartile of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England. One of

these Super Output Areas ranks within the worst 10% in England. The Census shows that, in addition to over a third of households having no car, 37.5% of the population have health which is either 'not good' or else they have a limiting long term illness. 23.4% claim benefits, compared to 14.5% for Cannock Chase as a whole and 14.2% nationally.

- The Post Office claims that there are two other post offices nearby. However, given the level of deprivation the aim should be to remove barriers to service delivery, not make them more difficult to access, and this should apply to Post Office services. Some would find accessing the alternative services a problem if they face an additional financial cost with the extra travel involved or if they cannot physically use a bus.
- Another concerning issue is the sustainability of the small grocery store / newsagent which is linked to the Post Office. A planning application has recently been lodged for change of use of the premises to a pizza takeaway. In a statement lodged with the application (reference CH080208, received on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008), the agent advises: 'my clients are making this application as this Post Office may be one for government closures which are imminent.....without the income from the Post Office side, the general stores will not make the clients an income'. It is also advised that the ATM machine will also disappear, so it can be concluded that the loss of the Post Office will also result in a loss of a variety of other services to the local community.
- The Post Office states that the St Aidan's branch deals with between 750 to 999 customer sessions per week. Given the issues outlined above this level of usage cannot be deemed insignificant and the loss of this local facility in the district's most deprived ward should be resisted most strongly.

### Section 3

#### Contributions to CHASE

The recommendation would contribute to the 'Healthier Communities, Housing and Older People' objective that local people should live in 'a place where people are healthy, have opportunities to live in a decent house in a good environment. Where people have greater choice and control over their own lives and have an active role in the community with access to the support they need to remain living as independently as they choose'. St Aidan's Post Office is located in the most deprived ward in Cannock Chase district, and the loss of this facility will have a negative impact upon the choice and ease of access to local services currently experienced by residents of that ward.

### Section 4

#### Section 17 Implications

There are no Section 17 implications arising from this report.

### Section 5

#### Human Rights Act Implications

There are no Human Rights Act implications arising from this report.

Section 6

Data Protection Act Implications

There are no identified implications in respect of the Data Protection Act arising from this report.

Section 7

Risk Management Implications

There are no identified service or strategic risk management implications arising from this report. The risk that the Cannock North Ward will be further disadvantaged by the loss of the local Post Office services will be mitigated by the objection to the proposal recommended in this report.

Section 8

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising from this report

Section 9

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising from this report

Section 10

Human Resource Implications

There are no human resource implications arising from this report

Section 11

Conclusions

The closure of St Aidan's Post Office will be a significant loss to the most deprived ward in Cannock Chase district and this proposal should be strongly resisted.

Background Papers

Post Office Limited Network Change Programme. Area Plan Proposal Shropshire and Staffordshire

Post Office Limited Network Change Programme, Appendix

PostWatch leaflet 'The Post Office closure programme'

Planning Statement, planning application CH/08/0208

The State of Cannock Chase District Partnership report 2005 / 6

Census 2001