

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 20 November 2019

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Michael Downing, Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair in the Chair), Sandra Barr, Stephen Booth, Adrian Brown, Jim Brown, Teresa Callaghan, Jody Hanafin and Loraine Rossati.

Also Present: Cllr R Broom (Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Working)
Cllr L Briscoe (Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport)
Christine Donnelly (Director of North Thames and East Anglia Federation of Sub Postmasters)
Marie-Claire Clinton (Chair of Stevenage Old Town Business Partnership)
Chris Newbitt (Manager of the Co-op Symonds Green)

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.15pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Bainbridge and D Cullen and apologies for lateness were received from Councillors M Downing (Chair) and L Rossati.

Councillor A Mitchell CC in the Chair.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 3 SEPTEMBER 2019**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 3 September 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **REVIEW OF LOCAL POST OFFICE SERVICES IN STEVENAGE**

The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting and a round of introductions was made.

The Chair then invited Christine Donnelly to address the Committee.

Ms Donnelly made a presentation during which she outlined the issues facing sub postmasters, which included competition from alternative service providers, declining letters volume and a revised payments schedule which has resulted in reduced earnings potential for sub postmasters. On a more positive note the Committee was advised that an increase in parcel traffic, mostly returns to internet retailers, had provided additional business albeit at the cost of providing extra secure storage space for those items.

The Committee was advised that for most locations there was a need for the sub postmaster to have an alternative revenue stream (for example retail) within the premises to make a sub post office economically viable. It was acknowledged that a customer using a post office could return at a later point to make a purchase that might have been made elsewhere, thus further bolstering the sub postmaster's revenue.

The Committee was further advised of a number of activities that local authorities could undertake to support the post office network in their area. Such activities could include allowing tenants to pay council bills over a post office counter or providing free short term parking outside post office premises.

Members then asked a number of questions which included the strategic oversight of the post office network, the vulnerability of post offices within retail chains, the Crown Office closure problem and potential emergency measures to provide post office services to the Old Town.

With respect to the strategic oversight of the post office network the Committee was advised that Post Office Ltd had a target of providing services for the majority of the population within a three mile area, with exceptions made for remote rural areas. It was noted that headcount was not a factor in determining the number or locations of post offices, except in the aforementioned rural areas. When an application to open a new post office was received an impact assessment on other post offices in the area would be made and the application judged accordingly to support the viability of the existing network.

For those post offices located within retail premises provision of services was at risk from decisions made by the owner of the premises such as the closure of the Waitrose branch in the Old Town. The Post Office would have no say in such decisions. Post office services were also at risk from the retirement of either the sub postmaster or the business owner when no successor could be found.

In reply to the question concerning the Crown Office closure program the Committee was advised that Crown Offices had been closed and moved into retail outlets such as W H Smith in most towns of a comparable, and larger, size to Stevenage.

Contingency arrangements for the provision of post office services for the Old Town were then discussed and the Committee was advised that in certain circumstances Post Office Ltd could provide alternative arrangements where local conditions and Post Office Ltd funding and decision making permitted. Often this could be in the form of a porta cabin or temporary visit services. Members requested that Officers pursue this as an option and the Strategic Director undertook to write to Post Office

Ltd to request that they consider provision of emergency post office facilities in the Old Town.

The Chair thanked Christine Donnelly for her input to the meeting and then invited Chris Newbitt, manager of the Co-op at Symonds Green to address the Committee.

Mr Newbitt informed the Committee that following the closure of the discrete and secure post office facility in the store the decision to provide a range of post office functions had been taken at the Co-op's head office as part of its commitment to provide community services.

The Committee was then advised of the issues of providing both post office services and retail sales at the same till and the difficulties of balancing staff and customer expectations against business need.

Mr Newbitt identified a number of issues that had arisen including the length and complexity of some transactions, storage space for parcels and the lack of privacy for customers wishing to deal with confidential matters. The lack of a secure area also precluded the store dealing with larger banking transactions.

In reply to a question the Committee was advised that staff had undergone training and adhered to compliance requirements set by Post Office Ltd.

In reply to a further question the Committee was advised that the store was expected to reopen on Tuesday 26 November 2019.

The Chair thanked Chris Newbitt for his input to the meeting and then invited Marie-Claire Clinton, Chair of Stevenage Old Town Business Partnership, to address the Committee.

Ms Clinton advised the Committee that the effect of the closure of the Old Town post office had yet to be fully felt by local businesses although the lack of banking facilities in the Old Town High Street had caused some issues for local traders, especially around cash handling.

A reduction of footfall in the High Street had also been noted.

A request for a further update regarding the application for a replacement post office in the Old Town was then made of the Strategic Director to be requested from Post Office Ltd.

The Committee was advised that Post Office Ltd was actively considering an application to run a post office in the Old Town but that further details had not been forthcoming due to reasons of commercial sensitivity. Additionally a timescale for the reopening was unknown at this stage.

A Member suggested that the Council could lobby the Co-op's head office to reinstate full post office facilities in the Symonds Green branch.

The Chair thanked Marie-Claire Clinton and then invited comment from the Portfolio Holders present at the meeting.

It was noted that the views expressed by Members, the local community and Post Office Ltd reflected a clear need for post office services in the Old Town.

It was acknowledged that Post Office Ltd did intend to provide services in the Old Town and it was hoped that the reopening of a post office could be expedited, or reasons given should there be any delay to the process.

With regard to the closure of the Waitrose branch, regrets were expressed that neither the Council nor Post Office Ltd had received forewarning of the impending closure. However Officers confirmed that usually when new or changed facilities are proposed Post Office Ltd, as had been the case in Bedwell with the recent addition of new services, the Council and Members are made aware of this.

The Chair again thanked those in attendance, including members of the public, for their input and requested that the issue be revisited with a brief update at a future meeting of the Committee.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That Officers be requested to approach Post Office Ltd to seek provision of an emergency post office in the Old Town and to provide such assistance as necessary to facilitate the arrangement.
2. That the subject of post office provision be reviewed a meeting in the New Year.

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR