

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM

RELOCATION OF POST OFFICE PUBLIC MEETING

6 March 2008

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Mr Peter Mylchreest (Post Office Ltd), Richard Hall (Royal Mail Group) and Ian Hayward (WH Smith), together with approximately 100 members of public, Councillors and local representatives.

Following a presentation from Mr Mylchreest, the following concerns were raised and responses noted:

BACKGROUND TO THE DECISION

The Post Office had proposed the relocation of the Winchester Crown Post Office (currently located at Friarsgate) to WH Smith, High Street with a planned opening date of 22 May 2008. Its consultation period on the proposal would close 27 March 2008.

The Government had announced that it would no longer subsidise Crown Post Offices beyond 2011 as 37% of the £200m the Post Office Ltd's annual losses were attributed to Crown Post Offices, despite them making up only 3% of the Post Office's network.

The Post Office had therefore signed a national, seven year contract with WH Smiths to relocate Crown Post Offices within branches of WH Smiths. By June 2008, 77 Offices would be relocated in a move which, in addition to improving customer service, was hoped would halve these losses.

The contract stipulated that the new service must be at least as good as that provided by the current Post Office, and in admitting that current queuing times were unacceptable, Mr Mylchreest hoped that the new Post Office would offer significant improvements.

The contract also included a two-year notice period, in the unlikely event of WH Smiths deciding that the new arrangement was unsatisfactory. Mr Mylchreest stated that this period provided greater security than most Sub-Post Office franchises, but should the arrangement fail, the Post Office were committed to providing a facility in Winchester.

FACILITIES

The new Post Office was to be located at the rear of WH Smith (where DVDs were currently sold).

It would include seven open-plan, low-level desks to improve accessibility for the disabled (two of which would be fortress counters for those transactions which required a higher level of security) and writing desks for forms.

There was to be no stamp vending machine, as these were uneconomic to run and stamps (along with Lottery tickets) would continue to be available at any WH Smith counter.

The remainder of the WH Smiths Store would be altered by:

Additional counters at the front of the store to speed queues for WH Smiths products; removal of the news-cube stand and reduction in height of merchandising stands (to improve sightlines to the new Post Office); an extended range of stationery goods; and relocation of games and jigsaws upstairs.

QUEUES

Concerns were raised regarding the size of the new Post Office and its capacity to deal with long queues experienced at the existing facility.

The existing Post Office had ten counters, that, because of staff restrictions (which were unlikely to be carried forward to the new facility), only half were open to serve the public. The seven counters at the new Post Office were therefore more likely to open when necessary, thus reducing the length of queues. It was noted that WH Smiths had an interest to ensure that the queue did not spill over into the remainder of the retail store. The length of the queues was also likely to be reduced as an effect of the longer opening hours proposed by the Post Office.

Mr Mylchreest explained the logistics of the queue and that the aisles would be 1500 mm wide, which was DDA compliant and sufficient to allow motorised shopmobility scooters and double-prams to pass. Merchandising would be available to the queue of weekly magazines, etc and a limited number of chairs would be available. However, there were no plans to introduce perches for customers to rest upon in the queue. The capacity of the queuing area was approximately 30 people, which the Post Office calculated to be adequate, given the increased number of open, serving counters.

The queues and general performance of the new facility would be monitored by mystery shoppers and overseen by a dedicated management team. Of those Post Offices which had already relocated, the mystery shoppers had found a 6 % improvement in service.

ACCESS:

Concerns were raised regarding WH Smith's accessibility by the disabled and elderly, as it was further up the hill of the High Street, and further away from car parks and bus services than the current Post Office.

Access to both WH Smith and the new Post Office would be from the existing, power-assisted High Street doors and an existing side door onto Parchment Street. Mr Hayward explained that he would review signage to operate the power-assisted doors.

The rear door onto Parchment Street/St Georges Street had been sealed and would be converted to provide an emergency exit only to ensure the smooth flow of the queue within the building and other operational reasons.

Within WH Smith, it was planned that the racks nearest the Post Office would sell stationery items to ease access to the Post Office, as these were unlikely to produce a large number of shoppers browsing merchandise, in contrast to racks of magazines.

TRAFFIC:

Concerns were raised regarding the potential to block St Georges Street.

The Post Office would receive an average of four collections a day from Royal Mail and this might involve walking the mail to a van parked some distance from the Post Office.

STAFF:

The Post Office continued to exercise a policy of no compulsory redundancies; therefore existing staff would be offered relocation packages to another position within the Post Office Group or the option of voluntary redundancy.

The staff at the new Post Office would be employees of WH Smith but with the same training and security checks as staff at the Crown Post Office. WH Smith employees would be paid less (at a rate comparable to the pay of employees at Sub-Post Offices, to make the business competitive) and would have a more flexible contract than existing Crown Post Office staff, which should help ensure that more counters could be opened for longer. Staff that worked in the Post Office would not be transferable with staff in the remainder of WH Smiths.

The Forum also noted that there was a national agency of staff from which WH Smith could buy-in trained, emergency cover.

Staff would be expected to promote only Post Office products, rather than WH Smith items, in the Post Office.

OTHER COMMENTS:

- The Post Office should increase the range of services offered by existing Sub-Post Offices (such as road fund licenses)
- The Post Office was talking to the Council about amending street signs to the new Post Office
- Signage on the listed WH Smith Building was restricted by planning controls
- Royal Mail intended to retain the Pillar Box outside the old Post Office and that there would be posting facility at the new Post Office
- The relocation would affect the drop off point for Dial-a-Ride

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chairman thanked the presenters for clarifying issues related to the relocation of the Post Office and the public for their contribution to the debate.

The meeting commenced at 7.00pm and concluded at 9.10pm.

Chairman