

## **Chesham Post Office Public Meeting**

Trinity Baptist Church, Waterside – Monday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010

In attendance: Cllr Mrs J.C. Fulford (Mayor of Chesham), Chairman  
Cllr Ms J.E. Bramwell (Deputy Mayor of Chesham)  
Cllr A.K. Bacon (Chesham Town Council)  
Cllr N.L. Brown (Chesham Town Council)  
Cllr M. Fayyaz (Chesham Town Council)  
Cllr F.G. Holly (Chesham Town Council)  
Cllr Mrs C.M. Michael (Chesham Town Council)  
Cllr M.W. Shaw (Chesham Town Council)  
Cllr C.H. Spruytenburg (Chesham Town Council)  
Mrs Cheryl Gillan M.P.  
Ms. Martine Munby (Senior External Relations Manager, Royal Mail)  
Mr Stewart Swabey (Field Change Advisor, Post Office Ltd.)  
Mr Peter Wilkinson (Field Change Advisor, Post Office Ltd.)  
133 members of the public and press

*The meeting opened at 7.00 pm.*

### **1. Welcome**

The Reverend Colin Cartwright welcomed everyone to the church and stated that he was delighted to host such a meeting since everyone recognised the importance of the main town Post Office to the community. He then introduced the public to the Chairman for the evening, the Town Mayor, Councillor Mrs Justine Fulford.

Cllr Mrs Fulford thanked Reverend Cartwright for providing a venue big enough to accommodate the very many people who were interested in this important topic. She stated that she was particularly pleased to welcome representatives from Post Office Ltd on this occasion and looked forward to receiving an update from them in due course.

She advised that apologies had been received from Mr Tim Starkey; Cllr Steve Adams (Buckinghamshire County Council); Cllr Michael Brand (Buckinghamshire County Council and Chesham Town Council); Cllr Mrs Mimi Harker (Chiltern District Council) and Cllr Peter Yerrell (Chesham Town Council).

### **2. Minutes from Meeting Held on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2010**

Arising out of Minute No. 5(13), Cllr Mrs Fulford reported that Cllr Mrs Harker had written to both the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Postal Affairs and Employment Relations and Mr Wilkinson expressing extreme dissatisfaction with the current closure and requesting urgent action. To date, Cllr Mrs Harker had received no reply or acknowledgement. Mr Wilkinson confirmed he had received the letter and was in the process of replying.

Arising out of Minute No. 6(5), Councillor Mrs Fulford thanked everyone who had signed the petition objecting to the continued closure and particularly paid tribute to local residents Janet Rose and Margaret Powell who had collected a number of signatures. Accordingly she presented the Post Office representatives with the petition which contained over 1,300 signatures.

### **3. Update from Representatives of Post Office Ltd.**

CLlr Mrs Fulford introduced Ms Martine Munby, Mr Stewart Swabey and Mr Peter Wilkinson from Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd., respectively, and asked them to update the meeting on the current situation in regard to the Post Office. Firstly however she asked them to respond to some of the unanswered questions from the meeting held on the 20<sup>th</sup> January, namely:

- i. *Why doesn't Post Office Ltd. have emergency procedures in place for the sudden closure of branches?*  
Ms Munby responded by saying that Post Office Ltd. does have some monies for such emergencies but admitted the system was not foolproof and apologised again for the delay in re-opening the High Street branch.
- ii. *Could Greenway Post Office open on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons? Could Mr Patel provide coverage on these days?*  
Ms Munby paid tribute the Greenway staff for the way they had handled the increased footfall since the main Post Office closure but stated it would be difficult and unfair to impose further contractual conditions retrospectively on the staff there.
- iii. *Can the government fine Adam Crozier for his failure to provide us with a Post Office service?*  
Ms Munby responded by saying this was a matter for the government and not something she could comment on.

Councillor Mrs Fulford thanked Ms Munby for her responses and then asked Mr Wilkinson to update the meeting on developments in respect to the re-opening of the town centre Post Office.

Mr Wilkinson stated that he was delighted to report that the Post Office would re-open on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> February at the same site. He reported that a temporary sub postmaster had been appointed who had much experience and ran a number of other post offices across the country. This temporary appointment (and current one year lease agreement), he opined, would give the Post Office Ltd. a much needed breathing space to make a proper assessment of applicants seeking to run the facility on a permanent basis and he had already begun to advertise this post. He advised that a proper business plan was integral to any applicant's appointment since the site needed to be financially viable to ensure a closure did not re-occur in the future, particularly with the relatively high overheads associated with the building.

Mr Wilkinson then reported that while he was very happy with the current site, it was not the only option and he had investigated other possible sites in the centre of town. He stated that he was open to any suggestions but stated that the venue needed to be a certain size to host a viable retail shop and to accommodate at least four post office counters. He concluded by saying that Chesham had always been very high on his organisation's priorities and was extremely confident that Chesham would have a high quality and sustainable Post Office for the long-term.

#### **4. Address by Mrs Cheryl Gillan M.P.**

Councillor Mrs Fulford invited Chesham and Amersham's Member of Parliament, Mrs Cheryl Gillan, to briefly address the meeting.

Mrs Gillan thanked the Mayor for her invitation. She stated that she was aware of the first public meeting but had not been officially invited to it and thanked the Town Clerk for his apology for this oversight. She then stated that she had been in regular contact with Post Office Ltd. over the Christmas period and several times in January to discuss the progress of the negotiations that had taken place between the various parties. She advised that much of these negotiations were of a confidential commercial nature so there were certain matters she was unable to make public. However she emphasised that she kept abreast of the on-going developments at all time. She praised the Post Office representatives for their efforts in proceeding as swiftly as possible. She concluded by saying that she was proud of her record in fighting the closure of post offices generally and was delighted to see that the town centre branch would be re-opening on what she hoped would be a long-term basis for the benefit of the people of Chesham.

Cllr Mrs Fulford endorsed Mrs Gillan's comments on the importance of the facility to the public and also reminded the meeting of the negative effect the closure had had upon local businesses.

#### **5. Questions and Comments from the Floor**

Attendees were given the opportunity to ask questions to the representatives from Post Office Ltd. or to make general observations. The questions/observations were as follows:

1. *Why does Post Office Ltd. place so much emphasis on the web when many people do not have access to a computer?*

Mr Wilkinson responded by saying his organisation did attempt to utilise a range of communication tools and gave the example of the sub postmaster's job being advertised in local branches.

2. *I now pay my electricity bills in a shop in Asheridge Road. Will the re-opening of the Post Office affect this shop's business?*

Mr Wilkinson advised that this shop, like many others, had obviously signed up to Payzone UK Ltd. which allowed for the paying of utility bills. He reminded the meeting that the Post Office no longer had a monopoly on any services (save for postal orders) and therefore such shops were, in effect, competitors.

3. *I am concerned that the associated retail business required by Post Office Ltd. will not be sustainable thus putting the Post Office service at risk again. Can we have your assurance that you will ensure there is a sensible and viable business plan?*

Ms Munby responded by saying that the assessment of the business plan would be as rigorous as possible and would be integral to the appointment of the sub postmaster. She reminded the meeting that government had dictated that post offices should not be subsidised by the tax payer and therefore the associated retail outlet was essential. She advised that currently over 95% of the network was operated on such a basis.

4. *Why was the organisation's £1.7b contingency fund not utilised for Chesham when it was clear that the town centre branch closure meant that 95% of the residents were outside of the minimum access criteria?*

Ms Munby confirmed that such a fund did exist but there had been complicating factors in Chesham making the utilising of such a fund irrelevant. However she accepted there had been an unacceptable delay and again offered Post Office Ltd's apologies.

5. *The previous High Street Post Office was poor for persons with visibility impairments. Will the new one be improved in this area?*

Ms Munby advised that it would be, though probably not immediately as the emphasis was to get the facility as operational as quickly as possible.

6. *Are the previous staff being invited to work at the re-opened facility?*

Mr Wilkinson clarified that recruitment was down to the new temporary sub postmaster but the names of the previous employees had been passed on to her for consideration.

7. *The previous Post Office provision was not adequate, with a lack of provision at the counters. How reliable are the recording of customers' visits?*

Mr Wilkinson confirmed that the figures are recorded electronically and were accurately logged right up to the temporary closure in November. Therefore his organisation had no reason to suspect that the figure of approximately 3,500 people using the facility each week was incorrect.

8. *Would it be possible to have a larger rental area (such as the old 'Global Café' site) where the lease could be split to allow more than one retail franchise to operate? If this happened, it may have less effect on the Post Office if one of the retail outlets has financial difficulties.*

Mr Wilkinson confirmed he was willing to look at all options including this particular site but emphasised that the sub postmaster must ultimately have control of the entire premises.

9. *Why was the Post Office allowed to be closed for three months when the warning signs on the lease problems were apparent for all to see? And was Post Office Ltd. not given the required three month's termination notice as apparently required?*

Mr Wilkinson agreed that the facility had been closed for an unacceptably long time but advised that circumstances had resulted in him getting only one day's notice on its imminent closure.

10. *Can the monitoring not be improved to ensure this doesn't happen again?*

Mr Wilkinson advised that Post Office Ltd. was working hard to ensure this was the case.

11. *The standard response letters from the Royal Mail following letters of complaint on the closure were very patronising.*

Ms Munby apologised if this was how they were construed.

12. *There is a very strong industrial basis in the Waterside area yet the Waterside branch, despite not making a loss, was closed down. Accordingly private couriers have now taken up most of that delivery business. Is there not a strong case therefore for re-opening the Waterside branch to regain this lucrative business and having a smaller town centre branch?*

Ms Munby stated this could be looked at but did emphasise that the town centre branch needed to be a certain minimum size.

13. *Would a change of government result in a change of policy on post office provision in the country?*

After being invited to respond by the Mayor, Mrs Gillan opined her party had strongly opposed the spate of closures over the last few years. However her party would not be giving a detailed policy statement until it had examined the current financial position in detail.

14. *If high overheads were part of the problem to the previous closure, could the relevant authority look to waive/reduce the business rates?*

Cllr Mrs Fulford agreed that it would be advisable to speak to Chiltern District Council in regard to this.

## 6. Summary

Ms Munby expressed her gratitude to the Mayor for inviting her colleagues and her and also thanked all those who had attended tonight. She gave her assurance that such an unfortunate situation would not arise again in Chesham and confirmed that the business plan of the appointed sub postmaster would be given 'one hundred percent scrutiny'.

Cllr Mrs Fulford briefly mentioned the Mayoral Awards that were being promoted and requested that anyone wishing to nominate someone, or some company, for the People's Award; Young Person's Award or Business Award should contact the Town Hall for further details. Finally, Cllr Mrs Fulford thanked everyone for their attendance and, moreover, stated that she was pleased that the meeting had been so positive and she was looking forward to the official re-opening on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February.

*The meeting closed at 8.13 pm.*