



**What you need to know
about
Post Office closures
in
Torrige and West Devon**

**Geoffrey Cox QC
Member of Parliament
Torrige and West Devon**

FOREWORD BY GEOFFREY COX MP



Everyone in Devon knows that Post Offices are at the very heart of the identity and character of the community. They provide the local newsagent, chemist, or village shop. They are an essential support for the elderly and the disabled. Postmasters will watch out for their regulars, and miss them, and ask after them, if they do not come.

If the local Post Office closes, this vital support is ripped away; and as one of the most rural regions of England, Devon stands to be particularly badly affected. Our fragile rural economy will receive another blow; the elderly and those without a car still further disadvantaged; and our threadbare public transport network pushed even further towards breaking point.

We must do all we can to ensure that this does not become the case in Torridge and West Devon, as it has in other parts of the country. There is a powerful feeling for Post Offices in our area, and this should be made apparent at every opportunity. We must make determined and well-informed arguments, based on the government's own guarantees, and each and every one of us who values the service we receive, and the presence of our post office branches in our villages and market towns, must be prepared to demonstrate our practical support, not least by using them!

This information pack sets out how the consultation works, provides facts and figures that show how important Post Offices are to the region, and suggests what you can do to help save them. Only a determined campaign using reasoned arguments will have any chance of rescuing your post office branch if it has been identified for closure. We must fight to ensure that the Post Office Ltd. and the Government gets the message about the damage these closures will cause.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Geoffrey Cox". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

IMPORTANT POINTS

You can save your local Post Office.

The local community can have a real influence on the closure programme. Postwatch has promised to make sure Post Office Ltd takes the concerns of local people into account. If people don't demonstrate their support for their Post Office at the time of the consultation, they won't be able to do this.

Local support matters.

The more people who come together to show how vital the local Post Office is to them, the more chance there is of saving the branch. A large number of responses to the consultation can make a real difference.

Use examples to make your case.

Show that our area of Devon is particularly vulnerable to Post Office closures through your own examples. If you can't drive to the nearest branch, mention this; however the closures affect you, let the consultation know. Alternatively, use some of the facts printed in this booklet to make the point that people in our area need their Post Offices.

BACKGROUND

There are 8,000 rural branches and 6,500 urban branches in the post office network. Almost all the rural branches are understood to be losing money and the whole network loses £3 million a week¹. These loss-making branches are subsidised by the Government's annual £150 million Social Network Payment.

The rural Post Office network is the largest retail network in Europe which means that around 84 per cent of people living in rural areas are within a mile of a post office branch². However, the total number of post offices has fallen by more than 3,200 over the last ten years³.

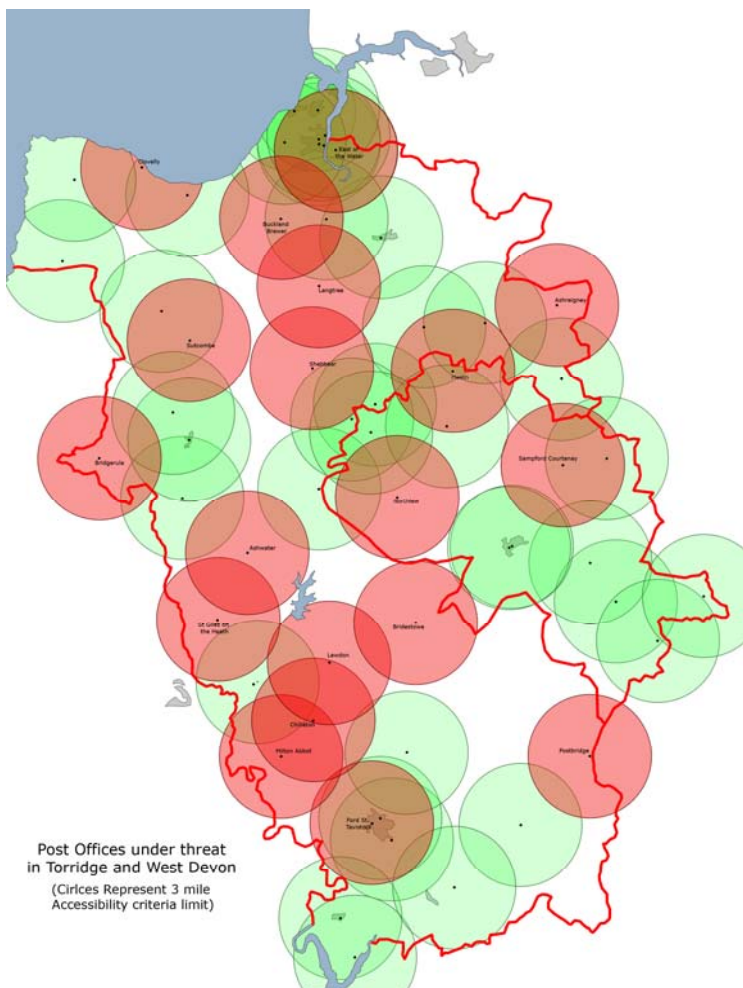
Unfortunately, last May the Government agreed with Post Office Ltd that a further 2,500 Post Offices will be closed. When these new closures are added on to the post offices closed since 1999, 33% of the network will have been shut down.

HOW WILL THE CLOSURE PLANS WORK?

Post office Ltd's 'Network Change'⁴ programme has divided the country into 50 areas. Each of these areas will then go through a three-stage process.

The first stage occurs for twelve weeks before the public consultation begins. It involves assessments of the areas' different Post Offices, their viability and profitability. Post Office Ltd has four major criteria for this process;

- The amount of business received by Post Offices, as sampled over the course of a year; importantly, business is measured using the amount of visits to the Post Office, not individual transactions.
- The distance of Post Offices from both each other according to the Government's accessibility criteria (see below)
- The size of the Post Office; small branches are particularly under threat.
- The benefit each individual Post Office provides, not to the community but to Post Office Ltd.



Post Office Ltd will also use this period to consult with the regulator, Postwatch, and Local authorities. This process has now taken place.

An 'area plan' has now been produced with the closure proposals. A copy of this can be found on the Royal Mail Website as well as on Geoffrey Cox's (www.geoffreycox.co.uk).

The second stage is the public consultation. Post Office Ltd will publish a list of the closures that it plans, and invites comment from the public. The public consultation will run from May 20th to June 30th.

When the six-week public consultation process ends, the third stage begins. This is a four week period where the consultation is taken into account and Postwatch is able to raise

issues relating to specific branches with Post Office Ltd. This is where public support for a local Post Office can make a massive difference.

Once this final period expires, an announcement will be made on whether the consultation has raised points that require the plan to be modified. All closures have to take place a month after this announcement⁵.

WHAT DO THE PLANS RECOMMEND?

Post Office Ltd is proposing to close or significantly downgrade 20 Post Offices across Torridge and West Devon. Of these, 5 Post Office branches are proposed for complete closure. They are:

*East the Water
Ford St, Tavistock
Peter Tavy Mobile Post Office
Sampford Courtenay
Sutcombe*

The remaining 15 Post Offices are intended to be replaced by an 'outreach' service. This means that they will not be closed completely, but will offer fewer services and be open for shorter hours be replaced by a Mobile Post Office, or operate a 'Home Delivery service' by phone. The Post Offices proposed for this measure are:

<i>Ashreigney</i>	<i>Lewdown</i>
<i>Ashwater</i>	<i>Meeth</i>
<i>Bridestowe</i>	<i>Milton Abbot</i>
<i>Bridgerule</i>	<i>Northlew</i>
<i>Buckland Brewer</i>	<i>Postbridge</i>
<i>Chillaton</i>	<i>Shebbear</i>
<i>Clovelly</i>	<i>St Giles on the Heath</i>
<i>Langtree</i>	

The full plans can be found on Post Office Ltd's Website, as well as Geoffrey Cox's own website.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

It is vital that as many people contact the consultation as possible. Post Offices can be saved by large numbers of well-argued submissions to the consultation, showing both widespread public support for the branch, and also how vital it is to the local community. The Consultation can be contacted in a range of ways.

You can:

Complete and return a postcard to Geoffrey Cox MP before 27 June 2008. You should find a postcard in your local PO branch.

Write to: National Consultation Team, Post Office Ltd, FREEPOST

Telephone: 08457 22 33 44

E-mail: consultation@postoffice.co.uk.

The more people reply to the consultation, the more importance the regulator Postwatch will place on these views.

As well as making your voice heard in the consultation, you can support your local Post Office in other ways. Display posters in your window, use your branch as much as possible to underline how vital it is, sign petitions, write to your local newspaper, anything that shows the strength of feeling for our local Post Offices.

USEFUL INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

Below is a range of information and statistics that you may want to include in your response to the consultation.

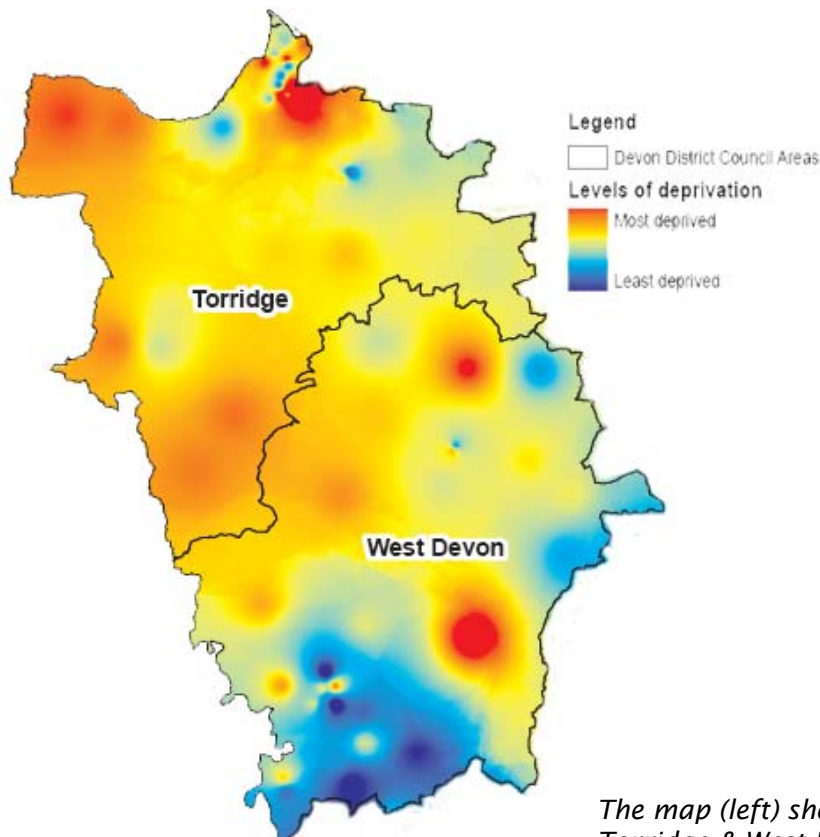
The Situation in Torridge and West Devon

Torridge and West Devon has a high proportion of residents who would be particularly vulnerable to Post Office closures. According to the 2001 census, just over a quarter⁶ of the constituency's population is 60 years old or older; 28.3% of households are comprised only of pensioners compared to a national average of 23.71%⁷. In 2005 6,975 constituents claimed housing benefits, more than half of whom were people over 60⁸.

West Devon is also one of the most rural and sparsely populated areas of England. Just 0.4 people per hectare live in West Devon, compared to an English average of 3.77 people per hectare⁹.

In regional terms, around 64% of the South West's population live in urban settlements, the lowest percentage of any English region and below the English average of 82%. More people live in villages, hamlets or isolated dwellings in the region than the English average, 17% compared to 8% respectively. With almost 4%, the region also has a higher percentage of people living in remote locations than the English average of just over 1%¹⁰.

A recent report by the Department of Communities and Local Government measured different types of social exclusion and deprivation. One of the measures of deprivation is 'geographical barriers', which measures social exclusion due to not having close access to essential services.



Torridge and West Devon are both considerably more 'geographically deprived' than the national average, and several areas in the area rate amongst the worst in the country. England was divided into more than 32,000 areas.

Within this, the wards of Bridestowe, Forest and Milton Ford are in the top 100 most 'Geographically Deprived' areas in the country, while Walden, Two Rivers and Broadheath are in the top 200. 14 areas in Torridge and West Devon are in the top 500¹¹.

The map (left) shows 'Geographical Deprivation' in Torridge & West Devon.

Sources

- 1 Royal Mail Group Plc 'Our brands' <http://www.royalmailgroup.com/portal/rmg/content1?catId=23200554&mediaId=23700541#13900299>
- 2 <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page4059.asp>
- 3 DTI Select Committee: <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmtrdind/91/91.pdf>
- 4 Royal Mail Website, "Network Change Programme"
- 5 Postwatch, "Memorandum of understanding in respect of the consultation process" May 2007
- 6 26.5%- Source: ONS Neighbourhood statistics
- 7 ONS Neighbourhood Statistics- Constituency Profile
- 8 ONS Neighbourhood Statistics- Housing Benefit
- 9 ONS: Census 2001, Population Density
- 10 ONS, Population Estimates, 22 August 2007
- 11 <http://www.conservatives.com/pdf/deprivationdata-excel.xls>