

How to fight back against the UK's worst attack on local communities

Hundreds of winners and losers amongst the first branch closures planned by "the people's" Post Office Ltd. are now known - hundreds more now face the same disaster.

Amongst them are hundreds of rural communities now coming to terms with fundamental changes that could force many out of their villages.

No Post Office probably means their only local shop is also doomed and thousands of small businesses, the elderly and infirm, young struggling families with no cars and little, if any, public transport, face a bleak future. PO Ltd, the public watchdog Postwatch, MPs, Local Authorities and other protest groups, acknowledge that Rippingale, a village on the edge of the Fens in Lincolnshire, put up a strong campaign - as this is written, it still doesn't know its final fate, nearly five months after its first public announcement.

But Rippingale believes it's done a vital job *for* the Post Office - in effect bench-testing closure policy and processes, enabling them to refine documentation and responses, correct crass errors and make it much tougher for the next poor devils.

So here's a guide on how to fight back

- Get started early. Our first announcement came on October 1 - Friends of Rippingale Post Office formed the same day, hard-copy petitions and Downing Street E-Petitions were up and running by Day 2, without any time-wasting public meeting to agree action.
- The Friends are (mainly) a bunch of old gits with attitude, but also with years of experience of business, industry, civil service, internet technology and the media - you'll find them in almost every community - sign 'em up.
- Get the back-story clear - the Government started all this by removing core contracts from PO Ltd, then discovering, surprise, surprise, that branch offices were losing money.
- Find out when your area closure plan will be published and whether your PO's on the list - go to www.postoffice.co.uk and click on Network Change - every corner of the UK will be affected.
- Start gathering information NOW, don't wait until the launch of your public consultation - six weeks isn't enough to prepare an effective case - it was deliberately designed that way.

- Start counting customers now, get a complete picture of "footfall," over the longest period possible. PO Ltd won't share any branch financial information and may intimidate your sub-postmaster/mistress into silence because of "contractual confidentiality," (but see below).
- Your sub-postmaster/mistress won't know in detail how much business they're doing over their PO counter - transactions are electronic and inaccessible locally. But he/she will know what they're paid and you can work from that.
- Also be very clear about what your sub-postmaster/mistress wants to do - face the fact that many may want to take the compensation offered and go - and if that's the case, you've probably lost before you've started.
- Find out which month's finances they checked - they could be a year old. Ripplingale's store and branch PO was recently refurbished, business has boomed, but the period monitored by PO Ltd was before the present Sub-Postmaster took over.
- PO Ltd talks about "customer sessions," not individual transactions, even though a session can mean buying a single stamp, or a stamp, plus paying bills, sending a parcel and withdrawing cash, simultaneously.
- Check who's who in PO Ltd., the difference between Network Change, National Consultation and External Relations Teams, where they're based and how you contact them directly. Get the name of the Regional Network Change Manager who signed off your regional plan and make contact (firstname.lastname@postoffice.co.uk or firstname.lastname@royalmail.com) (and see below).
- Check the '06 NATIONAL public consultation, based on changing usage, falling customer numbers and income. There were few objections. Even the Federation of Sub-Postmasters agreed the closure plans, swayed by compensation offers (and now regretting it.)
- The result was the DTI (now the Department of Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform) response document, dated December 2006 - Google a search phrase like "DTI PO closure" and you'll find it. Also the Memorandum of Understanding between PO Ltd and Postwatch, dated May 2007 - tucked away at the bottom of FAQs on the Post Office website - www.postoffice.co.uk - click on Network Change. They make interesting reading.
- Forget all that. Forget geography, social and economic impact, local

transport, demographics, local businesses and home workers, voluntary closures, increased car use, housing expansion, any emotional argument. The real story is that they couldn't make all that work - too much conflicting detail - what they went for was a neat, geographical pattern on a map.

- Or at least don't focus on them - you **MUST** concentrate on the essentials. Rippingale received unusual access to PO Ltd. - first, a face-to-face meeting with the man who signed off their regional plan which proposed closure for their branch. He said there were only 4 criteria that PO Ltd would consider - proximity to the next nearest branch, numbers of customers, size of business and crucially, whether the branch was making a loss. (though see below).
- That was confirmation, if needed, that Rippingale was taking the right approach with a 120 page dossier, strongly attacking a litany of errors in PO Ltd documents, manipulation of inaccurate and out-of-date information, contempt for Government criteria, confused, badly written scripts, inarticulate, clumsy and contradictory presentations.
- Each targeted branch has its own closure consultation document - Rippingale's gave the village of Folkingham as its next nearest service. Unfortunately, Folkingham's also closing - and their notice gave Rippingale as **THEIR** next nearest branch.
- A month **BEFORE** notices were served, PO Ltd agents visited Rippingale and, working to a script, told the Sub-postmaster that his branch would close, no appeal allowed and introduced an "Outreach partner." This "partner" then offered the Rippingale Sub-postmaster an insulting £1000 a year to keep his counter open for 13 hours a week and was told where to stuff it.
- Plan your campaign around the media and make sure anything you say, is articulate, focussed and interesting - profiles of real, vulnerable groups, not pictures of old ladies weeping that they don't know what to do - they're irrelevant.

Rippingale produced two, sometimes three Press Releases a week with blanket coverage - front page leads in five local papers, lead items in bulletins and programmes on three local radio stations and three regional TV stations.

If you have a website, use it - go to www.RippingaleVillage.co.uk
Best of luck with the national media - Rippingale never cracked them and remains amazed that they (with the exception of the Mail on

Sunday) and David Cameron simply didn't get it.

- Copy everything as widely as possible - to your local authority, MPs, everyone in the PO Ltd political and management chain, including Sue Huggins - the Director of PO Network Change, Alan Cook - MD of PO Ltd, Allan Leighton - Chairman of Royal Mail, Paula Vennells - PO Ltd Network Director, Pat McFadden MP - the PO Minister, George Thomson - General Secretary of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters and to relevant regional reps in Postwatch.
- Go for a few high profile but meaningful events. Quentin Davies MP, even though (or perhaps because) he's crossed the House of Commons floor and Nick Boles, his Tory successor, who'd just been selected, drew a crowd of 250 outside our local shop/branch. Our march to the next nearest branch, down the busy, dangerous A15 - no footpaths, no public transport - to demonstrate the consequences of closure - over 100 protesters, dogs, horses, wheelchairs, babies, mobility scooters, police - topped the local news agenda.
- Look VERY carefully at any offer of "Outreach," - these are attempts to install limited services but they don't come cheap - in some cases they cost more than the branch they're replacing. Match your customer numbers against proposed opening hours - it's revealing.
- Don't knock Postwatch, they're in an invidious position - a watchdog with no teeth - but they'll be your final voice in the review process. Also be aware that Postwatch is being replaced by the new National Consumer Council (hopefully to better effect).
- Rippingale was gifted the supreme example of bad timing and judgement - the "people's Post Office," TV campaign, starring that regular PO customer Joan Collins - PO Ltd privately admitted this was their worst mistake. No one apart from PO Ltd knows what this cost - even the Lords have been refused access to this information under the Freedom of Information Act.
- But you will have one other big advantage - it's called the Sustainable Communities Bill, promoted by the Lib Dem MP Tim Farron, due in the Lords and likely to be law very shortly. Keep an eye on this - it's going to be important.
- National small shop chains like Londis and Spar have belatedly realised what a threat this programme is to their survival - get them on side.

- PO Ltd surprisingly agreed to a personal handover of Rippingale's dossier, again to the man who'd make the final decision - the only group to achieve this. No press were permitted but villagers took their own pictures.
- Perhaps even more surprisingly, Rippingale were also granted a personal interview with Sue Huggins, the Director of PO Network Change in what turned out to be a valuable and revealing meeting. From this came an invitation to continue negotiations with the Network Change team to try to find viable alternative solutions to closure - this process is continuing as we speak. So watch this space.
- The big story which emerged in February 2008 is the report of the Parliamentary Select Committee into PO Closures and which both validated and vindicated everything Rippingale had done up to that point. It's a vitally important document. It confirms that PO Ltd have got so much wrong in both reaching decisions and in the process of consultation. It says that if it's the last shop in a village, the presumption should be to keep the PO branch open, that community needs should be given greater priority and the need to keep information about branches confidential should be strictly limited. It adds that PO Ltd is now open to imaginative ideas and alternative solutions to closure.
- You'll find a two page summary of the Select Committee findings and the full report on this website - read them both - they could be your best tool in the fight-back.
- Remember - work doesn't stop at the end of that six-week consultation, there have to be fall-back positions for each of the next, review stage, outcome options and imaginative ideas for a viable future.

Many of the mistakes listed above won't be repeated - PO Ltd have cleaned up their scripts and learned valuable lessons.

Rippingale apologises if we've helped make your jobs more difficult and offers this guide in the hope you'll find it useful.

Future visitors to the local shop may well find a closure consultation desk alongside the busy PO counter.

Jim Latham

Friends of Rippingale PO

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