

DRAFT RESPONSE SERVICE

As part of the Rural Opportunities Bulletin, RSN will regularly provide concise potential responses to key current consultations. These are not intended to be definitive or to reflect the views of RSN and may include potentially opposing responses to reflect different views designed to assist individual organisations in compiling their own response. We do however recognise the pressure members are under and we hope this service will assist.

Post Office Network consultation – Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy

Government provides funding to maintain a national network of post office branches that is accessible to everyone. They are seeking views on what people expect from the post office network. The consultation states that responses will be used to help determine the funding provided to the post office after the existing agreement with Post Office Limited ends in 2018. It further states that the government is not proposing any changes to the network through this consultation.

This consultation closes on 21 December 2016.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-office-network>

Question 1: Do you agree that the existing criteria should continue to be used for defining what a nationwide network of post office branches should look like?

Draft response: As a minimum, the current criteria should be maintained. From a rural perspective, large areas do not have access to superfast broadband services or mobile phone reception. It is critical, therefore, that the current criteria is maintained as follows: “in rural areas, 95% of the total population across the UK to be within three miles of their nearest post office.”

In addition, the remaining 5% of the rural population should not be abandoned and detailed analyses should take place for each area to ensure a proper understanding exists of just how the communities affected can access Post Office services. Indeed, there is a strong case that those areas which do not have access to post office services within 3 miles should be prioritised in relation to the rollout of superfast and 5G services.

Question 2: What different criteria or what different approach could government consider to define what a nationwide network of post office branches should look like, including steps to ensure provision of post offices in small remote or hard-to-serve communities?

Draft response: Remote rural areas often suffer the combined problem of poor broadband provision and poor mobile coverage. If poor access to the physical services offered through the post office network is added to these issues then such communities are clearly in a very difficult position. There is a strong case for such areas to be prioritised for the rollout of superfast broadband services and, indeed, a positive way forward would be for a remote rural area to be selected as one of the pilot areas for 5G coverage announced in the 2017 Autumn Statement.

There is a real fear that remote rural communities could, effectively, be abandoned in relation to service provision in future and some form of positive move needs to be put in place to help such communities access important services, such as those provided through the Post Office network.

Question 3: What, if any, new services do you think could be offered at post office branches in the future – in particular considering those that could support remote communities, vulnerable members of society and others that rely on over-the-counter transactions?

Draft response: The consultation document correctly identifies the critical issue of people who cannot access digital or online services. To these people in remote rural communities, access to over-the-counter services is fundamental. This includes basic access to cash and benefits as well as the opportunity to pay TV licences, car tax and other services such as a delivery point for parcels. It is right that individuals, businesses and others are being asked what sort of services they would value to be added to the current offer and we hope that the government genuinely listens to the responses received. There would be real value in maintaining an open channel with local communities and businesses as service provision continues to evolve (both online and off-line) in order to ensure the ongoing relevance of Post Office services and to ensure that advantage is taken of local opportunities.

Question 4: What ways do you think communities might be able to play a more significant role in the operation of the post office network, in particular with the objective to support rural economies and strengthen local communities?

Draft response: Acknowledgement of the strong and supportive role played by local communities, local businesses and community enterprises in delivering effective services is welcomed. A key issue in enabling such local activities to be successful and sustainable is long term commitment from key partners and long term commitment to key contracts. There would be great value in providing long term certainty to such local activities and organisations with regard to the continuing availability of Post Office services.

Greater community involvement will assist in enabling an open channel to be maintained with regard to future demands from communities and opportunities for appropriate services to be provided.

The commitment to enhanced community involvement is welcomed.

Question 5: Do you have any other views on the points raised in this consultation that you feel government should consider regarding its approach to the post office network?

Draft response: The commitment to “maintaining a national network of post office branches that is accessible to all and to securing the future of 3,000 rural branches” is welcomed. Above all, this commitment must not waver. Ongoing commitment to this principle will be the strongest way of maintaining and growing local community support for the services available, enabling ongoing belief and trust in the services to be developed.

Ongoing dialogue with local communities and businesses should be maintained and not restricted to periodic consultation exercises as an important mechanism to ensure the continued relevance of the services available and in consolidating local trust.