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The post office is a crucial lifeline in rural areas – communities will suffer without subsidies

Post offices are the glue that hold local communities together and often act as an anchor for our high streets and villages. They are one of the most trusted public sector organisations in Britain, with research from Citizens Advice in 2017 finding they are the most valued local community asset, with almost half of Britons ranking their local post office branch as the most important service, ahead of banks, pubs, libraries or shops.

The services post offices provide are particularly vital in highly rural constituencies like mine. The Cotswolds is 65 miles long by 45 miles at its widest point, made up of more than 120 towns and villages. The demographic is mixed, but around 26 per cent are aged over 65. For these elderly constituents in particular, the post office is a lifeline, helping them carry out everyday activities and connect with loved ones. In an increasingly digital world, the post office is a crucial backstop for those who cannot access digital services, cash, or mail elsewhere.

I have heard of many examples of post offices being used as a hub to help someone in need, offering indispensable assistance to someone in trouble or unwell. In polling by the Post Office, 87 per cent of those asked said that the essential services they provide help vulnerable or lonely people.

There has been for some years a worrying decline in the number of post offices, especially in rural areas; this has been an issue since I became an MP 29 years ago. I have on many occasions spearheaded campaigns to save or establish post office services across my constituency. Between March 2020 and March 2021, the number of post offices in the UK decreased by 223. There has been a steady decline since the 1980s, increasing as we reached the mid-2000s.

When I visit my local post office it not only offers the normal range of services essential for businesses and individuals, it also offers a good range of everyday necessities.

In supporting businesses, 43 per cent surveyed said they would simply not be able to function without post office services, while 83 per cent of small and medium enterprises had said that over lockdown this had been an important aspect of running their business.

Access to post offices is a real concern. Ideally, constituents should be able to walk or cycle to their nearest branch; 67 per cent of Britons have a post office within a 10-minute journey, 38 per cent are a 10-minute walk away. Unfortunately, in rural areas such as my constituency, a significant number of people live further away. Every time a post office closes it will mean a longer journey

by car or, if available, by bus to the nearest post office in a town.

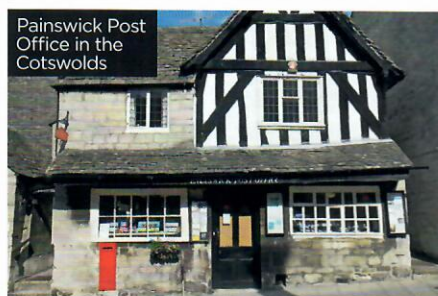
The government does recognise the importance of post offices. In November 2020 ministers announced a £227m investment for 2021/22, including a £50m network subsidy payment and £177m to invest in the future of the network.

We need to preserve post office services as much as possible. Given the lifeline they provide, especially in rural areas, there is a

strong case for subsidies to be provided by the government to support the operations of rural post offices that are not profitable.

More innovative solutions will have to be introduced to keep services running in smaller villages. In 2010, I presented to Parliament a proposal for an Outreach Service, using a core post office in larger towns to provide services 2.5 days a week for smaller nearby villages. This would significantly increase accessibility without massively impacting profitability. Fortunately in a number of cases this saved the village post office.

The impact on communities from closures of such services is huge and if we have learnt anything from the last couple of years, it is the paramount importance a strong community can play in our welfare and wellbeing.



Painswick Post Office in the Cotswolds



Guiting Power Post Office combines with an English tea room and antique shop in the Cotswolds