

Community proposal to Post Office Limited to re-open the Post Office at Sandham Memorial Village Hall RH201GG as an Outreach Service, on a trial basis.

This proposal has been drafted by the Committee of Sandham Memorial Village Hall, Coldwaltham Parish Council, Tracy Consentino postmaster at Alfold, Coldwaltham resident The Lord Navnit Dholakia, Andrew Griffith MP for Arundel and South Downs, and the local community. We are grateful to POL staff for advice and input.

1. The justification for this proposal

The part-time Post Office branch hosted by Sandham Memorial Village Hall (FAD 121908, Watersfield, RH20 1GG) was closed suddenly on the 14th September 2023 within 48 hours of the postmaster giving in her notice due to ill-health on 12th September. This decision was made with imperfect information and without community consultation.

At that time, Post Office Limited (POL) was under the impression that the Village Hall had withdrawn the free use of the premises. This was not the case. Moreover POL were unaware at that time that an experienced local postmaster was willing to take responsibility for running an outreach service three mornings a week. Since the closure, the community has learnt that POL had concerns about the level of usage of the service. This is a surprise as the Post Office always seemed busy during the 12 hours a week it operated (9 to 1, Mon, Tue & Thu). We have since learnt that despite the retiring postmistress' ill health over 2 years, the impact of COVID on Village Hall and PO use, and the limited opening hours, our Post Office had a CS (Customer Sessions) figure of 99 per week.

There is also a lack of understanding on the part of POL of the inaccessibility in practice of the nearest alternative branches.

Suddenly closing an essential service on the basis of such imperfect and sometimes incorrect information is not acceptable or fair to those who are affected. It was not until 29th November 2023, two and half months AFTER the closure, that POL issued notification of temporary closure.

This proposal, for a six-month trial led by the community, to re-open our Post Office, is an effort to help POL put this right. It will gather solid evidence on the viability, or not, of running a Post Office Outreach Service. We note that of the estimated 11,500 PO branches, 14.5% (1,651) were outreach services in 2021¹ so we feel confident that our proposal aligns with a common POL model. As a community, we will host this service from the same location as the post office branch which was suddenly closed down. This is at Sandham Memorial Village Hall, Coldwaltham, RH20 1GG, where much of the previous sub Post Office infrastructure remains in place, offering minimal reinstatement costs. The proposed outreach service now available to us

¹ Source: <https://corporate.postoffice.co.uk/media/lzkfri54/network-report-2020-21-regular-print-final-2.pdf>

can offer very similar days and hours to the previous branch offering. Whilst the Village Hall does not currently offer retail services (this may develop in future), it has undergone a resurgence in activity and use since COVID, under the new management committee. The building itself is currently used regularly 5 out of 7 days a week, and in addition the parking is used daily in term time by our school and nursery staff and parents. We would also seek to increase footfall by extending the services available (eg DVLA, ParcelForce, Euros on demand, Foreign Currency with a day's notice, Amazon Returns, provision of change/coins). The service will serve a significant catchment area south of the River Arun and, unlike alternative provision highlighted by POL, it offers easy access directly on the A29 and plentiful free parking to those with vehicles (see Appendix 1).

2. The objectives of the trial

1. The first objective of this 6-month trial is to establish the viability of a part-time outreach service. If it is found that a subsidy is required then the trial will establish the level and explore, with POL, the feasibility of providing this subsidy moving forward and the level of contribution that might be required from the community.
2. The second objective is related to social value² and we hope it will help re-establish the reputation of POL within our community.

3. The proposal

The proposal is to deliver part-time outreach post office services from the same counter facilities as those used by the branch that was suddenly closed down. These facilities have always been offered without charge to the incumbent Postmaster, with rent and utilities covered by the PC and Village Hall Committee. We would be willing to extend this offer, going forward. The services would be delivered by a qualified postmaster (Tracy Consentino) who already runs outreach services from her base in Alford Post Office (FAD 0549231, Alford Post Office, Loxwood Road, Alford GU6 8ER). Tracy is able to offer three mornings a week: 9 to noon, Mon, Tue & Thu. Tracy has requested that the data line (ADSL) be reactivated (it is already installed) and registered under her FAD number for this purpose due to the unreliability of the mobile service in the area. As previously, the post office counter infrastructure, toilets, heating, cleaning and parking will be provided to the Post Office by the hall committee and the Parish Council at no cost to the Postmaster or POL.

4. Action required from the community

Since the sudden closure of our Post Office, POL have stated that a key closure consideration was low usage levels, estimated by POL as 99 Customer Services (CSs) per week. This reason for closure was a surprise to the community. We note that this corresponds to an average 8.25 CS/hour of opening. Given this situation, the community will need to be made aware, and will

²<https://corporate.postoffice.co.uk/media/q4setrdu/part-and-parcel-the-economic-and-social-value-of-post-office.pdf>

be mobilised under a “use it or lose it” message to increase awareness of the fragility of the service and the need to increase usage.

The community will continue to provide the premises rent-free to POL/the outreach Postmaster.

The community, as represented by the Parish Council, would provide all relevant data and participate in a mid-point review of the trial. It would undertake any course correction activities identified by the mid-point review. The community and its representatives would not seek to interfere in any way in the relationship/contract between POL and the outreach postmaster.

The Parish Council will provide a suitably qualified project manager to run the trial and provide him/her with the necessary support.

5. Action required from POL

POL will authorise the trial and support the outreach service, and those running it, in the same way they support any other outreach service, for the 6 month trial. POL would reinstate the connection to the existing ADSL line and cover the usage costs of this.

POL will appoint a counterpart project manager of an appropriate level of seniority for the trial.

POL/the outreach postmaster (as appropriate) will provide, on a confidential basis, data relevant to the trial, including, for example, Horizon printouts, and participate in a mid-point review of the trial. The relevant party would undertake any course correction activities required on its part as identified by the mid-point review, within existing contract conditions.

6. Project management arrangements

The trial will be managed by the Parish Council who will nominate a project manager with relevant experience. The project manager will require a direct relationship with a named counterpart in POL with the appropriate level of seniority to be able to mobilise the necessary POL resources to support the trial. The project manager and his/her counterpart in POL will report to the project steering committee responsible for overseeing the trial and for providing advice and guidance. The project steering committee would meet initially to receive and approve a project initiation document (PID) from the project manager and formally start the work of the trial and then at least monthly, or more frequently at the joint request of the project manager and his/her POL counterpart. The steering committee will be made up of:

1. POL rep 1
2. POL rep 2
3. POL rep 3
4. Outreach service representative
5. Parish Council representative
6. Village Hall representative

7. Community representative

Ideally, the first meeting of the steering committee would take place at Sandham Memorial Village Hall (the host of the proposed outreach service) with subsequent meetings taking place virtually if necessary.

The chair of the steering group would be elected at the first meeting.

By agreement, the steering committee will report back to other relevant parties, such as the local MP and our House of Lords representative.

7. How would success be measured?

- The trial would aim to demonstrate an increase in customer sessions (CSs) per week. POL will provide a target number of CSs for viability at the start of the trial.
- We would be willing to discuss other success measures which POL would like to see.

8. Timing of the trial

The trial would start as soon as possible. Immediately on approval of the proposal the community would move to raise awareness of the trial with Mon, 18 Mar as the target date for the first outreach session. The trial would run until mid September with the last trial outreach session on Thu, 19 Sep. The mid-point review would take place on Mon, 24 Jun. At this point any necessary course correction may take place (eg changing the frequency of outreach visits etc). On Mon, 15 Jul the steering committee would meet to recommend actions at the end of the trial.

9. Summary of key dates

The following dateline is offered as a target for discussion. Early confirmation would be extremely helpful to enable the community to mobilise.

28 Feb	Approval of trial proposal by POL
18 Mar	First outreach session (target date, already agreed in principle with the outreach postmaster)
24 Jun	Mid-point review
15 Jul	Recommendations for the future from the Steering Committee (post 12 Sep)
29 Jul	Approval (or not) of the Steering Committee recommendations by POL
12 Sep	Last outreach session of the trial

10. Budget sources and income destination

Income raised during trial		All income will go to POL/Postmaster
Project manager and support	Community	
Provision of venue inc counter	Community	
Running costs of venue (energy, cleaning, toilet facilities, parking etc)	Community	
Data line (ADSL)		
reinstatement		POL
running costs		POL
Community mobilisation	Community	
Outreach facility		
Postmaster visit fee		POL
Postmaster expenses (eg travel)		POL
Outreach equipment		Already available via outreach postmaster

Annex 1

Population and access supported by the proposed trial

There are five Parishes south of the River Arun which are impacted by the lack of an *easily accessible* PO facility within 3 miles. More than 3,000 people live in these Parishes, in the settlements of Bury, Parham, Sutton, Coldwaltham (comprising Coldwaltham, Watersfield and Hardham), and Fittleworth. Sandham Village Hall PO was within walking distance for at least half of these residents. The lack of any meaningful public transport or any safe walking route means all visits to the PO infrastructure remaining after the closure of Sandham Village Hall PO branch will now have to be by car; vulnerable and disabled clients will be severely affected. There may be a specific discriminatory issue in the current lack of provision.

Car access is also problematic at alternative branches proposed by PO, through constrained car parking. There are just two car parking places (also used for MOTs/garage services) at the Elite Garage, which hosts the Pulborough PO. At Fittleworth PO, car parking places are shared with the shop, cafe, playground, village hall and school spill-over and these additional facilities compete for parking space. Bury outreach post office, where parking is less contended, is open only 2 hours a week, on a Friday. In contrast, Sandham Hall offers over 35 car-parking spaces and is free.

Walking to alternative provision is virtually impossible. All routes flood regularly. There is no pavement along the A29, a prerequisite for pedestrian access to both Fittleworth PO and the Elite Garage service, nor via the alternative route to Fittleworth via the B2138. Moreover, the A29 has been partially closed at Church Hill, the major access road north/south, for over a year. This renders pedestrian access to the Elite Garage PO branch impossible from the south.

This local situational report has been presented by many local residents in writing to POL to counter the claims it has made that provision at Fittleworth, Pulborough and Bury meet the government's access criteria for rural populations. Whilst criteria may appear to be met 'as the crow flies', in reality, on the ground, access criteria are not met.

Source: Wikipedia descriptions of the Parishes and their populations.