



Commission for  
Rural Communities  
Tackling rural disadvantage

**Alternative ways  
to provide Post  
Office services**  
case studies

## **The Master Robert Inn, Buriton, Hampshire**

### **Background**

The village of Buriton lost its post office in 2001. The Village Association responded to this by renting a building and employing a manager to run a village shop and post office. Rising costs, particularly rent of the building meant that the business was not viable and once more closure of the post office service was imminent.

### **Getting started**

The new owners of the Master Robert Inn began discussion with the Village Association about developing an unused conference room as a shop and post office. With no rent to pay, utilities covered by the pub and rural rate relief as the only shop in the village, a viable business plan was developed and implemented. The owner, Pauline Davy, received intensive and thorough onsite training from Post Office Ltd in order to become sub-postmaster.

### **Funding**

The cost of refurbishing and equipping the conference room was about £18,000 and initially there was resistance from grant making bodies to make awards to a private individual. This was addressed by working in partnership with the Village Association who could apply for grants for this obvious community enhancing project and then Ms Davy could apply to the Village Association for grants toward the project. The Post Office Rural Re-start Fund was happy to award up to 50% of project costs and gave £7000. £6000 came from County, District and Parish Councils and Ms Davy invested £5000.

### **Post office services**

The post office is open from 9.00am to 5.00pm on weekdays and from 9.00am until 12.30pm on Saturday. The shop is open 7 days per week. The post office counter is integrated with the shop counter so that the business is seen as connected and Ms Davy can operate both services. There are 20 regular customers per day with about 10 businesses using the post office for banking, including the church and the school.

The services offered in the post office are marketed through the village magazine, being careful to choose different services than those being marketed by the Post Office nationally at any particular time. Pensioners' lunch clubs in the pub are used to advertise post office services. Although car tax discs cannot be bought in this post office, customers are encouraged to buy savings stamps which they can then use to buy their tax disc at a main post office.

### **Key points**

- for a viable business costs need to be kept low. Sharing with another business (the pub) which is also their place of residence has made the shop and post office profitable.

- constantly reminding people of the services that are on offer and finding creative ways to put transactions through the post office (e.g. savings stamps)
- combining the shop manager and sub-postmaster roles
- Communicating with the community and local authority to get and keep them onside.
- Being determined and not taking a no as the final answer.

### The future

The business has become sufficiently profitable that someone can now be employed to replace Ms Davy in running the shop and post office.

January 2007



## Parton Village Hall, Cumbria

### Background

Parton is a former pit village and a relatively deprived area near to the town of Whitehaven. When the owners of the village shop and post office were due to retire they were unable to find a buyer for the business and eventually the property was sold as a residential dwelling.

### Getting started

Post Office Ltd wanted to maintain a service in the village and approached the parish council to ask them if they knew of any suitable premises. The village hall was investigated and judged to be a suitable venue with only minor alterations required. The biggest problem was fitting the dedicated phone line. Post Office Ltd approached local postmasters and the postmaster from neighbouring Lowca agreed to operate a satellite post office two mornings a week in Parton.

### Funding

No capital funding was needed to set up the service. Utility costs and minor security alterations, such as better locks, have been paid for by the rental charge to the Post Office of £45 per week.

### Post Office Services

The full range of post office services is available on Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9am to noon. They are used by 40 – 50 regulars each week. There are no business users as there are no local businesses in Parton.

### Key points

- Post Office Ltd was proactive in seeking suitable premises and finding a local postmaster, making it easier for the local community.
- There was a gap in provision between the old post office closing and the new service being provided. Some customers were lost as they transferred to post offices in the nearby town and have not transferred back.
- Residents are not all aware that a full range of post office services is available and that it is not a “second rate” service because it is offered part-time in a village hall. Thanks to technology all services can be accessed.

### Future

The present situation remains viable and there are no plans to change the provision.

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## Sheepy Magna, Leicestershire

### Background

In March 2003 the local post office was due to close, but a chance conversation with the Revd Annette Reed led to the offer of the church as a place to locate a satellite post office. As it happened, the church council of Sheepy Magna parish had previously drawn up plans for re-ordering the church to provide much needed toilet facilities. They had employed an architect and successfully navigated the Diocesan Advisory Committee process to gain approval to reorganise the base of the bell tower. However, the plans were shelved when funding was required for urgent roof repairs.

### Getting started

Post Office Ltd accepted the offer in principle and the earlier plan was agreed with few alterations. The Post Office requirement for toilet facilities was already included in the plan but a phone line giving internet access was also required. Further permission had to be gained from the local Planning Authority as the project involved a change of use. The church also agreed to operate a drop-in coffee shop during the post office hours for security and to provide an escort for the sub-postmaster when entering and leaving the building with the alarmed briefcase. The post office opened for business in December 2003.

### Funding

The overall cost of reordering the church was £45,000. The Post Office Development Scheme and the Sub-post office Start-up Capital Fund contributed £11,000 towards the toilet provision and the post office area. Other grants received included:

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| Countryside Agency                      | £1000 |
| Church of England Central Churches Fund | £3000 |
| Leicester Diocesan Mission Initiative   | £3000 |
| The local Primary Health Trust          | £1500 |
| Landfill Community Fund                 | £5000 |
| County Council                          | £2500 |
| Borough Council                         | £5000 |
| Market Towns Initiative                 | £6500 |
| Sheepy Magna Church Council             | £1000 |

The Church Council charge the post office £7 per session to cover the direct costs of using the building.

### Post office services

A mobile counter with screen is housed in the church and is used by the sub-postmaster as a satellite post office from an existing branch. Initially the service was offered two mornings a week but has recently been reduced to one because of difficulty in providing a postmaster. The post office is used by about 30 customers a week including the local school for banking dinner money.

### Key points

- Using a church building can be problematic in getting approval of plans in a timely manner. There are often conflicting heritage interests. This project was

implemented quickly because plans had already been agreed. This also facilitated the fundraising.

- A project champion was needed to put together a complex funding-package.
- The satellite post office requires the availability and willingness of a local sub-postmaster to operate this service.
- Voluntary support is needed for security and for caretaking tasks.
- The building became more attractive to criminals! A month after the post office opened the church was broken into by professional thieves looking for cash and documents relating to the post office. It should be made clear that nothing like that is kept on the premises.

### **The Future**

Although the provision of the post office service is being reduced, it still remains an important community facility and provides a community focus. A computer based local authority information access point is being provided and it is hoped that a local hospice shop and a Fair Trade outlet will operate alongside the post office.

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## Yarpole Community Shop, Herefordshire

### Background

In October 2004 the privately owned shop and post office faced closure. Post Office Ltd indicated that they wanted to see 18 hours of post office services provided in the village. The process of creating a Yarpole Parish Plan was already underway and provision of a community shop and post office had a high priority. 110 people attended a public meeting from which a steering group of 12 was formed.

### Getting started

A portable building was rented and sited on the pub car-park at a peppercorn rent. A part-time manager (12hours) was employed and volunteers engaged to run the shop 7 days a week. There are 24 shopfront staff plus 10 backup and 8 in the management/service team. The Association set up to run the project has 300 community shareholders. Post Office Ltd provided a sub-postmaster.

### Funding

The portable building costs £56 per week to rent.

Cost of counter was £3000 of which Post Office Ltd provided a 50% grant.

£300 of other equipment was provided by individual sponsorship.

Creating a secure area required £500 of materials but it was constructed with donated labour.

Providing an electricity supply cost £1600 plus VAT and the labour for digging the trench was provided by volunteers

The telephone line and alarm system were provided by the Post Office.

Grants were obtained from the parish council, Herefordshire County Council and Herefordshire Partnership, as well as individual sponsorship and a private loan.

Much help was given with shopfittings and advice by the regional and local Co-op through their Buddy scheme.

### Post office services

The post office operates from 9am to 12 noon Monday to Saturday. There are 18-20 customers each day and 4 or 5 businesses use the post office for banking. Numbers have increased since the main post office in nearby Leominster closed and moved into a shop. There is good crossover between the post office and the shop. The village shop/PO had always been a vital centre for social and community interaction, and after the gap of the closed period, this hub of circulation has been restored.

### Key points

- The village community were kept up to date with plans and progress of the project.
- Check community commitment regularly
- Steering group needs people with skills: retail knowledge, financial control (not just book keeping), marketing and business acumen. Enthusiasm is not enough

- Ask the community when they would like the facility open.
- Don't underestimate the community.
- Perfection is an unnecessary luxury
- Believe it can happen!

### The future

A public meeting is to be held including the 300 shareholders and the wider community to look at two options for a permanent site for the shop and post office, a purpose built building, or a partnership with the local church. The post office remains integral to both suggestions.

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