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Adrian Wales,
Network Development Manager,
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FREEPOST CONSULTATION TEAM

30 July 2008

Your ref.

Our ref. JC/CSSC

Dear Sir

Post Office Ltd Network Change Programme
Area Plan proposal for Tyne and Wear with Northumberland and Durham

At its meeting held on 15 July 2008, the District Council of Easington's Community Services Scrutiny Committee considered the Post Office Ltd Network Change Programme for Tyne and Wear with Northumberland and Durham.

As Chairman of the Committee, I wish to place on record the Committee's concerns regarding the proposals set out in the programme.

The District of Easington is situated along the coastal strip of County Durham, between the more urban centres of Sunderland and Hartlepool, with a population of 94,000. The economic base for the area was previously associated with coal mining and has over the last ten years been subject to regeneration activities to address the economic, social, health and environmental legacies connected with the loss of the predominant sector of employment.

As a consequence of this structural economic change, the district has chronic levels of deprivation and is ranked as the 8 worst district (ODPM's IMD, 2004). There are 19% of the population living in the worst 5% deprived area, 53% of the population living in the worst 10% deprived area and 56% of the population living in the worst 15% deprived area. This is supported by the fact that fourteen out of the twenty wards in the District fall in the worst ten percent nationally, with eight wards falling in the worst five percent (IMD).

The Council has sought to provide a strong community leadership and advocacy capacity to address the District's future 'well being' and through this provide the communities of Easington with a more certain and sustainable future. As part of this role, the Council has recognised its future prospects will be, in part, shaped by actively contributing to policy debates and consultations. The aim is to ensure national and regional service organisations are well informed of the needs of Easington to bring about a positive impact for the communities of Easington.

Specifically, concerns have been raised along the following lines, namely that:-

- They put at risk the basic service provision enjoyed by the residents of Easington particularly the more vulnerable.
- The reforms could leave some areas within the District of Easington without an accessible post office. The position is exacerbated with the reduction in the number of banks and building society branches meaning that post offices are in many villages the only place to access cash points or to pay bills and receive benefits.
- Internet access within the district is low with groups such as the elderly, infirm and low-income families accessing post office services directly from post office outlets.
- The District of Easington suffers from significant social problems including high levels of poor health. The District is ranked the 8th most deprived in Britain on the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation with 14 out of 20 Wards being in the worst 10%. Given the levels of benefit claimants and pensioners with the District it is essential that these people can access their monies via the Post Office network currently available, as many do not have personal bank accounts. Any reduction in the number of post offices within the District will increase hardship amongst these groups due to the financial burden of using public transport to access alternative post office facilities that may be considerably further away.
- Public Transport links with the District are also poorer than elsewhere particularly in the rural western part of the District where post office facilities are seen as the hub of the local community. Any reduction in the Post Office network within the District of Easington will result in many of the more vulnerable sections of the Community i.e. the elderly, infirm and low income families losing access to much needed services.
- There are low levels of car ownership with the District of Easington which will also restrict the ability of residents to reach alternative Post Office facilities.
- The District Council of Easington has long been recognised for its work in reducing poverty and increasing the ability of the more vulnerable residents to access benefits. It would be ironic if the work of the District Council and the Department for Work and Pensions in increasing benefit take up was negated by a reduction in the number of post offices where benefits can be accessed and an increase in travel costs for benefit recipients.

For the reasons stated above, the District of Easington Council wishes to declare its opposition to the closure of the three Post Offices identified. Furthermore, Easington Colliery Parish Council resist the closure of the Easington Colliery Post Office. It was felt that the regeneration proposals for the village which would likely see the development of significant new housing warrant further deliberations about the need to retain existing service levels, at least until the renaissance proposals can be fully evaluated. The Committee feels that the Government and Post Office Limited should look to increase the range of services provided at Post Offices to ensure their long term viability.

APPENDIX A

On a more positive note, for those areas where the proposals relate to the retention of the existing facilities, the Committee are happy that the representations made in April 2007 in respect of the original consultation document have been borne in mind.

Yours faithfully,

Colin Patching

**Chairman
Community Services Scrutiny Committee
District of Easington Council**