

Rural Affairs

Working for rural areas, communities and businesses in the South West

Issue 1: Winter 2007/08

Welcome to Rural Affairs!

Bringing you news, views and issues from South West Rural Affairs (SWRAF). Each issue will feature a topical issue.

What is SWRAF?

Set up in 2002 the South West Rural Affairs Forum (SWRAF) is an independent nominated body of 23 members and regional bodies from across the region with a wide range of experience in the countryside and rural communities.

SWRAF is the primary opportunity for influence and rural accountability. It is charged with monitoring Government policy in the rural South West reporting directly to Ministers on a regular basis to ensure that rural communities and businesses are properly considered and good practice shared. Some of SWRAF achievements are listed overleaf.

The forum is administered and financed by the Government Office for the South West.

SWRAF events and topics

Quarterly meetings:

Topics to be confirmed

September 07: Access to rural services

December 07: Rural housing; Delivery of the Tourism Strategy

March 08: Local Government and wider roles of agencies (including Natural England)

June 08: Impact of Climate Change on rural areas including coastal threats from flooding

Speakers and special interests are invited to inform meetings and working groups

Which Post Offices will close in the South West?

People will struggle to prepare well-informed responses in the six week consultation on proposed closures

POST OFFICE LTD has made clear its intention to close 2,500 post offices across the UK by 2009 and replace 500 with 'outreach offices'. The Government agreed to the proposals in May and, so far, nothing to suggest a change of direction from the new regime in No.10 Downing Street.

By the time you read this, the decision on post office closures in the South West will already have been made by a process of pre-public consultation. From October, the public consultation process comes to the South West. Communities will have a chance to argue for their post office's continued existence, but only for six weeks. Within this time, local councils and communities must consult on proposed closures, gather statistics regarding use and need, and demonstrate that their post office fits Government criteria for retention. Crucially, communities must also use these six weeks to offer proposals for keeping their post office open, or suggest alternatives.

The South West is a key area for the debate on the effect of rural post office closures and what alternatives might replace them. The region

Photo: Kate Freeman



This thriving village shop relies on its Post Office services

has 1,576 post offices, of which 1,119 are classified as rural. Nearly 90% of these are under threat. According to Stephen Wright of the South West Network of Rural Community Councils (SWAN) the great majority of rural sub-post offices share premises with the village shop. The two are heavily dependent on one another. The impact is also likely to be acutely felt because the South West has the highest concentration of rural businesses, at 24%, which tend to rely on post offices.

Several regional bodies have questioned the Post Office's approach. While 95% of communities might remain within three miles of a post office, the Citizen's Advice Bureau warns that access criteria must not be based simply on distance and a presumption of car use, but also on public transport, and age and health demographics. Nor has the Post Office made it clear if it is willing to pay taxi fares or lay on buses.

Is there a Plan B?

Uncertainty has hindered attempts to explore alternatives. Sarah McKean, of Somerset Rural Community Councils, reported that >



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Wanted: New Members

The Forum is on the look out for new members for 2008. For an information pack, to suggest a name or register an interest please contact Mark Burden at the address opposite or visit the SWRAF website.

Newsletter team: Mark Burden, Kate Freeman, Tean Mitchell, Mal Traherne

SWRAF website

This issue of **Rural Affairs** and related links have been published on our new website:
www.ruralaffairs-sw.org.uk
Our thanks to 'Energetics Ecology' for hosting it.



Photo: Kate Freeman

The new Community Shop in Urchfont, Wiltshire includes a Post Office

Which Post Offices will close?

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their district council is reluctant to offer practical support until the situation on closures is clarified. So is there a Plan B? Outreach offices are one option. Although, as Tim Coombes of Wiltshire's Community First says, these can work but they can alienate elderly clientele if held in pubs. On the other hand, an outreach scheme in Steeple Ashton, Wiltshire, has developed into a community shop. In some instances, it could be argued that the Post Office's subsidy agreed with Government, known as the Social Network Payment, merely maintains the status quo and props up unsustainable post offices. Mr Coombes agrees but warned that we need to sustain rural POs for the next 10–15 years to support the older generation who have a "traditional way of life".

Several organisations feel that the Social Network Payment (which subsidises local post offices to the tune of £150m a year, and is due to end in 2011) could be given to Government to redeploy creatively. "If half the present subsidy for the South West - about £10m a year - were available, we would advocate using the money to modernise shops, improve their management, broaden the services and increase community ownership, said Mr Wright. "That's likely to make them more sustainable and reduce our carbon footprint."

■ Written by Mark Rowe.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of SWRAF.

■ Research by Kate Freeman



Post Office consultation programme

CONSULTATION AREAS are grouped by clusters of constituencies. Post Office catchment areas might overlap:

15 Oct 07 Hampshire and Isle of White: Plans could affect borders of Wiltshire and Dorset.

10 Dec 07 West Berkshire and Wiltshire: Newbury; Reading West; Reading East; Wokingham; Westbury; Devizes; North Swindon; South Swindon; North Wiltshire; Salisbury.

25 Feb 08 Bristol & Somerset: Weston-super-Mare; Woodspring; Bridgwater; Somerton and Frome; Taunton; Wells; Yeovil; Bath; Wansdyke; Bristol East; Bristol North West; Bristol South; Bristol West; Kingswood; North Avon.

21 April 08 Devon: East Devon; Exeter; North Devon; Teignbridge; Torridge and West Devon; Plymouth Devonport; Plymouth Sutton; South West Devon; Tiverton and Honiton; Torbay; Totnes.

16 June 08 Cornwall: North Cornwall; South East Cornwall; Falmouth & Camborne; St Ives; Truro & St Austell.

16 June 08 Dorset: Bournemouth East; Bournemouth West; Christchurch; Mid-Dorset and North Poole; Poole; South Dorset; North Dorset; West Dorset.

NOTE: Dates might change. For further information contact Postwatch: Tel: 0845 601 3265 Email: info@postwatch.co.uk Website: www.postwatch.co.uk/issues/

Renewable energy

THE SOUTH WEST has led the way in developing alternative technology in Britain and plays host to expertise in renewable energy.



Photo: Cornwall Sustainable Energy Partnership

Cornwall Enterprise and Cornwall Sustainable Energy Partnership aim to help businesses and communities in Cornwall to reduce carbon footprints – and cut energy bills too. How to make available impartial information around the region was a key issue that SWRAF wishes to address.

More information:

www.cornwallenterprise.co.uk

www.csep.co.uk



Introducing...

**Cate Le Grice-Mack MBE,
Chair of SWRAF**

Cate is founder of Norwood Organic Farm and visitor centre, breeding native breeds. Cate became chair of SWRAF this year having been vice chair since its inception. Cate also chairs the Social Economic and Environmental Partners of the South West Regional Assembly and the trustees of Envolve Partnerships for Sustainability. Cate was a founder board member of the Countryside Agency. After graduating in geography and economics, Cate's first career was in teaching. Cate is passionate about making links between sustainability, regeneration and rural communities.

Two new ministers

New Minister for Rural Affairs is **Jonathan Shaw**, MP for



Chatham and Aylesford, Kent. Previously assistant whip in the Treasury.

Ben Bradshaw, MP for



Exeter, is minister of state for health and for the South West. His other role is to act as advocate for the South West in Whitehall.

Some SWRAF achievements

2002: Established a regional group to improve funding for village halls.

2002 and 2003: Initiated Defra's regional study on affordable housing and 'rural proofed' Regional Housing Strategy. Resulted in 'sustaining rural communities'.

2004: Influenced second edition of Local Transport Plans and Accessibility Planning Guidance.

2006 and 2007: Two conferences for and about migrant workers (with SW Regional Assembly and Cornwall Strategic Partnership) contributing to a regional strategic group.

2006: Environment conference leading to newsletter and website.

2004 to 2007: Contributions and evidence to Draft Regional Spatial Strategy Examination in Public on seven matters.