

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 FEBRUARY 2019

Title:

FARNHAM POST OFFICE CONSULTATION

[Wards Affected:All]

Summary and purpose:

Farnham Post Office is currently located at 107 West Street, Farnham. The Post Office is consulting on proposals to relocate to within the curtilage of WH Smith at 14, The Borough, Farnham. The consultation process started on 23 January and will close on 6 March. There is understandably much local interest and concern about the proposed move.

We have published the consultation on the council's website, circulated details to all Farnham ward members and are encouraging residents and businesses to respond to the consultation. The Post Office has been invited to attend Community Wellbeing Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 19 February but if they are unable to attend a special meeting could be arranged.

How this report relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities:

Post offices are a key community asset and their presence in the heart of the community is valued and needed. Their retention fits with all three of the corporate priorities – Place, people and prosperity.

Financial Implications:

There are no resource implications for the council as a result of responding to this consultation.

Legal Implications:

No legal implications.

Introduction

The Post Office's proposal is to move its Farnham branch into the WH Smith store at 14 The Borough, Farnham, GU9 7N. If the move goes ahead the branch will be run by WH Smith High Street Ltd, with extended opening hours including Saturday afternoons and Sundays. The public consultation has now started and will continue until 6 March 2019.

The change of management of the branch will be to one that is operated by a retail partner and as it is a commercial decision for Post Office Ltd they are not seeking feedback on this aspect of the change. However they are looking for feedback and comments that can help inform plans, particularly on the following areas:

- **How easy is it to get to the proposed new location?**
- **Are the new premises easy for you to get into and are they easily accessible once inside?**
- **Are there any other local community issues which you believe could be affected by or affect the proposed move?**
- **If the move were to proceed is there anything we could do to make it easier for customers?**
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As part of the consultation they will also be holding a 'customer forum' event designed to allow customers or stakeholders the opportunity to come along and ask questions or seek clarification from Post Office managers.

The reason for the relocation is the continuing modernisation of the branch network, to secure the long term viability of Post Office services through retail partners - they believe this is the best approach to keeping Post Offices in main shopping locations. Their letter states that a wide range of services would still be available at the branch, with the exception of a cash machine. The nearest alternative external cash machine at a Post Office branch can be found approximately 4.2 miles away at Tongham Post Office, 88 - 90 The Street, Farnham, GU10 1AA.

Proposed new branch

It is proposed that the new branch will operate from a newly built dedicated open plan Post Office area located to the rear of the WH Smith store. Access into the store is level with automatic doors at the entrance to the premises. Directional signage would be provided from the entrance door through to the new Post Office area. It is proposed there will be three serving positions, two open plan positions and one traditional screened position which will also provide travel money services. Additionally, there will be two self-service kiosks for mails transactions including home shopping returns, E Top-Ups, and a range of bill payments.

Feedback

Members have been asked for their thoughts on the key questions ahead of Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The initial comments will be verbally updated at the meeting. Key concerns raised when the relocation was first announced included:

- Given the size/status of the post office in Farnham (serving a population of over 40,000) it is important that the same level of service needs to be retained including self serve tills with members of staff offering assistance. Smaller post office stores have seen a service reduction so it is particularly important that the main Post Office in Farnham offers more services to a wider audience.
- There is a feeling that the WH Smith site is 'cramped', and the large numbers of public who currently go to the West Street Post Office, could swamp the Farnham branch.
- At a time when the council is investing heavily in Farnham Town Centre, and new homes are planned, it is important to provide more services for new as well as existing residents and visitors who may be visiting the town in future. It is felt that the post office should be planning on how to benefit from expected additional service demands.
- The new location will need the facility to cope with the demand throughout the year and at key times throughout the day. There are lengthy queues at the post office at

certain times of the day and this demand will increase at certain pressure points through the year.

- Whilst the proposed location offers step free access and could accommodate wheelchairs it is felt that the store will need an improved layout to ensure customer access. The narrow footpath outside WH Smith in The Borough is unsuitable for the foot traffic that could be generated and there are concerns about polluting traffic inches away.

Conclusion

So far, councillors have felt that the proposed move to WH Smith is unwelcome and are very concerned about the impact on the level/quality of service provided. More comments will come through Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendation

That the Committee responds to the consultation after its meeting, and that a separate response is sent from the Portfolio Holder.

Background Papers

There are no background papers (as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) relating to this report.

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