

# Wokingham Post Office

I have received this letter from the Minister regarding the move of Wokingham Post Office. I will be taking up her offer of a further meeting.



Department for  
Business, Energy  
& Industrial Strategy

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

| ○ June 2019

Dear Sir John,

Thank you for coming to see me on 7 May to discuss the franchising of the Wokingham post office, and for presenting me with the results of your petition showing the level of local concern about post office services in your constituency. I appreciate your ongoing interest in post office branches and the impact that they have on your constituents. As Minister for Postal Services, I am keen to ensure that Post Office Limited is providing the best possible service for citizens and responding to their concerns, while operating in a commercially sustainable way.

As I know you understand, while the Post Office is publicly owned, it is a commercial business. The Government sets the strategic direction for the Post Office – to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so more sustainably for the taxpayer – and allows the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business.

As we discussed, franchising is not a privatisation or closure programme. Post Office Limited's proposals to franchise or host its Crown branches are part of its plans to ensure a sustainable network in the face of unprecedented change on our high streets and in consumer trends. Franchising has helped the Post Office's Crown branches move from a £46 million loss in 2012 to break even today, thereby reducing the taxpayer funding that the Post Office requires from Government whilst maintaining, and in some instances improving, customer service levels. With over 11,300 branches (almost 98% of the total network) operating successfully on a franchise or agency basis, franchising is a tried and tested way of delivering key services.

Since we met, I have requested and received more information from Post Office Limited on the specific circumstances in Wokingham, as I was keen to understand how the issues that you and your constituents have raised would be addressed. I have also met with Tim Parker, Chairman of the Board of Post Office Limited, and Alisdair Cameron, Interim CEO of Post Office Limited, and raised your concerns with them. I also shared with them the results of your petition.

One of the specific concerns that you raised was about the level of service provision at the new site. You noted that there are sometimes long queues at the current Post Office branch. As you are aware, the new WHSmith branch will have three counter serving positions and two further self-service kiosks. I have asked Post Office Limited how they decided that this is the right level of provision. They have explained that they use a data

modelling system to establish the number of counters required. This system uses data from transaction logs and assumes that existing custom will transfer to the new site. The system is able to model usage down to 15-minute slots and it is on this basis that Post Office Limited are confident that the planned level of provision is appropriate for the level of service required in Wokingham.


Post Office Limited have also explained that queues at the current Wokingham branch are primarily due to the handling of undelivered mail collections for Royal Mail through one of the counter positions at the current site. That service will not be transferring to the new Post Office and so queueing should be notably reduced. The new branch will also be open an additional 15 hours a week, including all day on Saturday and for four hours on Sunday.

You raised a concern about accessibility for customers with wheelchairs or push chairs. Post Office Limited have assured me that as part of the conditions of appointment, WHSmith are required to maintain one aisle as the designated walkway to the post office. This will be marked by directional signage and the aisle will be wider (1500mm) and will be kept clear of obstructions.

Finally, we discussed how the franchised branch would handle increased footfall in future, as you noted that you expect the population of Wokingham to increase. Post Office Limited have clarified that the franchising plans for Wokingham are based on present customer habits and needs. However, as part of their broader approach to the network, Post Office Limited continually monitor demand and changing requirements in particular locations, taking steps to address these through network growth and other changes as required.

Let me assure you that Post Office Limited is committed to ensuring all branches across its network offer excellent customer service and has a strong history of working with its many franchise partners and agents to achieve this. Overall customer satisfaction levels with Post Offices across the network are good, with levels of satisfaction in relation to service performance and waiting times both consistently very high. Furthermore, a 2017 report by Citizens' Advice indicated that franchised branches are performing in line with or better than traditional branches on service quality and accessibility. Post Office Limited ensures that their franchising partners are experienced retailers who share the common desire to deliver a high level of customer service.

I hope that this letter provides you with some reassurance that you can take back to your constituents that the post office services available to them will be appropriate following franchising, and that Post Office Limited have given due consideration to the concerns that have been raised in this particular case. I am also pleased to note that in my meeting with Tim and Alisdair, they offered to arrange a further meeting for you with senior Post Office Limited officials if it would be helpful to discuss this further. They will be in touch with you separately to arrange this.

yours ever  


**KELLY TOLHURST MP**

Minister for Small Business, Consumers & Corporate Responsibility

P.S happy to discuss further..