

Heart of the local community: Rural post offices are facing harsh times as the Government is planning to shut down around 500 branches

'The post office is the only social network we have in the village'

By Kate Chambré

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that the move represented a further erosion of traditional village life, and would leave elderly people vulnerable to attack.

One Donegal postmaster Brian Cannon, who runs Lettermacaward post office in the county, said that he believed older citizens would be preyed upon by thieves.

'My fear if my post office is closed down is that all the pensioners will have to travel further afield to collect their pensions,' he said.

'And instead of going to collect it on a weekly basis they will go every three weeks and be left with a heap of money.

'These are vulnerable people and they are becoming bait now.'

'Pensioners becoming bait'

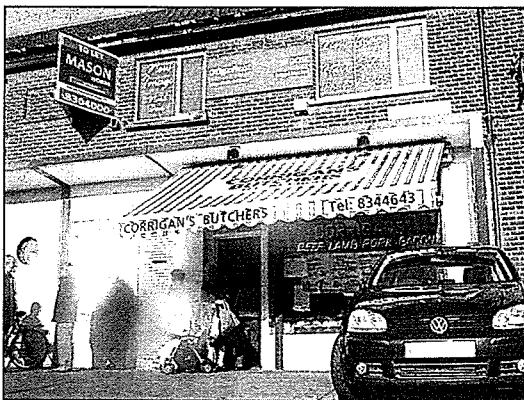
Meanwhile postman Michael Gallagher who works in Cloughan, in Co. Donegal, said it would be a 'disaster' for his local community if the post office closed down.

'Over the years I've seen a lot of post offices close down. But people living in very isolated areas don't like having to travel to post offices in other areas because it's frightening for them,' he said.

'It would be a disaster if my post office closed down because it's the only social network they have here in the village.'

And Fine Gael's Dinny McGinley, spokesman on Rural Affairs, said the closures would be a blow to local communities.

'Very often the post office is the only State-funded institution in



Disappearing: A visit to your local post office may soon be history

these small villages and they provide service very often for the elderly, needy and their dependents.

'The decision to take a post office away places greater burden on these people.'

And he added: 'It seems to be an understanding between An Post and the Government that there should be no closures before the General Election.'

'It seems that for political reasons the planned closures are postponed to avoid political difficulties for the Government.'

And Labour savaged the plans, accusing the Government of decimating the postal service. Labour Party TD Tommy Broughan claimed that last year one post office was shut down every ten days.

An Post is finalising a deal with the Irish Postmasters' Union (IPU) in order to begin the process of shutting down offices.

It is understood that closures will be spread around the country leaving every citizen within a specified distance of a post office.

It is unlikely, however, that there will be any compulsory closures and it is hoped they can all be achieved on a voluntary basis.

An Post last night confirmed that closures were inevitable as part of the review but refused to say how many post offices would be effected.

A spokesman for An Post said: 'The figure [of 500 closures] has come from nowhere and it has been very unhelpful that the figure was leaked. We are in the middle of discussions with the IPU at the

moment. And it's inappropriate to make any comment on the detail.'

About the review she said: 'The review is not just about numbers. It's about the types of post offices we need in the future. It's inevitable there will be closures. Ireland has far more post offices per head of population than any other country in Europe.'

'There has been a steady stream of closures in recent years in rural areas, and that is mainly down to a change in lifestyle. It's an international phenomenon as well.'

With some postmasters earning as little as €8,000 for a 42-hour week, John Kane of the IPU admitted that many postmasters were 'feeling the pinch'.

But he added: 'All that has been asked of us, is to take part in a joint review of the post office network, and a joint review of the remuneration of postmasters, and obviously it's the latter we are primarily concerned with.'

'We do have a concern as well for the social impact of the loss of the post office to any community,' he said. 'At one stage in the Sixties you would have had in excess of 2,000 offices. As recently as 2001 you would have had 1,750 offices.'

'Offices are closing and continue to close as of today. If we don't do anything more offices will close. All is being suggested here is do we take a structured approach to the post office network and see where post offices should be sited?'

'See how many are commercially viable, and see how many may not be commercially viable but are still required from a social dimension? And if so how are they going to be funded? Obviously we will be arguing that there needs to be part of the network brought in with a public service obligation.'

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Fury erupts as Dublin Airport evades deal to pay all of Cork's debt

By Petrina Vousden

THE Dublin Airport Authority has been ordered by ministers to take on €120million of debt from Cork Airport.

Cork Airport Authority has to shoulder the remainder of the €220million debt in a deal which sparked fury last night.

The instruction was made in an effort to end the ongoing controversy over who would pay the airport's debt.

Fine Gael MEP Simon Coveney, said the move was the most 'blatant breach' of a political promise in Cork during the lifetime of the Government.

The row erupted as management at Shannon Airport withdrew a €35million restructuring and redundancy deal from workers.

Mr Coveney said: 'When Aer Rianta was split up and Cork, Shannon and Dublin Airports agreed to go it alone, the Government gave an absolute assurance in writing, later confirmed by the Taoiseach in the Dáil and directly to the staff in Cork Airport, that Cork Airport would not be saddled with the debt associated with the building of its new terminal.'

'The agreement was that the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) would take on this debt and in return the DAA was compensated by taking over the assets of the Great Southern Hotel Group and Aer Rianta's terminal. It's worth noting that the DAA have since sold the Great Southern Hotel Group for €220million more than the cost of

'Cork is not a political priority'

building Cork's new terminal.' He said for Cork to be saddled with the debt means that passengers will have to pay a levy making Cork Airport less competitive than it should have been if the Government had kept its promise to allow Cork Airport to begin debt free.

Mr Coveney said: 'The six Government TDs in Cork city should hang their heads in shame as they have been outmanoeuvred and outmanoeuvred politically by the DAA.'

'My understanding is that this decision has been taken by the Taoiseach himself to finalise the debt issue relating to Cork Airport.'

'He has clearly demonstrated that Cork is not a political priority, even three months out from a General Election.'

'Finally to add insult to injury the DAA are insisting on taking ownership of some of the development land attached to Cork Airport. This claim must be strongly resisted as it is a valuable landbank that should be in the ownership of Cork Airport.'

Workers at Shannon Airport have requested a meeting with Transport Minister Martin Cullen after the Shannon Airport Authority withdrew a restructuring package.

The company is now carrying out an 'urgent review of all of its costs'. The company has been negotiating with workers on the deal for more than two years.

The SAA said it must act to turn Shannon into a modern, well served airport.

Siptu said a ballot of its members has returned an 80 per cent vote against the plan, while other unions, Impact and the TEEU, have also rejected the proposals by 90 per cent and 65 per cent respectively.

The cost-cutting measures include 200 voluntary redundancies and the outsourcing of jobs and services at Shannon.