



Supporting Diverse Communities

A Local Postal Network in Essex



Background

In Essex, Post Office Ltd's operations are divided into two areas. The largest area covers the centre and north of the County. The area encompasses many rural villages, hamlets and the towns of Basildon, Braintree, Brentwood, Colchester, Chelmsford, Clacton-on-Sea, Harlow, and Maldon. The network review by PO Ltd was concluded in this area in February

2008 and resulted in the decision to close over thirty post offices. The smaller area encompasses the south east of the county including Castle Point, Rochford, Southend-on-Sea, and Thurrock. The network change programme was concluded in July 2008 for this area and will result in the closure of a further four post offices.

The importance of local post offices

In many parts of Essex, particularly in villages, the sub-post office is an important community facility as well as a commercial business. They provide a vital interface between local residents and external services. Historically, they provided a single access point to central government services, but more recently they have offered a "gateway" service including financial products, as well as the traditional postal service. More fundamentally, local sub-post offices often provide the following additional benefits.

1. Community information;
2. Access to banking services such as cash withdrawal (and some state benefits);

3. Bespoke help for elderly and infirm residents who have difficulty travelling; and
4. Related commercial and other retail products (e.g. groceries etc).

Although in its network reviews PO Ltd indicate alternative sub-post offices that could be used by residents and businesses who suffer as a result of a closure, the proposals do not always reflect the following factors: the distances involved in walking along country roads; infrequent bus services; the limited physical mobility of some residents; the environmental impact of additional/ longer journeys; and the impact on local businesses.

The aftermath of closure – a local perspective

Our experience of the closure programme is one that is characterised by confusion and uncertainty. Most local communities have continued to support the shops where the postal services were provided. Traders have reported a decline in business generally as well as unhappiness at having to turn away

customers – both businesses and local residents. Post Offices in Essex support literally hundreds of high street traders and they offer the only remaining service for customers who wish to deposit cash. Many of these customers have been left wondering why the post office could not continue.

Developing a new service for those in need

Our starting point has been to establish contact with all former post offices that have been closed as part of the network change programme. At the same time we have undertaken an analysis of the services available in a local area and also the demographic make-up of the local community. Simultaneously, we have also approached PO Ltd for every location to see if there is any potential to re-establish a service. This process has taken a considerable period of time but it is necessary to ensure that any service is based on a thorough assessment of the local community's needs.

A small dedicated project team has been established by the County Council to develop the implementation plan. The County Council has been able to staff the team without the need for additional resources. However, we have been very fortunate in obtaining a secondment from PO Ltd. This has been crucial to our success as the County Council needed to understand the retail environment; something existing staff had no experience of. The small team includes the following skills and experience:

- 1.** Legal support;
- 2.** Finance and accountancy expertise;
- 3.** Project Management; and
- 4.** Retail knowledge.

The main activities of the project team can be categorised into some distinct areas based on the need to implement a complex, but focused, initiative over a relatively short timeframe. These are listed below.

- 1.** Powers, contracts and state-aid issues;
- 2.** Funding arrangements, risk management, and grant monitoring;
- 3.** Member liaison; District, Borough and Parish Council, and community consultation and information;
- 4.** Site identification, negotiation and assessment;
- 5.** Community information and IT; and
- 6.** PO Ltd liaison.

The project team's main aim is to develop a new local network for services to help diverse communities in Essex. To do this there has been a commitment to extend local information services to a range of local, small-scale, shops and community centres. This is key part of the project team's remit and will ensure that in the future people not able to use the internet at home will have be able to access it at their local shop or village hall.



What does the service look like?

The Essex County Council network will be – in effect – a new brand on the high street in the County. Of course, not all our sites will be based in a high street but we will be making it clear that our service is there to provide community information in an accessible, informal, setting. Community information points – as they are known – will offer a range of services from a diverse "menu":

1. Internet access and on-line services;
2. Information via leaflets etc;
3. Cash machines;
4. Bill payments;
5. Postal services;
6. Banking; and
7. Convenience food and other similar products.

A range of venues will host the services we will be commissioning. These include community halls, community shops, shops on traditional retail parades, and high street shops. There are no plans to commission services via multiples or large retail providers. As such, all our services will be situated in small local settings. Some of these will operate under a wholesale franchise brand but the County Council will only support independent providers. To help these businesses continue to develop and thrive we are appointing a specialist to help develop services and products, and provide dedicated support for our funded partners.

Promoting community well-being and sustainable businesses

Acting in accordance with the well-being powers of Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000, this new initiative will help local communities by ensuring that access to a range of services is available. The initiative forms part of a wider Essex Works programme and sits within our broader work to promote sustainable economic growth in Essex.

Where small businesses are best placed to host the new service they will be able – for the first time – to access a bespoke County Council grant programme that will help them both deliver services locally and sustain their business. General business advice does not form part of the initiative but specific support will be available for grant recipients to help develop customer care skills.

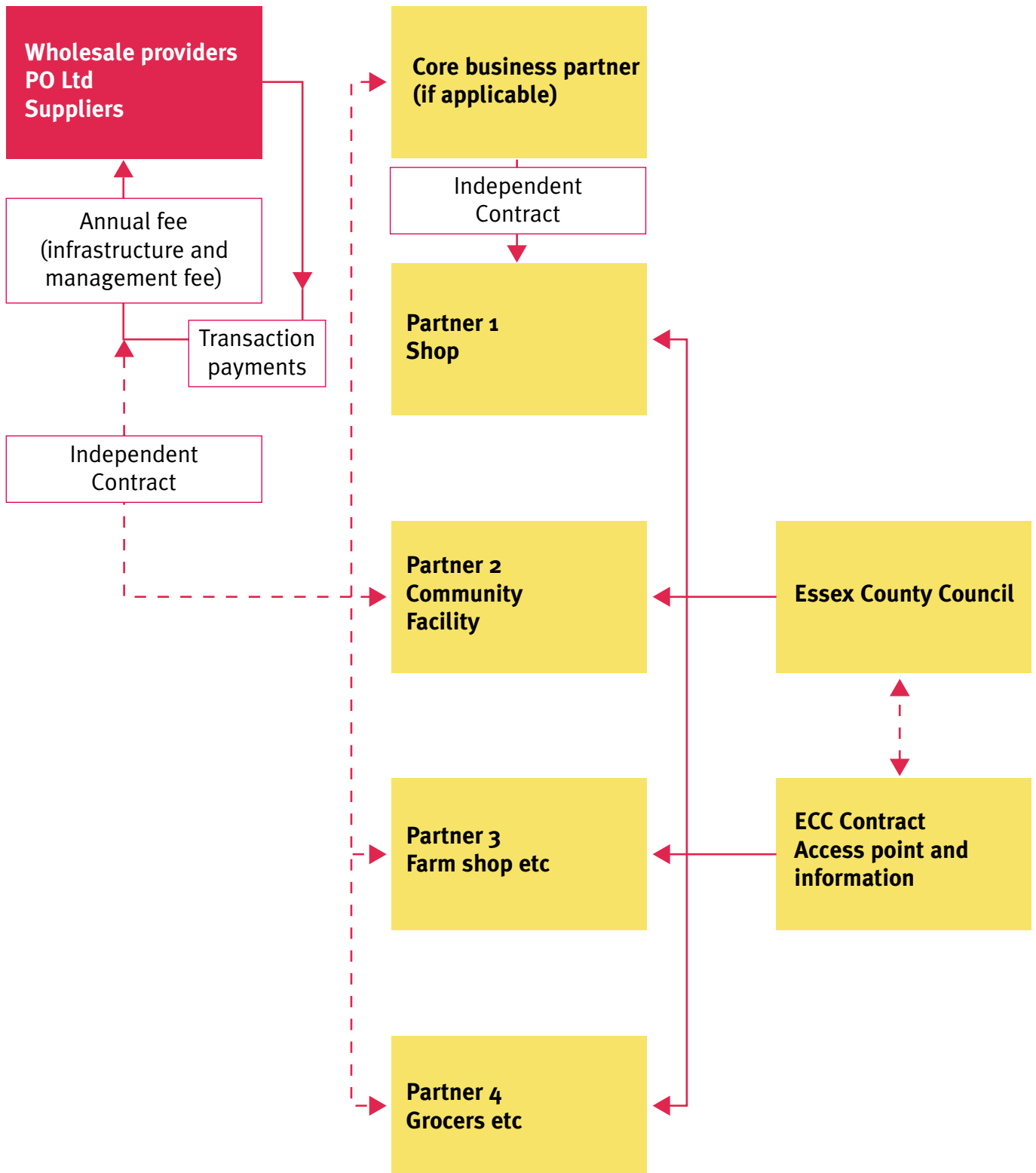
The grant programme

The County Council's initiative is a grant programme to small independent partners who will in return allow the council to provide community information and other related services from their premises. No grants are available for improving commercial premises (other than to meet DDA requirements); and funding is only available on an annual basis.

In return for a grant recipients have to submit a business plan to the County Council for approval. This has to demonstrate that the grant recipient will be able to use the grant to improve the efficiency of their overall business while undertaking to make available space on their premises for the community information services.

Appendix

Pilot service model



This booklet is issued by

Essex County Council.

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The information contained in this leaflet can be translated
and/or made available in alternative formats on request.

Published September 2008.