



## Putney, Roehampton and Southfields

Anita Turner  
Network Development Manager  
Post Office Ltd  
FREEPOST CONSULTATION TEAM

31 March 2008

Dear Ms Turner,

### **Proposed Closures of branches at 209 Lower Richmond Road, SW15 1HJ and 279 Putney Bridge Road, SW15 2PT**

I am writing to argue for the retention of the Post Office branches at 209 Lower Richmond Road and 279 Putney Bridge Road. Although I am aware a decision will be made on the individual merits of each branch, I am making a single response as many of the arguments in favour of keeping them open apply equally to both branches, in part because of their close geographic proximity.

#### **Consultation Process**

Before I set out the reasons why I believe that the Post Office should keep these branches open, I wish to comment on the consultation process itself. The way in which the Post Office has handled the consultation on these closures has been rightly criticised at all levels and on all sides of the political divide. It is simply not good enough to place a poster in the window of the branch concerned and leave a couple of boxes of the consultation leaflets inside. It is for this reason that I wrote to every home in the surrounding area: just under 4,000 households. Under separate cover I am delivering all the response cards and online petition forms that I received, which at the time of writing was 735, all Putney residents opposed to these to these closures.

Demonstrable public support for the retention of a post office branch will I hope, be a factor when you review your provisional decision to close these branches. However, I accept it cannot be the sole criterion, so this response sets out the geographical, infrastructure and need-based arguments I believe justify retaining these two branches.

#### **209 Lower Richmond Road, SW15 1HJ**

The Lower Richmond Road branch lies on the edge of Putney Common. This community is geographically isolated insofar as to the north lies the river Thames; to the east Putney and Barnes Commons, the Barn Elms playing fields and the West London wildlife and wetland centre and to the south the mainline railway.

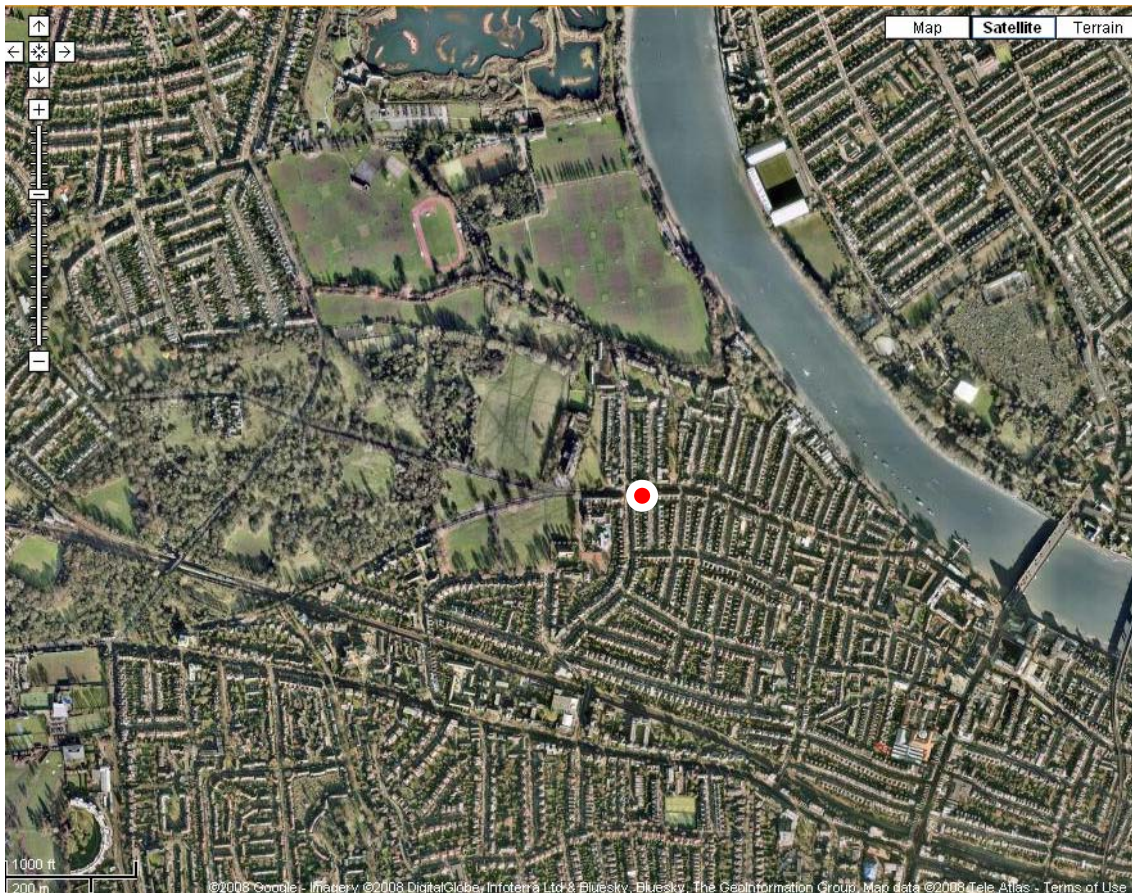
**Stuart King**

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Below is the Googlemaps satellite image of the area, with the dot in the centre marking the location of the Lower Richmond Road post office.



This image demonstrates the geographical isolation of this community.

To claim, as you have in the consultation, that “other branches in the area” include the Barnes branch - the other side of these two commons and two areas of public open space - emphasises the vast gap between your proposals and the reality on the ground in this area for Putney residents. Barnes is not “in the area” - it may be barely a mile as the crow flies but people are not crows: they have to take a circuitous route by foot, by bus or by car.

It would be useful to consider the public transport options for someone living in this area. The nearest branch (or more accurately, least furthest away) is the branch at 214 Upper Richmond Road opposite Burston Road. There is NO bus route that runs from Lower Richmond Road to Upper Richmond Road. Indeed, there is no bus route that runs from Lower Richmond Road up Putney High Street.

A return journey by bus to the Upper Richmond Road branch from Lower Richmond Road would involve at least four different buses: the 22, 265 or 480 along Lower Richmond Road and one of several buses up Putney High Street. This is easily an hour-plus round trip, just to buy a stamp, cash a giro, or collect a pension. I cannot agree that this could be considered as a reasonable alternative, and for those for whom public transport is a great difficulty (parents with toddlers, prams and the like; the elderly and disabled) this would present a genuine hardship rather than an inconvenience.

The other alternative branches suggested in your consultation document as adequate in fact offer no better an alternative. The other "nearby" branch you mentioned was in Fulham, the other side of the Thames and also not directly served by a single bus journey (the nearest bus, the 22, travels down New King's Road, but stops nowhere near the Fulham Road branch you cite as a reasonable alternative.

I understand that one of the criteria used by The Post Office is a ward-level index of deprivation, whereby a poorly used branch in a ward of high deprivation would be more likely to be retained than a better used branch in a more affluent or less deprived council ward.

I understand and, indeed, welcome considerations of deprivation within your closure criteria. However, there are two flaws with this measure as they have been applied to these two branches: first, in boroughs like Wandsworth which has large wards of often over 14,000 residents often acute hardship within otherwise affluent areas you get erroneous results, and second, in London as a whole, where massive affluence and extreme poverty live within a few yards of each other ward-level measurements are less appropriate and less likely to give the whole picture.

The relevance of this criterion to both the Lower Richmond Road and Putney Bridge Road branches is that they both lie within Thamesfield ward; on most measures an affluent community. But also in this area you find the Ranelagh Estate and Stockhurst Close, two council estates of upward of 300 residents. There is a substantial elderly population in this area too: lifelong Putney residents in most cases who do not have cars and are either dependent for their mobility on public transport or who shop locally because they cannot travel too far afield from their immediate locality. It is these residents who have been most concerned by your closure proposals and for whom I contend the greatest hardship will be created.

It is also worth noting that the Post Office has already, in recent memory, closed a Post Office branch in Lower Richmond Road, between Bendemeer and Gladwyn Roads. At the time, the justification for that closure was the existence of an alternative branch in the same road. Perhaps you could reflect on the arguments you used at the time for retaining the branch at 209 Lower Richmond Road, as I find it very difficult to believe that anything consequential has changed in the ensuing three years; indeed, given the earlier Lower Richmond Road closure, custom will in all likelihood have increased since then.

Finally, it would appear that you have paid little or no attention to the changing nature of the area. It is a mistake not to consider trends within a community when seeking to make changes to service provision. In the case of Lower Richmond Road development will start later this year on the Putney Hospital site - a development that will not only return a primary care centre to the area but also a significant housing development - both of which will bring additional custom to this branch.

### **279 Putney Bridge Road, SW15 2PT**

The branch at 279 Putney Bridge Road almost mirrors that of Lower Richmond Road. It serves the other end of Putney's riverside, again, geographically impaired by the Thames to the north and the mainline to the south.

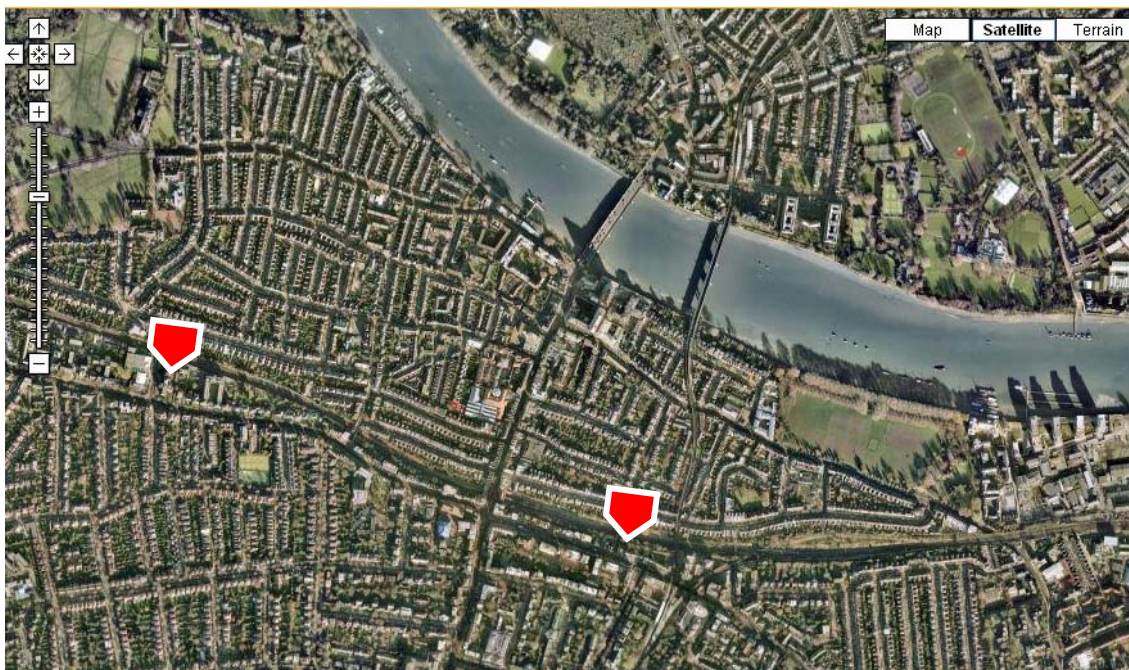
Public transport accessibility for residents of this area is no better than for Lower Richmond Road despite being a little closer to the High Street. There is no left-turn for

any vehicles from Putney Bridge Road into Putney High Street. Hence there is, again, no direct bus route from Putney Bridge Road to the alternative branch you propose in Upper Richmond Road.

The real public transport journey to this branch for someone living in, for example, Deodar Road, unable to walk and without a car would be as follows: 220 or 270 bus from Putney Bridge Road to either the junction of Putney Bridge Road with Putney High Street, or to Putney Bridge. Were one to get off at the junction with Putney High Street you would need to cross a busy road to get to the southbound bus stop that is outside the cinema. If you got off at the Putney Bridge northbound stop, which is in the middle of the bridge, you would need to complete a 200 metre walk back into Putney, crossing this very busy road, again to get to the southbound stop outside the cinema. Then with either route you would need to get a bus up the High Street, followed by a 100 metre walk to the post office. Or alternatively, a 220 or 270 in the other direction - all the way to Wandsworth town, to change onto a 37 or 337 that goes back along Upper Richmond Road. Neither of these routes is convenient, reasonable or proximate.

Because of the no left-turn at Putney High Street from Putney Bridge Road, things are no less difficult for those residents fortunate enough to have cars. Because of the mainline railway, there are only two usable crossings from the Putney town area south to Upper Richmond Road: Oxford Road and Dryburgh Road (Charlwood Road being void because you can only access it from Norroy or Chelverton Roads, which in turn are only accessed from Putney High Street). Upon navigating the local roads a private vehicle customer must then seek to find a parking space as the roads outside and around the alternative branch in Upper Richmond Road are controlled by parking restrictions. As neither alternative is a within reasonable walking distance (especially for the frail, elderly or in inclement weather conditions) I believe you have a responsibility to take into consideration the significant difficulties and barrier to access that exist for customers travelling by car.

It cannot be emphasised enough how the area of Putney north of the railway line is physically detached from those to the south - something I appreciate anyone unfamiliar with the area just looking at a map might not properly appreciate. I have illustrated the two crossings over the railway line on the Googlemap below.



In no way is this a reasonable journey to expect residents to make; and that's before considering the environmental objections to such needless and extensive journeys as well as the additional traffic you are proposing to direct through residential backstreets.

As a result of the earlier closure of the Upper Richmond Road branch that was situated between Galveston and Schubert Road, your proposed alternative at 214 Upper Richmond Road also serves a community of East Putney who access it via the pedestrian bridge across the railway line between Oakhill and Fawe Park Roads. I would like to point out that Oakhill Road has two sheltered housing blocks: Olive Haines House and Cambria Lodge, both of whose residents use and depend on this branch.

There is also significant new development planned for this part of Putney. On the far right of the image above you can make out the Riverside Quarter development (the four blocks casting long shadows over the Thames) which is barely half completed. For these residents and businesses the Putney Bridge Road branch is their nearest and local. There is also significant development around East Putney Station, for whom the Putney Bridge Road branch is also the nearest - not only the SW15H development that was completed a couple of years ago, but now a plan for two tower blocks opposite the station. These are additional customer and revenue opportunities for the Post Office.

I would like to make two final points in support of the case for retaining both of these two branches. The first relates to the very poor customer service provided at the Upper Richmond Road branch and the second to local business usage.

#### **Alternative branch at 214 Upper Richmond Road**

It is a measure of how bad the service is in the Upper Richmond Road branch that the realisation that they would have no choice but to use it is invoking in local residents as much concern and disquiet as the loss of their local branches in both Lower Richmond Road and Putney Bridge Road.

The Upper Richmond Road branch is renowned for the long queues and poor service its customers experience. Most people I have spoken to - which can be numbered in dozens - refer to a usual wait of 20 minutes or more. The branch is understaffed, the premises are run-down, and if the branch cannot cope at present how are we expected to have confidence in it when it becomes the only branch left in Putney town? The answer is we cannot, so unless you are prepared to announce major investment in this branch the level of service it provides must count as a further, major, reason against the closure of either of the other two branches.

#### **Transparency in determining branch closures**

Unfortunately, the Post Office has not set out why these two branches have been identified for closure, and de facto, why the remaining branches in Putney have not. You have offered no insight into how clear cut or otherwise each branch was as a candidate for closure. All of this has contributed to a concern that local people are faced with a *fait accompli*.

Although it has been denied during this consultation, there is a belief - in my view, reasonably held - that several of the branches earmarked for closure in this current round are on the list not because they are strategically unnecessary, but because the Postmaster is nearing retirement and his branch is therefore a reasonable target. This is certainly the belief held in the community surrounding the Putney Bridge Road post office, who's postmaster has previously postponed retirement because his service is so

much in demand. I recall at the time of the last round of closures that it was a significant determinant in retaining a branch in Roehampton High Street, where the Postmaster is young, but contributed to the closure of the Tildesley Road branch, where the Postmaster was of retirement age.

### **Small businesses and home workers**

Finally, I trust that you have received a detailed report back from the public meeting held at St Mary's Church a fortnight ago, at which your representatives were present. I should, first of all, thank Post Office staff for attending - you cannot have expected an easy time and to turn up in such circumstances is appreciated, even if the plans you were defending are not.

However, one of the arguments I was most struck by was the number of small businessmen and -women who spoke up about the importance of their local post offices in making a success of their business. Putney has many small businesses; I suspect many more than is typical nationwide, some operating from home, some in work-live units like Archway Mews close to the Putney Bridge Road branch, and many in small units around the town centre.

As much as the primary purpose of any Post Office must be to provide a service that meets the needs of local residents, local businesses use postal services extensively and there is a wider economic argument that must be considered within any closure plan above and beyond that of just the financial outturn of any given post office branch. In short, the negative impact the closure of these branches could have on local business is potentially greater than the amount closing them would save the taxpayer in central government post office subsidy.

It cannot seriously be your contention that an area that covers vastly in excess of 15,000 residents and Putney town centre can adequately be served by just one post office, which would be the consequence of your closure plans. This is exacerbated when one considers that the single remaining branch would be the malfunctioning one at 214 Upper Richmond Road branch. If that is not your contention, there is only one course open to you: reverse your closure plans for both, or certainly at least one, of these branches.

Do please go through the huge number of responses I submit alongside this letter from local residents and businesses: testament to the genuine desire for their retention the community feels.

Yours sincerely,



**Stuart King**

Labour Party Parliamentary candidate for Putney