

## **Impact of Bank Closures**

### **Burnmouth Community Council**

I have been asked by my colleagues on Burnmouth Community Council to respond to the 'Call for views on bank closures' by the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee of the Scottish Parliament. The comments and views expressed here reflect both our personal concerns and those of the members of the local community we represent.

Burnmouth is a small community of around 220 residents (as recorded on the electoral roll) which has undergone considerable change in recent years as a result of economic and social influences. This once thriving fishing village, which had a railway station, several shops, a post office, primary school and two pubs has seen the decline of fishing as the main source of employment and the closure of all the listed amenities, with the exception of one pub. These changes have had a particular impact on the demographic profile of the village, as there are fewer family groups than average and a higher than average percentage of retired and older residents. Lack of employment opportunities, poor local amenities and transport access issues to parts of the village, also mean that there are a large number of properties which are not permanently occupied; they are used as holiday accommodation or second homes.

Burnmouth has strong historical and social links with Eyemouth, the nearest town, which is one and a half miles away. These links have been reinforced in recent years as our school aged children are educated in Eyemouth, there is also a doctors' surgery and dental practice, small independent shops, a Co-op and currently, two banks. The proximity of these facilities in Eyemouth helps to support the quality of life for the residents of Burnmouth. As such, we are firmly of the opinion that closure of one of the banks (RBS) will have a negative impact on Eyemouth, and as a consequence, Burnmouth.

One of the key arguments driving the bank closures is the fact that customers' habits are changing and that online banking and cashless transactions have reduced the number of customers making personal visits to the banks. This does not reflect the experience of our local community in Burnmouth, where broadband speeds are problematic, short power cuts a regular feature, mobile phone coverage dependent on service provider and there is a population demographic that does not have the technology or the inclination to use anything other than 'traditional' banking methods. There is also the legacy of an agrarian and fishing based economy that in the past has suffered severe fluctuations in prosperity. A number of our local residents have commented on the fact that it is still common practice to draw out money to live on 'cash in hand', as a way of budgeting family finances.

As the Treasurer of the Community Council I have to follow a code of practice which means that online banking is not a 'fit for purpose' method for managing public funds at local community level. Expenses are paid using cheques which need to have two signatures. According to the RBS leaflet 'Help and Support for Personal and Business Customers' which I received following notification of the closure of the Eyemouth Branch, I can withdraw money

from the local post office using a debit card and PIN. Again, as a publically funded body, the Community Council does not have this option.

Apart from public bodies, other organisations that are vital to the resilience and well being of our local community will be affected by the bank closure. Our Village Hall offers social support through a Walk It Group, a Seniors Club and regular coffee mornings. There are also a number of groups that hire the Hall and provide opportunities for local residents to participate in glass making, a photography club, dancing and singing. Volunteers from the village organise the annual Burnmouth RNLI Brae Races and we have a 50/50 Club draw to provide funds for community projects; at the moment we are fund raising for a defibrillator. Groups such as these add to the quality of life of our community and in many cases, help to fill the gaps that have been created by the reduction of funding from other sources. None of them could operate without the enthusiasm and hard effort of volunteers and they all require easy and open access to financial services to operate efficiently. These volunteer groups are a fundamental part of rural Scotland and deserve consideration and support rather than obfuscation and difficulties.

The features of the local economy of East Berwickshire are reflected in the working patterns of Burnmouth residents. Quite a few are self employed and operate their own businesses. Several residents work from home and a number have seasonal employment which is closely linked to the local tourism industry. There are also a number of residents who produce works of art for sale. The presence of a local bank provides the flexibility that this multitude of working styles demands and the absence of a local bank will make Burnmouth less appealing as a place to live and work.

The positive point about having a bank in Eyemouth is the accessibility for Burnmouth residents. For those with a car, there is a free car park just a short walk away to the bank. For those needing public transport, there is a regular bus service, which again stops near the bank. The nearest alternative is to go to Berwick, where access to car parking can be an issue and would involve a longer walk from the bus stop. The suggested alternatives for an RBS bank in the 'Help and Support' booklet are Haddington (31.3 miles), Kelso (31.3 miles) and Tranent (38.3 miles). For those Burnmouth residents who want a personal banking service, Berwick will be their preferred choice. That will have an impact on footfall in Eyemouth and subsequently the viability of local businesses there.

Eyemouth has a small and compact commercial area, in which the bank buildings, because of their size, are a significant presence. A number of other commercial premises have already closed, so the addition of a bank closure will reinforce an impression of neglect and economic downturn. At the present time, Burnmouth and Eyemouth are very dependent, both directly and indirectly, on tourism and a positive image of East Berwickshire as a place to visit. Regeneration of this area is going to depend in part, on its attractiveness to commercial interests and its popular appeal. The fact that the largest town in the region has a number of derelict buildings is a worrying concern for our local community; especially for those who want to see more employment opportunities to encourage families and young people to live and work here.

In summary, as a Community Council, we believe that bank closures can only have a negative impact on rural communities such as Burnmouth. To use financial considerations and 'banking trends' as a 'one size fits all' bench mark to justify these closures shows a total lack of awareness or understanding of the realities of life for our residents. Our concerns were heightened by the sudden and unexpected closure of Eyemouth Post Office for several days recently. While this was a temporary problem, it served to highlight the reliance of our local community on access to personal financial services and the very real impact that the removal of these services has. While we accept that there is probably nothing that can be done about the June 11<sup>th</sup> closure of the RBS branch in Eyemouth we would like the Committee to consider the following in the expectation of further closures:-

- Extension of the notification period that has to be given for a bank closure to 1 year. This will allow more time to put alternative arrangements in place, such as the provision of suitable sites for mobile bank facilities
- Consider financial support for consultations to look into the possibility of bank sharing or banks sharing buildings with other commercial interests
- The provision of replacement mobile banking that is proposed. Is it suitable for elderly or disabled access? Is extra mobile banking being provided to an area or just spread more thinly? Are the proposed visits of the mobile bank frequent and varied enough to provide some flexibility to the customers?
- What guarantees can be put in place to ensure that moving from a permanent bank to mobile banking is not the 'thin end of the wedge' in terms of a complete removal of banking services from a community?
- What are the expectations regarding the maintenance and appearance of buildings no longer used by the bank? Should they be maintained by the bank to a reasonable standard of appearance even if they remain derelict? Can local councils exercise some control over the display of marketing and 'for sale' boards to reduce the visual impact of large buildings remaining empty?
- Is it possible for the Post Office to replicate all banking facilities so that local residents, public bodies and local voluntary groups continue to have access to the financial support that they require?

**Burnmouth Community Council**  
**The Scottish Borders**