

Statement regarding the future of Brenchley Post Office – January 2024

Issued jointly by Brenchley and Matfield Parish Council and Christine and Andy King

Following on from the recent survey concerning the future options for the Post Office and shop (PO) in Brenchley High Street, the Parish Council and Chris and Andy King feel it is important to ensure there is a shared understanding amongst all in the Parish as to the current position and facts around this matter.

The Background

1. Members of the PC have been engaged in numerous discussions with Chris and Andy since early 2021 regarding both their future and the future of the PO. Discussions have also been held with the landlord for the building regarding the possible options detailed below.
2. Chris and Andy had been leasing the PO on a succession of 5-year leases that were renewable at their option but the last one expired in November 2021 as they decided they did not want to commit to a further five-year period for various reasons, including concerns regarding the increased rent proposed.
3. The current contract Chris and Andy have from the Post Office is, sadly, no longer available and could not be transferred to a new postmaster. As a result, after they leave, any new postmaster would not receive a salary but, instead, only a small payment per transaction. The level of income from future PO activities by any successor, if a new contract were available at all, would therefore be substantially reduced, thus raising significant concerns regarding the continued financial viability of the whole shop.
4. Chris and Andy signed a new lease in January 2023 for a fixed period expiring on 31st October 2024. This included provision for early termination, exercisable at any point after 31st October 2023 subject to six months' notice. The landlord intended to exercise this option last October, which would have meant the tenancy ending and the shop closing on 30th April 2024, i.e. in just three months' time.
5. The landlord, who has been sympathetic in trying to secure a future for the last retail facility in the village, only decided not to exercise the option because of the ongoing discussions with the PC. They have offered the PC an opportunity to buy a long-leasehold for the retail space alone, with the landlord carrying out the necessary re-configuration work to the building. They would then renovate the flat and put it up for sale or rent, entirely separate from the PO.
6. The current lease is therefore due to expire later this year, at the end of October 2024, and does not contain any option for Chris and Andy to extend or renew.

The Future

1. The recent survey was undertaken to gauge the level of local support for the continued existence of the shop and Post Office as well as identifying possible alternative uses for the space. Significant community support is necessary to underpin applications for financial assistance / grants which could cover the majority of the cost to buy the shop, should that be the decision taken.
2. Over 90% of respondents want the shop to remain but much of that support was on the basis that the PO would remain as it is, with a full-time Post Office service.
3. The PC will prepare details for two possible options for consideration by the community in advance of a public meeting, to be held as part of the Annual Parish Assembly on Friday 8th March at 7pm at Brenchley Memorial Hall:
 - a. To buy the retail space alone, i.e. without the flat currently occupied by Chris and Andy. Sources of grant funding for up to 80% of the likely cost have been identified, subject to developing an acceptable business plan, including satisfactory evidence of community support and financial viability.
 - b. To buy the shop and flat as it stands. This would require a very much more significant fund, probably around £500,000, to be raised from and/or by members of the local community. This would need to be driven by an organisation such as a Community Interest Company set up to structure the purchase, find funding and take on future responsibility as the owners. The PC would assist but could not lead such an endeavour and will only discuss this option if residents express an early and strong interest in establishing such a group.
4. If the final decision by the parish is that a sustainable future cannot be secured then the landlord has indicated preparedness to allow a final extension of the current lease by a further 12 months to expire in October 2025. At that point, Chris and Andy would retire and the shop would close.