

UK's Subpostmasters Blast DWP "Underhand Tactics"

Government plans to abolish the Post Office® Card Account - used by 4.3 million people every week to access their benefit payments - are already in full swing, says the National Federation of SubPostmasters.

The account is already being run down, some new claimants will be refused access to the facility from February 2006, and some existing customers will be stripped of their accounts without their consent, according to new information obtained by the NFSP.

The Department of Work and Pensions' intention to close the account in 2010, threatening the viability of thousands of post offices, was exposed by the Federation earlier this month. Now, it appears, the demolition process has already begun.

The General Secretary of the NFSP Colin Baker said: "This is another body blow for the UK's subpostmasters and their customers.

"Without warning, publicity or consultation, the DWP has started a stealth campaign to finish off the local post office as a place to collect benefits. The last benefit book was withdrawn only nine months ago. Our customers gave them up only after a struggle, and in the belief that the Government was committed to their local post office and to the new card account. Their trust was misplaced - as was ours," he added.

During February, the DWP will start to deny access to the card account with three separate pilot schemes designed purely to kill off the Post Office® Card Account:

- New benefit claimants will not be given the option to open a Post Office® Card Account
- 35,000 existing customers will receive a letter from the DWP telling them to use a bank or building society account and demanding their account details
- 2,500 existing customers will, without choice or consultation, find their benefits are no longer paid into their Post Office® Card Account, paying them instead to a bank account, totally ignoring the preferences they made when their benefit books were stopped

The Federation will this week launch a campaign in post offices to urge customers to resist what it calls "the underhand, bully-boy tactics the Government has chosen to employ."

Colin Baker warned: "The Government refuses to acknowledge our customers' support for their post office or their right to choose how they access their benefits. We won't let Government stamp out people's right to choose. We urge everyone contacted by the DWP as part of this closure programme to simply say 'no'."

Notes to Editors:

- **Sub post offices make up 97% of the national network of post offices and are run by private business people - subpostmasters**

- **The post office network is the largest retail branch network in the UK. It has 41 million visits a week and offers 170 different services**
- **The network also provides free access to cash, keeps local shops going, is a focal point for communities and supports vulnerable residents.**
- **The NFSP represents subpostmasters in pay and conditions and across a wide variety of activities affecting the everyday lives of subpostmasters**

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