

Access to banking:

Focus group summary

June 2019

Background

As part of the **Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's** inquiry into **Access to Banking**, the National Assembly for Wales' Citizen Engagement Team has been gathering the views of citizens across Wales on the impact that bank closures have had on individuals and communities.

Methodology

As well as conducting a survey, the Citizen Engagement team held face to face focus groups with community groups in areas that have seen the closure of their last bank. This was to ensure that the views of those who may be digitally excluded from taking part in the survey were also captured.

Four focus groups were held across Wales involving 53 Citizens in Llanwrtyd Wells, Ceredigion, Llanfyllin and Anglesey.

Participants included senior citizens, people with a disability, support workers and mothers with young children.

Many thanks to Llanfyllin Lunch club, Llanwrtyd Wells Community Transport scheme, Ceredigion Disability Forum and Anglesey Mother and Baby group for giving up time during their group meetings to contribute to this inquiry.

Format

Participants were asked to discuss the following themes:

- Which banks have closed and when
- How much notice and consultation did the banks provide



- What impact have bank closures had on them
- Alternatives to bank branches, including mobile banking vans, the post office, telephone banking and online banking
- What impact have bank closures had on the local economy and community
- What could be done to help

Summary of Key Contributions

Consultation and notice from bank providers

- Llanwrtyd Wells

Barclays was the last bank to close in the town in 2017. Participants stated that the bank put a sign up in the window with a months' notice but they did not consult with the community. Santander has also closed in the nearby towns of Builth Wells and Llandrindod Wells. Participants have also heard that Barclays in Llandovery and Builth Wells may close - which is the last bank in the town.

"By the time you'd read it and thought ok right ok and by the time you look around it was gone." **Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells**

"They didn't have a general meeting so that people could air their views. Nothing. Nothing at all." **Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells**

- Llanfyllin

Participants explained that HSBC was the last bank to close in the town a few years ago, and Natwest closed before that. Customers received a letter to let them know about the closure.

"We had a letter with a couple of months' notice. No shorter opening hours. They even took the hole in the wall with them."

"I met with one of the hierarchy from HSBC and we spent an hour in the office with her. In that hour 17 people came in but she insisted it was four per day that were using the bank and that was why she was closing." **Participant, Llanfyllin**

- Anglesey

Many banks closed on the island in the last 5 years alone. HSBC have closed in Menai Bridge and Amlwch, in addition to NatWest.

The group were from all four corners of the Island - those North and Central to the Island have access to High Street Banks in Holyhead and Llangefni (albeit limited in options due

to closures). Those on the periphery of the Island (West towards Rhosneigr, East towards Amlwch and South towards Llanfairpwll / Menai Bridge) have to travel to the centre of the Island or off the Island completely.

- Ceredigion

Participants were from different towns and villages in Ceredigion which has seen a number of banks close. Participants discussed how Lloyds bank has closed in Newcastle Emlyn and Barclays in Aberaeron will close at the end of May.

Impact of bank closures

- Travel

All groups now have to travel further in order to access a bank branch which has raised a number of issues for participants, including:

- the extra cost of transport and parking
- fear around how they will manage as they get older and are unable to drive or fear of driving in busier towns
- inconvenient public transport options
- more difficult for those with autism to travel to bigger and busier towns

“A trip to the bank used to take 15 minutes. I could park just outside, they would help me into the building and I knew the staff so they knew how to help me. Now I have to drive for an hour to my closest bank, the parking is really far away and I don’t know the staff.” **Participant, Ceredigion**

“If you don’t have your own transport up here you are really stuck which is not nice at all.” **Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells**

“We’re all old pensioners now and because from April to September we have to pay for the train. Which isn’t fair really. Because when you do need your transport its extra money. Luckily I think everyone has got bus passes.” **Participant, Llanwrtyd**

‘I don’t know how I’ll manage when I can’t drive. I’m 80 now so won’t be long. It will be a real hassle then’ **Participant, Llanfyllin**

- Loss of independence

For participants in the Llanfyllin, Llanwrtyd Wells and Ceredigion groups, the closure of local bank branches has meant that they now have to rely on friends, family and support workers to access banks further away which has impacted on their independence. For

those who now require a support worker to take them to the banks this has also meant increasing costs.

Stemming from this, some of the groups felt there was also a loss of community with the closure of banks. Where there used to be a familiar point of contact in the branch for some individuals, who could look out for those who are more vulnerable, it was felt this community was no longer present in some of the towns that had experienced closures.

“It limits your choices. My father had always banked with Barclays but when it closed he wanted a local branch so we considered moving his account to the Post Office but the practicalities of him accessing it meant we couldn’t.” **Participant, Ceredigion**

One participant described an experience when her card was swallowed by the Barclays ATM in the town and she was unable to talk to anyone face to face because it had closed. Her son then had to take her to the nearest bank branch in a different town which was a worrying experience.

“I think our generation, we’ve been brought up with banks. You know when I lost my card they say ‘why don’t you go online’ but we’re not all computer experts you know that’s the thing. It’s wrong.

Contact you know. You can’t talk to a computer. And that’s the trouble I had when the machine took my card I thought ‘oh my god’ but then I got to meet someone face to face explaining the situation and it does put you at ease. You know it really does [...]I mean I was lucky my son come over then and took me over [to the bank] because he could see I was getting too stressed.. but it’s not nice. It’s not fair on him because he lives in Newtown so you can imagine that it’s a worry otherwise.” **Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells**

- ATMS

All groups were concerned about bank closures impacting on the number of ATMS left in the town, the number of free ATMS and the reliability of the ATMS that are left of not running out of cash.

Some members of the group in Anglesey were aware of ATMs being removed that made accessing cash difficult. This has meant that there is an increase in pop up ATMs in shops/bars that charge a fee for withdrawing / using, putting some people in difficult financial situations to access their monies.

- Budgeting

Many of the support workers in the Ceredigion group felt the lack of ATMS was having a negative impact on budgeting for some of those they support. Many find budgeting easier with cash and this is difficult with limited access to cash points, either in not having

access to enough cash, or taking out more cash than usual when they're able to access the cash point.

Being able to budget properly with less ATMS was also a concern for participants in the Llanfyllin group.

"We were brought up in a time when Dad said 'You don't buy anything unless you pay for it'...and all I deal with is cash.. I hardly ever deal with a card because I can't see the money going" **Participant, Llanfyllin**

Alternatives to bank branches

- Post Office

Most of the groups had also seen the closure of local Post Office and now had branches located inside shops instead.

"Using Post Offices is fine but it still doesn't solve the problem that if you belong to a bank they are a service provider and they should provide a service for everybody in communities. It's all very well passing the buck to the Post Office but not everywhere has a Post Office. We're very lucky here – its incorporated into another business.'
Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells

Although many groups were complimentary of the staff working in the Post Office, its position usually at the back of shops presented a number of issues in terms of privacy and accessibility. For many with a disability, this is difficult in terms of physical access and for those with autism for example, can also be difficult in terms of accessing a new and busy environment.

"I live down the road so I use the Post Office in Llanfechan which is there once a week and that's fine but I don't use the one here because the queue for spars tills are right behind me. And do you want to do business with people stood right behind you? Not really." **Participant, Llanfyllin**

- Telephone and online banking

There were a number of barriers for the groups in using telephone or online banking as an alternative to a bank branch.

A fear of scams was a barrier and a concern for older participants in using online or telephone banking.

"When you hear about all this hacking and so forth it makes it not worth it. I'm not going to risk it." **Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells**

“I can’t believe what’s been happening lately. We’ve been getting these letters from HSBC and it’s all to do with security – and you know we’re told not to give detail over the telephone but they want you to telephone”. I think we’ve got a date now where they’re going to ring my husband and you’ve got to give a password... **and to me it’s a bit frightening**” **Participant, Llanfyllin**

“I don’t like using...I’m going to be old-fashioned .. I don’t like paying online.. I mean I’m on the computer, I’ve done a lot on the computer all my life – but I do not do my banking on the computer because I was listening to a programme the other day and one bank has lost a lot of money now through scams so I don’t use anything, I don’t pay anything online.” **Participant, Llanfyllin**

“We’re creatures of habit. **I feel safe in the bank.** I deal with the bank, I know what happening and that’s it” **Participant, Llanfyllin**

Poor Wifi connectivity was a barrier for participants in the Anglesey group in using online banking as an alternative to a bank branch.

Mobile banking vans

Llanfyllin, Llanwrtyd and Anglesey participants either did not have access to a mobile banking van or had not used one. Participants from Llanfyllin have tried campaigning for access to a Natwest mobile banking branch but this has been unsuccessful so far. Participants from Ceredigion had used a mobile banking van but said the queues were often long and the vans sometimes have to move on before they’ve seen everyone.

While some groups felt that mobile banking vans would be better than nothing, other felt it was not an adequate replacement for a bank branch due to the lack of privacy and services it can offer.

Impact on local economy

The majority of groups discussed how bank closures have impacted on footfall in the high street, shops closing and ATMS running out of cash during busier times of the year when tourists visit.

‘Well the farmers coming out of the local market used to stop at the bank and then stop in the spar to buy but now I’ve noticed that they go straight through there’s no need to stop so it does impact’ **Participant, Llanfyllin**

“It’s impossible to pop in to the bank anymore...in considering the closures of High Street businesses, cuts to public transport and links it would be a wasted journey, waiting around with nothing to do for a service that would normally take 5 mins in person and the same amount of time online.” **Participant, Anglesey**

For participants from Aberaeron, the lack of cash points has had a bit impact on the town. There is one cash point left in the town now and during the summer, when tourism is at its height, there are long queues.

“The queues are ridiculous. Tourists have a problem with this, you can hear them discussing it in the queue. It won’t help the industry here.” **Participant, Ceredigion**

“We get a lot of people coming in.. like walkers that come off the train. Now this weekend this is going to be big because we’ve got the vintage rally cars coming and if people haven’t brought enough money with them where are they going to go to get it? It’s just going to be very awkward. We’ve got man vs horse which is going to be a big event this year because its 40 years since it’s been going and that does bring in a lot of tourists for us so it does help us in that way you know. But then again we’re back to square one because they won’t know where to get money” **Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells**

Impact on Community

Groups in Llanwrtyd Wells and Llanfyllin discussed how local bank branch closures had made it more difficult for local community groups and charities, often run by older members of the community, to access change and deposit takings. This meant them making special journeys or keeping money in the house for longer.

“But the other thing that was difficult - I helped at a coffee morning on Saturday for the heritage centre and the lady that runs it [...] said to me, ‘if you’ve got any change can you bring it?’ cause of course now there’s no banks she can’t get the change. Then of course they’ve got the problem of getting all this cash. Cause it’s not like you can send a cheque through the post, to the bank. And they bank with Barclays where there is one in Builth but there used to be one here in town and that would have been absolutely fantastic.” **Participant, Llanwrtyd Wells**

“I’m treasurer for the WI so that has to go into a bank - I don’t drive. So just to put £10 into the bank it’s a 2 or 3 hour roundtrip. By the time you’ve got the bus and waited for the next one it could be 2 to 3 hours - that’s an issue.” **Participant, Llanfyllin**

“I was in Welshpool yesterday, I help out with Christian aid, and I had a good sum of money in the house to take in but Natwest has gone from Welshpool so I’ve got to go to Oswestry which takes 25 minutes to half an hour” **Participant, Llanfyllin**

What could be done to help?

- Credit Union and Community banking

One participant mentioned a credit union had been trialled in Ceredigion at one time but they weren’t able to get the volunteers to support it so it was closed, which had an impact on public confidence in credit unions. It was also felt there was a lack of

awareness of credit unions in general so perhaps with more support, this could be a potentially successful alternative.

Some participants in Anglesey felt that community banking would help vulnerable older adults in the community, but community banking access points are poorly planned (i.e. some areas of Anglesey very rural and would still require some travel)

“I did look into setting up a community bank but there are an awful lot of regulations and work. There’s one in Welshpool – not a community bank, what do they call them – credit union. But there’s a lot of rules to get into that -you need to get a lot of people into that and I couldn’t get the interest.” **Participant, Llanfyllin**

- Better Wi/Fi

Participants in Anglesey felt that a better WIFI connection would help.

- More Post Office banking services

The preference in Llanwrtyd Wells was that either the banks stay open, re-open or the Post Office offers more banking services.

- Mobile vans

Many participants were concerned about the lack of privacy available in a mobile banking van but some participants in Llanwrtyd Wells and Llanfyllin felt it would be better than nothing.

“I think if we had a mobile banking van coming once a week it would bring people in from outside. If it came on a Thursday when Derek the fisherman was here, we have a little street market on a Thursday - it’s very small but if they brought the mobile van, it would bring people to that too” **Participant, Llanfyllin**

“I like the idea of a community bank