

6 April 2011

Councillor Ken Thornber CBE
Hampshire County Council
The Castle
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Dear Councillor Thornber

Thank you for your letter of 21 September to Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, regarding Royal Mail's Postcode Address File and county information. I have been asked to reply as my directorate at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has policy responsibility for postal affairs. Your letter has only just found its way to me so apologies for the delay with my reply.

As you are probably aware, Royal Mail's Postcode Address File (PAF) was originally designed by Royal Mail simply to aid the efficient delivery of mail, though over the years the PAF data, especially postcodes, have come to be used by many other types of organisations for a number of other purposes.

The county name does not form a part of the postal address as used by Royal Mail and indeed has not been part of the official postal address since 1996. The existing information, which includes the administrative, historical and traditional county data sets, does not form part of the PAF address, but it is optional information contained on the company's "Alias" data file which third parties can purchase from the company. But the company did make very clear back in 1996 that although it would retain the existing information due to demand by those organisations that wanted to utilise the data, it would not maintain the information as it was not needed for postal purposes.

In 2003, a Postcomm consultation on the future of the PAF concluded that it was not reasonable to hold Royal Mail responsible for the way in which other bodies used their data. If other organisations, private or public, central or local government, decide to use postal addresses or postcodes for other purposes, those

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organisations must take account of the limitations of the data. And if there is a problem caused by the way in which postcodes are being used by third parties, the matter should be drawn to their respective attention to allow them the opportunity to reconsider and rectify the way in which they are using the data.

More recently in 2009, Postcomm carried out another consultation which looked at the PAF Code of Practice. And although county information is not covered by the Code, as it does not form part of a postal address as defined by Royal Mail, Royal Mail wanted the topic covered in the consultation in order to gain a better understanding of concerns over the use of county information. The consultation closed at the end of July 2009 and Postcomm published its findings and decision in May 2010.

During the consultation, the users of the data raised concerns about the disruption to their services that the immediate deletion of county data would bring and requested that Royal Mail continue to provide this information as a separate file until the review of the licence in 2013, and that after this point there should be a transitional period if this data is to be removed.

I understand that Royal Mail has not yet made any decision to discontinue the provision of such information and any such decision would only result in a gradual phasing out over a number of years of instances where people received addressed mail which includes the "wrong" county information due to the information held on Royal Mail's Alias data base.

More information on Postcomm's consultations on the PAF database can be found on Postcomm's website (www.psc.gov.uk).

Apologies again for the lateness of this reply.

Yours sincerely



Steven Guilbert
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Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)