

BCA Statement and Questions to inform meeting between Australia Post and Julian Leeser MP. October 2023

BCA Statement to Australia Post

The BCA and broader community welcome this meeting of Australia Post executives with our federal member for Berowra, the Hon Julian Leeser MP. It acknowledges the advocacy of the federal member for Berowra and the importance of the restoration of financial and postal services to Brooklyn and surrounding communities numbering 2000 people.

The map attached for Australia Post's information provides some level of information as to how distant the 12 communities are, most boat access only, and the distances for many to reach available services, with some a 4 hour return trip which may include boat, mooring and/or car travel or public transport (if available). Some do not even have a delivery service. In short - a vulnerable lower Hawkesbury region with limited transport options which deserves consideration of its unique circumstances.

Services in any community are vital for community cohesion and connection. During COVID-19 as mentioned by Australia Post we witnessed the isolation of many residents and with limited access to services, not only because of the unprecedented economic shutdown through 2020-2021 but because of fear, especially for the elderly and the infirm, fear of contracting the virus, which continued through 2022. Australia Post acknowledges the decline of services as well due to COVID-19 and which the BCA maintains is partly due to the gamut of complaints over years which resulted in many customers going to Hornsby, the city and elsewhere. This failure of duty of care by Australia Post cannot be solved by the word 'disappointing'. The complaints included abuse, bullying and harassment of community members. Two larger communities (Mooney Mooney and Cheero Point) advise they ceased using the post office altogether because of this abuse and nothing was done.

All businesses experienced downturn both through this COVID period and in the aftermath – with many advising that only now in the second half of 2023 they are witnessing comebacks in patronage for tourism, cafes, and retail. During this period, Brooklyn, and river communities such as Dangar Island all experienced an upsurge in numbers – the importance of moving away from congested cities and buying homes that were more affordable as rents continued to escalate. The cost-of-living crisis is also acknowledged.

With the cost-of-living crisis, many residents are limiting travel and relying on local services as much as is feasible. Foot traffic lost through the demise of the post office is expanding and within a different environment that offers its own opportunities for both the community and Australia Post. People are increasingly working in hybrid situations from their home to reduce commute times and contain costs. Since the pandemic many micro-businesses have established locally and look for opportunities for parcel post and banking. The local school, real estate agency and other associations have legislative requirements to bank cash received by 3pm, on the same day. Elderly residents, many on pensions continue to fear internet banking and scams, travelling by train 25kms

to Hornsby on their Opal seniors' cards, not to Berowra given mobility and poor accessibility of banks.

Australia Post has mentioned 23 transactions a day in the correspondence (equating to 6,578 per year over 5.5 days). It previously identified a minimum number of 10,000 transactions are needed annually to ensure the sustainability of the service. This presents a difference of 3,500 transactions or 30%. Based on the substantial community feedback received since the former LPO's closure, we have absolute confidence that with new management in place and a fresh start, the community will use and support a new Brooklyn LPO - resulting in significantly stronger future consumer and transaction volumes. We are seeking the opportunity to try. We believe that if given the chance we will be able to demonstrate active consumer participation at the Brooklyn LPO, and that Australia Post stands to benefit both in terms of PR / community goodwill as well as commercially from this venture.

Emerging through COVID-19, with the opportunities presented through growth of new families and retirees settling in Brooklyn and on the Hawkesbury, new businesses requiring convenient financial and postal services suggest that Brooklyn and the lower Hawkesbury should be provided with banking services (we have no bank) and postal services that can meet and grow this new market. With no services, people look to internet banking (if they have internet access and some communities have patchy internet at best) and alternate offerings for parcel delivery in competition with Australia Post. The community seeks a fair go and re-establishment of a licensed post office in time for our 150th anniversary of the Brooklyn Post Office in 2024.

A different and progressive perspective

An application for a licensed post office was submitted by Adrian Bevan to Australia Post on 28 May 2023. Australia Post promised to the federal member and to this community that it would assess an application for a licence. This application may be fine-tuned further but offers an opportunity that the community considers should be given a chance that acknowledges the vulnerability of this region, untested patronage due to previous complaints and COVID and the cost-of-living crisis. It responds in a 'fair go' way to the distances involved and impact on families and small businesses in a cost-of-living crisis and acknowledges the lack of consultation to transition a new licensee.

Through our research there are small township licensed post offices that have transitioned or re-opened elsewhere in the state and in other states, in NSW, Queensland and in Tasmania for example. The post offices build on other services that are needed, whether it is a community service hub like in Taralga, a café such as Tambo, Queensland or a pharmacy like in Yolla, Tasmania, or other business. The applicant for the Brooklyn licence has an existing business and a full licence would augment his business and ensure a good level of foot traffic, foot traffic that will then continue for a coffee, or to visit to the pharmacy or go to the pub for lunch. The BCA proposes that this augmented multi-service model built on the solid foundation of an existing successful business should be given a chance. In summary:

- The vacant premises already exist for a commercial lease at 214 Brooklyn Road.
- Staffing is already available within the current business, with the applicant's spouse having experience in operating a licensed post office.
- Shop refurbishments and insurances are partly covered through the existing business.

- Training and licensing from Australia Post

If the community is not able to negotiate through this meeting for a reasonable and progressive solution that meets Australia Post and its needs, even for a 3-year trial to confirm how the new model supports excellent customer service underpinning connection in the community, we would then seek independent mediation between the community delegates and Australia Post

A community survey conducted in April 2023 across the Brooklyn and river communities firmly illustrates the level of support for a licensed service with the key services requested. Of 200 responses, 96% consider Aust Post is an essential service for the community and 95% would support the business if re-opened. 49% used Express Post, 53% used Parcel Collect, 54% would use a JP, 48% postal boxes, 48% passport ID. Banking 38%, Post-pay 30%. We would have a viable business that could be well supported with 35% of the responses identifying they would use the service once a week and 8% once a day. Australia Post were previously provided this analysis with no response.

Questions to Australia Post and to seek their response as needed:

1. *Is Australia Post aware that Brooklyn as a service hub to the lower Hawkesbury does not have a bank? (noting that Paul Graham the CEO of Australia Post advised a Senate Inquiry that Australia Post would not leave any community that did not have a bank)*
2. *Is Australia Post aware of the significant inconvenience and distances imposed on Brooklyn and the lower Hawkesbury communities to access financial and postal services, during a cost-of-living crisis and patchy internet access especially for elderly people? What solutions could Australia Post consider? A trip on the Hawkesbury through all these locations would readily identify the demographic, the distances, and the accessibility issues.*
3. *The importance of excellent customer service is the backbone of sustainable service delivery. Yet Brooklyn Post Office waned following years of abuse and items thrown at customers, changing the licence without changing the management, with further patronage decline due to COVID and its aftermath. The community wants to build renewed loyalty to Australia Post, re-invigorate our town and create opportunity for growth and restore service numbers rather than retreat and use alternate services.
How can the exceptional/unique circumstances of this community, not unlike remote regional communities throughout Australia, be celebrated and sustained with Brooklyn as a viable and functioning service hub with an Australia Post service of 150 years standing at its core?*
4. *Would Australia Post consider a trial for 3 years for a licensed post office recognising our unique regional circumstances, or alternatively agree to independent mediation to work with the community and identify what a new and accessible financial and postal service might look like?*

**Brooklyn Community Association
16 October 2023**