

## By Toby Maine

**A** NEW threat to Britain's post offices is swelling support for Financial Mail's campaign to save this vital part of national life.

Thousands of readers have pledged to join the fight, but the introduction next month of new payment methods for state pensions and other benefits means more people than ever are voicing their concerns.

That is why Financial Mail is renewing its call to readers to join us and take action.

Complete the form on this page and return it to Financial Mail. The forms - and we expect a mountain of them - will be passed to top brass at the Post Office with a demand that they listen to what you say.

Benefit payments account for about 40 per cent of a post office's revenue. By showing that you wish to continue to receive payments across a post office counter using a benefit book, you will be helping your local branch survive.

You will also be exercising your basic right to freedom of choice. Financial Mail believes that the Post Office is riding roughshod over many people's wishes by forcing them to receive payments via bank or building society accounts or a Post Office card account.

The card account will only be for collecting state benefits, with claimants picking up cash at a post office by tapping in a personal identification number and having their cards swiped.

Letters are already being sent to claimants spelling out these options, but not mentioning that the Post Office must also offer an 'exceptions service' catering for customers who do not want their benefit books scrapped.

Only about 150,000 benefit recipients will be hit by the changes next month. But the Post Office aims to



impose the new payment plan on all 14 million pensioners and other benefit claimants by 2005.

Neil MacCormack, 45, sub-postmaster at Wheatley in Oxfordshire, says: 'If we do not act now, it will be too late. If this change goes through, it will force post offices out of business and a vital community service will be destroyed for ever.'

'The vast majority of my customers, most of them pensioners, back the campaign and are refusing to be forced into opting for new payment methods they don't want. They will fight to the bitter end.'

Sheena Palmer, 43, post-mistress of Watlington post office in Oxfordshire, fears the new system will be unworkable for many pensioners and the disabled.

**S**HE says: 'Many find that benefit payment books help them to budget. They prefer to see the cash in their hand and not have it transferred electronically to a bank account.'

'And the Post Office card account will be fraught with difficulties. Cards will be stolen and people will forget PIN numbers.'

But Sheena says it is wrong that the Post Office should bear the brunt of complaints because the changeover has been forced on it.

The Government is demanding that the Post Office network halts losses of £200 million a year. This has resulted in a brutal cost-cutting programme that will axe 3,000

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