

Post offices win national accolades

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A FEW years ago the future of two Suffolk post offices looked doomed - and it was only community spirit and the drive of two very special postmistresses that ensured their transformation into thriving businesses.

Now, the women - Patricia Larman at Stanningfield near Bury St Edmunds and **Mandy Coll at Monks Eleigh** near Lavenham - have clinched national Post Office awards in recognition of their hard work, which saw both businesses reopen and flourish.

But what makes the achievement all the more remarkable is that the two rural post offices are only seven miles apart.

Both women were yesterday delighted with their prizes, which were handed over at a glittering ceremony at London's Café Royal on Friday. Mrs Larman's office was named best national rural post office and her neighbour's business won best national community post office.

Mrs Larman took on the new post office in Stanningfield - which is attached to the Red House pub - a year after Norman Langridge was forced to retire as postmaster through ill health after 14 years in the job.

Now Mrs Larman runs it with the help of Mr Langridge, 66, who has made a successful recovery from open-heart surgery.

The postmistress also runs the postal business at nearby Sicklesmere and last year she won a successful campaign to save it from closure after funds for much needed security improvements were found.

Mrs Larman threatened to shut up shop after she failed to get a Government grant but with the help of Bury MP David Ruffley she was handed £6,000 from St Edmundsbury Borough Council, which was matched by the Countryside Agency and funds from her own pocket.

Speaking after picking up her award, and £1,500 in vouchers, the postmistress said she felt her passion for the rural communities she serves had been recognised: "It's community based and that's what I have fought for from day one and I have been here for six years. I believe in rural communities - it's my passion, that and my family."

And Mrs Larman urged people struggling to keep rural post offices open to keep fighting: "If you believe in it you can win - with a lot of help you can make them work. Don't be frightened of standing up and saying what you think if you believe in it. People will take notice."

Mrs Larman, who says she hates shopping - preferring to be on the other side of the counter - is planning to buy a digital camera with her winnings and share the rest between family and staff.

Her right hand man at Stanningfield, Mr Langridge, said he was thrilled with the win: "I'm absolutely over the moon - it's quite an achievement to beat off competition from across the country.

"But I think we deserved to win - we have a special relationship with all our customers. They are our friends."

Miss Coll was also delighted with her win. She said the post office and community shop - opened earlier this year in an outbuilding at the Swan pub a year after the old post office closed down - had become a thriving amenity.

"I think the fact that it's the community award says it all really. We are a post office that serves the community and we're here for everyone. The community decided they wanted a shop and post office so a brilliant committee was formed and now we've got this absolutely smashing community shop, which is run by volunteers, and post office. It'll soon be our first anniversary and things are fantastic."

Miss Coll said the post office was offering an ever wider range of services: "From November we'll be doing home insurance and savings products and we already do car insurance, personal loans and personal banking is going from strength to strength.