



## Post Office News - January 2019

### **Citizens Advice shows self service speeds up queues**

Self service is now available in around 2% of post offices, and our [new research](#) shows the machines significantly speed up service. Customers queuing for self service kiosks (SSKs) save an average of 3 minutes compared to staffed counters and are 3 times less likely to have to queue at all.

Most people who use SSKs have a good overall experience, and the machines are particularly popular with younger people. But our research shows that habit and lack of confidence stop many from using self service in post offices.

Whilst face to face services must be preserved, providing additional SSKs and helping more people to use them could reduce queues and improve public perception of the Post Office. Expanding SSK provision could also free up staff to spend more time assisting consumers who need/want a more personal service.

However, our research shows consumers experience some difficulties with the machines, including navigating options, identifying equipment, and posting items. Some also have problems waiting for assistance to complete transactions.

Citizens Advice recommends 4 improvements to maximise consumer benefits:

- Significantly increase, by at least double, the number of post offices with SSKs, and retain SSKs in Crown branches that go on to be franchised
- Improve consumer awareness of SSKs in branch
- Make the current stock of SSKs easier to use and improve reliability
- Develop new generation machines that are significantly more intuitive

Post Office Ltd has already agreed to make a number of changes in response to our recommendations.

## **Citizens Advice examines impact of having no address**

A fixed postal address is vital for homeless people to access and engage with services. However, many homeless people have no fixed postal address and are left trapped in a catch-22 situation.

A [new study](#) from Citizens Advice finds that having no fixed postal address prevents homeless people from accessing the services and support they need. Failure to receive important correspondence from public services including healthcare, Jobcentres, courts and housing services can have serious consequences. These include benefits sanctions, dropping down waiting lists and missing out on offers of housing. Without a fixed address, homeless people are also excluded from applying for services such as bank accounts.

Citizens Advice is recommending 2 potential solutions, which build on existing systems:

- An adjusted form of Poste Restante - a system that allows you to have your post sent to and collected from post offices - for homeless people
- A free PO box-type system for homeless people - giving an address to put on applications and enabling people to pick up post from one of Royal Mail's 1,350 delivery offices

We have set up a working group with Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd to further develop solutions.

For further details, also see our [blog](#) and [animation](#).

## **Citizens Advice consumer work plan 2019/2020 consultation**

Citizens Advice has a formal role representing consumers in the postal and energy markets, and this includes our post office policy work. Our work [plan](#) sets out our agenda for improving markets for consumers and is now open for consultation with stakeholders and the general public.

We welcome feedback, which will be reflected in our final work plan in March. Please let us know if you would like to discuss the work plan or how to respond.

The consultation closes on 8 February. Please email your response to [consumerworkplan@citizensadvice.org.uk](mailto:consumerworkplan@citizensadvice.org.uk) or send it to Consumer Work Plan Consultation, c/o Rebekka Rumpel, Citizens Advice, 200 Aldersgate Street, London EC1A 4HD.

## **MPs concerned about post office capacity to meet banking needs**

MPs have again highlighted the important role now played by post offices in providing consumers with banking services. However, MPs also raised concerns about the ability of the post office network to meet consumers' banking needs, in separate discussions on [rural post offices](#) and [ATM closures](#).

MPs suggested post offices are under significant pressure to try to meet the gap in services created by the banks. Concerns around the adequacy of payments to post offices for undertaking banking transactions, the viability of subpostmasters' businesses, and temporary post office closures were raised. The [National Federation of SubPostmasters](#) says pay rates for banking do not come close to covering the costs of delivering the services.

Postal services minister Kelly Tolhurst [reports](#) that the Post Office has reassured her 'it will do all it can to ensure that postmasters are better remunerated for the vital [banking] services that they offer'. The minister also stressed the additional funding available for community post office branches, and was clear that the Government and Post Office Ltd will continue to support rural post offices.

## **Protests against franchising of Crown branches**

The transfer of 74 Crown post offices to WH Smith branches continues to raise controversy. About [50 demonstrations](#) across the country have been reported, attended by protesters and supported by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Labour MPs. The [CWU opposes the franchising](#), and is concerned about the quality of service in franchised post offices, and the impact on jobs.

The [government](#) stresses the move is not a downgrading of post offices, and states that WH Smith already operates 135 post offices. The vast majority of the network's branches, around 98%, are already operated by third parties on a franchise or agency basis. [Citizens Advice research](#) finds that former Crown branches generally perform as well as, and some cases better than, Crown post offices on a range of measures.

## **Citizens Advice reports on consumer experience of parcel sending services**

Most parcels sent by consumers go through the Post Office. [Research](#) from Citizens Advice finds 80% of parcels to family and friends, 77% of items sold online and 63% of online returns are sent at a post office. Over a third of consumers are unaware of other options for sending parcels, such as parcel

shops or Royal Mail depots.

Although consumers are generally satisfied, there is a problem with over 1 in 10 parcels that are sent. And when problems arise, many consumers find them difficult to resolve. Almost half (46%) of consumers who had a problem said they found it difficult to find contact information for the parcel delivery company. 22% said they had to make contact multiple times to resolve their issue and 24% had to wait over 2 weeks for a resolution.

Citizens Advice recommends that postal operators make insurance restrictions and packaging guidance clear, and improve their channels of communication to ensure consumers are able to resolve problems when they arise. This year, we will engage with postal operators to help them improve their current practice.

### **New parcel returns label printing service**

Royal Mail has launched a new service to make it easier for customers to return items. The [Labels to Go service](#) enables online shoppers to use their mobile devices to print returns labels at post offices. Shoppers process the returned item on the Royal Mail returns portal or the retailer's own website and receive a unique QR code, which can be scanned to print a label. The service is also available at Royal Mail Customer Service Points.

### **Post developments around the world**

- **Belgium** - Belgian postal service bpost has teamed up with German online retailer Zalando to trial [in-home deliveries](#), in which delivery personnel are given access to customers' homes. Participating homes are equipped with a 'smart' doorlock and doorbell. bpost couriers ring the smart doorbell, which sends a notification to the customer's smartphone. Customers can then remotely open the door to provide access to the courier and watch the delivery via video stream.
- **United States** - Members of Congress are campaigning for the US Postal Service to [reestablish non-bank financial services](#) to people who are financially excluded. Services could include cheque and savings accounts and small short-term loans.

Separately, the Treasury Department has [published a long-expected proposal for overhauling the US Postal Service](#) (USPS), recommending major changes to the USPS's business model, but not supporting privatisation.