

Accessibility at post offices



Gemma Byrne

Contents

Summary	2
1. Our role in reviewing post office changes	3
2. Method	4
3. When planning a trip to a post office, it's not clear what accessibility features you can expect to find	5
4. Shoppers had a positive experience getting to a post office	8
5. Those with limited mobility struggled to enter the branch	9
6. Access was easier inside the branch	11
7. Staff were helpful but key facilities weren't available	12
8. We asked Post Office Ltd to make some changes	15
9. Here's what Post Office Ltd have done	17

Summary

Post offices are valued and frequently used by disabled people. Almost 3 in 10 (29%) disabled people say they use a post office at least once a week or more, compared with just over 2 in 10 (22%) non-disabled people.

We wanted to better understand the accessibility of the post office network and the impact it has on disabled consumers. So we asked disabled mystery shoppers to visit over 400 post offices and tell us about their experience.

We have 2 key findings. The first is that accessibility varies across the post office network. Despite some examples of good practice, such as staff interaction, provision can often be inconsistent. For example, in 44% of visits shoppers with compatible hearing aids were not able to use a hearing loop.

The second is the importance to disabled consumers of providing information on the accessibility of branches. Post Office Ltd (POL) does not provide any disability information on its main online branch finder, unlike other companies such as DPD and Collect+ (POL has some branch accessibility information hosted elsewhere, but it is extremely difficult to find and some of it is now out of date).

Post Office Ltd demonstrates in its comprehensive accessibility guidelines that its intentions are to provide good disabled access at all branches. However, this research, as well as previous Citizens Advice research, has shown that standards too commonly slip in the post office network. The problem lies in the implementation of those guidelines and POL does not currently have a systematic process to maintain and monitor disability access.

We shared our findings with POL in February and made 2 recommendations:

1. Post Office Ltd should introduce a spot check or audit process to monitor the accessibility of post office branches
2. Post Office Ltd should update the accessibility information available on post office branches and embed this into the standard branch finder

Since presenting our findings and recommendations, POL has committed to monitoring the accessibility of its branches through visits to a sample of branches. It's also committed to updating its accessibility information and attaching a link to it on the main branch finder. But to properly address our concerns, POL needs to provide greater clarity on its proposals.

1. Our role in reviewing post office changes

Since 2012 the post office network has undergone its biggest ever period of change through a £2 billion investment programme called the Network Transformation Programme (NTP). The NTP has helped to maintain the size of the network and place it on a stable footing whilst reducing operating costs for the Post Office.

During this time Post Office Limited (POL) has converted over 7,500 post offices to new operating models with many integrated into retail outlets such as newsagents, convenience stores and petrol stations. As part of these changes, POL committed to providing a suite of disabled facilities at new branches. Depending on the type of branch these included portable PIN pads, hearing loops, low-level counters and low-level writing desks.

During the NTP POL communicated and consulted with consumers and local representatives on individual post office changes. As the statutory watchdog for postal consumers, following each period of community engagement, Citizens Advice reviewed the proposal with POL and any feedback from consumers and local representatives.

To date, as a result of the public consultation and formal review process, improvements have been agreed or reassurances provided in 75% of post office changes. These range from a new post office operator agreeing to install a permanent ramp at the entrance before the change takes place, to ensuring the aisles are wide enough to allow wheelchair users easy access inside a branch.

This process helps to ensure that at the point a proposed change is due to take place, a new post office can meet the needs of disabled consumers. However, our recent research looking at the impacts of the NTP in Wales shows that the changes agreed as part of this review process are not always carried out or maintained over time.¹ For example, in changes where disabled parking was to be provided, when we visited, half (50%) had no dedicated disabled bays in place.

The findings in this report support this view and show that POL needs to do more to ensure disabled facilities are implemented and maintained over time.

¹ Citizens Advice, [The lasting impact of Post Office transformation: A Welsh view](#), May 2018

2. Method: We asked disabled consumers to visit post offices and report their experience

Our previous mystery shopping research raised some concerns about the accessibility of the post office network.² This showed that disabled access was variable across the network. In particular, the provision of key disabled facilities such as hearing loops and portable PIN pads was patchy.

Recent research monitoring the satisfaction of post office customers supported these findings. When dissatisfied disabled consumers were asked why they weren't satisfied with post office accessibility, the biggest reasons given were getting into the branch, struggling to move around the branch and the feature they needed not working.

We wanted to better understand what this meant for disabled consumers, so we asked them to take a look for themselves and report back on their experience.

Given the previous research highlighted issues with portable PIN pads and hearing loops, we conducted 12 in depth interviews with people with hearing loss and limited mobility to better understand how important these facilities are to them and what else matters to them in retail environments.

We then commissioned over 400 mystery shopping visits (undertaken by GfK for Citizens Advice), half with shoppers with hearing loss and half with shoppers with limited mobility. To test the functionality of hearing loops, 150 of the shoppers with hearing loss had a compatible hearing aid. Of those participants with limited mobility, 88 used a wheelchair or mobility scooter, and 10 had restricted growth.

We followed up with another 50 visits using a mixture of non-disabled and disabled mystery shoppers with hearing loss and limited mobility.

Our mystery shoppers were asked to make observations and assessments of accessibility features throughout their visit, including getting into the branch, moving around inside, queueing, and the service at the counter.

By asking disabled shoppers to carry out the research we were able to better understand the accessibility of post offices across the network, and hear first hand the impact of any absent features.

² Citizens Advice, [The state of the post office network](#), June 2017.

3. When planning a trip to a post office, it's not clear what accessibility features you can expect to find

It can often take disabled people longer to travel places, including to a post office, and they might need to arrange for someone to accompany them. It's, therefore, frustrating if they arrive at a post office to find they are unable to access the facilities they need. With the right information available, consumers could pick the post office they visit based on which one best meets their individual needs.

Currently, you can filter your search for a post office branch by the services available. These range from Passport Check & Send, to foreign currency, to Lotto ticket sales.

However, at present the standard branch finder does not offer any information on branch accessibility, nor does it allow you to refine your search based on accessibility.

This falls behind the information, albeit limited, provided on the branch finders of parcel pick up and drop off points such as Collect + and DPD.

Fig 1. DPD shows branch accessibility on its main branch finder

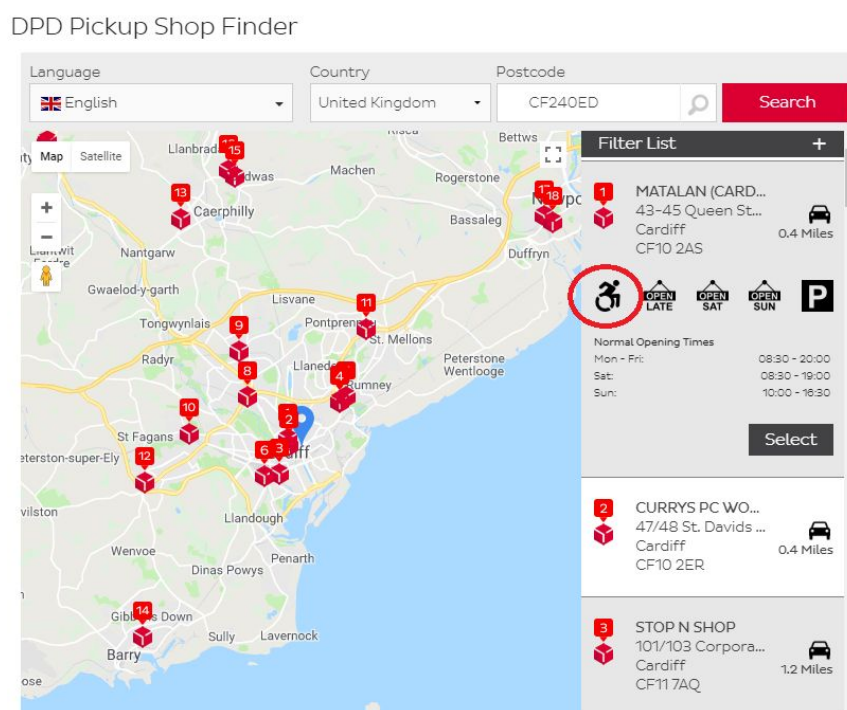


Fig 2. Collect + describes disabled access on its main branch finder

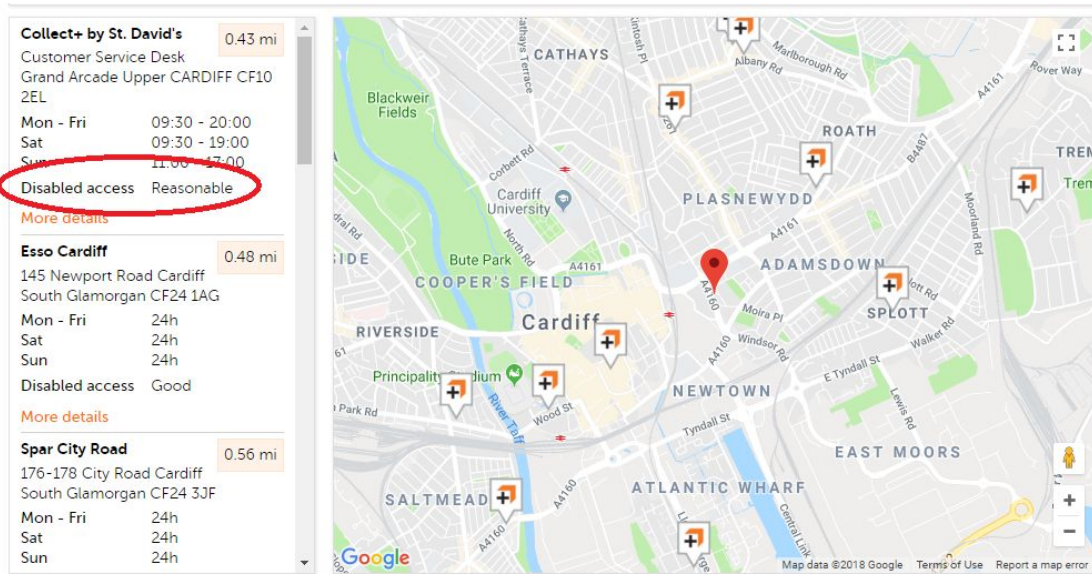
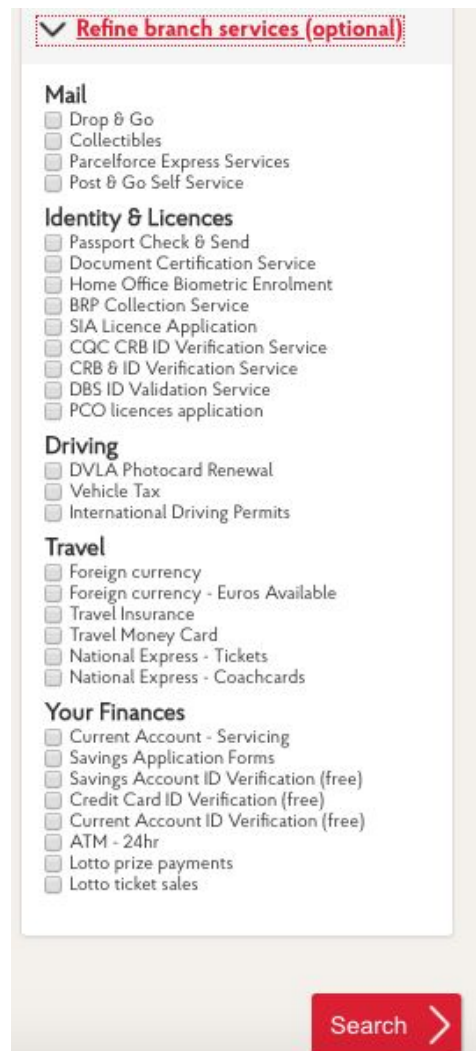


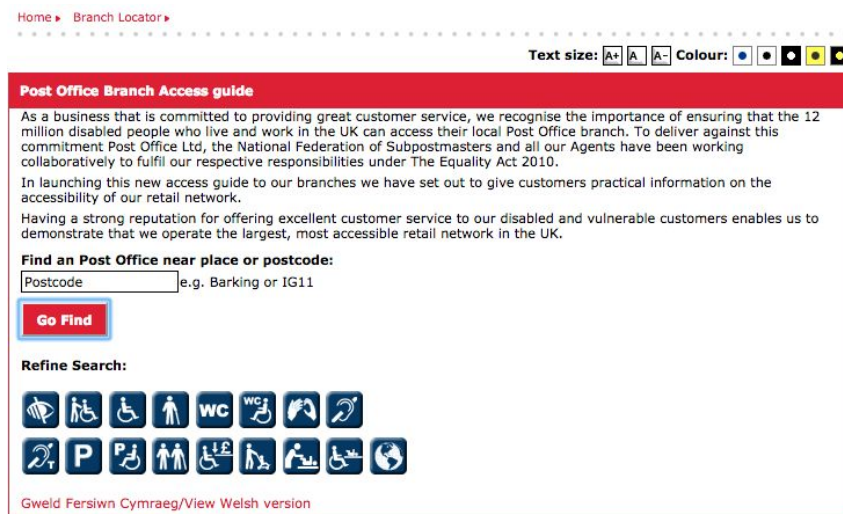
Fig 3. The Post Office search filter does not allow you to refine a search based on accessibility



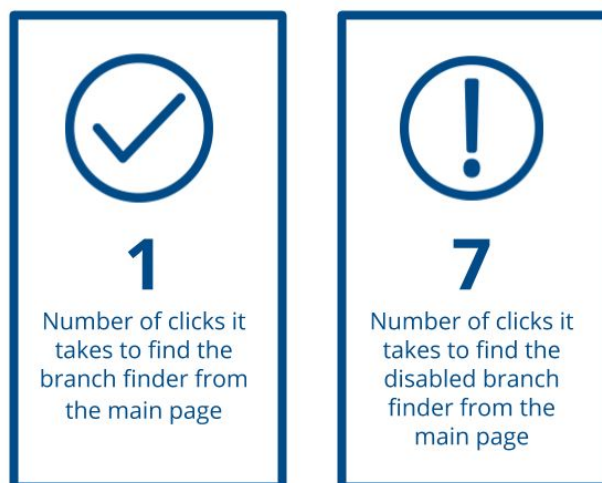
After a lot of searching of the post office website (Home > Help & Support > General Enquiries > View all general enquiries > What is the accessibility service? > new access guide), you may come across the Post Office Branch Access Guide. This has the potential to be incredibly useful to disabled consumers.

The access guide is a version of the post office branch finder, run through Direct Enquiries, that provides information on the accessibility of most branches. It also allows you to refine your search by a number of accessibility criteria.

Fig 4. The Post Office access guide is detailed but not easily accessible from the homepage



However, not all branches have accessibility information available and it is unclear how recent, or up to date, the information is. If this information were updated and incorporated into the standard branch finder it could be very helpful for disabled consumers planning their trip to the post office. However, as it stands it is almost impossible to find on the post office website.

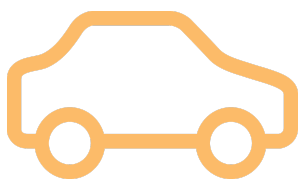


4. Shoppers had a positive experience getting to a post office

Disabled people are more likely than people without a long term condition or impairment to travel to a post office by public transport. The most accessible post offices will, therefore, be easy to get to by public transport, and are only a short distance from the nearest stop or station

For people with limited mobility and those who rely on transportation by car, it is particularly important that a post office has nearby parking. Travelling from a car park to a post office can be made harder if pavements are uneven, curbs are not dropped, or steps limit access. Having free or 'blue badge' parking bays as near as possible to the post office can help to improve this journey for disabled people.

Overall, shoppers reported that the post offices they visited performed well on this aspect.



82% of shoppers with limited mobility said it was **easy or very easy to get to the post office branch**



Just over **3 in 4** shoppers with limited mobility said the pavements in the vicinity of the branch were **level and smooth**



“Nearby street parking outside the post office branch together with wide and step-free pavements made visiting easier” - Jim - Parkinson’s

5. Those with limited mobility struggled to enter the branch

Getting into the post office branch is a vital step to carrying out the transaction, so it is critical that the entrance is as accessible as possible. In fact, 98% of the shoppers who used a wheelchair or mobility scooter described external features as important or very important to them.

The shoppers pointed out some positive aspects of the branch entrances:



93% of wheelchair and mobility scooter users found the post office **door was wide enough** to fit through

However, a significant proportion of shoppers with limited mobility struggled with getting into the post office branch they visited



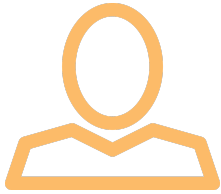
Almost a quarter (23%) of wheelchair/ mobility scooter users found it **difficult or very difficult to enter the branch**



In branches without an automatic door, **half of shoppers with limited mobility said the door was heavy or difficult to open**. This rises to **59%** for **wheelchair or mobility scooter users and those with restricted growth**

If consumers are unable to get into the branch, most of the time it means they are unable to carry out their transaction. This can be incredibly frustrating, particularly if it has taken a long time to get to the branch. Experiencing difficulty getting into a branch can evoke many different feelings for consumers, ranging from pain to embarrassment.

Some of our shoppers who faced difficulty getting into the post office branch commented on their experience:



"[the door] was **really heavy** to open. I left my wheelchair in the car and went in with my stool as **I could not manage without help.**"



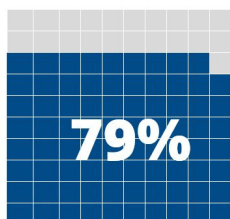
"The door was **very heavy**. I could not open it from the scooter and **had to wait until a customer held it open for me.**"



"If I was on my own, **I would not have been able to go in.**"

6. Access was easier inside the branch

Shoppers with limited mobility and hearing loss felt their needs were better met once they were inside the branch.



of wheelchair and mobility scooter users said the **aisles in the post office were wide enough** for them to move around.



90% of people with hearing loss said post office **lighting was suitable for their lip reading needs.**



90% of post office **queue barriers were wide enough** for wheelchair and mobility scooter users.

8 in 10

shoppers with limited mobility **found it easy or very easy to get from the entrance to the post office counter.**

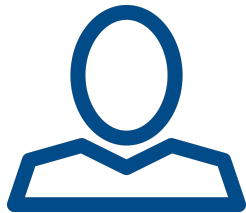
However, on a number of occasions shoppers noticed stock, promotions or other objects in the aisles that made it harder for wheelchair and mobility scooter users to move around.



Almost **1 in 5** (17%) post offices had **obstacles in the aisles** that could prevent or **impede wheelchair access**

7. Staff were helpful but key facilities weren't available

When being served at the post office counter, shoppers reported a very positive experience of interacting with staff.



90% of disabled shoppers said post office staff were **helpful or very helpful** when they made their purchase



94% of disabled shoppers felt post office staff spoke to them with **appropriate speed, volume and clarity**

However, shoppers experienced difficulty when some important facilities weren't available.



In **44%** of the branches visited by people with compatible hearing aids, shoppers were **not able to use a hearing loop**.

There were a variety of reasons for this:

- Hearing loops weren't available
- Staff didn't know if hearing loops were available
- There was a hearing loop but staff didn't know how to use it
- There was a hearing loop but it wasn't working

For hearing aid users, a hearing loop reduces background noise and helps them to hear the member of staff at the counter more clearly. Loops should be available and ready for use in all post offices, and all staff should be trained to use them.

To support consumers with limited mobility or restricted growth, Post Office Limited's (POL) policy is that all branches should at least have either a low-level counter or a portable PIN pad that can be passed down to a lower level.

For wheelchair or mobility scooter users and people with restricted growth, a low-level counter makes a big difference. It ensures that customers can reach the counter to hand over a parcel or letter, can see the figures on the scales and can make payments. Low-level counters also facilitate better staff interaction as customers and staff are better able to see each other.

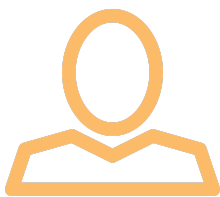
However, low-level counters are not available in all post office branch types, and in post office locals, which are often situated in convenience stores, you are unlikely to find a low-level counter.

Where there was not a low-level counter available in a post office, half (48%) of wheelchair and mobility scooter users said they would have preferred to use one.

If a low-level counter is not available, having an extendable or portable PIN pad is essential to ensuring people in wheelchairs/mobility scooters and those with restricted growth can pay. A fixed PIN pad can limit their ability to see how much they are being charged, to reach the machine and to enter their PIN. This either results in them compromising their privacy by asking for help entering their PIN, or limits their payment options to cash.

Although POL requires all their branches to have either a low-level counter or a PIN pad on an extendable lead, in reality shoppers in a significant minority of visits were not able to access these facilities.

Where PIN pads were fixed on regular counters shoppers reported pain trying to reach them:



"It was **painful** but manageable for me to pay using the PIN pad. It was painful for me to reach the card reader."



"It was **hard** and I had to **stretch** to use the pin pad, but it was doable."



"It was **difficult** to pass up my letter. I could not read the scales or reach the card reader without **pain**. It did face down though which helped with entering my pin."

8. We asked Post Office Limited to make some changes

In February 2018 we presented the findings of our research to Post Office Ltd (POL).

POL is committed to ensuring its network is accessible to disabled consumers, and branch accessibility has significantly improved as a result of the Network Transformation Programme.³ They also have a comprehensive set of accessibility guidelines that they send to their branches.

This led us to conclude that the problems we identified were not in the understanding of what disabled consumers needed but in the implementation of the guidelines. Despite good intentions, there were some issues in ensuring branches followed through on them.

Speaking to POL, there was no indication of a system in place to monitor the accessibility of the existing branches in the network or to support operators to ensure they continue to comply over time after a branch initially opens. The lack of audit or spot check procedure has meant that over time accessibility standards in some branches have slipped and there has been no central way of reporting back and monitoring this.

Citizens Advice made 2 recommendations to POL off the back of this research:

Recommendation 1: POL should put in place a regular audit or spot check process to ensure the good intentions of the accessibility guidelines are followed through and can be monitored.

Any spot check or audit process put in place should at minimum meet the following standards:

- The process is proactive, not simply reactive to customer complaints
- A random sample of branches is visited on a regular basis
- There is a system in place to regularly review the evidence on the accessibility of branches and address any problems, systematic or at individual branch level, if they emerge.

³ Citizens Advice, [The state of the post office network](#), June 2017.

Citizens Advice is willing to help POL monitor the progress of any agreed spot check or audit process and review the associated findings to ensure disabled facilities are implemented and maintained over time and post offices can meet disabled consumers' needs.

Recommendation 2: The Post Office Branch Access Guide should be updated and the accessibility information be embedded into the standard branch finder. A reliable audit process would help ensure that this is kept up to date.

We understood that this may not be a quick process and asked that in the meantime the Post Office Branch Access Guide is made easier to find on the website, and that a link to it is made available on the standard branch finder page.

9. Here's what Post Office Ltd have done:

Overall, the response from Post Office Ltd (POL) has been positive. POL recognises the importance of ensuring good disabled access across their network and have committed to making some changes in response to our research.

The success of these high level commitments will be determined by the detail, design and delivery of the individual processes they've committed to. We summarise our assessment of this progress below.

Citizens Advice will continue to work with POL to ensure progress continues to be made to best meet the needs of disabled consumers.

The progress POL has made so far on our recommendations:

Recommendation 1: *POL should put in place a regular audit or spot check process to ensure the good intentions of the accessibility guidelines are followed through and can be monitored.*

POL has committed at a high level to monitoring the accessibility of their branches over time. It is encouraging that they have mentioned visiting a sample of branches in person to check accessibility features as part of this.

At this stage the detail of this process is unclear. It is essential that these checks are regular and that subpostmasters are reminded of POL's accessibility guidelines on at least an annual basis. Citizens Advice will continue to seek reassurances from POL that its new structures will reflect this.

Post Office Ltd said:

"POL is committed to providing the best possible service for customers and recognises the need to ensure that branch standards are maintained and is committed to putting in place a support structure that enables branches to better serve customers."

"The revised processes will ensure that branches receive the support that they need and provide a system that ensures that key accessibility features are checked at a sample of branches through face to face visits."

"The changes set out ... will ensure that... there is intervention and support when it is required and a feedback system so that key accessibility features are checked at a sample of branches."

Recommendation 2: *The Post Office Branch Access Guide should be updated and the accessibility information be incorporated into the standard branch finder. A reliable audit process would help ensure that this is kept up to date.*

We are pleased that POL recognises how important accessibility information is to disabled consumers and that it is working to ensure the branch level information is available by clicking through from the main branch finder page.

POL has committed to updating the accessibility information it holds on each branch and is working to ensure there is a 'mechanism for ongoing updating'.

Once this branch information is up to date, POL has committed to adding a link from its main branch finder page to the Direct Enquiries branch access guide. At the time of writing this report, POL projected this link would be available by mid November.

Citizens Advice welcome this progress in the short term, but will continue to seek commitments from POL to fully embed accessibility information into the standard branch finder and to establish a process to keep this information accurate.

Other changes planned by Post Office Ltd:

Alongside the action taken on our recommendations, Post Office Ltd has informed us that it's carried out a comprehensive review of the guidance it provides to branches and has produced a new accessibility guide. POL is currently finalising this guidance in consultation with Disability Rights UK and Kate Nash Associates.

POL said it will be communicating the accessibility guide to network operations staff, as appropriate, this month.

Over the next year Citizens Advice will continue working with POL to help it drive these changes forward and meet the needs of disabled consumers.