

The lasting impact of Post Office transformation: a Welsh view

Since 2012, 484 post offices around Wales have been modernised or moved into new premises such as convenience stores, newsagents and pharmacies.

These changes have all been part of the Network Transformation Programme (NTP), a £1 billion programme of work designed both to help maintain the sustainability of the post office network by moving post offices into existing retail premises and retain or improve access for vulnerable consumers.

To help make sure these changes are successful an expert team at Citizens Advice has reviewed proposed changes and made recommendations to improve access for vulnerable consumers.

As a result of this process, Post Office Ltd (POL) agreed improvements or provided reassurances in 73% of reviewed cases before implementing them. Between August and September 2017 Local Citizens Advice gathered data to find out whether these changes had been followed through on.

Key Findings:



63%

Of branches visited have no concerns



16%

Of branches visited have minor concerns such as stock restricting access and lack of privacy



21%

Of branches visited have major concerns such as failing to carry out agreed improvements and poor disability access

Method:

Staff and volunteers from 16 Local Citizens Advice in Wales visited 122 post office branches and gathered responses to over 200 consumer surveys from August to September 2017.

Data was collected on the ease of access to and into the post office, ease of movement inside the post office and staff knowledge of post office products and services.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to staff and volunteers from Bridgend, Caerphilly, Ynys Mon, Cardiff & Vale, Ceredigion, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Newport, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Swansea Neath Port Talbot, Torfaen and Wrexham Local Citizens Advice, and Debi Massey.

"The post office staff were friendly and helpful to an elderly customer and did not rush him to complete his business.

I also had a parcel to post and the assistant recommended ways of altering the wrapping to get the parcel within a lower postage band."

Mystery Shopper



Our role as consumer watchdog:

Citizens Advice is the official consumer watchdog for the postal market.

Our role is to ensure postal services and post offices meet the needs of consumers in a way that is fair and accessible for all.

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Findings:

Of the 122 branches visited there were:

- **No concerns in 77 branches**
- **Minor concerns in 19 branches**
- **Major concerns in 26 branches**

For an interactive version of this map, scan the QR code or visit:

<https://goo.gl/7HoCnN>

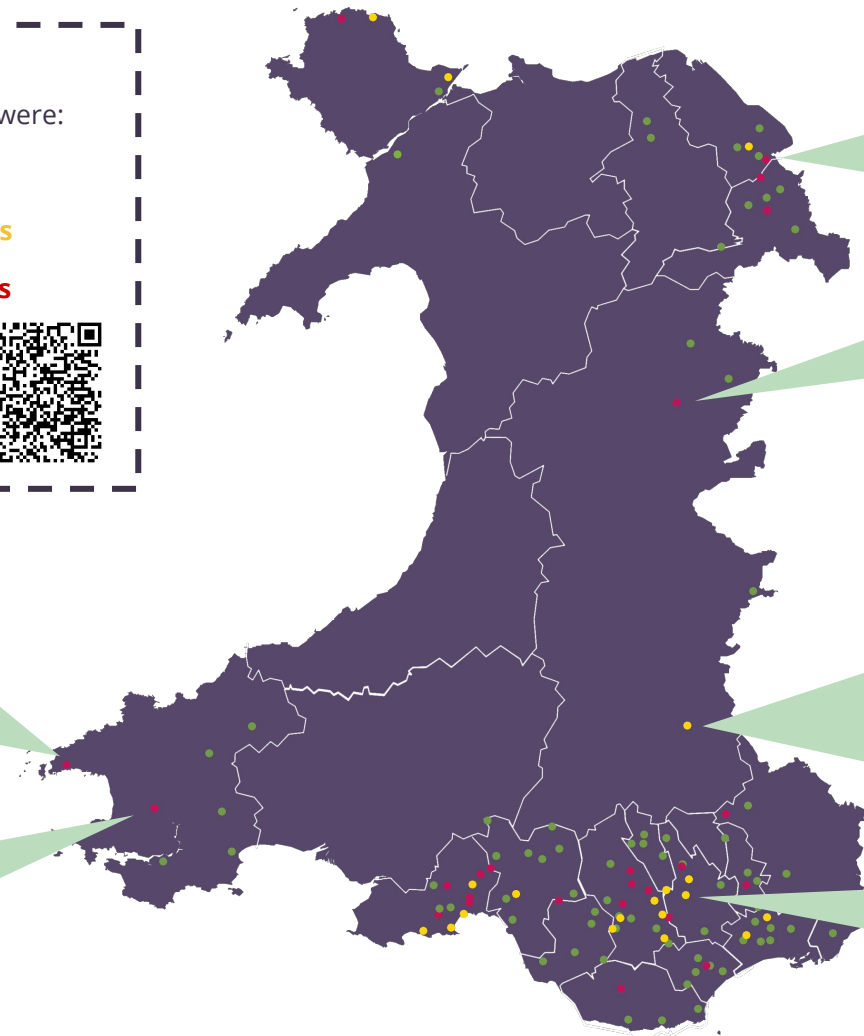


Restricted access:

Almost 1 in 5 (17%) of the branches visited had retail stock, fixed displays, or free-standing objects restricting movement around the premises.

Disabled parking:

Of cases where disabled parking was to be provided half (50%) have no dedicated disabled bays in place.



Temporary closures:

3 of the branches visited were temporarily closed, 1 has closed since this research was carried out and another will be closing later this year.

Level access:

27% of branches with major concerns had uneven thresholds or steps up to the branch.

Bill payment:

Not all staff were clear on whether they could accept cheques for bill payments. 22 branches provided incorrect information with 9 branches that should accept cheques saying they didn't accept them. In 2 branches which would not normally accept cheques, staff exceeded requirements by accepting cheques made payable to the shop or Post Office Ltd.

Privacy:

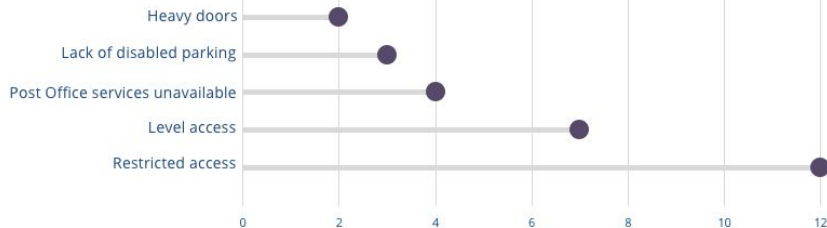
Concerns were raised about privacy at the counter when performing sensitive transactions in 4 branches.

Restricted access is a major concern:

Restricted access into and around the branch is the most significant problem for the 26 branches where we found agreed improvements had not been implemented or other major issues. The next most common issues are problems with level access into the branch, services being unavailable due to temporary closures, a lack of disabled parking and heavy doors.

Looking across all branches visited, almost 1 in 5 (17%) had issues with restricted access. Although restricted access can be a temporary issue when stock hasn't yet been unpacked and put on shelves, it can also be caused by more permanent features such as retail display units or free-standing objects like coffee machines, lottery stands, or fridges and freezers.

Major concerns:



"The post office never seems to be open. The staff said there aren't enough people to manage it.

I can't use it anymore, I have to use another one which is more reliable." *Citizens Advice client*



Case Study: Pontygwaith

In order to ensure disabled access to the post office the new operator was to install a new customer entrance to the side of the building with adequate lighting and signage.

Although there was a side entrance, this was blocked by a door which was secured by a hook and chain.

There is signage on the door directing customers to ring for assistance but the person carrying out the visit could not see a bell nearby.

Further signage and a bell to call for assistance were at the inner door. However, a customer in a wheelchair would not have been able to reach them due to walkway being narrowed by trays and a trolley.

This case highlights the importance of checking agreements have been actioned at that they are compliant with POL's accessibility standards.

Since this research was undertaken POL have spoken to the operator to ensure that clear access is maintained and that a clear bell and signage is in place.

← Images of front and side entrance.

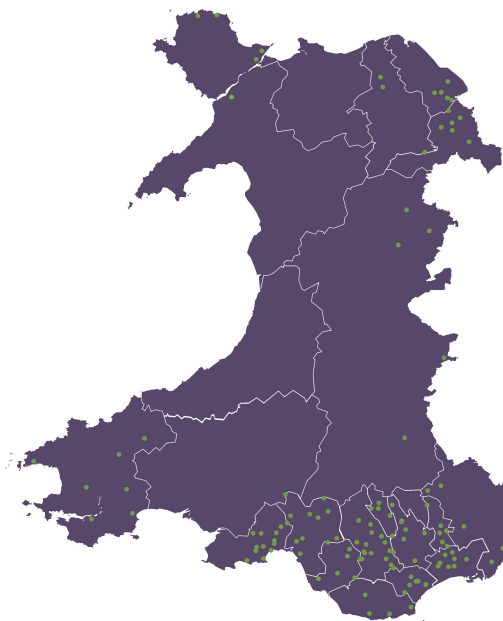
Taking our findings to Post Office Ltd:

Following analysis of data gathered through mystery shops and waiting room surveys we met with Post Office Ltd (POL) to discuss our findings.

We asked POL to visit all poorly performing branches and deliver the improvements they previously committed to.

POL agreed to review the data and have now committed to return and make improvements to 100% of all cases with concerns. This means that:

- In all branches where it is unclear whether a portable ramp is available POL is providing signage to let people know how to seek assistance.
- POL is in discussion with operators to overcome the lack of level access in 7 branches.
- All 3 outstanding disabled bays are now being put in place.
- Stock or other obstacles restricting access have been removed from 20 branches.
- Queue posts and signage are being put up in 3 branches to aid privacy.



100%

Of branches with major concerns now have improvements underway



100%

Of branches with minor concerns have been addressed or are underway

Next steps:

We welcome the improvements Post Office Ltd (POL) have made to the branches highlighted in this research.

However, it is important to remember that around 7,500 branches have been through the Network Transformation Programme (NTP) and have moved into new premises.

This means that as many as 1,600 branches across other parts of the UK could have major concerns similar to those discussed in this research.

To ensure access is maintained, Post Office Limited should:

- Establish an audit process to monitor the Post Office network to ensure that all branches remain fully compliant with POL's accessibility guidelines.
- Include accessibility information on their branch finder so consumers can know what facilities to expect in each branch.

If you have an issue with your local post office:

You can reach us on Twitter @cabpost or email at: postofficechanges@citizensadvice.org.uk