

# Who uses post offices?

**97%**

of consumers use a post office at least once a year

**17 million**

people visit a post office each week

**1 in 3**

rural residents use a post office at least weekly

**81%**

of people describe the post office as important to them

**55%**

of people with a disability or long term impairment use a post office at least monthly

**11,600**

post offices in the UK. Almost 93% of people live within 1 mile of a post office

## Our role as consumer watchdog

citizens advice

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.

# Self service technology

Self service technology in the UK dates back to 1967 when the first automatic teller machine (ATM) was invented in London. 17 years later, the first self service checkout was created, inspired by long queues at a supermarket in Florida. By 2013 there were over **200,000** self service checkouts in stores worldwide. It is thought that by 2021 this will rise to **325,000**.

The thinking behind self service machines is that they can streamline the transaction process whilst reducing overheads. By putting several self service machines in the space of a staffed counter, more customers can be served at any one time without retailers incurring extra staffing costs.

In theory then, self service machines can help **save money** and **reduce queues**. Supermarkets, train stations, fast food outlets and many other businesses have deployed self service technologies in recent years for these reasons.



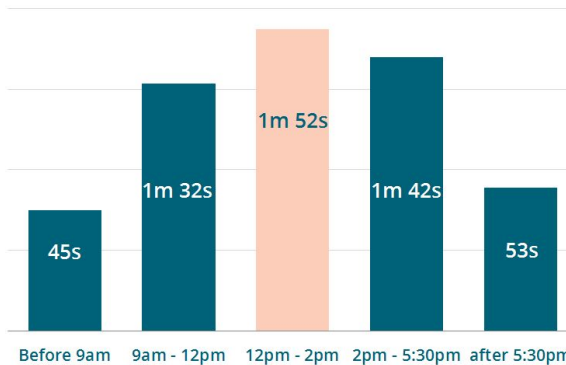
## Should there be more self service machines at post offices?

Currently, only **220** of the **11,600** post offices in the UK have self service machines, with around **11 million** UK adults ever having used one. These are mainly in the larger flagship branches. We want to know if there's a case for rolling these machines out further.

### Could they help reduce queue times?

If you visit a post office before 9am you are, on average, only likely to wait 45 seconds before being served. However, if you visit at lunchtime this time more than doubles. Waiting in long queues can be stressful, especially at Christmas time. In fact, in the first week of December there were 3 times as many tweets complaining about post office queues as the average week from the previous 3 months.

Average post office queue times by time of day






Bringing in extra staff for two hours a day to address the lunchtime queues is not a feasible option for post offices or for employees. However, introducing a few self service machines to a branch could help reduce the queues for staffed counters during those peak hours.

### Could they help with temporary closures?

In March 2017 there were 688 temporarily closed post offices. These post offices can sometimes be closed for a long time before a new one is opened. In fact, just under 400 post offices have been closed for over 18 months.

In the meantime, the local community is left without access to post office services. Could self service machines be placed in local shops, cafes or pubs to provide access to basic services whilst post offices are temporarily closed?

# How do post office self service machines compare to others?

	 Supermarkets	 Train stations	 Post offices
Complexity of transaction	<p><b>Low</b> For the most part transactions involve scanning a barcode and at times searching for an item. Potential mistakes include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scanning an item twice or not at all</li> <li>- Selecting the wrong item when having to search for it</li> </ul>	<p><b>High</b> There are a number of questions to answer, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peak time or off peak?</li> <li>- Open return?</li> <li>- Railcard?</li> <li>- Ticket for future travel?</li> </ul> <p>It is not always immediately obvious what these terms mean.</p>	<p><b>Medium</b> There are many important elements to factor in when posting a letter or parcel, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The size of the letter or parcel</li> <li>- Whether you want it signed for</li> <li>- Whether you want tracking</li> <li>- Should you insure it?</li> <li>- First class or second?</li> </ul>
Consequences of making a mistake	<p><b>Low</b> There is potential to be overcharged for an item that has been mistakenly selected or scanned. However, these mistakes are usually obvious to consumers, who can then alert staff for help.</p>	<p><b>High</b> The consequences of making a mistake can range from the mild inconvenience of having to travel at restricted times, to a large fine for not possessing the correct ticket for a train.</p>	<p><b>Medium</b> The consequences of making a mistake range from choosing a more expensive stamp than is necessary, to paying insufficient postage for your parcel to arrive, to posting a valuable item without insurance.</p>
Consumer preferences	<p><b>Broadly positive</b> 75% of consumers would consider using a self service machine to buy a small number of items at a supermarket. This rises to 91% amongst 18-24 year olds but drops to 44% for over 65s.</p>	<p><b>Mixed</b> Recent research found that 77% of customers were satisfied with their experience at a self service ticket machine in a station. However, only 66% were totally confident they had purchased the right ticket.</p>	<p><b>Mixed</b> Research shows consumers are happy to use self service machines for simple transactions like buying a stamp, but most prefer to go to a staffed counter when posting a parcel. Older people are less likely to consider using a self service machine for either.</p>

**Are post offices lagging behind?**

In terms of complexity and the consequences of making a mistake, post office self service machines lie somewhere in the middle.

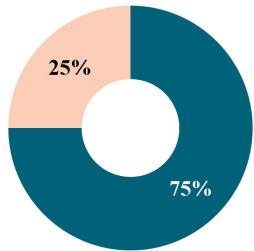
They're not as easy to use as self checkouts in supermarkets, but not quite as complex as those in train stations.

And yet, you'll find a self service machine at almost every train station in the country.

So why is it not the same for post offices?

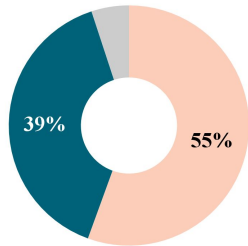
## Consumer Views

75% of consumers would *consider* buying a stamp on a self service machine at a post office

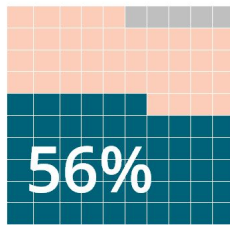


75% would also consider using a self service checkout to buy a small number of items at a supermarket

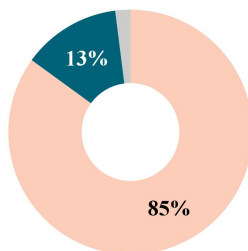
39% *prefer* to buy stamps at self service machines



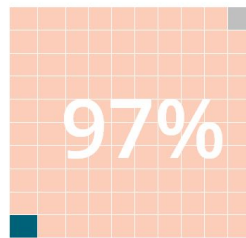
In London this is the preference of the majority



But 85% of all consumers prefer to post *parcels* at a staffed counter



This rises to 97% for over 65s



Staffed counter    No preference  
Self service machine

## There could be some problems...

### 1. Complexity

Transactions at post offices can be complex, especially when it comes to parcels. A key role of staff at post office counters is to recommend the right product to meet customers' needs. When this function is transferred to a machine, people may find the options harder to navigate, slowing them down and increasing queues again. There would need to be enough post office staff available to assist customers who are having problems using self service machines.

### 2. Functionality

Sometimes technology fails. If self service machines are put in place during a temporary post office closure, then technology problems mean no access to post office services.

### 3. Self service machines aren't for everybody

Although young people like to use self service machines, older and digitally excluded people prefer going to a staffed counter. Over half (53%) of 18-24 year olds prefer to buy a stamp on a self service machine at a post office, but this drops to 11% for over 65s and 9% for digitally excluded consumers.

Overall, 17% of UK adults have used a self service machine at a post office. However, only 11% of over 65s, and 3% of those who do not use the internet, have used them.



### 4. Post offices don't just do mail

There are many services post offices provide that self service machines cannot. These include the banking services available through post offices and the passport application checking services. Post offices also play an important role in the community, providing information about local events and services, as well as informal help and advice with official documents and forms.

## Next steps

- We are conducting research into consumers' experience of self service machines at post offices
- We will share our findings with Post Office Ltd and work with them to address any issues that consumers face
- We will explore how best to meet the needs of older and digitally excluded consumers in an environment that is becoming increasingly digitalised
- We want to hear your views. Get in touch on **twitter: @CABPost**

