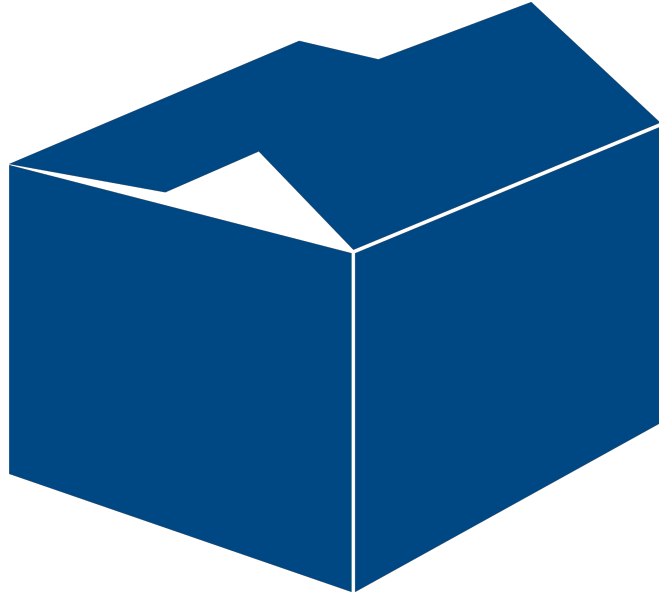


# The customer journey: disabled people's access to postal services



citizens  
advice

Gemma Byrne  
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# Summary

13 million people in the UK have a disability. They all have their own unique experiences and needs. Postal services are highly valued and frequently used by disabled people.

This report looks at each stage of a customer's journey, from ordering online and home delivery to collecting, posting or returning parcels at an access point. We consider what's important to disabled people at each stage and outline our findings on how well postal services are meeting their needs. **We find that there are clear areas that retailers, parcel operators and postal access points must focus on to improve the experience of disabled consumers.**



## Ordering online and arranging Home delivery

**35%** of disabled people would prefer for a parcel to be sent to their **home** than an access point.

Disabled people often miss deliveries because they don't have **enough time to get to the door**.

Disabled customers should be able to **state their specific delivery needs** when ordering online.



## Planning and travelling to the access point

Disabled people are more reliant on public transport. **Access points should have good transport links.**

**2 in 9** post office branches have disabled parking available nearby.

**Information on accessibility** should be available for disabled people to plan their journey.



## Entering the access point

**Manual doors** can be heavy and difficult for people with limited mobility to open.

**35%** found that the entrance to a post office was **not flat**, or that there was an **obstacle** to getting through the door.

The entrance to an access point must be **step free**, with a bell or **buzzer to alert staff** when customers need **assistance**.



## Moving around inside the access point

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

Appropriate lighting and background noise is important for people with many different impairments.

**Aisles and queue barriers** in access points must be wide enough for wheelchair and mobility scooter users.



## Being served at the counter

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

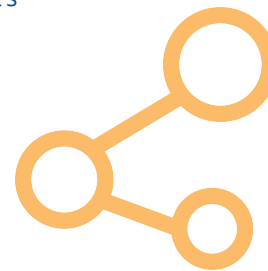
**Portable PIN pads and hearing loops** are vital facilities for disabled people at access points.

# Joining the dots on disabled access

This report brings together the experiences of disabled consumers across each stage of their journey accessing postal services. It's important to recognise that disabled people are not homogenous and that each person will have unique experiences and needs.

For one individual, the biggest obstacle to accessing postal services may be reaching the door in time to sign for a delivery. For another it may be the anxiety they face when travelling to an access point. This report draws on [three pieces of research](#) and examines what's important for people with different impairments at each stage of their postal journey. We draw on the experiences of real people with a range of impairments and conditions to report on how postal services currently meet their needs.

Citizens Advice has unique insight into the problems disabled people face. Many of the clients we see at our local offices across England and Wales are disabled or have long-term health conditions. In 2017 we saw 494,491 people with a disability or long-term health condition. That's 42% of all unique visits.



## 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, with particular regard for vulnerable consumers.

## Understanding disability

As defined by the Equality Act 2010, a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial adverse and long term effect on their ability to carry out normal activities. However, disability is not just about health problems.

Citizens Advice views disability according to the **social model**, in which the physical, institutional and attitudinal barriers in society make people disabled, not their impairments. The social model focuses on the personal experience of disabled people and the development of more inclusive ways of living. When barriers are removed, disabled people can be independent and equal in society and gain control over their own lives. Service providers have an obligation, known as the 'duty to make reasonable adjustments', to ensure disabled people can use a service as close as is reasonably possible to the standard offered to non-disabled people.

# Disabled people value and use postal services

## Disabled consumers use postal services frequently

- Disabled people are **more likely to use the post as a means of contacting others** than non-disabled people (62% v 52%)
- **28%** of disabled people **send items in the post at least once a week**
- **53%** of disabled people **receive online retail parcels** through the post

## In the past 6 months ...

- **77%** of disabled people **received letters** or postcards through the post
- **60%** had a **parcel**, signed for letter or recorded item **sent to their home**
- **37%** **collected a parcel**, signed for letter or recorded item from a depot, Royal Mail delivery office or pick up location

## Post offices are particularly important to disabled consumers



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. Across every service provided at the post office, disabled people report greater use than non-disabled people.



**9 in 10** (91%) disabled people describe the post office as '**essential**'. Disabled consumers are almost **twice as likely** to say that the post office is **extremely important** to them (29%) compared with non-disabled consumers (16%).



**Without access to local post offices**, the majority of disabled people said they would need to spend **more time** (86%) and **money** (68%) to get the services they need. They are also twice as likely as non-disabled people to say they would **lose contact with neighbours and friends** (24% vs 12%).

# The customer journey

When we order online, we will usually have an item delivered to our homes or to an access point where we can collect it. If, for whatever reason, we miss a home delivery, we will often end up going to an access point to pick it up. Access points are also used for returning items and sending parcels or letters. Access points include post offices, Royal Mail delivery offices and other pick up and drop off points, such as CollectPlus, which are often located within convenience stores.

These are the 5 key stages of the customer journey. At each stage we'll look at what's important to disabled consumers, what disabled people have told us, and what we found out about the state of disabled access.

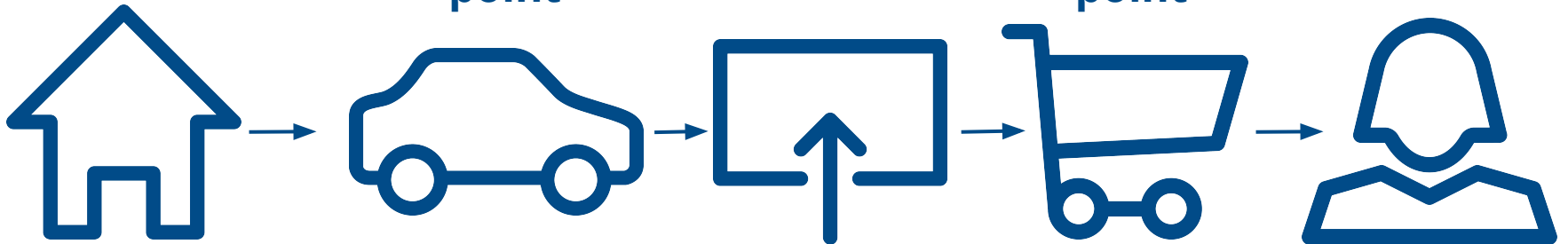
**Ordering online  
and arranging  
home delivery**

**Planning and  
travelling to  
the access  
point**

**Entering  
the access  
point**

**Moving  
around Inside  
the access  
point**

**Being  
served at  
the counter**



# Ordering online and arranging home delivery

## What's important?

**Enough time to get to the door:** There are a number of reasons why it can take longer for people to get to the door to sign for a delivery. A person with hearing loss may not hear the doorbell the first time. Someone with limited mobility may need more time to move to the door. Others may find answering the door to a stranger anxiety-inducing. Often this means that disabled people miss deliveries as the courier assumes no one is in. Therefore, it's important that consumers are given adequate time to reach the door before the courier leaves.

**Specifying needs:** For some disabled people the ability to state their specific needs when ordering online would be very helpful. This could include flagging that it might take longer to get to the door, or that any 'sorry we missed you' cards should be in extra large print, or instructions not to leave a parcel in a hard to reach place.

**Information:** We'd all like more information on when we can expect our delivery, but for disabled people this is particularly important. For people with hearing loss they are less likely to miss the doorbell if they know when to expect it. For people with limited mobility, they can ensure they have easy access to the door around the time of the delivery. Knowing when a parcel is likely to arrive can also help reduce stress for people with anxiety. Specific delivery slots and the ability to track deliveries are, therefore, important elements of the online ordering process for disabled people.

## What we heard...

*"Having my parcels delivered to my house would be much easier because of the distance and to avoid the inconvenience of going to a collection point."* - **Michael - ADHD and learning difficulties**

*"When they put it somewhere I can't get to I have to see if a neighbour is back & see if they'll get it down.. or wait for one of my kids to come home and see if they can get it down"* - **Vicky - wheelchair user**

*"I find it difficult when I'm not given enough time to answer the door."* - **Abby - learning difficulties**

*"When I have home delivery this helps me to stay independent. I will not need to ask anyone to assist me to pick up a parcel."* - **Abdul - limited mobility**

*"I wouldn't collect a parcel often as I would prefer home delivery. The problem with collecting a parcel is the inconvenience of arranging assistance for me to be driven to collect the parcel. It's much easier to have home delivery and it avoids the awkward feeling of keep asking for assistance to go to collect a parcel."* - **Leah - learning difficulties**

## What we found...



**3 in 10**

**disabled people have not had enough time to answer the door when having a parcel delivered**

**1 in 10** disabled people said they would like to be able to state any specific needs that they may have for deliveries

**35%** of disabled people would **prefer a parcel to be sent to their home** than a collection point

**Over a quarter** of disabled consumers have felt **rushed, irritated or anxious** when signing for a delivery



# Planning and travelling to the access point

## What's important?

**Information about accessibility:** It can often take disabled people longer to travel to access points and they might need to arrange for someone to accompany them. It's important for them to have as much information as possible about accessibility and the availability of certain facilities before they travel to the access point.

**Knowing the quietest times of day:** For some people with anxiety, going to an access point when it's very busy can be distressing. This can also be difficult for people with limited mobility, especially where the access point is small or has narrow aisles. Information on the busiest and quietest times of day can help these people plan their trip.

**Parking:** Having parking nearby to an access point is particularly important for people who have mobility difficulties and rely on transport by car. Travelling from a car park to an access point can be made harder when pavements are uneven, curbs are not dropped, or steps limit access. Having free or "blue badge" parking bays as near as possible to the access point can help to improve the journey for disabled people.

**Public transport:** Disabled people are more likely to travel to an access point by public transport than people without a long term impairment or condition. The best access points for disabled people are easy to get to by public transport, and are only a short distance from the nearest stop or station.

## What we heard...

*"It would be useful to know when the post office is likely to be quiet."* - **Pete - anxiety/depression**

*"The most important factor for me is the distance in terms of travelling. The travelling distance can be up to 15 miles to our local depot."* - **Gavin - learning difficulty**

*"There is a bus stop about 120m from the location but the buses only run once an hour which makes visiting by public transport difficult"* - **Alison - limited mobility**

*"I travelled by bus. The buses have visual as well as audio indicators of the next stop and so I found it very easy to identify the stop I wanted."* - **Caroline - hearing loss**

*"Nearby street parking outside the post office branch together with wide and step-free pavements made visiting easier"* - **Jim - Parkinson's**

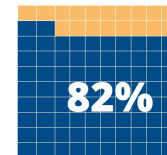
## What we found...



**1 in 10** disabled consumers who recently collected an item from a location other than a neighbour found it difficult to travel there

**2 in 3** post office branches have parking available nearby, but **only a third** of those include **disabled bays**

Disabled consumers are **twice as likely to rely on public transport** to collect missed deliveries



of customers with mobility problems said it was **easy or very easy to get to the post office branch**



# Entering the access point

## What's important?

**Width of the entrance:** It's essential that people in wheelchairs or mobility scooters can get through the door. This requires the doorway to be wide enough and the avoidance of sharp turns that hinder access for wheelchair or mobility scooter users.

**Doors:** Opening doors can be difficult for wheelchair and mobility scooter users and for those with other conditions such as arthritis. For some people this results in pain and, at times, embarrassment. Automatic doors are the best option for people with limited mobility, but where manual doors are the only option it is important to ensure they're not too heavy or stiff.

**Step free access:** Even a small step or lip can be a significant barrier to people in wheelchairs and mobility scooters getting into an access point. They can also be a tripping hazard for people with other mobility problems, so entrances should ideally be 'step free'. Where this isn't possible, other measures such as a ramp should be put in place or at hand to ensure all customers can freely enter the access point.

**Assistance on hand:** Access points should have a bell or a buzzer for customers to alert staff if they need assistance getting into the shop. It is essential that this is clearly signposted and within reach of customers in a wheelchair, mobility scooter, or with restricted growth.

## What we heard...

*"A bell is important so that you can alert someone inside that you are outside and require assistance."* - **Andy - limited mobility**

*"If I had been in my wheelchair I would have found it impossible as there is also a small lip style step."* - **Katie - limited mobility**

*"They should have a bell you know? At the entrance... you shouldn't have to be standing there looking for it, it should be obvious."* - **Graham - limited mobility**

*"I pushed the door open with my back and backed into the branch. A customer saw me struggling and held the door open for me."* - **Joanne - wheelchair user**

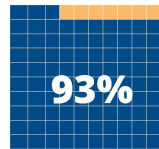
*"When you're in a wheelchair, pushing a door is horrendous"* - **Jill - wheelchair user**

*"Having a ramp is essential for me and automatic doors are much easier for me"* - **Gareth - limited mobility**

## What we found...

**30%**

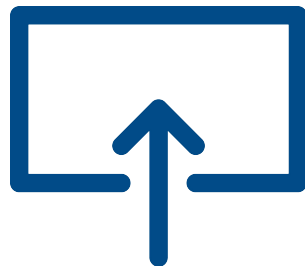
of the post offices we visited had an automatic door



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



found that the entrance to a post office was not flat or that there was an obstacle to getting through the door





# Moving around inside the access point

## What's important?

**Aisles and queue barriers:** Many access points are located in convenience stores which can be tightly packed. It is essential that the aisles of these stores are wide enough for wheelchair and mobility scooter users to move through without difficulty. Stock and promotional stands must not impede access in narrow aisles for people with limited mobility. Similarly, queue barriers must not be too narrow or involve sharp turns.

**Lighting and noise:** Appropriate lighting and background noise is important for people with a range of disabilities. For those with visual impairments, low level lighting can make it difficult to navigate the access point, and for people with hearing loss it can be a significant barrier to lip reading. If background noise is too loud this can be distressing for people with autism or anxiety, and can make it harder for those with hearing loss to understand staff.

**Seating:** When queues are long, people with limited mobility may find it painful to stand for too long. Where an access point is large enough, providing seating can make a great difference.

**Signage:** If an access point is located in a retail store, it's important that there is clear signage showing where the postal service is located. This can be particularly helpful for people with learning difficulties, alzheimer's or dementia, and anxiety. There should also be clear signage for facilities such as hearing loops outside the access point and on the counters they're available at.

## What we heard...

*"It was hard work maneuvering round the aisles and sharp turns, but there were no obstacles on the floor."* - **Paul - wheelchair user**

*"There was no indication as to which way to go to the queue for a visually impaired customer. There were no tactile or other floor markings and no direction arrows."* - **Nancy - visually impaired**

*"It was quite a long time for me to stand in one position and there were no chairs to sit on for relief from the pain of standing for so long."* - **Jean - arthritis**

*"The staff are friendly and quiet, as is the branch, which helps hugely in my anxiety."* - **Janette - anxiety**

*"The aisles of the shop were crowded. If there had not been extra stands or intrusive displays it would have been okay."* - **Ian - learning difficulties**

*"For this autistic and anxious person, it was too much white light with too much flickering."* - **Ben - autism and anxiety**

## What we found...



**79%** of wheelchair and mobility scooter users said the **aisles** in the post office were **wide enough** for them to move around

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

**1 in 5** post offices visited had seating available

**90%** of post office queue barriers were wide enough for wheelchairs and scooters



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



# Being served at the counter

## What's important?

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

**Portable PIN pads:** When chip and PIN machines are not portable it becomes incredibly difficult for people in wheelchairs/mobility scooters and those with restricted growth to pay for goods and services. A fixed PIN pad limits 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. Having an extendable or portable PIN pad is essential to ensuring disabled people have equal access.

**Hearing loops:** 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 access points, and all staff should be trained to use them.

**Staff interaction:** Having a positive interaction with a member of staff is important to all customers. Staff should treat all disabled customers with respect, be sensitive to their needs and offer assistance where appropriate.

## What we heard...

*"Looking at things from my son's point of view I would expect staff to be really patient and understanding. If someone has got learning difficulties, maybe they can't express themselves as articulately or quickly as a mainstream person, so address them with a bit of patience"* - **About Adam - learning difficulties**

*"A smile goes a long way"* - **John - mobility problems**

*"The shopkeeper was very kind to my son who was struggling to count out his money, he's not very good at numeracy and he came unstuck, so the man said 'I'll help you and he counted out the money on the counter."* - **About Brian - learning difficulties**

*"The member of staff seemed to be more patient with my mother and did not rush her during the different transactions she had to undertake. I appreciated the care and attention the member of staff gave to my mother."* - **About Geraldine - Parkinson's**

*"The member of staff spoke clearly and at a suitable pace and did all he could to help me with the hearing loop."* - **Angela - hearing loss**

*"It was quite painful reaching up to weigh the envelope and to reach a pin machine."* - **Lynn - mobility problems**

## What we found...

**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**



**97%** of disabled shoppers felt that post office

staff gave them **sufficient time** to undertake their enquiry and purchase.

Where there was not a **low level counter** available in a post office, **half** (47%) of wheelchair and mobility scooter users and shoppers with restricted growth said they **would have preferred to use one**



# Next steps...



We'll talk to disability charities, retailers, Post Office Limited, Royal Mail and other parcel operators about the importance of disabled access.



We'll flag up any concerns we have with the current state of accessibility for disabled people.



We'll make recommendations and ask parcel operators, retailers and Post office Ltd to act on them.



We'll publish reports with greater detail on our findings and the action that has been taken in response to our recommendations.

## Free, confidential advice. Whoever you are.

We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

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We're here for everyone.



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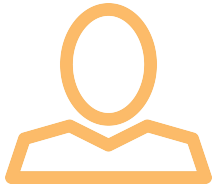
# Appendix: methodology

This report presents the findings from 3 pieces of research:

## Disabled consumers' access to post offices

This research looked at disabled people's experiences of accessing post offices. It involved 117 mystery shopping visits, carried out by disabled people either alone or accompanied by a relative in new model post office branches (Locals and Mains) between December 2016 and March 2017. We also conducted 12 telephone and 6 face-to-face depth interviews with disabled people or their carers, and 2 focus groups involving a total of 14 disabled participants. This research was undertaken by GfK for Citizens Advice.

All participants self-identified as disabled and had, or cared for someone who had, at least one or more of the following impairments or conditions:



Alzheimer's or dementia, anxiety or depression, arthritis, autism, blind or vision loss, deaf or hearing loss, learning difficulties, Parkinson's and reduced or limited mobility

## Access to post offices for consumers with hearing loss and limited mobility

This research focused on 2 types of disability: hearing loss and limited mobility. We conducted 12 in depth interviews with people with hearing loss and limited mobility to better understand what's important to them in retail environments.

We then commissioned 405 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. 88 of those with limited mobility used a wheelchair or mobility scooter, and 10 had restricted growth. These shoppers were able to give a first hand account of any difficulties they faced moving around or getting inside post office branches.

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



## Disabled people's access to postal services

This project relates to postal services. This includes ordering online, receiving items at home, and sending, collecting and returning items at access points.



We ran a face-to-face nationwide survey between October and November 2017 of 990 non-disabled and 914 disabled postal service users.

The participants were drawn from a nationally representative sample of adults aged 15+ in Great Britain. This research was undertaken by Ipsos Mori on behalf of Citizens Advice.

We also undertook a series of interviews with a range of disability organisations to assess the key issues disabled people might face in accessing postal services.

We complemented the survey with interviews with 11 disabled people, which gave us further detail as to their experience of using postal services. We also interviewed 11 parcel operators and couriers to explore how they incorporate and reflect the needs of disabled people within their service design and delivery.