

# Gaps in the network

Impact of  
outreaches and  
temporary  
closures on  
post office  
access



Annabel Barnett  
Andrew Willshear

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# Summary

The post office network continues to provide vital access to essential face-to-face services at a time when many service providers are deserting the high street and moving to online only models. Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) people visit a post office every week, while nearly half (45%) visit at least once a month.

The government and Post Office Ltd's publicly stated intention is for the network to be convenient and easily accessible to everyone. But in recent years we've seen sharp increases in the number of temporarily closed post offices and part-time outreach services, leading to significant and growing cracks in coverage.

This trend is particularly severe in rural areas. These are the communities which rely on post office services the most, and where the impact of any reduction in service is more acutely felt. Almost 1 in 4 (23%) rural residents use a post office at least once a week. Older and disabled people, carers and people who don't use the internet are also disproportionately impacted.

New Citizens Advice analysis reveals 1 in 3 rural post offices in Britain are now provided as part-time outreaches. These services are open for an average of 5 and a half hours a week, although it can be as little as 1 hour.

An additional 1,291 post offices were 'temporarily closed' in September 2021, nearly twice as many as the 662 in September 2017. Temporary closures often last a significant period of time - more than 8 in 10 are shut for over a year - causing significant inconvenience and uncertainty for the people living in these communities. Again, the impact of closures falls disproportionately in rural areas.

This report sets out the findings of comprehensive new quantitative and qualitative research centering on the impact of temporary closures and outreach services. Citizens Advice commissioned a nationally representative survey of 2000 individuals as well as 39 in-depth interviews with people living in rural areas experiencing a temporary closure or part-time outreach service.

The findings confirm post office closures and outreach services make it significantly harder for people to access services. When services are lost people are forced to take on the additional costs and inconvenience of travelling further

to access post office services - something which can be particularly challenging in rural areas and for those who face barriers to travelling long distances. For some, this is so challenging that they stop accessing the services they need altogether.

Although outreaches can be a lifeline for those who would otherwise be left without a post office service at all, many find the service inadequate. Provision is too infrequent, opening hours inconvenient, queues too long, and vital services missing.

The impact goes beyond individuals, as communities are deprived of what was once a thriving social hub and source of support. Many neighbourhood small businesses also find their needs are no longer being met. There are additional broader economic losses when the 'honeypot' aspect of the post office - drawing people in to use other local businesses - vanishes.

A growing number of communities are facing barriers to accessing essential face-to-face services as a result of these gaps in post office provision.

Post Office Ltd and the government have not yet come forward with a convincing plan to address the rapidly rising numbers of temporary closures and part-time outreaches. Urgent action is needed to reverse this trend to ensure that the post office network really is convenient and easily accessible to everyone.

Following this report, Citizens Advice will continue to work with stakeholders, including the government and Post Office Ltd to develop workable solutions and push for their implementation.

# 1 Introduction

In many parts of the country, post offices are now the only remaining outlet providing people with face-to-face services.

Post Office Ltd acknowledges the importance of the wide reach of the network, describing it as ‘essential’ that branches are in convenient locations for customers if post offices “are to continue to meet [people’s] needs and remain relevant to local communities”.<sup>1</sup>

The government agrees and says its vision is to “ensure that the Post Office’s services continue to be easily accessible to all consumers, particularly the vulnerable groups that need them most.”<sup>2</sup> The government has committed to maintaining a network of 11,500 post offices.<sup>3</sup> This is underpinned by access criteria designed to ensure minimum levels of coverage throughout the UK.<sup>4</sup>

Post offices offer the in-person services which many people still rely on. And, increasingly the network plays a crucial role filling the gaps left behind by the migration of services online and bank branch closures. These functions are especially important in rural areas where there is little alternative provision.

Post offices also have a critical function connecting people with the online economy as more of us shop online. At the same time they provide support to high streets and businesses and help to maintain the social fabric of local communities.

## Almost everyone uses post offices

Our latest research underscores the value of a network that is easily accessible to all. We find post offices remain extensively used by nearly everyone.

Almost 9 in 10 people (88%) visit a branch at least once a year.<sup>5</sup> Just under 1 in 2 (45%) use a post office at least monthly. And nearly 1 in 5 (18%) use a post office

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<sup>1</sup> Post Office Ltd, [The Post Office Network Report 2020](#), 2021

<sup>2</sup> Postal Affairs Minister, Paul Scully MP, [Westminster Hall debate on post office closures](#), 19 October 2021

<sup>3</sup> BEIS, [Government Response to the 2016 Post Office Network Consultation](#), 2017

<sup>4</sup> Post Office Ltd, [The Post Office Network Report 2020](#), 2021

<sup>5</sup> Yonder Data Solutions, 2021

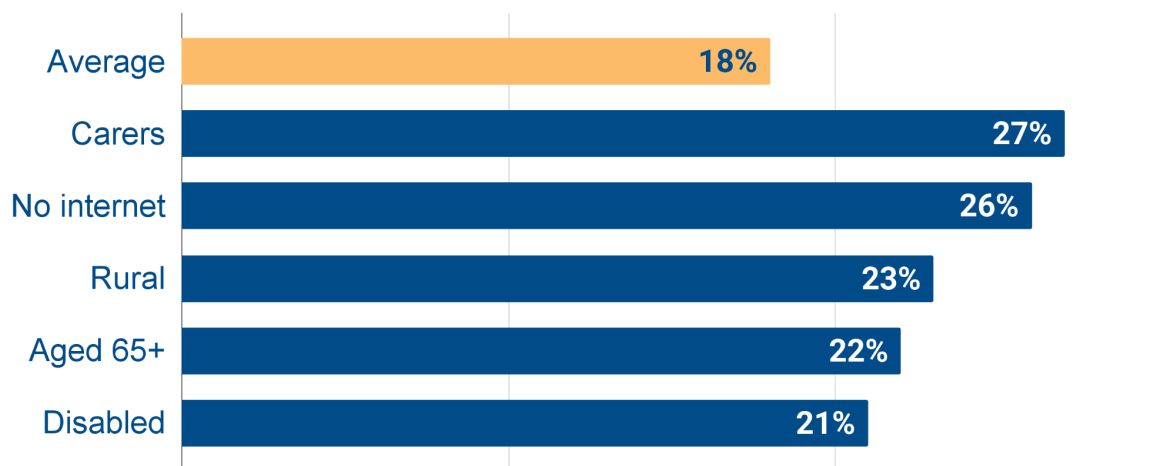
at least weekly.

People in rural areas visit post offices more frequently than those in urban areas. Our polling confirms 23% of rural residents go to a post office once a week or more often, compared with 17% of urban residents.

Post offices are particularly important for those of us who are more likely to be in vulnerable circumstances. Older people, disabled people, carers and people who don't use the internet are more frequent post office users (see figure 1 below).

### Figure 1. More vulnerable groups use post offices more often<sup>6</sup>

*Demographic groups using post offices at least once a week, compared with average*



## But the network is under strain

Despite the important role post offices play for individuals, communities and local economies, the network is under strain - significant cracks have developed and the cracks are growing. The very thing people value their local post offices for - the convenient holistic service - is being undermined.

Post offices' traditional business has been eroded by declining letter volumes, loss of government contracts, services moving online and increased competition. Postmasters also face challenges from the level of remuneration they receive for providing services, rising business rates and staffing costs.<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence a sharply increasing proportion of post offices are provided

<sup>6</sup> Yonder Data Solutions, 2021

<sup>7</sup> Citizens Advice, [Post Offices Transformed](#), 2019

on a part-time basis as outreach services. There are also a high number of 'temporarily' closed branches. These cracks are worst in rural areas, where people most need the service. Despite Post Office Ltd's figures showing the network meets the key government access criteria<sup>8</sup>, our research finds that significant numbers of individuals and small businesses no longer have convenient access to a post office.

Post Office Ltd is currently planning a range of developments in the network, designed to increase its size and make running a post office easier and more financially viable for postmasters. These include a new, simpler post office model, Drop & Collect which primarily provides parcel collection and return services. And some existing branches are now offering services from a wider range of parcel operators such as Amazon and DPD.

Although we welcome Post Office Ltd's plans to increase the size of the network and provide additional parcel services, we remain unconvinced that this will make a significant difference to the problems we've identified. We understand the new Drop & Collect model is being introduced primarily in urban areas to compete more directly with other parcel shops, not to fix the gaps in rural areas. The impact of new parcel services on branch and network viability is unclear at this early stage.

This report focuses on the research Citizens Advice has undertaken to look at the impact on people and small businesses from the rise in post office closures and part-time outreaches. Our research primarily draws on 2 new studies - i) a telephone survey of 2,000 adults and ii) in-depth interviews with 54 people living or working in 10 villages across Britain, including 39 who had experienced a temporary closure or part-time outreach service.<sup>9</sup> The report also includes our analysis of post office network data provided by Post Office Ltd.

In the next section we examine the increase in temporary closures, and the effect this has on individuals, small businesses and communities. And in section 3, we look at the impact of replacing full-time permanent post offices with outreach services. Whilst these 2 situations have much in common, we report on them separately as they also result in distinct experiences and challenges.

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<sup>8</sup> Post Office Ltd, [The Post Office Network Report 2020](#), 2021

<sup>9</sup> See appendix for details

## 2 Rising temporary closures

In this section, we look at how the number of temporarily closed post offices has increased in the last decade and the length of time post offices are closed. We also examine the practical, financial and social impact closures have on individuals, businesses and communities.

### **There has been a significant increase in closures**

Since 2013, the number of temporarily closed post offices in Britain has more than doubled (see figure 2).<sup>10</sup>

Post Office Ltd classifies post offices as 'temporarily closed' under a range of circumstances. This may be because of renovations or to deal with unforeseen events like a break in or a fire. In other cases, it is because the previous postmaster has resigned, or is no longer in post, and Post Office Ltd is still seeking a replacement postmaster.

Post offices that are classified as temporarily closed are usually shut for a significant period of time. Over 8 in 10 stay closed for over a year, and almost 6 in 10 for over 2 years.<sup>11</sup> In reality, many of these branches are likely to be permanently closed.

Although there was a spike of closures during the first coronavirus lockdown, the long term trend clearly shows a steady rise in the number of temporary closures. By September 2021 there were 1,291 temporarily closed post offices (see figure 2).

### **People living in rural areas are more likely to be affected by closures**

Rural residents in Britain are nearly 4 times as likely to see a closure than urban residents.<sup>12</sup> Post offices that temporarily close in rural areas also stay closed for

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<sup>10</sup> Temporary closure figures provided to Citizens Advice by Post Office Ltd

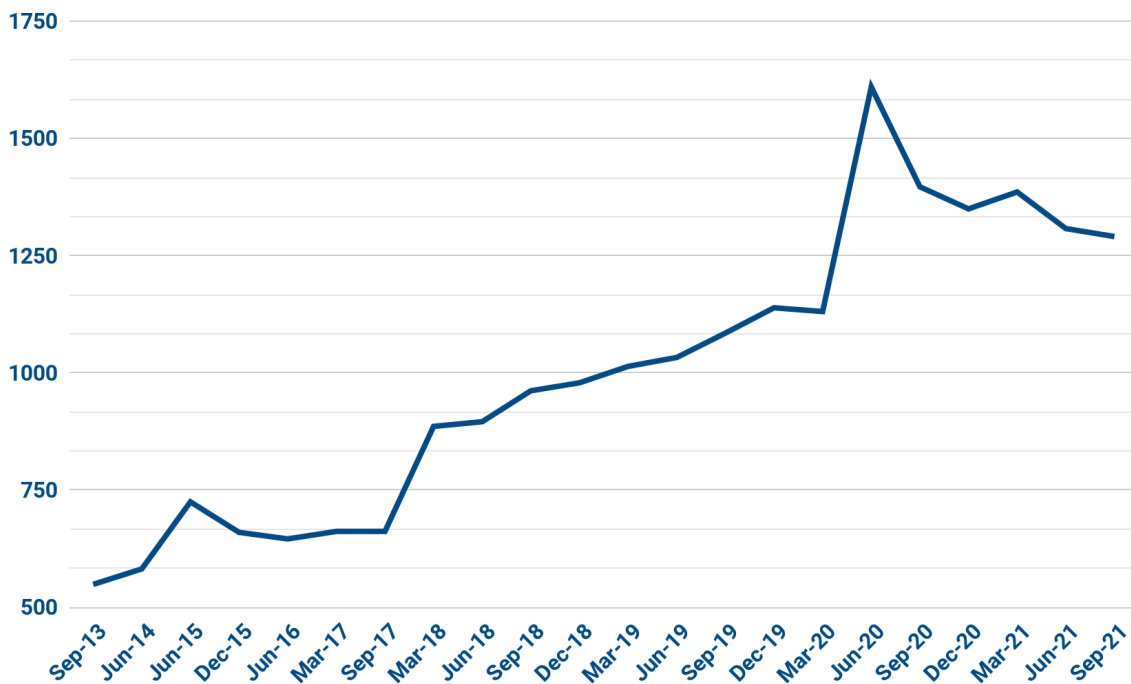
<sup>11</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd as of the end of September 2021

<sup>12</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd as of the end of September 2021. There are nearly 4 times as many closures per person in rural areas compared to urban areas. This is based on the number of temporarily closed post offices per 100,000



a long time. This is a particular concern, as people living and working in rural areas are more dependent on the network.

**Figure 2. Sharp rise in the number of temporarily closed post offices<sup>13</sup>**  
*Total number of temporarily closed post offices (GB)*



## Closures affect a high proportion of local residents

1 in 5 people (21%) who took part in our representative survey had experienced a post office closure in the last year.<sup>14</sup> This causes problems for a lot of people. 1 in 2 (49%) told us they have been, or would be, negatively impacted by the closure of their local post office. In rural areas this rises to over 1 in 2 (53%).<sup>15</sup>

A closure makes it harder for people to access Post Office services. It costs them more time or money, and can have knock-on consequences for individual

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residents using rural urban classifications from 1) Rural Urban Classification (2011) of Output Areas in England and Wales and 2) Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2016, and population estimates from 1) Office for National Statistics mid-2020 estimates at an Output Area level (England and Wales) and 2) National Records of Scotland mid-2020 Population Estimates by Urban Rural Classification version 2016

<sup>13</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd. Data points referenced are those available to Citizens Advice

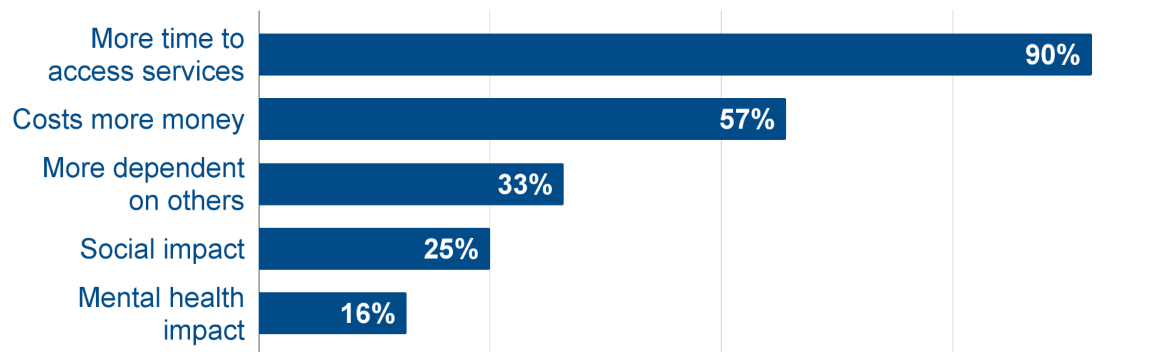
<sup>14</sup> Ipsos MORI, 2021

<sup>15</sup> Ipsos MORI, 2021

wellbeing and community cohesion.

### Figure 3. Post office closures result in a range of harms<sup>16</sup>

*Problems caused for people who said they have been negatively impacted by closure*



## It takes people longer to access services

Almost everyone (90%) who has been negatively impacted by a temporary post office closure says it now takes them more time to access services.<sup>17</sup> This is unsurprising, as alternative branches are usually some distance away.

Our analysis shows that temporarily closed post offices in Britain are on average 2 miles away by driving distance from the closest full-time branch. This increases to 3 miles in rural areas.<sup>18</sup>

For people who rely on bus services, a trip to the post office could be a **significantly longer journey** than before. In one rural village included in our research, it now takes residents half a day by bus. This compares with 10 minutes when the post office had been in the village. Even for drivers, the round trip can take a lot longer.

<sup>16</sup> Ipsos MORI, 2021

<sup>17</sup> Ipsos MORI, 2021

<sup>18</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd as of the end of September 2021 using Here.com matrix routing API v7 and the Office for National Statistics Rural Urban classification (2011) of Output Areas in England and Wales, and Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2016. Measured by driving distance. A full-time permanent post office is any other type of branch apart from an outreach

'I have to drive to a post office. So, it takes up time that is valuable... Which might take me an hour to go to the post office where before it would have taken me 10 minutes.'

**Female, aged 35-54, East Midlands**

Closures mean that people now have to **plan a trip** to a post office. Previously, they had been able to make a quick spontaneous trip, or drop in on the way past whilst out and about. As a result, for many people the post office is no longer the convenient service it once was.

## People spend more money to access services

Nearly 6 in 10 (57%) people who have been negatively impacted by a post office closure say it now costs them more money to access services.<sup>19</sup> This was more likely to be flagged as an issue by rural residents and people living on low incomes when we asked people how they would be impacted by a future post office closure.<sup>20</sup>

The main reasons for the increase in cost are due to the **extra journeys** people are making to get to the post office. Our research finds that for drivers this means extra **fuel and parking costs**.

People who don't drive may have to pay a lot more to get to a post office, often because they have to pay **bus or taxi fares**. In one village we looked at in South West England the bus fare is £4.50 return to the nearest town where the post office is based.

But many research participants confirmed that bus services are infrequent or impractical for them which means they have to get a taxi. This can be significantly more expensive. In one East Midlands village where the post office had closed, participants told us there are no buses after 2.30pm to the neighbouring village and the taxi fare is £7 each way.

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<sup>19</sup> Ipsos MORI, 2021

<sup>20</sup> Of people who believe they would be negatively impacted by a future post office closure - 77% of rural residents said it would cost them more money to access services. 73% of people with household incomes under £25k pa said it would cost them more money.

People are also hit financially in other ways when their local post office closes. Several participants told us they **kept unwanted or defective mail order items**, rather than returning them because it was so difficult and inconvenient.

‘There was something slightly wrong with the product that I’d bought and normally I’d probably have said I’m just going to return this... I actually kept it because returning it was going to be such a pain in the proverbial.’

**Female, aged 55-64, South West England**

Some were **guessing postage**, often erring on the side of caution and potentially overpaying, rather than having items accurately weighed and priced at the post office. Others said they were **spending more on items elsewhere** that would have been cheaper at the post office - such as packing materials.

## Some people post less

Whilst some people and small businesses are paying the financial penalty of not having convenient access to a post office, others told us they have reduced the number of items they post as a result of their local post office closing. This included doing **less online shopping** because of the difficulty returning items.

‘That’s the most annoying thing - when you shop online and you can’t send stuff back because you have to take it to a post office. That’s irritating. And that puts me off online shopping a bit. Because I think if it doesn’t fit, then I have to drive all the way into [town].’

**Female, aged 35-54, East Midlands**

One small business owner told us they have decided to **promote and sell less** since the closure because they can't easily get to a post office or calculate postage.

## Others become more dependent on friends and family

1 in 3 (33%) of those who have been negatively affected by a post office closure say it has made them more dependent on others to access services. When we asked people how they would be impacted by a future post office closure, **younger** and **older people** and **people on lower incomes** were more likely to say they would become more dependent on other people.<sup>21</sup>

Our interviews with rural residents who have experienced a temporary closure find that **non-drivers** are particularly likely to lose their independence as a result of the post office closing. Often it is older people who can no longer drive.

'I don't like to keep asking. I want to be independent and do it on my own. My mum's like 72, and my sister's got 3 kids. Although they never ever would complain because they feel terrible that I can't drive, it's just another thing they have to do for me.'

**Female, aged 35-54, South West England**

But this also includes younger disabled people, younger people with health conditions, and people on lower incomes without access to a car.

## Community connections are lost

Post offices are often described as the **'focal point'** of a community or providing a 'social hub'. Of people who have been negatively impacted by a post office closure, 1 in 4 (25%) say they now feel more **isolated** or disconnected from the community.

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<sup>21</sup> Of people who believe they would be negatively impacted by a future post office closure - 54% aged 18-24 say they would be more dependent on others to access services, 35% aged 65+, 42% with a household income of under £25k pa. (30% average)

Many individuals told us that they have lost the opportunity for social interaction that came with village post office trips. Previously these had involved bumping into friends and acquaintances, and a conversation with a known postmaster. They said that the post office played a unique role as an informal social hub.

Our findings indicate older people and people on low incomes are most likely to feel more isolated once their local post office closes.<sup>22</sup> This compounds the impact of closures on these groups as they are more frequent post office users and are more likely to become dependent on others once their branch closes.

'Some people only ever met up with people in there. All the older people used to come and get their pensions. They would stand and talk to [the postmaster] and other people in there. There's nowhere else really.'

**Female, aged 55-64, South West England**

People told us that the post office had been a kind of community 'glue'. Post office staff were seen as a valuable **source of information** and **looked out for more vulnerable residents**. The post office was also often used to promote local events and groups.

## Closures aren't good for people's health and the environment

The closure of a local post office also has a detrimental effect on residents' health. Having to drive means that some miss out on the walk to the post office. This is worse for older people in villages who used their regular post office trips as a way of getting **exercise**.

Our research shows post office closures can affect people's mental health. Of people who have been negatively impacted, 16% said it had an impact on their mental health, such as **increased anxiety**. Many described the stress of getting

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<sup>22</sup> Of people who believe they would be negatively impacted by a future post office closure - 32% aged 65+ say this would have a negative social impact on them, 32% with a household income of under £25k pa. (24% average)

to a post office further afield - having to drive, find parking, often walking further with large parcels.

'I'd rather just walk to the post office. Getting in the car for a small journey. It's not great for the environment. I would have probably felt better in myself if I'd just walked to the post office and back.'

**Female, aged 35-54, East Midlands**

Driving also means **using fuel**. Some research participants in villages where post offices closed resent this environmental impact, particularly when they have to use a car for the sole purpose of visiting a post office.

## Closures cause problems for local businesses

Small businesses are often frequent users of post offices - undertaking regular postal and/or banking transactions. When a village post office closes it can be costly for them.

'I now have to travel... to go to a post office. The post office was literally 500 yards [away]. So there's a big difference, if you do that 4 or 5 times a week, that's quite expensive in terms of petrol and time.'

**Small business owner, East Midlands**

Previous studies have highlighted the important role post offices play in local economies.<sup>23</sup> Our research supports this - participants told us that their village post office had drawn in people from outlying villages, who then also used other services in the village.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, University of Chichester, [Final Report on the West Sussex Post Office Closure Impact Study](#), 2009. Post Office Ltd, [The Economic and Social Impact of the Post Office](#), 2020

Some also told us that village post offices and shops both benefited by being co-located, as customers would end up spending money in both. In this way, by acting as a **'honeypot'**, a local post office supports other local businesses.

'You're keeping people in the village, you're keeping people together in the community and it might be it helps the village shop because if someone says, 'I'm going to buy some stamps', then they might spend a few pounds in the village shop because there's some lovely bread or all sorts of cakes and greeting cards and things like that.'

**Female, aged 35-54, East Midlands**

So, as we have seen, temporary post office closures cause a wide range of problems for local residents and businesses - from costing them more money and time to access services to a loss of community cohesion. In the next chapter, we examine the impact of replacing a full-time permanent post office with an outreach service.



### 3 Increasing outreaches

Recent years have seen a dramatic rise in the number of part-time outreach post offices. In this section we look at the total number of outreaches and their limited opening hours. We then examine people’s experiences of using this type of post office provision. And finally, we discuss how well the model is meeting the needs of individuals and local communities.

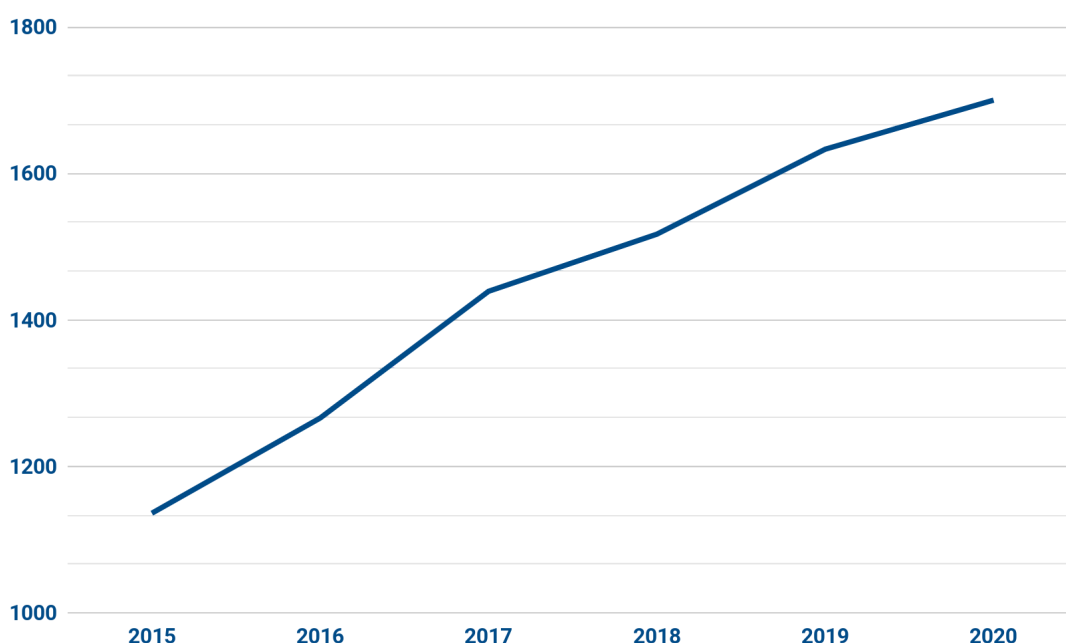
#### Outreaches are now a bigger part of the network

Outreach post offices are part-time services typically provided by a mobile post office van or hosted in a village hall or other community setting. They are run by a postmaster from a standard ‘bricks and mortar’ permanent post office. Often a single postmaster will supply outreach services at many different locations.

There has been an extraordinary rise in the number of outreaches. In the year 2000, there were 52 (1% of the network) across the UK.<sup>24</sup> But since then we’ve seen a steady increase (see figure 4).

**Figure 4. There’s been a significant increase in outreach services<sup>25</sup>**

*Total number of outreach post offices (March each year, UK)*



<sup>24</sup> House of Commons Library, [Effect of Post Office Closures on Local Communities](#) - debate pack, 2021

<sup>25</sup> House of Commons Library, [Post Office Numbers - briefing paper](#), 2021

By the end of September 2021 there were 1,805 outreaches across the UK, 16% of the whole network. **This represents a 59% increase since 2015.** Today 1 in 3 branches in rural locations are run as outreaches.<sup>26</sup>

**1 in 3**  
rural post offices are **outreaches**



## Outreach opening hours are short

Outreaches have short opening hours. In Britain they provide services for an average of only 5 and a half hours a week.<sup>27</sup> Some outreach post offices are open for as little as an hour each week. This leaves people with very limited access compared with full-time permanent branches, which are open for an average of 59 hours a week.<sup>28</sup>

Problems for people living and working in areas served by outreach post offices are compounded by the fact the nearest full-time branch is usually a fair distance away. Our analysis shows outreaches are, on average, 3.4 miles from the nearest full-time post office. And 1 in 7 outreaches are more than 5 miles away from a full-time branch.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd as of the end of September 2021 using the Office for National Statistics Rural Urban classification (2011) of Output Areas in England and Wales, and Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2016. This shows 33% of post offices in rural locations are outreaches. Based on Post Office Ltd's definition of rural post offices 29% are outreaches

<sup>27</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd as of the end of September 2021

<sup>28</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd as of the end of September 2021

<sup>29</sup> Citizens Advice analysis at a GB level of data provided by Post Office Ltd as of the end of September 2021 using Here.com matrix routing API v7 and the Office for National Statistics Rural Urban classification (2011) of Output Areas in England and Wales, and Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2016. Measured by driving distance. A full-time permanent post office is any other type of branch apart from an outreach

## Limited hours don't work for many people

Replacing a permanent full-time post office with a part-time outreach can be highly inconvenient for local residents, and many don't use the service at all. Many people described wanting to use a post office at **a time that suits** them. But instead, as with post office closures, the limited hours of the outreach service means they have to plan in advance and arrange their day around it.

People who are employed are often **unable to leave work** to use the service. Equally, some retired people have **conflicting appointments** which can make attending the outreach difficult. Others simply forget to pop out at the right time.

'It's no good to me because I haven't got a memory. You have to remember when it's open, which I don't do. Because if it's me I'd always go when it's shut because I would have forgotten the proper time.'

**Male, aged 55-64, Yorkshire**

For people who have to travel to the outreach post office by public transport, it can be simply **impractical to get there during its limited opening hours**.

'I've used [the outreach van] in the past but I struggle to get it to coincide with bus times... If it's pouring with rain, you'll go to [the village] to go to the post van and then be sitting in a bus stop waiting for three hours to then come home.'

**Female, aged 35-54, Highlands**

Wanting or **needing to use a service on a day the outreach was not there** was a key reason for people using alternatives and why local residents and businesses don't use outreaches.

## Less frequent service can be a serious problem

In some instances, the lack of frequent service is more of a serious problem. For example, letters relating to benefits often require a **quick response** or **bills** may need to be paid. Similarly, items bought online may need to be returned within a tight timeframe.

'Some bills you've got to pay... You can't save them up... Sometimes the likes of a benefits letter, if you've got to sign something and send it back. It's time specific, it's got to be returned by a specific date and I might not be going to Tesco for another two weeks...'

**Female, aged 35-54, disabled, Highlands**

Some people are particularly reliant on post offices to **access cash**. And a lack of availability can have very serious repercussions.

'I think it's extremely unacceptable that we've only got a service for so many hours of the week, because a lot of people will be living hand-to-mouth. If their benefit payment comes through and they withdraw it at the post office, and they can't get to the post office or the post office doesn't exist anymore on the morning where they get that money, they might not have anything to eat. Or not be able to put money on the electricity meter....'

**Female, aged 55-64, Highlands**

Just as we found with post offices closing, a less frequent service provided by outreaches can result in people having to spend extra time and money to get to an alternative service. This can be an acute problem for people in vulnerable circumstances, such as people on low incomes.

## Small business needs are no longer met

In the same way shorter opening hours don't work for consumers, they also cause serious difficulties for small businesses, many of which are regular users of post offices.<sup>30</sup>

The small businesses we spoke to told us outreach opening hours are **not frequent enough** or owners or staff **can't leave their work at the time outreach services are provided**.

Some businesses **need to send parcels for next day delivery**, for example where customers have paid for quick delivery or for perishable goods. In these cases they told us they have changed to couriers with local drop-off points or parcel companies that pick up from their offices. Compared with couriers some feel that the post office services they originally used had provided better reliability and convenience.

Businesses also described having a close relationship with the post office staff and said they could simply drop off parcels and pay later or on another day if there was a queue. However, this option is not available in the outreach.

Other businesses had been reliant on the previous full-time post office for their **regular banking needs**. But the outreach does not provide the daily service they need. Some small businesses are concerned about **security** at outreach post offices - one owner told us they are less comfortable waiting outside the mobile post office van whilst carrying large amounts of cash.

'We have no banks here so we relied on the service of the old post office. We used the post office mainly for banking, paying in cheques, paying in cash, and sometimes we'd use it for change giving facilities... [The outreach post office] doesn't fit in with our timescale. You want to have the flexibility of a post office, 5 or 6 days a week.'

**Small business owner, West Midlands**

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<sup>30</sup> Citizens Advice, [Consumer Use of Post Offices](#), 2017

## Outreach services are not always reliable

On top of the limited opening hours, our research indicates that outreach services are not always reliable.

Outreach users describe how dependent provision is on a single individual and van. When the postmaster is ill, or on annual leave, or the van needs repairs the **outreach service is cancelled**. Often this happens at short notice or with no notice. Whilst research participants did not see this as a common occurrence, it would happen occasionally. And none of the outreach services we studied appeared to have a formal way to notify people that the service was cancelled.

'With the van it seems to be a bit temperamental... you just have to try and wing it and hope that it's there. It's very hard to plan round that.'

**Male, aged 35-54, Highlands**

These findings are corroborated by recent local media reports, which indicate van breakdown and staff holidays can lead to communities being without any post office service for many weeks.<sup>31</sup> Our previous mystery shopping research also indicates that outreach post office reliability is a significant problem. We found service unavailable in almost 1 in 5 visits to outreaches during advertised opening times. This was usually because the outlet was not open or the mobile van was not there.<sup>32</sup>

'The first time I went to use [the outreach van], I had a barcode for an electricity voucher. I was told to go to the post office so I went to the mobile van and they [couldn't] process the voucher. So I had to go the 15 miles to get my electricity that day... It was roughly nearly a tenner for me to get a return ticket.'

**Female, aged 18-34, Highlands**

<sup>31</sup> For example, The Courier, '[Unacceptable': Apology as Fife villages are left without a mobile post office for a month](#), 25 August 2021

<sup>32</sup> Citizens Advice, '[Banking on It](#)', 2020

Outreach customers also told us that **specific services are not always available**, even if the outreach was open. Typically these instances seem to be related to problems with connectivity, and it is not always possible to get cash or pre-pay for utilities. This is likely to affect groups such as people on low incomes who tend to be most reliant on these services. The issue has arisen in both vans and hosted outreach services. Poor outreach internet or telephone connectivity is also reported by postmasters that operate outreach services.<sup>33</sup>

## Physical accessibility can be difficult

Even when outreach services are available, some of our research participants raised concerns about physical accessibility, particularly for **people with mobility problems**. Problems mentioned included the steps up to the mobile van and lack of space in a hosted outreach location.

'[If] I've got my boy with me, he's got special needs, it's easier to take him into town somewhere where there's a bit more room where he can move around...'

**Male, aged 35-54, South West England**

Difficulties with physical access may be compounded by **long queues** which are frequently reported by participants - due to the number of people using the outreach service during its restricted opening times. Waiting can be especially difficult for people visiting mobile post offices - for instance in wet or cold weather, and for people who are unable to stand for long periods due to health conditions or disabilities.

'My husband used [the outreach] once near Christmas, it must have been to send a parcel, I think. And it was very busy, and he had to queue for an awful long time in the cold. And he kind of vowed he'd never use it again after that experience. So I've never even tried.'

**Female, aged 35-54, Highlands**

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<sup>33</sup> Citizens Advice Scotland, [Subpostmaster Views on Post Office Outreach Services](#), 2020

## Services and social functions are lost

Just as our findings show how people lose access to services when their post office closes, people report a loss of some services when their branch is replaced with an outreach.

Some participants told us that **parcel collection** is now a problem for them. Whilst they used to be able to collect from the village post office, the outreach does not offer this service so they have to visit a sorting office, which is less convenient. Others also said they thought they couldn't **post larger parcels** at their outreach post office.

People frequently talked about missing the additional retail services that permanent full-time post offices provide - such as **groceries, fresh food, stationery and cards**.

Participants reported that they generally find outreaches provide **less opportunity for social interaction** than the post offices they replace. As with a post office closure, the introduction of an outreach means the social hub is lost. Again, it is older and less mobile people who are most likely to be affected.

Residents mentioned that the physical set up of a mobile outreach and the postmaster providing the service not coming from the village meant it was not conducive to informal chats in the same way as the previous full-time permanent post office. Vans do not provide anywhere warm and dry to wait, so people do not linger after they have used the post office.

'The blokes who went to get the morning paper, they often went about the same time each day and saw each other about the same time each day and then walked the dogs. Those things, they don't have a tangible benefit but they're about community... an easy way for folks to check up on each other without checking up on each other. So, unintrusive community networking.'

**Community leader, West Midlands**

In contrast, a few people in communities with hosted outreach services, said these could potentially be more social. Hosted outreaches are typically provided in a village hall or other community setting for limited hours. This



means everybody who needed the post office would be in the building at a similar time.

## But outreaches can be a 'lifeline' for some

Despite the drawbacks of outreaches compared with permanent full-time post offices, some participants told us it is **better than nothing**.

'Lesser of two evils... Or you can spend two hours on the bus going to [the nearby] town. I suppose in a way it is more convenient.'

**Female, aged 35-54, Highlands**

Some outreach users - especially those who are retired - expressed gratitude that they were able to access postal services, cash and banking they would not otherwise have access to in the village. They described it as a **'lifeline' compared with not having any post office** at all. This was particularly the case for people who use the post office for cash withdrawals, or to collect their pension. The ability to do this after a period of having no post office gave back some independence to older people who couldn't drive.

'I'm so grateful for it even though it's only a couple of hours. It means you get it here in the village which is wonderful... [If I didn't have it] it would make life very difficult. You'd be beholden to other people all the time.'

**Female, aged 75+, South West England**

As our research shows, the short opening hours of outreach services don't work well for many individuals and small businesses. We've seen how a less frequent service means some simply don't use the service. Users can find reliability patchy, physical accessibility problematic and some services no longer available. As with closures, the social function of the post office is often lost.

# Conclusion

The post office network is intended to be convenient and easily accessible to all. It is particularly important in rural areas where there are often no alternatives.

Although the post office network continues to meet the government's access criteria, our research shows that a significant and growing number of individuals and small businesses no longer have convenient and easy access to the services they need, and are experiencing harm as a result. This raises questions as to whether the current access criteria are fit for purpose.

Over the last decade there have been high numbers of temporary closures. We've also seen a dramatically increasing proportion of post offices provided on a part-time outreach basis.

'Temporarily' closed post offices are usually shut for a significant period of time. And the 1 in 3 rural post offices that now operate as outreaches are usually only open for a few hours a week. This makes it harder for people to access services.

Closed post offices are simply not there at all. People are forced to take on the additional costs and inconvenience of travelling further to access services. And although outreaches may be 'better than nothing' for some, people generally find the service inadequate. Provision is too infrequent, opening hours inconvenient, queues long and services 'missing'.

The holes in the post office network are worse in rural areas - the very places where people are most reliant on post offices to start with.

These changes leave many communities and individuals scarcely served by the post office network - with very poor access to services and no social and economic hub. For affected people and local businesses, the Post Office no longer provides the convenience they once valued.

The groups who already tend to be disadvantaged and rely most on post offices to access services are hardest hit - those without cars, on low incomes, and

disabled people. The loss of a local post office or a reduced service can lead to a loss of independence for people who regard it as a lifeline.

Post Office Ltd and the government have not yet come forward with a convincing plan that will be sufficient to address the rapidly rising numbers of temporary closures and part-time outreaches.

Urgent action is needed to tackle these issues to ensure that the post office network really is convenient and easily accessible to everyone.

Following this report, Citizens Advice will continue to work with stakeholders, including the government and Post Office Ltd to develop workable solutions and push for their implementation.

# Appendix

Unless otherwise referenced, the findings referred to in this report are from the following research studies.

## **Consumer survey of postal service and post office use**

Citizens Advice commissioned Yonder Data Solutions to undertake a telephone survey of 4,015 GB adults. Fieldwork was undertaken in two waves between 7 and 28 February 2021, and 2 and 18 August 2021.

The survey examined how often people use post offices and which Post Office services they use.

## **Consumer survey on post office closures and outreach services**

Citizens Advice commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake telephone interviews with 2,005 GB adults between May and June 2021.

The survey asked people how they had been, or how they would be, impacted, by post office closures or the replacement of a full-time office with an outreach service.

## **Qualitative research into the impacts of temporary closures and outreach services**

Citizens Advice commissioned Community Research to undertake one-to-one in-depth interviews with 54 people living or working in 10 villages in England, Scotland and Wales. 39 interviewees were based in locations where the post office had closed or were served by outreaches. The research took place in May and June 2021.

The research locations included

- 3 villages with permanent post offices
- 3 villages whose post office had closed 12-18 months ago
- 2 villages with an outreach post office hosted in a village/recreation hall
- 2 villages with an outreach post office service provided by a mobile van

Of the 54 participants - 36 were people living in or around the village, 9 were 'community leaders' (active in their communities, involved in organising

community groups and activities), 9 ran or worked for small businesses based in the village.

All participants were users of post offices (having used services at least once in the past 3 months). Amongst those in villages with outreach services, half used the outreach service and half did not.

Participants were of a mix of demographics including a mix of ages (from 25 to 93), 11 had disabilities or long term conditions, 5 were digitally excluded or had low confidence online, 15 participants were in socio-economic groups DE and/or on household incomes of under £21,000.

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