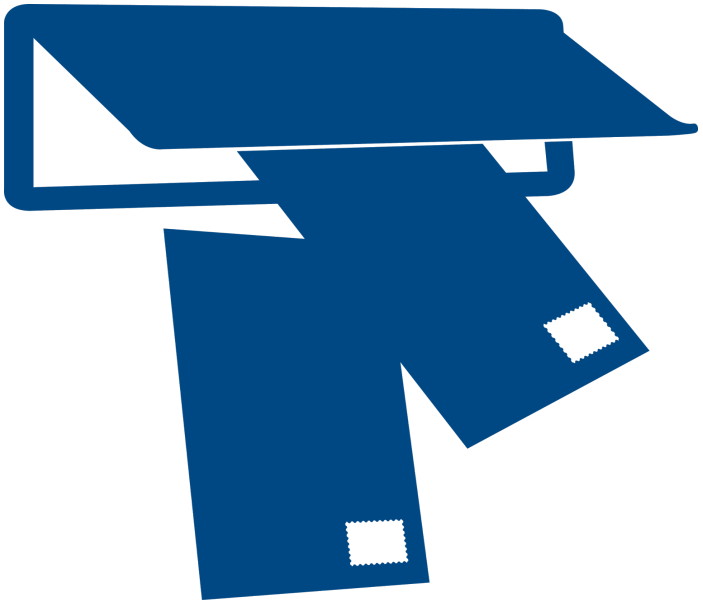
The state of the post office network

Measuring performance across new and old models



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Summary

The Post Office is reaching the end of the biggest period of change in its history. The number of branches has been preserved, but the way that most of them operate has been changed significantly. So what does this mean for consumers?

For the first time, Citizens Advice has reviewed service standard performance across the majority branch types in the post office network. We used mystery shoppers in order to understand the consumer experience of using different types of post offices.

Overall, the post office network is performing well, considering its size, complexity and the significant change it has been through since 2012. New branches are also performing in line with, or better than, traditional post offices.

Disabled access is better at larger and new post office models. Nearly all (99%) former Crowns have at least one appropriate entrance for consumers with mobility issues compared to 71% of sub-post offices. But too often facilities that should be available are not being correctly advertised, signposted or provided.

Waiting times were lowest in traditional sub-post offices and new style Post Office Locals and Post Office Mains (under 3 minutes) and were most likely to serve shoppers immediately. Shoppers were most likely to queue and queue for longest at the largest Crown and former Crown branches (over 4 minutes).

Single, appropriate recommendations were provided by the majority of staff, after prompting, across all mail scenarios. However, staff were still largely dependent on further prompting to reach the correct recommendation. Initially, this was provided in only half of small parcels and 2 in 5 (40%) large letters.

Parcel collection, banking and government services were available in the majority of visits. But 1 in 5 (22%) visits shoppers were unable to deposit cash.

To improve the performance of post offices for consumers, we recommend:

1. POL and operators should ensure that **hearing loops and portable PIN pads** are in place and clearly communicated in branches.

2. POL and operators should review what more can be done to **reduce queues at Crowns and former Crowns**.

3. POL should review training to ensure staff are asking the **appropriate questions** to determine consumers' needs before providing a **single correct product recommendation**.

4. POL should closely monitor and work with operators to ensure that branches are correctly delivering the **full range of banking services**.

Background

The post office network provides access to a range of mail, banking, financial and government services to 17 million customers each week. The network offers unrivalled access to these services, with over 11,600 branches - that is more than all high street banks combined. This access is particularly important for vulnerable groups, such as older and disabled consumers, those on low-incomes, and those living in rural areas .

The Network Transformation Programme (NTP) involves the conversion of traditional sub-post offices to new operating models. By the end of the programme in March 2018, around two thirds of the UK's 11,600 branches will have converted to the new models:

- PO Locals provide Post Office services in a wider range of retail outlets, with transactions usually carried out by general retail staff at a retail counter. These branches still provide 95% of services but some manual banking and international parcel services are only provided in the enhanced 'Local Plus' model.
- PO Mains offer the majority of products and services, with dedicated counters and staff, and will typically be located in the largest town and city centre branches.

Citizens Advice supports the effort of the NTP to ensure the financial stability and size of the post office network with benefits for consumers such as increased opening hours. Our recent research showed that PO Locals are generally performing in line with, or in some cases slightly better than, traditional models but there is still room for improvement in accessibility, waiting times and the quality of service.[1]

Crown post offices are changing separately from the NTP. These are run directly by Post Office Limited (POL) and are often flagship high street stores. They provide the full range of products and services through dedicated post office staff. Since January 2016, POL has announced plans to franchise or host approximately a third of the remaining Crown network in alternative retailers such as WHSmith. Citizens Advice is supportive of the efforts to maintain the network at its current size but suggests these relocations need to be carefully managed. Some branches are moving off ground floor locations or into shopping centres, raising concerns about disabled access and quality of service.

As the NTP comes to an end, Crown changes continue and with the Government due to announce future funding of the Post Office, it is important to understand how the network is performing, which is crucial to its future use and sustainability. This is in the context of increasing competition from other parcel operators, the face-to-face provision of services for the most vulnerable and the ability of the network to fill the gap left by bank branch closures.

[1] Citizens Advice, Post Office Local Review, February 2017.

Research method

We have undertaken research to understand and assess the performance of:

- the post office network as the NTP comes to an end and ongoing changes are made to Crowns
- new post office models introduced as part of the NTP and Crown changes compared to traditional post offices
- small and large post offices

To fulfil the research objectives we commissioned a research company, GfK, to undertake a mystery shopping project. This allowed us to assess, for the first time, service standards at the majority of branch types in the network.

1,813 mystery shopping visits were undertaken to sub-post offices[2], Post Office Locals (PO Locals), Post Office Mains (PO Mains)[3], Crowns, former Crowns[4] and other large privately managed branches[5]. Fieldwork was conducted between February and March 2017. This consisted of 907 visits across sub-post offices and PO Locals, and 906 visits across PO Mains, Crowns, WHSmith, newly franchised Crowns and Privately Managed branches. Each branch was visited at least once, with former Crowns visited 2-3 times.

During each visit, mystery shoppers would act as normal customers and conduct between 2 and 3 product scenarios consisting of a mixture of purchases and enquiries. For the first time, all mail scenarios were undertaken as purchases. Shoppers were provided with detailed briefing notes on how to conduct each scenario, independently assessing if staff provided the correct product and pricing advice to meet their needs. Shoppers also assessed a range of internal and external branch attributes such as accessibility, privacy and queuing times.

The number of visits and type of scenarios undertaken varied across each branch type to reflect operational differences, where issues have been raised in our previous research and to meet sampling requirements. To provide an assessment of the performance of the network, the findings in this report only focus on the scenarios conducted across all branch types. A more detailed assessment from GfK of each branch type is published alongside this report. We will also be publishing smaller reports examining the performance of Crowns and the high street network later this year.

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[2] Mystery shoppers only visited sub-post offices that would otherwise have been modelled as a PO Local but were not involved in the NTP and were not designated as a Community branch. The latter branch type was included in this study.

[3] Mystery shoppers only visited PO Locals and PO Mains operating for 3 months or more.

[4] Former Crowns consist of branches franchised to a range of independent and multiple retailers in the Crown Transformation programme between 2013-15 and Crowns franchised to WHSmith between 2007-08.

[5] Privately managed branches are run by a range of independent and multiple retailers and operate on a modified sub-post office (MSPO), independent franchise post office (IFSO) or centrally franchised post office (CFPO) contract. A separate analysis of the performance of these branches is not included in this report. This will be included in a separate report later this summer.

1. Accessibility

This chapter examines how easy it is for consumers to get to, into and around post offices. We put particular emphasis on disabled consumers. In 2015/16 there were 13.3 million individuals in the UK who were disabled.[6] Recent Citizens Advice research found that 29% of disabled consumers think post offices are extremely important, almost twice as likely as those without an impairment (16%).[7] It is crucial to the future use and sustainability of the network that the correct facilities are in place to meet the access needs of disabled people.

The NTP and changes to Crown post offices involve a substantial investment of funds to improve branch accessibility. POL has committed in the NTP to maintain level access across the threshold at new post offices if similar arrangements are present at the outgoing branch. All PO Locals and Mains should include portable PIN pads and hearing loops, and PO Mains must have additional facilities such as low-level counters, writing desks and scales.[8] POL's accessibility guide requires all post office operators to also make reasonable adjustments in line with the Equality Act but to go beyond this by providing sufficient aisle widths and turning circles.

Overall, our findings indicate that investment in the network is leading to better access for disabled consumers at new post office models compared to traditional models. However, despite the good performance of new post offices in a substantial number of visits, facilities that should be available are not being provided, correctly advertised or signposted consistently. The largest high street post offices are performing better in providing facilities for disabled people such as flat entrances, hearing loops and portable PIN pads. Conversely, smaller branches have slightly better access in terms of nearby parking facilities.

Getting to and into the post office

Our research illustrates that new NTP models and smaller traditional sub-post offices have better parking facilities. Although parking is beyond POL's direct control, nearby parking facilities are important to consumers and one of the aspects POL consult before relocating a branch. Based on an analysis of our case handling data, in the recent Crown changes, local residents raised concerns about parking in 73% of proposed cases.[9]

In 4 in 5 (80%) visits to PO Locals, PO Mains and sub-post offices, shoppers noted nearby parking facilities (within 100 yards of the branch). This figure falls to under 1 in 2 (48%) Crowns and 2 in 5 (41%) former Crowns. The recent Crown

[6] Department for Work and Pensions, Family Resources Survey 2015/16, March 2017.
[7] Forthcoming survey of consumers' use of services traditionally provided at the post office.
[8] Former Crowns have been reclassified internally by POL as PO Mains and are expected to provide similar facilities to branches converted to a PO Main in the separate NTP.
[9] Based on analysis of our case handling data, in 63 Crown branch relocation consultations from March 2016 to January 2017, parking was raised as an issue by local residents in 46 (73%) of cases.

changes often result in post offices being relocated to pedestrianised zones, which do not have parking facilities as closely situated as at the outgoing branch. Whilst new branches may still be situated relatively close to other parking facilities, the lack of any nearby on-street parking or drop-off point can present challenges for disabled and older people.

Although larger high street branches were less likely to feature nearby parking, where parking was available they had a greater provision of blue badge bays. Figure 1 shows that these were most likely to be provided at former Crowns (71%) and Crowns (57%). This helps compensate for the significantly lower provision of free parking without time limits (14% for Crowns and 10% for Former Crowns, compared to an average of 60%).

Figure 1. Type of nearby parking where available

	Total visits (1,274)[10]	Sub-post offices (241)	PO Locals (488)	PO Mains (246)	Crowns (72)	Former Crowns (124)
Free parking no time limit	60%	72%	79%	57%	14%	10%
Free parking with time limit	27%	24%	17%	34%	42%	36%
Pay and display	18%	6%	7%	14%	60%	58%
Blue badge bays	37%	24%	23%	42%	57%	71%

We also looked at getting into the branch. Performance was good in this regard, in just under 9 in 10 (87%) visits shoppers observed at least one entrance wide

[10] The total or overall findings in this report is based on visits to all branch types. However, as we have not included a separate analysis of privately managed branches in this report the visits at each branch type shown in this and every subsequent table, chart, graph or infographic will not add up to the total or overall visits. We will aim to report on the performance of privately managed branches in a separate report later this year.

enough for a wheelchair that was flat, ramped or had other measures in place to aid access.

Our findings show that new and larger post offices provided better access into the branch. As shown in Figure 2, in nearly all former Crown and Crown visits at least one entrance appeared wide enough for a wheelchair that was flat, ramped or had other measures in place to aid access. PO Mains also performed well, with these measures in place in over 9 in 10 (91%) visits, whilst PO Locals performed better than sub-post offices. In this way, the NTP and Crown changes appear to have improved access into branches. However, in just over 1 in 7 (14%) visits PO Local branches did not have measures in place to aid access into the branch.

Figure 2. Provision of at least one accessible entrance

	Total visits (1,813)	Sub-post offices (307)	PO Locals (600)	PO Mains [11] (302)	Crowns (150)	Former Crowns (303)
Entrance appeared wide enough, flat or ramp/other access features[12] present	87%	71%	86%	91%	97%	99%
Entrance did not appear wide enough for wheelchair or not flat, no ramp or other access features	13%	29%	14%	8%	3%	1%

Moving around inside the branch

Our findings show that in the visits to branches with aisles, just under 9 in 10 (89%) shoppers found them wide enough, and/or clear of obstacles impeding access, for wheelchairs and mobility scooter users. This left a minority (11%) of visits in which shoppers considered that aisles were not wide enough for wheelchair access and/or obstacles were impeding access.

The largest high street post offices had the best provision of a clear route to the serving positions and/or no obstacles blocking access. This was the case, in 98% of Crown visits, dropping slightly at former Crowns (95%) and PO Mains (91%). Smaller sub-post offices were the least likely to have sufficiently wide enough aisles for wheelchairs and/or no obstacles impeding access (79%) whilst PO Locals performed better (87% of visits).

[11] Findings don't equate to 100% due to rounding.
[12] Includes handrail and/or low-level buzzer or bell.

1 in 8 (12%) visits to the largest high street branches found the post office counters were situated in the basement, on the first floor or higher. This equated to 89 branches, of which 78% had an internal lift. All of these lifts appeared to be working and large enough for a wheelchair. In the event of an internal branch lift not working, POL has agreed with Citizens Advice to provide a service point on the ground floor for disabled consumers.

A substantial minority of larger high street branches with post office counters on the basement or first floor (22%) did not provide an internal branch lift. However we assume that in all these cases an external lift was available, where, for example, the branch is located in a shopping centre.

Despite our research showing that the post office network is providing a good level of disabled access into and inside branches, Figure 3 shows patchy provision of key disabled facilities at the counter position used by mystery shoppers. Newer post offices performed better than traditional sub-post offices and Crowns. However, in a significant number of visits to new post offices hearing loops and portable PIN pads, facilities that should form part of these models, did not appear to be available.[13] This appears to be a persistent problem at PO Locals, as uncovered in our previously published research.[14] There was also patchy provision of other disabled facilities such as low level scales, counters and writing desks at larger branches. We will go into further detail on these findings in a separate report.

Figure 3. Provision of clearly visible disabled facilities

	Total visits (1,789)	Sub-post offices (305)	PO Locals (579)	PO Mains (302)	Crowns (150)	Former Crowns (443)
Hearing loops	41%	22%	32%	61%	46%	51%
Portable PIN pads	61%	45%	62%	64%	67%	65%

Overall, we welcome the results demonstrating that new post office models are performing in line with, or better than, traditional branches in providing facilities for disabled customers. When combined with similar findings against measures for getting into and moving around inside the branch, this demonstrates a consistent pattern of much improved accessibility overall at new post offices.

Recommendation: POL and operators should ensure that hearing loops and portable PIN pads are in place and clearly communicated in branches, particularly at new post offices where they should form part of the model. Our research suggests that this is a persistent problem at PO Locals.

[13] It is conceivable that these facilities may have been available at other counter positions other than the one used by the mystery shopper.
[14] Citizens Advice, Post Office Local Review, February 2017.

2. Counter environment and queue times

This chapter reviews shoppers' experiences of accessing services at the post office counter. Recent research shows that when consumers choose which post office to visit, a quick service is ranked the third most important factor, behind quality of service and distance from where they set off.[15]

In the majority of visits shoppers were served immediately, particularly at the new model NTP post offices and traditional sub-post offices. These branches also had the lowest queue times for those shoppers who did have to queue. However, our findings show that despite the investment to improve customer service at some of the largest branches (refurbished premises, self-service kiosks, queue hosts and ticketing systems), shoppers here were most likely to have to queue before being served and queue for the longest.

Queuing times

In just over half (51%) of all visits shoppers were served immediately (within 5 seconds), as shown in Figure 4. Smaller branches - sub-post offices and PO Locals - performed best, with higher proportions of shoppers being served immediately (68% in PO Local visits). And, of shoppers who did have to wait, queue times were significantly lower. PO Mains also performed above average on both measures.

Crowns and former Crowns performed significantly worse. Only a minority of shoppers were served immediately and the remainder who had to queue waited for an average of more than 4 minutes. Performance was particularly bad in branches managed by one multiple retailer - where 8 in 10 (80%) shoppers had to wait to be served. Moreover, these shoppers had to wait for an average of almost 5 minutes (4 minutes and 44 seconds) to be served - over 2 minutes longer than for PO Locals.

Figure 4. Shoppers served immediately, had to wait/queue and average waiting times[16]

	Total visits (1,789)	Sub-post offices (305)	PO Locals (579)	PO Mains (302)	Crowns (150)	Former Crowns (303)
Served immediately	51%	58%	68%	52%	38%	29%
Had to wait or queue	49%	42%	32%	48%	62%	71%
Av. waiting time where queued	3m 21s	2m 48s	2m 31s	2m 56s	4m 12s	4m 15s

[15] YouGov & London Economics, The Social Value of the Post Office network, November 2016.
[16] Visits were broadly consistent across the time of the day at each branch type.

Shoppers who had to wait or queue recorded, in their opinion, the reasons for their wait. The volume of customers was cited by a majority across all branch types, and was highest in Crowns and Former Crowns (87% and 83%) respectively.

Figure 5. Reasons for shoppers wait or queuing before being served

	All visits (873)	Sub-post offices (129)	PO Locals (185)	PO Mains (146)	Crowns (115)	Former Crowns (214)
Volume of customers	73%	73%	54%	73%	87%	83%
Wait for a trained staff member	15%	15%	22%	16%	11%	10%
Retail customers served first	4%	5%	14%	2%	1%	2%
Other	6%	8%	11%	9%	1%	5%

PO Locals were the best performing model overall in terms of customers being served immediately and average queue times. It is worth noting, however, that PO Local shoppers who did have to queue tended to cite slightly different reasons for waiting, such as waiting for a trained staff member or retail customers being served. Our recent research on operator experiences of running new post office models found that some mid-sized PO Local operators experienced problems adequately staffing their branches and serving both post office and retail customers.[17] Overall, though, these branches appear to be providing a good queueing experience.

Shoppers who had to queue also recorded whether staff were doing anything to reduce or manage the queue. The most common feature was having separate post office queues (average of 38%, rising to 53% for PO Locals). Around 1 in 5 (22%) branches had staff actively managing queues, rising to 36% of Crowns and 29% of former Crowns. A similar proportion (20%) of branches had automated queue management devices, although this was found almost solely in Crowns and former Crowns. Overall 15% of consumers said additional counters were opened to deal with demand, again with this being most common in Crowns (22%) and former Crowns (16%).

As shown in Figure 6, overall mystery shoppers recorded that there were 3 counters on average per visit. This varied significantly from an average of 4.5 counters at Crowns to 1.2 counters at PO Locals. Crowns and former Crowns had the most counters actually open with staff on average, but over half of these were not open at the visited time. Consequently, at the time of shoppers visiting

[17] Citizens Advice, Transformation health check, January 2017.

these branches, sufficient staffing levels may not have been in place to ensure they received a quicker service.

Figure 6. Average counter positions, in total, open and closed

	Total visits (1,789)	Sub-post offices (305)	PO Locals (579)	PO Mains (302)	Crowns (150)	Former Crowns (303)
Total	3.0	1.7	1.2	2.3	4.5	3.9
Open	1.6	1.2	1	1.3	2.1	1.9
Closed	1.4	0.5	0.2	1.0	2.4	2

Self-service kiosks

Self-service kiosks (SSKs) are machines that allow consumers to complete transactions themselves. They are already widely used in other contexts, such as supermarkets and train stations. They could help post offices reduce queue times, particularly at busy periods, by reducing the strain on counter staff. They are currently being rolled out into some post offices, but SSKs are mainly used in larger branches. Our research shows that 1 in 5 (20%) of the largest branches have them. This was highest at Crowns (58%) and at WHSmith branches (43%). The vast majority (91%) of shoppers who observed SSKs said they all appeared to be working.

Our previous research indicated that a significant minority of consumers (40%) would actively *prefer* to use an SSK than be served by counter staff to buy stamps. A higher proportion would *consider* using a SSK for stamps (76%) or parcels (57%), but this is lower amongst older consumers.[18]

POL and operators are supposed to ensure that an appropriate staff member is available to help consumers use the machines. Tools such as parcel box guides are also typically provided at each machine for consumers to make sure they are purchasing the correct postage. This help and guidance is important to the future uptake and success of the machines in order to provide a quicker level of service at the largest branches.

Our research shows that in the majority (75%) of visits to branches with a SSK, shoppers reported that staff were clearly available to help people use the machines. In over 9 in 10 (91%) visits there was a parcel box guide at, at least, some of the SSKs. However, in a minority (25%) of visits staff were not clearly available to help consumers. This may result in consumers, particularly those unsure of using the machines, deciding to queue or wait be served at the counter, potentially leading to longer overall waiting times.

[18] ComRes, Citizens Advice - post office polling, March 2017 (unpublished). Based on a telephone survey of 1,031 adults in Great Britain.

Recommendation: POL and operators should review what more can be done to reduce queues at Crowns and former Crowns. This could include the provision of self-service kiosks (SSKs) at branches where they are not currently provided, ensuring appropriate staffing to guide and encourage greater consumer use of SSKs, or additional staffing in peak periods to open counters previously not in use.

Privacy measures

Privacy in post offices is important. Our research on consumer use of post offices shows that vulnerable consumers are disproportionately more reliant on using the post office to conduct a range of sensitive personal banking or financial transactions. Analysis of our NTP consultation case handling work shows that privacy concerns were raised by consumers in 3 in 4 off site PO Local conversions.[19]

Our findings show that just under 4 in 10 branches visited had some privacy measures (37%). This was higher in larger branches (50% in former Crowns, 44% in PO Mains and 39% in Crowns). The provision of perspex screens only was the most common (17% of visits) privacy measure overall, followed by other measures such as floor headers or signage only (12%). In the remaining 8% of visits, both perspex screens and other privacy devices were provided. The smallest branches, sub-post offices and PO Locals, were least likely to have any privacy measures. The lack of privacy measures may deter some consumers from undertaking sensitive transactions at the post office.

Figure 7. Provision of privacy measures

	Total visits (1,789)	Sub-post offices (305)	PO Locals (579)	PO Mains (302)	Crowns (150)	Former Crowns (293)
Measures	37%	30%	31%	44%	39%	50%
No measures	63%	70%	69%	56%	61%	50%

[19] Based on analysis of our case handling data, in 1,408 PO Local off-site conversions, consumers raised privacy as a concern in 1,065 (75%) cases from October 2012 to March 2017.

3. Service standards

Post office staff are required to ask appropriate questions to determine consumers needs before offering a service. Consequently, this is supposed to lead to a single correct product recommendation which is tailored to, and best meets, consumers' needs.

We tested service standards by completing transaction scenarios. Our findings show that, across all mail scenarios, staff are likely to offer the correct product. However, they are largely dependent on further prompting from shoppers to reach solely the correct product recommendation and often fail to ask sufficient questions to determine shoppers' needs. Consequently, there is a risk of consumers being offered a more expensive or inadequate service that does not meet their needs. PO Locals and newly franchised Crowns are performing in line with, or better than, traditional sub-post offices and Crowns in the provision of the correct service to meet consumers' needs. Despite the good provision of non-mail services, in a large minority of visits shoppers were unable to access these services, particularly depositing cash. This potentially places access to these services, for those disproportionately more reliant on them, at risk.

Mail services

The Post Office remains the biggest provider of Royal Mail services. Our research shows that 7 in 10 (71%) of all consumers buy stamps or send standard 1st or 2nd class mail at a post office.[20] 69% of all consumers use Royal Mail premium services, Special Delivery and Signed For, and over 6 in 10 (63%) post parcels at post offices (excluding mail order returns).[21] Provision of these services form a key part of Royal Mail meeting its legal requirement to deliver a universal service.[22]

Mystery shoppers conducted 4 mail scenarios:

- Large letter (second class)
- Signed For small parcel (second class)
- Special Delivery
- Parcel collection (Local Collect and Amazon Prime)

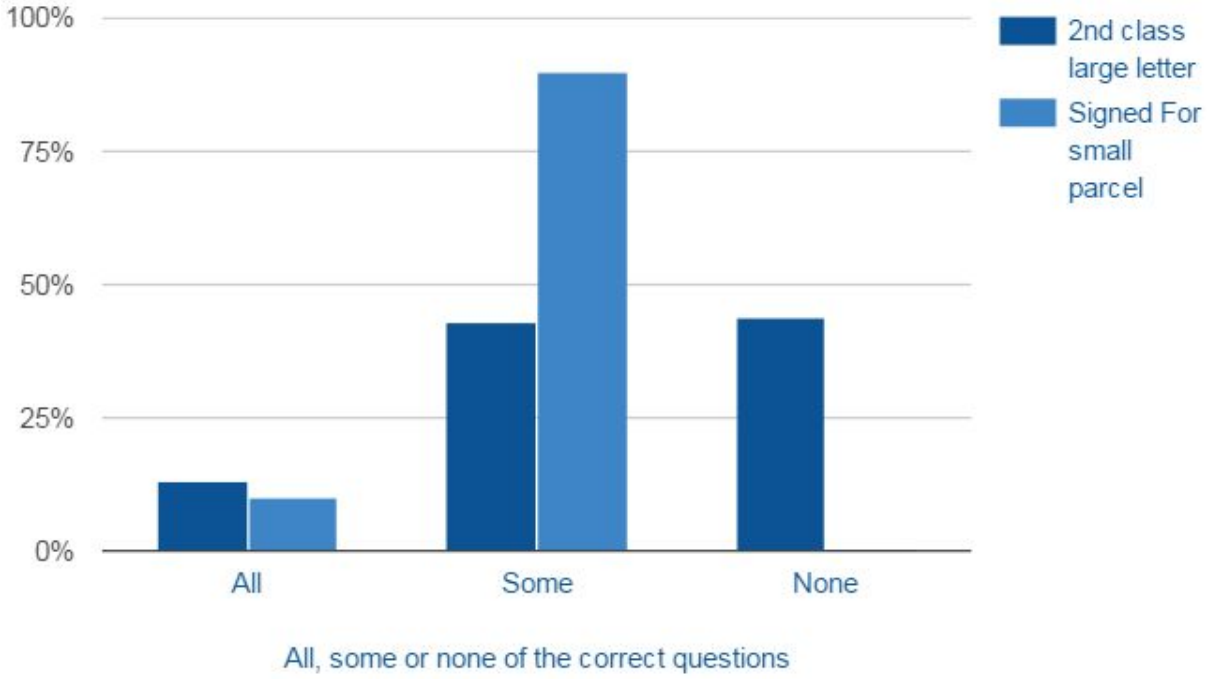
Large letter and Signed For mail services

These scenarios used a similar approach so we present them together. In both scenarios, staff needed to ask appropriate questions to offer the correct product. For the large letter scenario, shoppers only mentioned that the letter did not need to reach its destination until the end of the following week. And for the Signed For small parcel scenario, shoppers only asked how much it would cost to send the parcel and did not reveal any other aspect of their needs.

[20] Forthcoming survey of consumers' use of services traditionally provided at the post office.
[21] Forthcoming survey of consumers' use of services traditionally provided at the post office.
[22] This is legislated at EU level and sets out the right of citizens to have reasonable access to and receive a daily collection 6 days a week and a high quality service at reasonable prices.

As Figure 8 shows, staff were much more likely to ask the correct questions[23] before offering a service in the Signed For small parcel scenario than the large letter scenario. In all (100%) Signed For small parcel scenarios staff asked some or all of the correct questions before offering a service, although only 10% asked all of the correct questions. PO Mains (20%), former Crowns (17%), and Crowns (14%) were most likely to ask all the correct questions, whilst performance dropped at sub-post offices (9%) and PO Locals (9%).

Figure 8. Correct questions asked by staff before offering a service initially



In comparison, in under 3 in 5 (56%) large letter scenarios staff asked all or some of the correct questions before offering a service, increasing to 3 in 4 (74%) Crown visits. In the remaining 44% of visits staff did not ask any of the correct questions, increasing to 64% of sub-post offices and 52% of PO Locals.

Considering the low questioning by staff in the large letter scenario it is unsurprising, as our findings below show, that a low proportion of shoppers were offered solely the correct product initially. It is also concerning that many shoppers were offered a service at all despite staff not asking any of the correct questions. Ultimately, shoppers may have been offered a more expensive or inappropriate service that did not meet their needs. However, despite all staff asking some or all of the correct questions in the Signed For small parcel

[23] In the second class large letter scenario, before offering a service staff should have asked appropriate questions on the contents and value of the item and whether a signature was required. Shoppers had already stated that the letter did not need to reach its destination until the end of the following week. In the Signed For small parcel scenario, before offering a service staff should have asked appropriate questions on the contents and value of the item, whether a signature or tracking was required, the weight of the parcel and if it contained any dangerous, restricted or prohibited items.

scenario, a low proportion of shoppers were offered solely the correct service initially.

As figure x shows below, around 7 in 10 consumers were eventually offered a single specific recommendation across the 2 scenarios. The most common response in both scenarios was the correct service initially (40% for large letters and 50% for Signed For small parcels). This is the ideal service as staff have given a clear single recommendation to customers. Performance was consistent across all branch types, except for Crown branches (24% compared to 40% average) in the large letter scenario. This is despite Crown staff being most likely to ask some or all of the correct questions before offering a service.

A striking feature of these visits was that shoppers often had to probe to get a single correct recommendation. As Figure 9 shows, in 3 in 5 (60%) large letter and half (50%) of Signed For small parcel scenarios staff failed to provide the single correct service without the shopper seeking a recommendation and/or restating their needs. After seeking a recommendation and/or restating their needs, around 7 in 10 (70%) shoppers, overall, received the correct service. Although performance was consistent across branch types, this dropped at Crowns in the large letter scenario (58% compared to the 73% average).

Figure 9. Only correct service offered initially, after recommendation or restating needs

		All	Sub-post offices	PO Locals	PO Mains	Crowns	Former Crowns
Correct service only initially	2nd class large letter[24]	40%	46%	41%	44%	24%	41%
	Signed For small parcel [25]	50%	45%	50%	52%	52%	52%
Total correct service after prompts	2nd class large letter	73%	82%	75%	76%	58%	71%
	Signed For small parcel	67%	67%	69%	62%	71%	70%
Correct service as range after	2nd class large letter	20%	12%	18%	16%	32%	23%
	Signed For small parcel	15%	13%	16%	19%	10%	12%

[24] Findings for 2nd class large letter are based on 481 total visits, 59 at sub-post offices, 146 at PO Locals, 77 at PO Mains, 50 at Crowns, 99 at former Crowns
[25] Findings for Signed For small parcel are based on 477 total visits, 55 at sub-post offices, 143 at PO Locals, 75 at PO Mains, 52 at Crowns, 105 at former Crowns

prompts							
Incorrect only after restating needs	2nd class large letter	7%	7%	8%	8%	10%	6%
	Signed For small parcel	18%	20%	15%	19%	19%	19%

A minority (33% Signed For small parcel and 27% large letter scenarios) of shoppers were either not offered the correct product alongside other options or not at all, despite restating their needs or requesting a specific recommendation. This increased to over 2 in 4 (42%) large letter scenarios at Crowns and over 1 in 3 (38%) Signed For small parcel scenarios at PO Mains. In nearly 1 in 5 (18%) Signed For small parcel scenarios, despite further prompting, shoppers were not offered the correct service at all.

Special Delivery scenario

Shoppers asked staff how to post a standard sized letter or card containing vouchers. Only if asked, shoppers disclosed the value of the vouchers (worth over £50) and that it needed to reach its destination by the next day. Although vouchers may indicate the need for Special Delivery, appropriate questions still need to be asked about the value of the contents and urgency of delivery.[26]

Over 9 in 10 (94%) shoppers were offered Special Delivery, either spontaneously or after questioning, including shoppers solely offered Special Delivery or alongside other services. It is encouraging that this included over 4 in 5 (82%) shoppers who were offered the service following appropriate questioning. The remainder of shoppers within this headline figure (12%) were correctly offered Special Delivery but without questioning, meaning that the staff member could not be sure that it was the correct product.

As shown in Figure 10, although all Crowns offered the correct service, they were also significantly more likely (24%) to offer Special Delivery without *any* questioning to determine their needs. Although Special Delivery is the correct service, staff are expected to ask appropriate questions regarding the contents, value and urgency of the item before recommending a service. Otherwise, consumers may be sold a more expensive service which they did not need. Performance was worst in the new model NTP branches, with 12% of PO Locals and 7% of PO Mains failing to offer the correct product at all.

[26] All Special Delivery scenarios were enacted as purchases. Staff should ask the appropriate questions about the contents and value of the items in the letter and when it needs to reach its destination before offering a service.

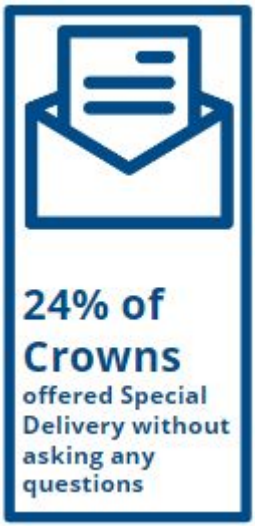
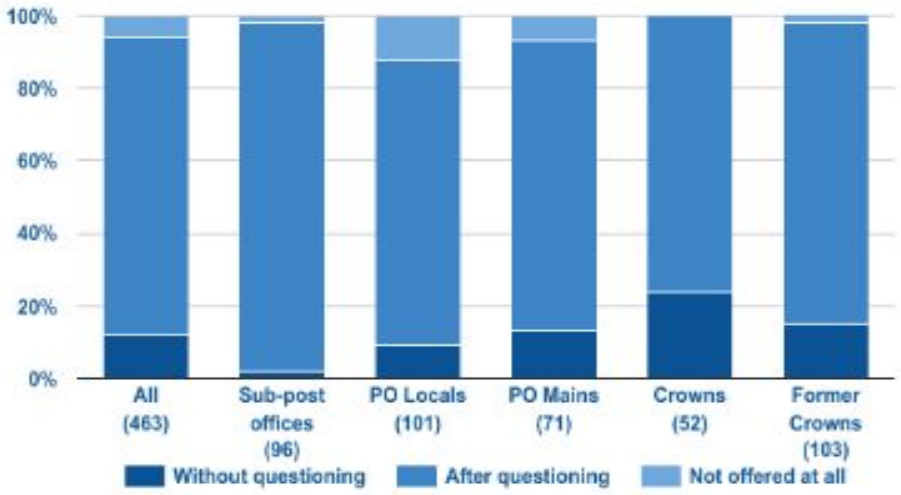


Figure 10. Shoppers offered Special Delivery spontaneously, after questioning or not at all



Recommendation: POL should review initial and ongoing branch training to ensure staff are asking the appropriate questions before offering a service and can provide a single correct product recommendation. Particular focus should be given to Crowns - in 2 out of 3 mail scenarios they were least likely to offer the correct service initially or most likely to offer the correct service without asking any questions.

Parcel collection

The click and collect market is becoming increasingly important to consumers and the economy through online retail. The geographic reach and convenience of the post office network means it is ideally positioned to capitalise on this market. Our research shows that 55% of consumers use parcel collection services, of which 38% use the post office.[27] Younger consumers, those on high incomes and socio-economic groups are more likely to access parcel collection services through any channel.

Mystery shoppers made inquiries about the availability of Local Collect and Amazon Prime collection services. The Local Collect service allows consumers who have missed the delivery of an item to have it re-delivered to a nearby Post Office for a fee of 70p. Amazon Prime customers have also, since November 2014, been able to collect orders from post offices. Both of these services are available from around 10,500 branches, just over 90% of the network.

Whilst customers access these services through Royal Mail and Amazon, the findings are indicative of the provision and staff knowledge of these services at post offices.

Shoppers informed staff that they received a 'something for you' card whilst they were out, and asked if they could get their parcel re-delivered to the branch. If

[27] Forthcoming survey of consumers' use of services traditionally provided at the post office.

not asked, shoppers mentioned that the parcel contained trainers and was the size of a small parcel. They then mentioned that they had recently taken out an Amazon Prime membership and asked if it would be possible to get their items delivered to the branch. If asked, shoppers mentioned that they would be purchasing a few books or CDs, no bigger than a small parcel and weighing less than 1kg.

As Figure 11 illustrates, in over 4 in 5 (84%) and 9 in 10 (87%) visits respectively, shoppers were informed that the Local Collect and Amazon Prime services were available at the branch. Provision of both services was better in traditional Crowns and sub-post offices. Despite forming some of the largest branches, in around 1 in 6 visits to PO Mains (17%) and former Crowns (16%) shoppers were informed that the Local Collect service was unavailable. A similar finding was uncovered for the provision of the Amazon Prime service at former Crowns.

Figure 11. Shoppers informed Local Collect available

	All visits (463)	Sub-post offices (96)	PO Locals (101)	PO Mains (71)	Crowns (52)	Former Crowns (96)
Local Collect	84%	90% (-4)*	81% (-6)*	83%	87%	84%
Amazon Prime	87%	85% (-5)*	82% (-7)*	93%	98%	83%

*performance compared to 2016 research

As shown in the table, the availability of these services has dropped slightly since the last wave of our research in 2016. Although sub-post offices and PO Locals are some of the smaller branches in the network, both should be able to accept small parcels. Our previous research on operators' experience running new post office models uncovered concerns about space issues at PO Locals.[28] The large minority of visits in which both services were unavailable at PO Locals may prevent the model, due to form the most common branch in the network by the end of NTP, from playing a full role in helping the Post Office to capitalise on the growing parcel collection market.

Access to banking and government services

Post offices provide government services as well as access to cash, banking and bill payment services. A recent agreement with high street banks means that the network now provides approximately 99% of UK personal banking services, such as withdrawing or depositing cash and checking account balances.[29] The provision of banking and government services is particularly important for vulnerable groups of consumers who are disproportionately more reliant on accessing these services at post offices. This is also important in the context of

[28] Citizens Advice, Transformation health check, January 2017.
[29] Post Office Ltd, Post Office and UK Banks' partnership secure access to local banking services, 2017.

ongoing bank branch closures and as more services are moved online. Our previous research found a good provision of the cash withdrawal service.[30] We tested 2 banking and government service scenarios: cash deposit, and Passport Check and Send.

Cash deposit scenario

Shoppers approached the counter and asked if they could deposit between £50 and £100 into their bank account. Only shoppers with eligible bank accounts conducted the scenario. Our research shows that nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of all consumers withdraw cash from the post office, and a further 6% deposit cash or cheques into an account at the post office.[31] Older and disabled consumers, those in lower socioeconomic groups, on lower incomes and those living in rural areas are most likely to access these services at the post office.

As Figure 12 shows, just over 3 in 4 (78%) shoppers were able to deposit cash into their account. Access to the cash deposit service varied across branch types. It was highest in sub-post offices (86%), PO Mains (84%) and Crowns (82%) and lower among former Crowns and PO Locals (77% and 74% of visits respectively).

Figure 12. Shoppers informed they could deposit cash

	All visits (628)	Sub-post offices (103)	PO Locals (266)	PO Mains (69)	Crowns (49)	Former Crowns (93)
Can deposit cash	78%	86%	74%	84%	82%	77%

The majority (71%) of shoppers unable to access the service were informed that it was not available and/or they needed to go to an alternative or larger branch. 1 in 4 (23%) shoppers recorded that staff were unsure or did not know how to conduct the transaction. In the remaining cases, shoppers were incorrectly informed that they required a paying in slip from their bank, or another member of staff was required to conduct the transaction.

Overall, our findings show that a significant minority (22%) of shoppers were unable to access a service which should have been available. This may result in significant detriment for vulnerable groups of consumers who are disproportionately more reliant on accessing banking services through the Post Office, and could potentially undermine the ability of the network to fill the gap left by bank closures.

Passport Check and Send scenario

Shoppers informed the member of staff that their passport is due to expire and asked if the branch provided the Passport Check and Send service. The scenario was conducted to establish if the service is available at the branch and if not, whether staff suggested an alternative branch. The scenario was conducted as

[30] Citizens Advice, Post Office Local Review, February 2017. 96% of shoppers visiting a sub-post offices and PO Local were able to successfully withdraw cash.
[31] Forthcoming survey of consumers' use of services traditionally provided at the post office.

an enquiry. Our research shows that nearly half (48%) of all consumers use the service.[32]

Passport Check and Send should be available at all Crown and former Crown branches. PO Mains will only provide the service if it formed part of the offering prior to the branch converting to the model. The service does not form part of the offering at PO Locals and there is a more patchwork offering of the service at sub-post offices.

Passport Check and Send was correctly offered in the majority of visits to branches where it forms part of the standard offering. All (100%) Crown branches offered the service and it was available in 97% of former Crowns. However, as our report later this summer looking at specific branch types will show, this dropped to 90% of privately managed branches. The service was available in 62% of PO Mains and 10% of traditional sub post offices.

In the majority (83%) of visits overall to sub-post offices, PO Locals and PO Mains where the service was unavailable, shoppers were informed of an alternative branch to access Passport Check and Send, rising to 93% of PO Mains. However, in over 1 in 8 (13%) visits, rising to nearly 1 in 5 (17%) PO Local visits, shoppers were not informed of any alternative post office. In the remaining 5% of visits, shoppers were informed of alternative channels other than the post office.

Overall, despite the majority of shoppers being able to access a range of non-mail services across the network, in a significant minority of cases services that should form part of the product range were unavailable. These services form a crucial part of the strategy to place the network on a stable footing and ensure that it meets consumer needs. Without the accurate provision of these services, the network is unlikely to meet consumer needs, affecting it future use and sustainability.

Recommendation: POL should closely monitor and work with operators to ensure that branches are correctly providing the wider range of banking services that should be available. This is particularly important if the network is to meet 99% of UK personal banking needs, as outlined in the recent agreement with the high street banks, and fill the gap left by bank branch closures.

[32] Forthcoming survey of consumers' use of services traditionally provided at the post office.

Conclusion

Our research shows that the post office network is performing well considering its size, complexity and the significant period of change. Citizens Advice welcomes the fact that new model branches, PO Locals and former Crowns, are performing in line with or better than traditional sub-post offices and Crowns, in terms of access into and inside the branch as well as the quality of service.

Despite the good performance of the post office network and new post office models, we have identified and made recommendations for improvement in the following 4 areas:

1. POL and operators should ensure that hearing loops and portable PIN pads are in place and clearly communicated in branches, particularly at new post offices where they should form part of the model. Our research suggests that this is a persistent problem at PO Locals.

2. POL and operators should review what more can be done to reduce queues at Crowns and former Crowns. This could include the provision of self-service kiosks (SSKs) at branches where they are not currently not provided, ensuring appropriate staffing to guide and encourage greater consumer use of SSKs, or additional staffing in peak periods to open counters previously not in use.

3. POL should review initial and ongoing branch training to ensure staff are asking the appropriate questions to determine consumers' needs before offering a service and can provide a single correct product recommendation. Particular focus should be given to Crowns - in 2 out of 3 mail scenarios they were least likely to offer the correct service initially (24% large letters) and most likely to offer the correct service without asking any questions (24% Special Delivery).

4. POL should closely monitor and work with operators to ensure that branches are correctly providing the wider range of banking services that should be available. This is particularly important if the network is to meet 99% of UK personal banking needs as outlined in the recent agreement with the high street banks and fill the gap left by bank branch closures.

As the NTP comes to an end and the remaining Crown changes are completed it will be important that the relevant improvements are made to the network to ensure that consumers are provided with sufficient access to and quality of service. As the statutory consumer watchdog for the post office network we will continue to monitor the performance of the network throughout the remaining changes and beyond to ensure that it meets consumer needs, important to its future use and sustainability. We will publish smaller reports focusing on the performance of Crowns and the high street network later this year.