

Post Offices transformed

Citizens Advice recently published its review of the Post Office restructuring programme which started in 2012 and finished in 2018 supported by £2billion government investment. Many post offices in the UK, including Northern Ireland, were modernised.

The report explains the restructuring programme achieved its aims. The number of post offices across the UK has remained stable and geographical coverage has been preserved. Post Office Ltd is also reporting positive financial results and lower operational expenditure.

By the end of the programme in 2018, two out of three branches changed to new operating models integrated into retail outlets. These branches have been refurbished. Also, many offer improved accessibility, shorter queues and longer opening times.

However, the report also points out the significant challenges ahead. For instance, many post office operators are worried about the viability of their branches. Another challenge is the uncertainty over the future of 3,000 community branches which, in many cases, represent the last shop in the village, and an increasing proportion of branches are operating as part-time outreach offices.

Post Office Network in Northern Ireland



There are **485**
Post Office Outlets
in the Northern Ireland
network.



68%

of the Northern Ireland
Post Office network
was updated as part
of the programme.

Network Transformation and the role of The Consumer Council

During the restructuring programme The Consumer Council had an important role. Since 2014, when we took over responsibility for consumer representation for Postal Services, The Consumer Council reviewed consumer feedback about post offices relocating within the local community and discussed consumer concerns with Post Office Limited before it made its final decision on the change it was proposing to make to Post Office outlets. The Consumer Council made a successful contribution receiving assurances and securing improvements from Post Office Ltd on a majority of proposals.



The Consumer Council reviewed **6,000** pieces of consumer feedback about post offices relocating.

In almost 60% of the 86 cases where the post office was relocated, The Consumer Council worked collaboratively with Post Office Ltd to secure improvements to benefit consumers.

Improvements included the provision of disabled car parking, marking out safe routes for pedestrians at garage forecourts and ensuring level access at entrances. Post Office Ltd was also receptive to other recommendations to seek further improvements to consumer access, which were typically areas outside its control such as engaging with the relevant authorities to seek the introduction of pedestrian crossings or designated on street disabled car parking spaces outside branches.

Where we had significant concerns we recommended that Post Office Ltd should reconsider its proposal.

Donaghadee Post Office. Proposed relocation in July 2016

“After careful consideration we (Post Office Ltd) have decided not to proceed with the proposed move of Donaghdee Post Office... In making our decision, we have taken into account all relevant factors including the impact this would have on customer access to our services, the responses we received as part of the consultation process and the concerns raised by The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.” (Post Office Ltd Decision letter).

Post Office Ltd found alternative solution in October 2018 for Donaghadee. The branch moved to a nearby location and another post office was opened away from the town centre.

The Challenges

The report Citizens Advice's has released identifies a number of challenges facing the Post Office Network now and in the future. These also extend to Northern Ireland and include:

- Loss of revenue from declining letter volumes and the loss of government contracts;
- The uncertain future of 3,000 rural branches across the UK after 2021 when UK Government support is expected to finish. These outlets are called Community Branches; and
- Some issues with disabled access, staff advice and availability of services over longer hours. The Consumer Council will be looking at these issues this year.

With these challenges, it is clear The Consumer Council will need to continue to monitor Post Office changes in Northern Ireland so consumers have access to the vital services provided at Post Office outlets across Northern Ireland.

A new Code of Practice has been agreed between the statutory UK Consumer Advocacy Bodies (The Consumer Council, Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland) and Post Office Ltd. Click the image below to download a copy.

This ensures that consumers and local representatives across Northern Ireland will know about future changes to the Post Office network and will be able to provide feedback to Post Office Ltd for significant changes like closures and relocations.

