



**Consumer Focus
Post**

Campaigning for a fair deal

Outreach or out of reach?

Consumer attitudes towards Post Office Outreach services in Northern Ireland



About Consumer Focus Post

Consumer Focus Post is the postal consumer champion in Northern Ireland. Through campaigning, advocacy and research, Consumer Focus Post works to ensure a fair deal for all postal consumers in Northern Ireland.

Consumer Focus Post is part of the larger Consumer Focus organisation, which is a non-departmental public body of the Department of Business, Information and Skills (BIS) created by the Consumer Estate Agents and Redress Act 2007.

Consumer Focus was formed through the merger of three organisations – energywatch, Postwatch and the National Consumer Council. Consumer Focus has a commitment to work on behalf of vulnerable consumers.

Contents

Introduction	3
Objectives of the research	4
Methodology	5
Summary of key general findings	6
Summary of findings for Outreach types	9
Conclusions	12
Summary of recommendations	14

Introduction

Consumer Focus Post is working to ensure that Post Office Outreach services in Northern Ireland provide a sustainable range of post office and banking services in safe, pleasant and accessible surroundings and over convenient hours which match the needs of rural communities and businesses.

In May 2007, following a national public consultation, the Government announced the closure of up to 2,500 post office branches across the United Kingdom under the Network Change Programme, with approximately 500 of these to be replaced by Outreach services. The intention was that the programme would be a key component in a strategy to help stabilise the network following a substantial reduction of business at many branches, by concentrating that business in a smaller number of branches with an assured future. At the same time the programme would ensure that good accessibility for consumers to post office services would be maintained, with a set of accessibility criteria¹ established to which the programme was required to conform.

The concept of Outreach service was adopted for the programme in rural areas of low population density and where low transaction levels meant it was difficult to justify a full-time conventional branch. Outreach was designed to ensure that the accessibility criteria were adhered to in such areas, with a range of formats providing a suite of key products, but at reduced service levels and incurring significantly less cost to Post Office Limited (POL) than a traditional post office.

¹ The Government's criteria for customer accessibility to post office services specify that:

- 99 per cent of the UK population will be within three miles, and 90 per cent within one mile, of their nearest post office service point
- 99 per cent of the total population in urban deprived areas across the UK will be within one mile of their nearest post office service point
- 95 per cent of the total urban population across the UK will be within one mile of their nearest post office service point
- 95 per cent of the total rural population across the UK will be within three miles of their nearest post office service point

In addition, for each postcode district:

- 95 per cent of the population of that postcode district will be within six miles of their nearest post office service point

Outreach services can be provided in four different formats:

- **Partner service** – A local business runs a post office service from their premises, for example a shop, mainly during the course of normal business hours, under the supervision of a nearby 'core' subpostmaster²
- **Hosted service** – A subpostmaster from a nearby core post office visits a community at fixed times and provides a service from a 'host' location, such as a village or community hall, or shop
- **Mobile service** – A subpostmaster from a nearby core post office visits a location in a vehicle fitted with a post office counter and equipment, at fixed times and for a set period of time each week
- **Home delivery service** – A subpostmaster from a nearby core post office branch offers a limited service to registered customers, at the door, or at a local 'drop-in session' at a designated place

The Network Change Programme effectively reached completion by the end of 2008. Within Northern Ireland the programme involved the outright closure of 38 branches and the replacement of 54 others with Outreach services. This resulted in a post office network in Northern Ireland at December 2008 comprising 441 conventional branches and 58 Outreach services (including four earlier pilot Outreach services). A breakdown of the numbers of Outreach services in Northern Ireland, by format, is as follows:

Partner	23
Hosted	22
Mobile	6
Home delivery	6
Total	58

² A core subpostmaster is an experienced subpostmaster running one or more conventional post office branches with whom POL has contracted, either for them to supervise the provision of post office services at one or more Partner services, or to provide post office services directly at Hosted or Home delivery service locations, or via a Mobile service operated by the core subpostmaster.

While the programme was underway, an unplanned, forced closure at one location (Kircubbin, Co Down) resulted in POL introducing a pilot for a new format similar to Outreach, called PO Essentials. This format is akin to Partner service, but it is stand-alone, without supervision of a core subpostmaster and with a slightly different operational structure.

Since the research was carried out two additional PO Essential branches have been opened to replace unplanned closures at conventional post offices and there have been a small number of adjustments in services at Outreach locations. A full list of Outreach and PO Essential branches in Northern Ireland at time of publication is attached.

The Network Change Programme met with strong resistance in many communities in Northern Ireland. Along with resistance to post office closures generally, much criticism was made regarding the likely impact of the closure of a community's conventional branch and its replacement by an Outreach service. Consumer Focus Post made it a priority to carry out an evaluation of the impact of Outreach on those communities where it was introduced, and if necessary, to campaign publicly for changes so that services provided better meet the needs of consumers.

This report summarises the findings of research commissioned by Consumer Focus Post, and carried out by Millward Brown Ulster, between September and October 2009. It evaluates the range of Outreach formats introduced across Northern Ireland, and includes some findings regarding the PO Essentials pilot established within the timeframe of the Network Change Programme.

This report reaches conclusions about each Outreach type individually, and about Outreaches generally, and goes on to make recommendations to tackle a number of important shortcomings in the formats revealed by the research.

Objectives of the research

The research was intended to gauge the consumer experience of Outreach services in Northern Ireland generally, and specifically, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the different types of Outreach. Based on this analysis, recommendations could then be made either to make major changes in the policy and approach to provision of postal services in sparsely populated rural areas, or to tackle any deficiencies detected in each Outreach format and at each Outreach location.

In particular, the objectives of the research were to:

- establish consumer awareness and satisfaction with Outreach services in Northern Ireland
- evaluate the reliability, location and accessibility of Outreach services in Northern Ireland
- establish for each format how frequently the various products and service are used; and which additional services consumers would like provided in future
- identify whether the introduction of Outreach services has changed the way consumers use post office services and whether this has had an impact on the local community
- consider the extent to which Outreach services deal with the needs of vulnerable customers, particularly with regard to privacy, safety and disability
- establish why potential users are not using the service and what might encourage them to do so

Methodology

The approach adopted for the research had two elements:

- a face-to-face survey of a sample of both users and non-users of each type of Outreach service
- focus groups including both users and non-users of all Outreach types

The **survey** included interviews with 333 users and 90 non-users and was designed to be representative of each county of Northern Ireland and each Outreach type within the county. Only non-users who were aware of the local Outreach, but had chosen not to use it, were included in the survey.

Interviewers targeted the communities where the Outreaches were located and made home visits until they had completed their quota of responses. Fieldwork was carried out between 4 and 18 September 2009.

The sample totals for each Outreach format were:

	Users	Non-users
Partner	149	39
Hosted	132	33
Mobile	44	13
Home delivery	0	5

Considerable difficulty was experienced in locating Home delivery service users, or non-users aware of the service. Consequently, no firm conclusions could be drawn from the survey results alone. However, the extreme difficulty in finding people aware of Home delivery service is itself an important finding.

The **focus groups** were held after the survey was carried out and this enabled key findings to be used in developing the discussion guide.

A total of four focus groups were held at four locations across Northern Ireland which were convenient to several Outreach locations. One focus group was intended for each Outreach type, but in view of the difficulty in finding Home delivery service users, it was decided to substitute an additional focus group for Hosted service. A focus group was also organised for PO Essentials users and non-users in Kircubbin.

The locations used for the focus groups were:

Dunamanagh, Co Tyrone	Partner
Park, Co Londonderry	Hosted
Dunnamore, Co Tyrone	Hosted
Jerretspass, Co Down	Mobile
Kircubbin, Co Down	PO Essentials

Groups were conducted between 13 and 16 October 2009.



Summary of key general findings

1. Awareness of Outreach services

Prior to the research it had been suggested, anecdotally, that publicity for the Outreach services was patchy. However, with the important exception of Home delivery service, the survey found that awareness for the other formats was high.

Most users say they found out about the service by word of mouth, either from staff at the previous traditional branch before it closed or from family and friends. Relatively few heard about it from POL publicity, or from information in leaflet or other form produced by core branch subpostmasters.

In terms of providing information in future on additions to, or changes in, the service, existing users suggest that POL should employ a combination of: articles in the local paper; local radio; leaflets or letters to local residents; and information from the Outreach staff themselves. Non-users recommend letters and leaflets to local residents and information via the local newspaper.

Awareness of the Home delivery service format was, by contrast, extremely low. Interviewers could find residents who claimed to be aware of the service in only one location (Drumnakilly) – and this finding is confirmed by the fact that POL have advised that there is only one registered user for Home delivery service across Northern Ireland and no one, to date, has actually used the service.

2. Satisfaction with Outreach services

Satisfaction with the Outreach format overall is high, with over 85 per cent of users stating in the survey that they are very or fairly satisfied with the service.

Satisfaction is highest among Partner service users, at 88 per cent very or fairly satisfied, but is almost as high for Mobile (84 per cent) and Hosted (82 per cent) services.

While consumers in Kircubbin were not included in the survey in view of the different format for PO Essentials, the findings from the focus group suggest that satisfaction with the service currently offered is lower here. But this may be driven partly by the length of the service gap between closure of the former branch and opening of the new service, the change in location within the village and some complaints about the standard of service currently provided (see comments below for each Outreach type).

3. Usage of Outreach services

Overall, a majority (62 per cent) of Outreach users say their use of post office services has not changed since the closure of the former branch. A third, however, say they use the local service provided less often.

The most popular format in terms of usage is Partner service, for which 67 per cent of consumers say they have maintained their level of custom since closure of their branch. This could be because most consumers are unlikely to be aware of much change in the service, which normally conforms to the shop's (sometimes longer) business hours and with little difference in service offered.

Mobile service also seems to be maintaining its level of custom quite well at 61 per cent, with Hosted a little way behind at 58 per cent.

In terms of frequency of use, 64 per cent of users say they visit their local Outreach every week, and this figure is consistent across Partner and Hosted users, with Mobile service users a little higher at 66 per cent.

Nearly half (46 per cent) of non-users of Outreach, however, say they now use an alternative conventional post office service less often, or not at all, and this represents a major consumer detriment to the communities involved.

4. Product range and popularity

Outreach services are overwhelmingly utilised for personal use, with only a small number of consumers overall (6 per cent) stating they

use them for business purposes. While limited business usage may be expected in a rural area, feedback from the focus groups suggests that the limited opening hours for most Outreach services discourages business use, particularly where daily banking or mailing is essential.

The majority of customers in the survey (71 per cent) said they are very or fairly satisfied with the range of services offered at Outreach locations and this was consistent across all Outreach formats. However, this still leaves a substantial proportion of the customer base dissatisfied with the product range, including those who take their business to other conventional branches, or no longer use the network at all.

Findings from the limited sample of those surveyed who were aware of Home delivery service indicate that the limited range of products and services provided in this format is not considered to be satisfactory, with 50 per cent saying they are dissatisfied.

Other aspects of service reduction in the transition from traditional to Outreach service mentioned in the focus groups included: the loss of access to an ATM located in the former branch which was available for cash withdrawal at all business hours; and loss of food essentials where the former post office had been located in a general store which had shut along with the branch.

The following figures show the percentage of users, taking all Outreach formats together, who make use of particular post office services:

Purchase of stamps	92%
Mailing letters	92%
Bill payment	77%
Mailing parcels	70%
Collecting pensions and benefits	67%
Special Delivery mail service	58%
Cash withdrawal	56%
Collection of official forms (eg passport and driving licence)	47%
Car tax renewal	45%
Foreign currency purchase	41%
Purchase of insurance products	16%

There is little variation in usage across the Outreach formats, and some of that variation will be accounted for by the fact that some of the more complex products (car tax renewal, and foreign currency purchase) are only available if provided at the Outreach's Core branch.

Members of the focus group for the PO Essentials service in Kircubbin also regretted the loss of the ability to open an account with the Post Office Christmas Club which was possible at the former conventional branch.

In terms of additional products which customers would like to see provided at their local Outreach, the items, in order of popularity, are:

Car tax renewal	26%
Collection of official forms (eg passport and driving licence)	14%
Foreign currency purchase	13%
Purchase of insurance products	10%

5. Personal safety, privacy and physical access

Most customers are content with the level of **personal safety** when using their local Outreach, with 83 per cent very or fairly satisfied with this aspect of the service. However, this figure dips to only 66 per cent for Mobile service users. This concern was confirmed in the focus group and relates principally to difficulties with physical access and lack of space, but it also extends to the welfare of staff operating the Mobile branch.

Privacy is an issue for nearly half (47 per cent) of all users. Partner and Mobile service users, in particular, did not consider the services private enough for them to conduct their business satisfactorily.

Given the nature of the customer base for Outreach services it is essential that they are accessible to those consumers with limited mobility and consumers with disabilities. Overall, users are generally satisfied with the issue of **physical access**, with 71 per cent agreeing that they are accessible to those with limited mobility.

However, this figure drops to only 41 per cent of Mobile service users, since many users consider the steps for access, the hydraulic lift arrangement for wheelchairs and the limited space inside the vehicle as significant issues of concern.

While the provision of post office services by Outreach will inevitably involve compromise, the disadvantages in relation to privacy, physical access and personal safety at some formats (particularly Mobile service) are matters of importance both to existing users and to an unknown number of potential users who feel constrained not to use the service.

6. Reasons for non-usage

Since maintaining and increasing usage is essential in establishing a stable Outreach network, it is important to understand the reasons why some consumers who are aware of the local Outreach service do not use it.

The vast majority (78 per cent) of local residents who are non-users are carrying out their business at another branch, and the principal reason for this is greater convenience – either to where they shop, where they work or where other members of their family live. But there are a number of other important reasons cited for using another branch including:

More regular transport	12%
Greater privacy	10%
Better range of products and services	7%
Better opening hours	5%

Concerns about irregular and limited opening hours and lack of privacy were discussed at length in the focus groups.

Focus group participants considered the restricted hours and days of opening to be the major deficiency in the Outreach service. Typical experience is a reduction from five and a half days per week with the former branch, to perhaps three part-days per week at the Outreach, and with those part-days at various times on each day.

This partly results from POL attempting to provide a service over restricted hours, at times which might be suitable to the broadest range of customers and which fit in with the capacity of the core subpostmaster. However, in practical terms, many customers and potential customers have difficulty remembering the hours of business and this hinders achieving a regular and firm customer base.

Lack of privacy is a concern for many of those who prefer to use an alternative branch. There are two particular strands to this concern: firstly that they do not like other members of their community over-hearing their business; and secondly, that if seen withdrawing a substantial amount of cash by people they do not know (for example at a Partner service in a shop or petrol station), they feel vulnerable to theft.

7. Converting non-users to users

If transaction levels at Outreaches are to increase, then significant numbers of non-users need to be encouraged to start using them. The research therefore explored what changes (if any) could be made to Outreaches to attract more local residents.

Almost half of non-users (48 per cent) said there was nothing that could be done to persuade them to use the local Outreach and this was either because they do not use post office services at all, or because the convenience of other branches was an overwhelming consideration.

However, improvements mentioned by the remaining 52 per cent of non-users which were considered likely to provide a significant incentive to use a local Outreach, were as follows:

Longer opening hours	22%
Wider range of products and services	16%
More publicity and information about the service	12%
Greater privacy	8%
Easier accessibility	7%
Better customer service	4%

Summary of findings for Outreach types

1. Partner service

Awareness of the Partner service is high, and there is also a high level of overall satisfaction generally (88 per cent) among users of the service. Accessibility and reliability of the service also score highly at well over 80 per cent. For the majority of customers interviewed (58 per cent) the Partner service is in the same location as the former post office.

Most customers (70 per cent) say they are very or fairly satisfied with the range of products and services offered, and 67 per cent of customers say they use the service provided in a similar way to how they used the former branch.

However, over half (54 per cent) feel the move to Outreach has had a negative impact on the community, including 50 per cent who feel that it has reduced social interaction.

The top five issues that consumers feel need to be addressed to meet their concerns are:

- Greater privacy at the counter for customers making sensitive transactions, either with a separate counter or by making more space available for post office transactions
- A broader product range – in particular provision for renewing car tax at Partner services where it is not currently available
- Longer opening hours
- Provision of more space generally in the premises
- Installation of an ATM on the premises

2. Hosted service

Awareness of the Hosted service was also high and they received the second highest satisfaction rate overall, with 82 per cent of users being very or fairly satisfied with the service. Most users are also satisfied with the accessibility of the service and for 71 per cent of customers the Outreach is in the same location, or nearby to the previous branch.

A majority of users (62 per cent) also felt that their needs were being met by the Hosted service and 72 per cent of users declared themselves either very or fairly satisfied with the product range. Reliability also received a high score with 82 per cent of users considering it very or fairly reliable.

Most local residents surveyed (59 per cent) feel that replacement of their former branch by Hosted service has had a negative impact on their community and 70 per cent feel that there is less social interaction than before. This is a significantly higher level of dissatisfaction than was recorded for users of Partner service, and this is likely to be because of the more restricted business hours of Hosted service, and the more informal arrangements for its location.

The top five issues that consumers feel need to be addressed to meet their concerns are:

- Longer opening hours
- Opening on more days
- Greater privacy for customers making sensitive transactions
- More convenient and consistent opening hours
- A return to a conventional post office branch

3. Mobile service

Mobile services are also well known in the areas where they are available and this is helped by their high visibility in the small communities they visit.

Satisfaction is also high, with 84 per cent of users interviewed being very or fairly satisfied with the service. Most customers described the location of the Mobile service to be different from the former branch, but it was relatively close by. Accessibility therefore achieved a high score and, given the technical problems early versions of mobile Outreach experienced elsewhere, reliability achieved a good satisfaction rating, with 82 per cent of users considering it very or fairly satisfactory.

Most users (61 per cent) claim their usage of post office services has not changed with the introduction of Mobile service and 75 per cent of those surveyed are very or fairly satisfied with the range of products on offer.

There are important concerns about access and privacy, however, with 59 per cent of users not satisfied that the units are fully accessible to those with limited mobility and over half (52 per cent) stating that the vans are not private enough to conduct their business satisfactorily.

Mobile service units are fitted into commercial vans requiring a small set of steps for access, and a hydraulic lift to accommodate wheelchair users. These impediments may be an inevitable compromise in producing a mobile unit, but are a matter of real concern for those with mobility problems.

Similarly, the commercial van body of the unit produces a small internal space requiring some miniaturisation to produce a fully-functioning post office. The cramped space available for the customer area eliminates any sense of privacy and many customers sensitive to this feel obliged to stand outside to wait their turn, rather than cluster inside. This is a major problem at times of bad weather, especially in winter, and suggestions were made to either provide a canopy outside the unit, or park it next to a community hall or bus shelter, to help overcome concerns of privacy and shelter.

Once again, users and non-users alike felt that replacement of the traditional post office by Mobile service had damaged the community and 59 per cent of those in the survey felt there was less social interaction than previously.

The top five improvements that consumers feel would help meet their concerns are:

- The unit should be parked in a less busy and safer location
- The unit should be made more suitable for older people and those with mobility difficulties
- More convenient and consistent opening hours

- Longer opening hours
- More privacy and a larger space in the vehicle provided for customers

4. Home delivery service

Awareness of the Home Outreach service at the five locations where it is claimed to operate is low to non-existent. The researchers could find no-one, either user or non-user, who was aware of the service at Carnalbanagh (Co Antrim), Dunseverick (Co Antrim), Ballintoy (Co Antrim), Ballycassidy (Co Fermanagh) or Carnteel (Co Tyrone). Only at Drumnakilly (Co Tyrone) could the researchers find a sample of people aware of the service. This is consistent with information from POL that there is only one registered user in Northern Ireland who has in fact, to date, made no use of the service; and this despite POL stating they have put up posters at the core branches providing the service and have carried out a leaflet-drop in all the Home delivery service areas.

It has therefore been impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions about Home delivery service from the very limited sample of five non-users aware of the service identified at Drumnakilly. However, the top five actions for POL suggested by these respondents do seem pertinent and are set out below:

- Return to a conventional post office service
- Advertise the service and provide more information to local residents
- Put the Outreach (if not a conventional branch) into a permanent building
- Longer hours of service
- More convenient and consistent hours of service

The same limited sample also agreed, overwhelmingly, that the change to Home delivery service had a negative impact on the community (Drumnakilly) and most claimed the community had less social interaction after the branch closure.

5. PO Essentials (Kircubbin)

Because of the different nature of PO Essentials and at the time of the research the Kircubbin service was a sole pilot in Northern Ireland, it was not included in the consumer survey. However, a focus group was held for a number of both users and non-users of the service and using the same discussion guide as the Outreach formats.

There seemed to be less awareness in the community of the service than there was for Partner, Hosted and Mobile services. This may be because the conventional branch closed suddenly and there was no service available for some months until a local business could be identified by POL to take on the PO Essentials role.

The group suggested that awareness of the service spread in the community largely by word-of-mouth and by its visibility in the local service station/convenience store, rather than by POL's information campaign.

There also seemed to be a lower level of satisfaction expressed in the focus group for the format than for the Outreach options. This seemed to be driven by a combination of a:

- less convenient location than the former branch, at the edge of the village
- perception that the staff were not adequately trained in dealing with post office products
- lack of privacy when transacting post office business in a relatively busy shop and service station

There was also concern that there should be a broader range of services. The facility to renew car tax was specifically mentioned, as was the facility to open a Christmas Club savings account.

Key items for improvement in the PO Essentials service mentioned in the focus group were:

- More training for staff
- Designating specific staff members to serve post office service customers
- Greater privacy for post office customers
- Increasing the range of products available



Conclusions

The Post Office Outreach models introduced as part of the Network Change Programme in Northern Ireland would appear (after one year of operation, and without commercially confidential information on transaction levels or financial details) to be making a useful contribution to the provision of post office services in rural areas.

Outreach, in most of its formats, seems to be fulfilling its role by ensuring accessibility to services for customers in sparsely populated areas and at substantially less cost to POL and, indirectly, the taxpayer.

They are not, however, a complete substitute for the traditional sub post offices which formerly served these communities. In many cases Outreaches provide a service with fewer postal products and involving less business hours than their predecessor branches. For Hosted and Mobile services in particular, the limited and inconsistent hours, the ad hoc nature of premises or the brief nature of the visit, give a perception of impermanence which customers contrast with what they saw as a social hub of their community, a regular visit to which many customers anticipated with pleasure.

One Outreach format, Home delivery service, appears to be failing completely. Although planned to be introduced by POL in six locations in Northern Ireland to replace conventional branches, there is, after one year, only one user registered across all six locations and no transactions have been recorded. This may be for a number of reasons including: inadequate publicity; the limited set of services provided; the complexity of registering and ordering the services; confusion over where the service is provided (the customer's home or a 'local drop-in session'); or just that other options are more convenient to local consumers. The Home delivery service format needs to be examined as a matter of urgency by POL and the necessary steps taken to deal with its deficiencies. Alternatively, it should be replaced by another form of Outreach.

Other general conclusions about Outreach services are as follows:

1. Awareness

Awareness of Outreach in local communities is high, apart from Home delivery service. The only other exceptions are where there has been a delay in introducing the service, or a break in the service, for some unplanned reason. This customer awareness needs to be regularly reinforced by POL, and by core subpostmasters where relevant. This is to ensure that local customers and potential customers are reminded of the service periodically and are also informed of routine changes to the service and post office products generally.

2. Satisfaction

User satisfaction with Partner, Hosted and Mobile services is high – at over 80 per cent for all formats. But POL should consider the needs of both the 20 per cent who did not register satisfaction and the non-users who are aware of the service but do not use it. Hopefully this is a matter of everyday good management by POL, but each format merits regular examination and refinement in terms of (among other things) location of service, hours of business, products and services offered and accessibility for less able consumers. The appropriateness of the particular type of Outreach for each community should also be considered over time and adjustments and substitutions made.

3. Product range

User satisfaction with the product range is also quite high – over 70 per cent registering satisfaction for Partner, Hosted and Mobile services.

This still leaves a significant number of customers dissatisfied, as well as a considerable number of non-users. While we are aware of some technical reasons which currently restrict the product range in some Outreach formats, there is clearly demand for a wider availability of car tax renewal and foreign currency services in particular. There also seems to be demand for a wider range of information and application forms to be stocked and for stationery items to be more widely available for purchase.

Given the steady increase in rural micro enterprises, it would also be useful for POL to consider how the service needs of rural businesses can be met better including, for example, relaxing the current weight limits on parcels, and improving the timing and regularity of Outreach business hours.

Consumer Focus notes with interest the Department of Business, Enterprise and Skills proposals for a Post Bank. These indicate an intention that all post office outlets, including Outreach, should play a role in this exciting new initiative. This would provide a useful opportunity for POL to consider ways to develop the role of Outreaches generally and to provide a broader range of products to meet the needs of domestic and business consumers.

Conclusions about each individual Outreach format are:

1. Partner service

From the customer's point of view, this is the most successful and popular Outreach format. For many the service is indistinguishable from what was provided in the former conventional post office branch, especially where it is located in the same premises.

There is good local awareness of the service and most users consider it accessible and reliable.

The product range suits most people's needs, but there were significant calls for a wider range, including car tax renewal and foreign currency services where they were not available.

Other than the product range, the most common complaint was the lack of privacy at the counter. This could be remedied perhaps by providing more circulation space for post office customers, including at the counter itself.

POL should consider ways of broadening the product range as suggested and dealing with concerns about privacy for customers when they carry out business of a sensitive nature.

2. Hosted service

There is good awareness of Hosted service in local communities and they are valued by users who recorded a high level of satisfaction in the survey. They are also generally considered accessible and reliable by those who use them.

However, a significant proportion of users reported that they did not meet all their service needs. This seems to be because of the limited and (apparently) inconsistent opening hours at most Hosted services, and the restricted range of products and services.

The most common calls for change were for an increase in the opening hours, including additional days of business and providing more space and privacy for sensitive business. There was demand also for additional services, particularly car tax renewal and foreign currency.

POL should review, at all Hosted services, the length and appropriateness of business hours, the range of services on offer and the customer environment.

3. Mobile service

Awareness of, and satisfaction with, Mobile service are also high. Accessibility and reliability of the service scored highly too.

However, nearly 30 per cent of users responded that their post office needs were not being fully met by Mobile service, somewhat higher than for other Outreach formats. Apart from issues to do with the product range and the restricted hours and days of business, this is likely to be because of concerns about access into the Mobile unit for those with mobility problems, the lack of space and privacy inside, and the lack of shelter outside for those waiting to be served.

Along with the review of products and hours/days of business we are recommending for all Outreach formats and locations, we would ask POL to consider all Mobile service sites in respect of available parking, safety, shelter for those waiting to be served, together with the possibility of installing a canopy on the units to provide shelter for customers in poor weather.

4. Home delivery service

As described earlier, we feel that Home delivery service is failing comprehensively as a format and it should be reviewed urgently. In the meantime, an alternative Outreach format should be introduced to the six communities which Home delivery service was intended to cover, after consultation with residents on which service best suits their needs.

5. PO Essentials

The research produced more limited information on this pilot service since it was not possible to include it in the survey. The feedback from the focus group held in Kircubbin is important but not necessarily representative of the full range of opinion in the village.

Feedback was often critical, with concerns about the level of publicity for the service, its location relative to the former branch, the product range, a lack of privacy at the counter and the level of training of staff. All of these concerns merit serious consideration by POL before the format is rolled out more generally across Northern Ireland.

Summary of recommendations

General recommendations to POL:

- A broader and more comprehensive strategy to consult with, and inform, residents should be used when introducing Outreach into a community – involving a range of approaches including leaflet drops, personal letters, posters and newspaper and local radio articles. This more comprehensive approach should be considered standard procedure within the terms of the current Code of Practice agreed with Consumer Focus. A similar approach should be taken with regard to proposed service alterations, for example revised opening hours, and when significant changes are being considered for the product range
- For ease of reference, handy leaflets or cards with opening hours and days should be produced and supplied to local residents by mail and at the Outreach
- The service provided at each Outreach location should be reviewed (to include customer feedback) on a regular, perhaps annual, basis to ensure its business hours, product range and customer environment are meeting the needs of the local community
- The Outreach format at each location should be considered on a regular basis to ensure it is the most appropriate one for the needs and characteristics of each community
- POL should work jointly with Disability Action on a review of all Outreach premises, and consider the design of the Mobile vehicle, to ensure they meet the needs of those consumers with physical disabilities
- POL should consider enhancements to the Outreach services to encourage greater use by small businesses, for example by increasing weight limits for mailing packages and making hours of business more regular and suitable

- The needs of the communities currently inadequately served by Home delivery service should be considered and an appropriate replacement format provided as a matter of urgency, while the future of Home delivery service as a format is evaluated

Specific recommendations to POL:

1. Partner service

- Increase products and services on offer, and specifically car tax renewal and foreign currency where these are not currently available
- Enhance levels of privacy by, for example, increasing public circulation space and room at the counter area
- Increase opening hours, if these are less than the full hours of the Partner business

2. Hosted service

- Consider the case for increased opening hours, and whether the hours offered match the community's needs
- Consider the case for increasing the days of service
- Enhance levels of privacy for customers by, for example, increasing public circulation space and room at the counter area
- Increase the range of products and services offered, in particular car tax renewal and foreign currency where these are not currently available

3. Mobile service

- Review the location of Mobile service units to ensure there is adequate parking for customers from further afield and that they are positioned in safe places
- Consider possible ways to improve physical access to Mobile units for less able customers
- Consider the case for increased opening hours, and whether the hours offered match the community's needs

- Review the privacy arrangements at Mobile units and whether they can be parked near shelters or community halls where customers can wait in greater comfort outside the unit
- Investigate the possibility of fitting canopies to Mobile units to provide shelter for customers waiting in poor weather
- Increase the range of products and services offered, in particular car tax renewal and foreign currency where these are not currently available

4. Home delivery service

- Carry out a comprehensive review of the Home delivery service format in view of its apparent failure in Northern Ireland
- In the meantime, provide other Outreach options at the locations where Home delivery service is not working, after full consultation with the residents on the most appropriate alternative Outreach option for those communities

5. PO Essentials

- Carry out a residents' survey in Kircubbin into the experience of the introduction of PO Essentials into the village
- Address those concerns raised with Consumer Focus via the focus group which include: the approach taken to publicise the new service, its location, the range of products and services offered, the level of privacy at the counter area and the standard of training provided to staff at the location
- Feed that knowledge back into the process for refining the format if it is decided to introduce PO Essentials into Northern Ireland on a more widespread basis

Outreach and PO Essentials branches in rural Northern Ireland

Outreach Location	Address	Outreach Type
Altamuskin	173 Altamuskin Road, Sixmilecross, Omagh BT79 9JA	Hosted service
Altnamachin	79 Blaney Road, Altnamachin, Newrym Newtownhamilton BT35 0EA	Hosted service
Annahilt	261 Ballynahinch Road, Annahilt, Hillsborough BT26 6BP	Partner service
Ardgarvan	4 Ballyavelin Road, Limavady BT49 0NE (Temporary closure)	Hosted service
Ardstraw	1 Carnkenny Road, Ardstraw, Omagh BT78 4LN	Hosted service
Aughabrack	248 Lisnaragh Road, Aughabrack, Dunamanagh, Strabane BT82 0SD	Hosted service
Ballinaskeagh	20 Ballinaskeagh Road, Banbridge, County Down BT32 5DJ	Hosted service (pilot)
Ballintoy		Home delivery service
Ballycassidy		Home delivery service
Ballygally	Presbyterian Church Hall, 47 Cairncastle Road, Cairncastle BT40 2RB	Hosted service
Ballyhalbert	24-28 High Street, Ballyhalbert, Newtownards BT22 1BL	Hosted service
Ballykinler	75 Commons Road, Downpatrick BT30 8BQ (Beside old PO)	Mobile service
Ballynacorr	9 Carbet Road, Portadown, Craigavon BT63 5RJ	Hosted service
Ballyvoy	95 Cushendall Road, Ballyvoy, Ballycastle BT54 6QY	Hosted service
Ballyward	2 Moneyslane Road, Ballyward, Castlewellan BT31 9PT (Car park at Ulster Arms)	Mobile service
Belcoo	CostCutter Stores, Railway Street, Belcoo, Enniskillen BT93 5FJ	Partner service
Belleeks	15 Main Street, Belleeks, Newry BT35 7PH	Partner service
Boho	Lesky, Enniskillen BT74 5BA	Hosted service
Boveva	297 Drumrane Road, Dungiven, Co Londonderry BT47 4NL	Partner service
Cabragh	230 Ballygawley Road, Cabragh, Dungannon BT70 1TF	Partner service
Carnalbanagh		Home delivery service
Carnteel		Home delivery service
Churchtown	16 Churchtown Road, Cookstown BT80 9XD	Partner service
Cladymore	88 Cladymore Road, Mowhan, Armagh BT60 2EP (Beside Tiny Tots)	Mobile service
Derrynoose	Derryvale Inn, Derrynoose Road, Keady Armagh BT60 3QR	Mobile service
Derrytrasna	19 Pier Rampant, Derryadd, Craigavon BT66 6QH	Partner service

Outreach Location	Address	Outreach Type
Desert Martin	7 Main Street, Desertmartin, Magherafelt BT45 5LN	Hosted service
Drumlough	179 Dromara Road, Hillsborough BT26 6QA	Hosted service
Drumnakilly		Home delivery service
Drumskinney	Drumnagreshial, Kesh, Enniskillen BT93 1EJ	Hosted service
Dunamanagh	215 Berryhill Road, Dunamanagh, Strabane BT82 0NB	Partner service
Dunnamore	41 Dunnamore Road, Cookstown BT80 9NT	Hosted service
Dunseverick		Home delivery service
Feeny	57 Main Street, Feeny, Co Londonderry BT47 4TD	Partner service
Garvaghy	91 Knockgorm Road, Banbridge BT32 3TE	Partner service
Gortaclare	29 Curr Road, Beragh, Sixmilecross, Omagh BT79 0UP	Partner service
Groomsport	Spar Store, 41 -43 Main Street, Groomsport, Bangor BT19 6JR	Partner service
Jerrettspass	Lay-by at Community Hall, Tandragee Road, Newry BT35 6LN	Mobile service
Katesbridge	2 Katesbridge Road, Katesbridge, Banbridge BT32 5PZ	Partner service
Killough	21c Castle Street, Killough, Downpatrick BT30 7QQ	Hosted service
Kircubbin	Mace Store, Samuel Kelly & Son, 39 Cooks Brae, Kircubbin BT22 2SG	PO Essential
Letterbreen	Letterbreen, Enniskillen BT74 9FH	Partner service
Liscloon	80 Longland Road, Dunamanagh BT82 0PN	Partner service
Lisnadill	Lisnadill Primary School, 7 Drumconnell Road, Lisnadill, Armagh BT60 2PS	Mobile service
Loughgall	56 Main Street, Loughgall, Armagh BT61 8HZ	Hosted service
Loughinisland	149 Newcastle Road, Seaforde BT30 8PL	Partner service
Loughmacrory	161 Loughmacrory Road, Carrickmore, Omagh BT79 9LF	Partner service
Mays Corner	1 Mays Corner, Katesbridge, Banbridge BT32 5RB	Hosted service (pilot)
Monea	(Temporary closure. POL seeking new fixed premises)	Mobile service (pilot)
Moneyglass	6a Loughbeg Road, Toomebridge, Antrim BT41 3TN	Partner service
Moorfields	166 Moorfields Road, Ballymena BT42 3EF	Hosted service
Mossley	Unit 1-3 Crescent Corner, Mossley BT36 5PB (Introduced in April 2010, after research complete, to replace conventional branch in Mossley)	PO Essentials
Mountfield	16A Main Street, Mountfield, Omagh BT79 7PP	Partner service

Outreach Location	Address	Outreach Type
Park	Learmount Community Resource Centre, Learmount Road, Park Village, Londonderry BT47 4BA	Hosted service
Scarva	In car park beside Scarva Visitor Centre, Main Street, Scarva BT63 6LS (Introduced after Outreach research was complete to replace the long-standing 'temporary closure' of a conventional post office)	Mobile service
Silverbridge	33 Silverbridge Road, Crossmaglen, Newry BT35 9LF	Partner service
Stralongford	190 Tummery Road, Trillick, Omagh BT79 3TY	Hosted service
Stranocum	2-4 Main Street, Stranocum, Ballymoney BT53 8PE	Partner service
Temple	88c Carryduff Road, Lisburn BT27 6YL	Partner service
Upperlands	Unit 1, 67 Kilrea Road, Upperlands, Maghera BT46 5RU (Introduced in February 2010 after research on Outreach was complete, to replace conventional branch)	PO Essentials
Urney	(Temporary closure)	Partner service



Consumer Focus
Post Elizabeth House
116 Hollywood Road
Belfast BT4 1NY

t: 028 90674833
e: contact.post@consumerfocus.org.uk
www.consumerfocus.org.uk
Media team: 020 7799 8004/8005/8006

Published: April 2010

If you have any questions or would like further information about our research, please contact Chris Thirkettle, by telephone on 028 90675041 or via email chris.thirkettle@consumerfocus.org.uk

If you require this publication in Braille, large print or on audio CD please contact us.

Deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired consumers can contact Consumer Focus via Text Relay:

From a textphone, call 18001 020 7799 7900

From a telephone, call 18002 020 7799 7900

ISBN: 978-1-907125-22-5