

Cross Party Group in The Scottish Parliament on Postal Issues

Minutes of the meeting on 24th November 2015

Present:

MSPs

Hugh Henry MSP (Co-convenor and chair), Kenneth Gibson MSP (Co-convenor), Jayne Baxter MSP

External Organisations

Helen Rance – Ofcom, David Moyes – Citizens Advice Scotland (minutes), Linda Bonar – Post Office Limited, Ronit Wolfson – Royal Mail, Andrew Burrows – Citizens Advice, Chris Donnelly – Citizens Advice Scotland

Apologies

John Brown – Communication Workers Union, David McKenzie – Trading Standards, Neil Coltart – Trading Standards, Sheila Scobie – Competition and Markets Authority,

1. Welcome

Hugh Henry MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Scottish Parcel Delivery Workshop

David Moyes, Policy Office at Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), gave an update on the work CAS has been engaged in around parcel deliveries in rural areas. He summarised main points covered in *The Postcode Penalty: The Distance Travelled*, published by CAS in September, and gave an overview of the parliamentary response to that report, resulting in debates at both UK and Scottish Parliaments. He then explained plans CAS have to arrange a workshop for parcel delivery operator and key public sector and other stakeholders. This would focus on the viability of a number of proposed measures to reduce the operating costs for delivery operators in rural areas of Scotland, with the ultimate aim being to reduce prices for Scottish rural consumers. Mr Moyes covered four such proposals, namely making use of the publicly owned ferry infrastructure; promoting further consolidation of deliveries over the 'final mile'; promoting collection of parcels from a central location, eg shop or parcel lockers; supporting the development of local community schemes.

In discussion, Hugh Henry stated the issue highlights what good value the universal service obligation (USO) is, and that the USO is a burden on Royal Mail. The government needs to properly fund Royal Mail.

Kenneth Gibson stated that the use of community schemes could be very difficult in some areas and could not replace a good postal service.

Jayne Baxter highlighted the existence of software that community transport schemes use that could be applicable to the use of these schemes in parcel delivery, although the software is expensive.

Helen Rance stated that OFCOM are looking at this issue, jointly across consumer and competition teams, and is keen to meet and discuss with CAS.

Hugh Henry asked whether there could be a campaign to get major retailers always to offer delivery by Royal Mail, and that this approach might circumvent unwillingness on the UK Government's part to legislate.

3. Post Office Locals Service Standards

Andrew Burrows, Head of Post Office Policy at Citizens Advice in England and Wales, gave the meeting an overview of research carried out by Citizens Advice into service standards in Post Office Locals. He explained that this is the fourth wave of research in a longitudinal study, and previous waves had found significant problems around staff knowledge, reliability (including opening hours) and privacy. This most recent research comprised 460 mystery shopping agency visits to post office locals. Mr Burrows summarised the findings, including that: in a minority of branches access was a problem; provision of counter facilities for those with vulnerabilities was low; queueing was not a problem; the refusal rate was 9%, comprising 4% of premises shut when they should be open, and 5% where services could not be accessed for other reasons; the accuracy of advice was concerning. He stated that while it is recognised that the transformation programme is difficult to implement, greater steps need to be taken to take a strategic approach to the issues highlighted in the research.

In discussion, Linda Bonar pointed out that some enquiries in the mystery shopping exercise were hypothetical, and the system staff use us designed for actual transactions where an item is placed on the scales. She also stated that Post Office Ltd (POL) is taking note of and welcomes the research, and that they may have to look at changes to training.

Kenneth Gibson stated that the research shows some improvement and some regression, as though areas may have improved at the detriment of other areas, and that some of the figures in the research are quite poor.

Hugh Henry asked that Post Office Ltd report back at the next CPG meeting on what is being done in response.

Jayne Baxter commented that staff training might be at the root of access problems, and asked whether post office locals could get assistance to address this.

Linda Bonar stated that POL complies with Disability Discrimination Act requirements when branched are converted, and that the findings of the research may be down to the perceptions of mystery shoppers rather than actual measurements.

Hugh Henry asked that POL and Citizens Advice work out what is at the root of this issue and report back to the next CPG.

Andrew Burrows stated that Citizens Advice would like POL to do its own mystery shopping research around post office locals and the issues Citizens Advice has identified.

Linda Bonar stated that POL does do mystery shopping, and that they don't get complaints around the issues Citizens Advice has reported.

Chris Donnelly stated that Citizens Advice understands that the transformation programme is difficult to implement and that many branches do work well.

Andrew Burrows highlighted that a fifth wave of the research is commencing at the beginning of 2016.

Jayne Baxter asked whether those who carry out the mystery shopping include people with disabilities. Andrew Burrows responded that Citizens Advice use a professional mystery shopping agency, and that while the research doesn't specify that people with disabilities should be recruited, it's likely that they will be included. Citizens Advice intend to carry out research in future focused on those with disabilities accessing post office services.

4. Any Other Business

There was no other business to discuss.

5. Date of Next Meeting and Close

The date of the next meeting Tuesday 23rd February.