

Community & Post Office

THE IRISH
POSTMASTERS'
UNION



Presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Wednesday, November 9, 2016

SUMMARY

1. The Post Office Network is owned by the people of Ireland and is a National Asset.
2. The future of the Post Office Network is at breaking point due to ongoing reduction in the Network's main contract, which is cash payment of Social Protection, exacerbated by the ongoing actions of Government Departments to drive these and other Government payments to the commercial banks using Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT).
3. Post Offices hold very significant public trust and goodwill. People want their local Post Office to stay open and they want it to do much more.
4. In the Post Office Network lies a key resource to address many of the challenges faced by rural Ireland.
5. The Network can increase the support it provides to communities by offering expanded State and Financial services and additional Community Services.
6. Government needs to plan and invest immediately to secure the future of the Post Office Network. To do this Government needs to sanction Post Office Network as its provider of choice for all possible State services. It also needs to invest in the development of additional Community services.

Background

Post Offices are the largest retail network in the country with 1,150 Offices, employing 3,700 people with 1,100 Offices operated by Postmasters, who are represented by the Irish Postmasters' Union (IPU).

Postmasters are contracted by An Post to provide the service and are paid based on the number of transactions they carry out.

Postmasters are responsible for all costs associated with running their individual Post Offices.

Post Offices are now at the breaking point, because of the reduction in transaction levels the collapse of the Network is imminent. This analysis has been independently verified by Grant Thornton.

Post Offices serve 1.7 million customers every week and were voted Ireland's most trusted consumer brand in 2014. In 2015 half a million people signed an IPU petition calling for the Government to do more to keep Post Offices open. In a recent online poll of 7,000 people, 82% said that government should do more to keep Post Offices open.

The Post Office Network is ideally placed to stop the current negative economic multiplier effects in rural areas. Post Offices can address barriers to services and bring a positive economic effect to the local economy.

Current Political Processes

There are currently two political processes underway involving Government, An Post and the Irish Postmasters' Union. These are:

Process 1: Development of a Five-Year Strategy

Chaired by Bobby Kerr this group includes the Department of Rural Affairs, the IPU and An Post. Progress in the group has been slow. The Group has identified that the Network requires immediate investment to ensure its viability. It is vital that this group agrees and finalises its report immediately and that its recommendations are approved by Government before Christmas.

Process 2: Development of 'Community Hub' rural Post Offices

Chaired by the Minister of State for Regional Economic Development Michael Ring this group includes the IPU and An Post. The group has been assisted in its exploratory work by a not-for-fee initiative called the Shared Value Network which includes a number of large corporates led, in this instance, by Ericsson's.

In recent months, the Shared Value Network has worked with the IPU to conduct 'listening sessions' in three rural communities to identify the additional services communities believe their Post Office could provide.

The findings of these 'listening sessions' are included in what follows mainly under section 3 *SOCIAL & COMMUNITY*. These items are particularly relevant for how Post Offices can support rural communities.

Post Offices role in the future of Rural and Urban Ireland

Postmasters vision for the future of Post Offices is called ***The State on your Doorstep*** which involves the Post Office becoming the community based provider of all State Services, increased Financial Services and novel 'Social and Community' services.

Following are details of enhanced and additional services which Postmasters want to deliver – many of which are particularly relevant for rural renewal.

1. STATE

a) Payments

Department of Social Protection Payments

All DSP payments made payable by choice of cash or electronic payment at the Post Office. (Family Income Supplement, for example, currently only payable by bank transfer.)

Jobseeker 'sign-on and off'

Jobseekers sign on and off extended to Post Offices.

Motor Tax – €65m taxpayer savings

Motor Tax payable at the Post Office. Independent research has estimated that this would save €65m over five years.

ALL Government services including HSE, CAO and Third Level registration

A&E bills, hospital bills, CAO applications and third level registration fees payable at the Post Office.

Fines – ALL inc. Parking and Court

Some fines are currently payable at the Post Office – this should be extended to incorporate all fines.

Licences – ALL

Some licences (TV and Dog) are payable at the Post Office. This should be extended to all licences, such as Driving Licences.

b) Forms**Identity verification for ALL official documentation**

Postmasters enabled to verify identity for key documents such as Passport, Drivers Licence and Court Summons. This would in effect mean Postmasters becoming Peace Commissioners.

Supply and completion of ALL Government forms

Post Offices equipped with a softcopy database of all Government forms together with the facility to print them out and supply to citizens for completion and return.

c) Advice & Registration**Government Information Service – Citizen's advice**

There is potential to upskill Postmasters as official outreach providers of Citizens' Information Services.

Maintenance of the Electoral Register

Citizens able to sign up and update their Electoral Register details at the Post Office.

2. FINANCIAL**Standard An Post Bank Account**

An An Post bank account facility delivered through Post Offices is currently in development. This account must be designed to actively incentivise and designate users to transact in Post Offices allowing Post Offices to retain a vitally important revenue stream.

Counter transactions for ALL Commercial Banks

Lodgement and withdrawal services are currently provided for AIB and lodgements for Ulster Bank. The IPU encourages all Commercial Banks to utilise the Post Office Network for lodgement and withdrawal services.

National Pension Plan – supported by the Network

Details of the National Pension Plan are being developed by Government. Post Offices should be considered for what role they can play in its delivery.

3. SOCIAL & COMMUNITY (particularly relevant for rural areas)**a) Health****Remote Health Checks**

The envisaged service would involve a private health booth on site in Post Offices with patients able to video conference with GPs and Hospital Doctors for basic and routine health checks. This would be beneficial for elderly people for whom travel to major towns and regional hospitals is challenging.

Prescription drop off point

This would involve the Postman collecting and securely transporting prescriptions from the pharmacy to the local Post Office, where they can be stored securely and collected locally by the patient.

b) Transport

Local transport service hub

- A contact point for local timetables, taxis, bus hire etc.
- A local transport booking service
- A contact point for car pooling
- A collection and drop off location for pooled services.

c) ICT & Information

Community Internet access and ICT learning

- Guaranteed wireless broadband access, and printing services, at all Post Offices
- Onsite ICT training with support from a training partner such as Solas.

Tourism & Genealogy Information point

- A formalised directory of local services, facilities and amenities
- A formal display board
- A formal relationship with Fáilte Ireland, operating as local Outreach Offices
- A formal genealogy service for details of ancestry, burial places and family trees.

CONCLUSION

Post Offices are ideally situated to provide a significant part of the solution to the challenges faced by rural Ireland. To make this happen the following is required from Government:

- Appropriate investment
- A five-year strategic plan
- Additional State services to be sanctioned
- Additional financial services must be provided
- New social and community services must be tested and delivered, particularly for rural areas.

It is critical that action is taken NOW to ensure no further damage is done to the Network.

Postmasters are asking the Committee to write to Ministers Denis Naughten, Heather Humphreys and Michael Ring to stress the role which Post Offices can play in rural renewal, to call for immediate action and to seek for clarification on the Government's position.

Many thanks for the opportunity to present to the Committee.

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