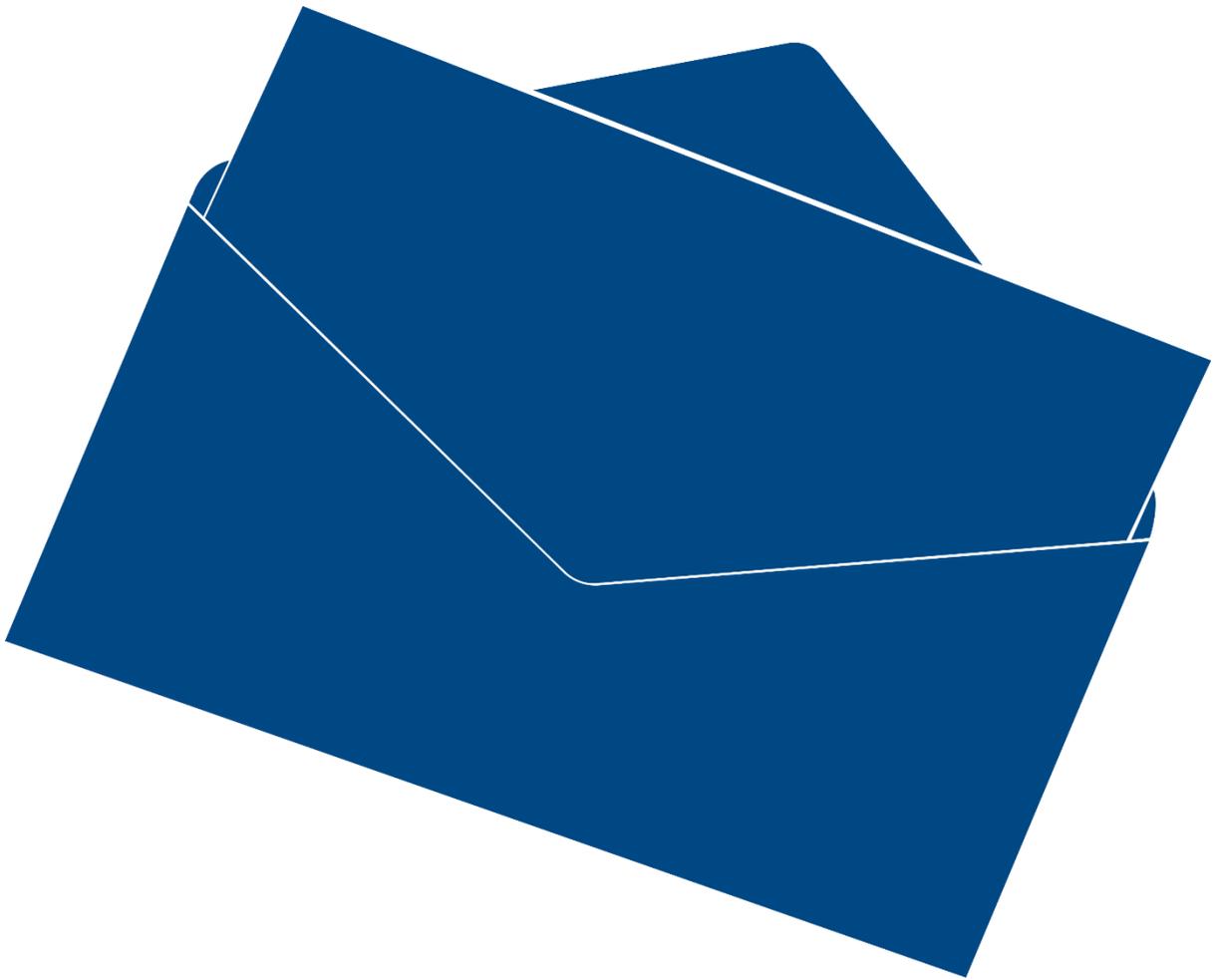


Letter Perfect?

Post office services in the
St Albans District



Tony Dolphin

**citizens
advice**

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Summary

This report sets out the findings of our research into the impact in the St Albans District of the Post Office's Network Transformation Programme (NTP). In particular, it focuses on the range of services provided by post offices in the District, the accessibility of those post offices and the impact of changes in location and service provision on Citizens Advice clients. The information in it was gathered through a combination of desk-based research; a survey of clients visiting Citizens Advice St Albans District (CASTAD); and a mystery shopping exercise. All the work was carried out in April and May 2017.

Some recent post office branch closures in the St Albans District have yet to be resolved by Post Office Limited. Two branches, one closing in 2015 and the other in April 2017, remain closed, although Post Office Limited are looking for new premises for them. As a result of these branch closures and a number of planned closures in 2009, the distribution of post offices across the District is very uneven.

Smaller post offices in the St Albans District meet most of the needs of Citizens Advice clients. Smaller post offices offer a limited range of services, but these are the services that Citizens Advice clients use most frequently. Some, though not all, smaller post offices are open for longer hours, which is also helpful.

Smaller post offices in the St Albans District sometimes fail to offer the correct service. When faced with relatively simple requests to send an urgent letter or a non-urgent letter with proof of receipt, smaller post offices – in particular those without a dedicated staff member dealing with post office services - often make incorrect recommendations.

Recommendations

Post Office Limited should continue to work with local retailers and the appropriate local authorities to restore post office services to those areas of the St Albans District where they have been lost in recent years.

Post Office Limited and individual post office operators should review staff knowledge and training to ensure customers are provided with the correct product and pricing advice.

Background

As the consumer champion for people using post office services, Citizens Advice has a responsibility to ensure continued access to such services for those who need them. There have been substantial changes to post offices in the St Albans District over the last decade, and the principal aim of the research reported here was to discover if these had left post offices in District in the position to meet the needs of consumers.¹

Post offices are still an important part of the lives of people in the UK. 96% of consumers say they have visited a post office in the last year.² The post office network provides vital mail, banking, financial and government services to approximately 17 million customers every week.³ But the network is currently undergoing its biggest ever restructuring programme – called the Network Transformation Programme (NTP). As a result, there have been changes in access to post offices and in the range of services they provide.

The aim of the NTP is to maintain the size of the network, while placing it on a more stable financial footing. This is being achieved by converting traditional sub-post offices into one of two new operating models: Post Office Locals and Post Office Mains.⁴ Citizens Advice estimates that by March 2018, when the NTP is due to end, around two in three of the 11,600-strong branch network will have been converted into one of the new models.⁵

These changes are already bringing some benefits to consumers. One of the aims of the NTP is to extend the hours during which people can access post office services. Post Office Limited says that, by March 2016, branches were offering an extra 200,000 opening hours a week compared to when the programme began, with more than 3,800 branches open on Sundays.⁶

¹ When we refer to ‘St Albans District’, we mean the area covered by the St Albans and District Council.

² <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/policy/policy-research-topics/post-policy-research-and-consultation-responses/post-policy-research/consumer-use-of-post-offices/>

³ <http://corporate.postoffice.co.uk/annualreport1516>

⁴ Post Office Mains are large, busier branches that offer post office services at a separate post office counter within a retail premises, such as a newsagent, during core hours (usually 9am to 5pm), with a more limited range of services accessible at a retail counter at other times. Post Office Locals are smaller branches located within retail premises such as convenience stores, which offer a reduced range of post office services over the same counter as other retail services.

⁵ <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/policy/policy-research-topics/post-policy-research-and-consultation-responses/post-policy-research/consumer-use-of-post-offices/>

⁶ <http://corporate.postoffice.co.uk/annualreport1516>

At a time when local bank branches are closing and the parcels market is growing, access to services through the post office network is particularly important for more vulnerable groups of consumers. Citizens Advice research shows that post offices are most important to older consumers, people with disabilities, rural consumers and people on low incomes.

The public strongly support the Government keeping post offices open. 85% of people believe the Government should invest money in the post office system to stop branches from closing, rising to nine in ten in rural areas⁷.

St Albans District

The St Albans District is an affluent part of the country with a population of over 140,000 people.⁸ Average indices of multiple deprivation rank the District at 319 out of 326 local authorities in England (with 326 being the least deprived); unemployment is relatively low and average education and income levels are relatively high. 85% of people describe their health as 'very good' or 'good' – one of the highest proportions in the country. 16% of people are aged 65 and over, in line with the national average.

However, these overall figures mask variations across the District. There are parts of the District where deprivation is relatively high and health outcomes are less good. There are also parts where the proportion of people aged 65 and over is well above the national average. Clients of Citizens Advice St Albans District (CASTAD) tend to come disproportionately from these deprived parts of the District.

There are currently 15 post offices in the St Albans District: a large Crown Post Office in the centre of St Albans and six smaller post offices located within St Albans in retail outlets, in most cases with a separate counter; three post offices in Harpenden – one large franchised post office and two smaller ones - and five post offices in villages and other population centres around the city. This is eight fewer than there were in the District ten years ago. Seven of these 15 post offices are Post Office Mains, five are Post Office Locals and three have not yet converted.

⁷ Citizens Advice telephone survey of 1,000 GB adults, conducted by ComRes. Forthcoming Citizens Advice research

⁸ All the statistics in this paragraph and the following one were compiled by St Albans and District Council. See: <http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/community-and-living/communityprofile/default.aspx>

Research methods

The objective of the research reported here was to find out more about the impact of the NTP on post offices in the St Albans District. In particular, we were interested in the impact on vulnerable consumers. We wanted to know about:

- The accessibility of local post offices, including opening hours, disabled access and public transport links
- The range of services and the quality of advice provided by post offices in the St Albans District
- The impact of changes in location or service provision on Citizens Advice clients

In order to achieve this objective, we employed a variety of research methods, including desk research to discover the locations of post offices in the area and how they have changed, advertised opening hours and available services.

We conducted a survey of clients visiting CASTAD on a number of days in April and May 2017, collecting 70 useable responses. 16% of the respondents said they had a disability and 31% said they were receiving benefits. Although these proportions are both well above the national averages, they are in line with our client base over a longer period, suggesting the sample is a reasonably representative one, at least in regard to these indicators. Clients were asked a range of questions about the post offices they used, the services they used them for, and their opinions on the level of service they received.

We gauged the quality of service provided by post offices by conducting a series of mystery shopping expeditions.⁹ We made two visits to ten post offices, on each occasion asking for, or about, two different services (from a range of five). In total, therefore, we collected 40 examples of post office service.¹⁰

Post office access

This section of the report covers post office access: getting to post offices, getting into post offices and getting around within post offices.

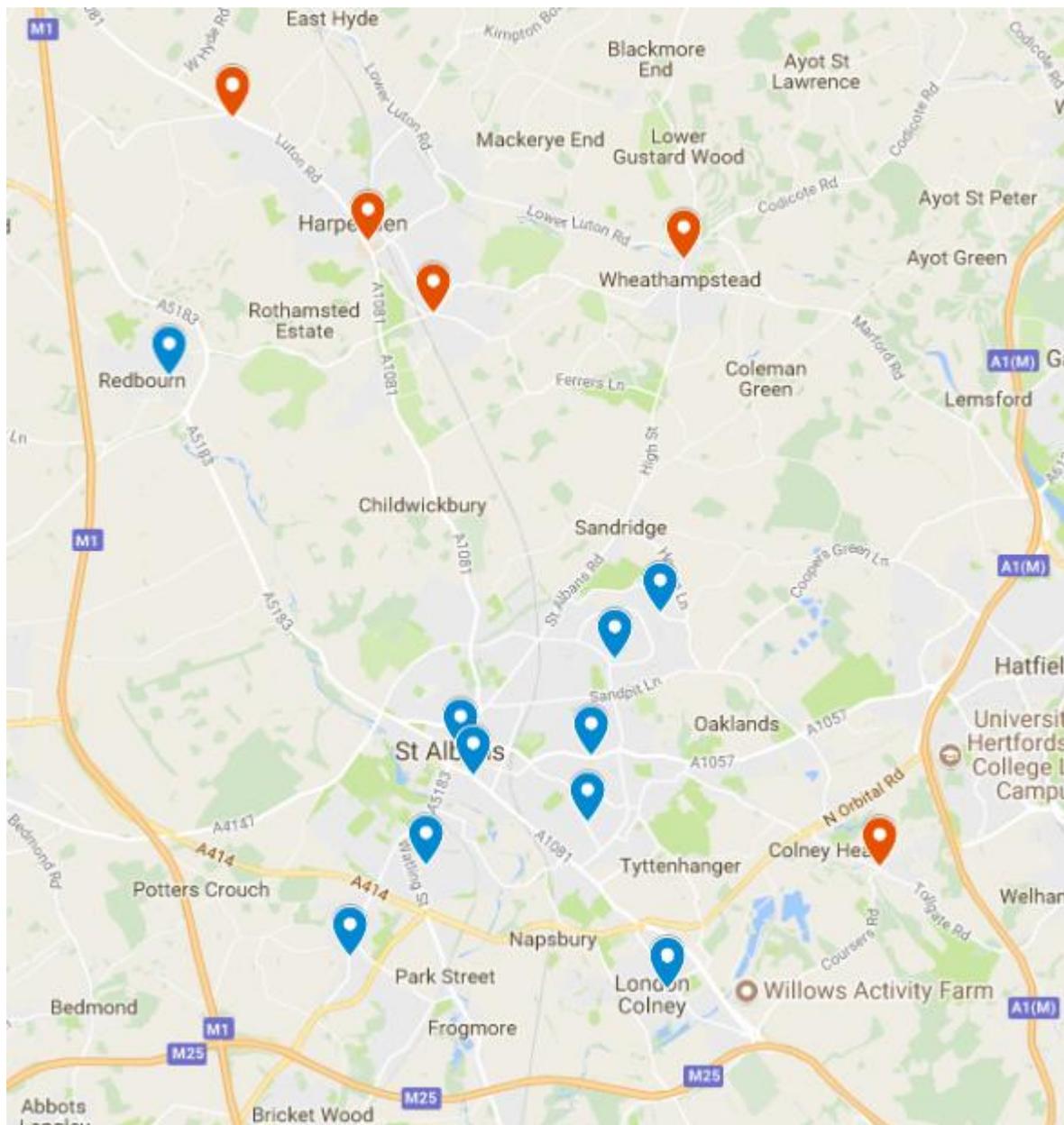
⁹ I am grateful to Mary Inglis, Anne Stojanovic and Alan Traviss for their participation in the mystery shopping exercise and for their comments on an earlier draft of this report

¹⁰ See Appendix A for details of these visits

Access to post offices

Just over two in five (43%) of the respondents to our survey of Citizens Advice clients said that they mostly used the Crown Post Office in St Albans. This is unsurprising because it is very close to CASTAD’s premises. The other respondents used a mix of the other post offices across the District.

Figure 1: Post offices in the St Albans District



Source: Google Maps and Post Office Branch Finder

Note: Mystery shopping exercises were carried out in the post offices shown in blue.

The distribution of post offices across the St Albans District is very uneven. Some areas are well-served, but there are also large areas that are effectively ‘post office free zones’. Although there are national access criteria, the location of post offices in St Albans appears to be the result of historical accident, rather than any plan to ensure everyone has, within reason, similar local access to a post office. Even within the city of St Albans itself, the distribution of the six smaller post offices is skewed: all six are located in the eastern part of the city.¹¹ Although this is the larger and more populous part, it means that there is a substantial area within the city, to the west of the city centre, that is not served by a single post office. Residents from this part of the city have to travel into the city centre, or to travel across the city, to find post office services. As one of the respondents to our survey put it:

“There is no post office in the area where I live. I would like post offices restored to what they used to be.”

The Crown Post Office in St Albans and the large franchised post office in Harpenden are located centrally and are easy to access by car. They are also on multiple bus routes. The smaller post offices in St Albans and Harpenden are also easy, or fairly easy, to get to. They are all on the route of a bus that passes through the town centre and close to a bus stop. Most have parking nearby, and this is often free, though in several cases it is limited and finding a parking spot very near to the post office could be a problem. The post offices located around St Albans are, unsurprisingly, less well served by buses – though all are on at least one bus route - and parking is usually a little further away.

Despite their uneven geographical distribution, most Citizens Advice clients do not face serious difficulties accessing a post office. Of those clients who completed our survey, more than two in five (43%) said they visited a post office at least once every couple of weeks, and more than three in five (64%) at least once a month. Those surveyed confirmed our impression that post offices in the District are generally easy to access. 43% usually drive when they visit a post office, with 21% taking a bus and 31% walking (and a small proportion using other means). 84% of people said that they find it easy to get to the post office that they use, either because parking is available nearby, or because the bus journey is easy and reliable, or because it is only a short walk.

¹¹ That is, to the east of the main road running through the city’s centre (St Peter’s Street).

Access into post offices

Although access to post offices is, therefore, generally good, smaller post offices are less likely to be accessible and easy to get into for people with reduced mobility. We visited ten Post Offices to assess their accessibility and found four had a step or steps at the entrance and no obvious ramp for wheelchair users or people with a pushchair, or signage to suggest assistance could be provided.

Access inside post offices

The retail stores in which smaller post offices are located are generally well-lit and not noisy, and in all ten that we visited it was clear where to go to access post office services. All the post offices have a post box immediately outside with a final collection time clearly displayed, and final collection times are also displayed inside most stores.

However, some of the stores in which the post offices are located are quite small and have narrow aisles that would make it difficult to negotiate a way to the counter for people in a wheelchair or a mobility scooter, or with a child in a pushchair. Only one of the post offices we visited had a sign to say where disabled people could go to get help, though eight had portable PIN pads visible that could be passed to someone in a wheelchair and seven had signs indicating that a hearing loop was available (both better than national averages).

Post office services

This section of the report covers the provision of post office services in St Albans District, how Citizens Advice clients use them and whether they are likely to receive the correct product and pricing advice.

The Crown Post Office in St Albans city centre offers the full range of post office services, encompassing mail, identity checks and licences, and travel and financial services (as does the large franchised post office in Harpenden). It is located very centrally and close to numerous bus stops from which buses come and go to the whole District. It is heavily used and it would have a major impact on the provision of post office services in the District if it were moved.

According to the Post Office 'Branch Finder' website, which our spot checks suggest is largely accurate, smaller post offices located within the city offer rather fewer services – though these are the services that people are likely to use most frequently.¹² Almost all the smaller branches have a 'drop and go' mail service, Parcelforce Express services and the facility to change sterling into euros; and most provide current account banking facilities. It is also possible to use them to pay utility bills and council rent and to top-up pre-paid gas and electricity meter cards. Just over half also sell travel insurance and National Express tickets, and it is possible to pay your vehicle tax in just under half. For the services that people are likely to use infrequently, including passport checking and various forms of identity checking, most are likely to have to visit the Crown Post Office in St Albans or the large franchised post office in Harpenden, though two of the smaller post offices offer some of these services.

Although they offer a more limited range of services, some of the local post offices found within St Albans and Harpenden have the advantage over the Crown Post Office that they have longer opening hours. In some cases, the smaller post offices found within retail outlets share the same opening hours as the store in which they are located. Quite often this means they are open in the evening, and throughout the day on Saturday and Sunday. This makes it easier for people who work during the week to find a post office open at a time suitable for them. However, this is less likely to be true of the post offices located around St Albans, three of which are only open from 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday and on Saturday morning (a fourth is open all day on Saturday, but not on Sunday; and a fifth is open all day, every day). Thus, while the NTP may be improving access to post office services for urban customers in the district, the same is not so true for rural customers.

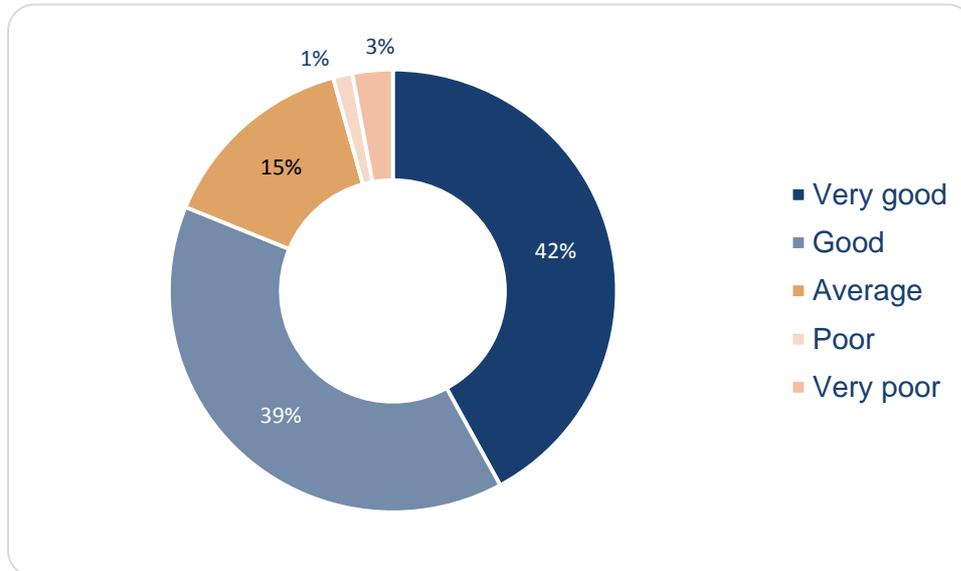
By far the most common reason for our clients going into a post office is to send a letter or a parcel. 86% of them said they use post offices for these services. However, one in seven (14%) use a post office to pay their utility bills and the same proportion, though not always the same people, use them to pay their council rent. Only a small percentage said they used them for topping up gas or electricity meter cards (6%) or mobile phones (3%), or for other purposes.

Those surveyed are generally happy with the service they receive at their post offices in the St Albans District and several commented, unprompted, on the friendliness and helpfulness

¹² <http://www.postoffice.co.uk/branch-finder>

of post office staff. 42% described the overall experience of using a post office as 'very good', with a further 40% saying it was 'good'.

Figure 2: St Albans Citizens Advice clients' overall rating of post office services



Source: CASTAD survey of clients conducted in April and May 2017

The principal complaint that came out of the survey related to the length of the queues, particularly in the Crown Post Office in St Albans city centre and at one of the local post offices within the city. This is a common complaint nationally. There were also a few people who said that they did not find it easy to top-up their gas or electricity card at a post office (three people), to pay their utility bills (four people) or to pay their council rent (three people). However, for each service there were four to five times as many people saying they did find it easy to do these things in post offices.

The results from our mystery shopping exercise gave a less favourable impression of the level of service available in St Albans post offices. Surprisingly, what seemed to be the simpler requests – to post a letter to arrive as soon as possible or to post a letter to be signed for on receipt – were more likely to result in the wrong service being offered, at least at first. This was particularly the case in post offices without a traditional postmaster or postmistress, where post office services, although offered at a separate counter, appeared to be offered by a general staff member. This is worrying because our survey suggests that people are most likely to use post offices for sending mail. On the other hand, when we tried to withdraw cash, top-up a pre-paid meter card or pay a utility bill, we found the service more consistent, and more consistently correct.

Postal services

First class

In the mystery shopping exercise, we said that we wanted to send a letter to arrive as quickly as possible, preferably the following day though this was not essential, that we did not need confirmation of delivery, and that the contents of the letter were not valuable. We should have been offered a 1st class stamp at a cost of 65 pence but, initially, this happened on only three out of ten occasions. On the other seven occasions, we were either only offered Special Delivery (guaranteed next-day), at a cost of between £6.45 and £6.50, or the choice between a 1st class stamp and Special Delivery. However, when we emphasised that next-day delivery was desirable but not essential, in each of these seven cases we were then recommended a 1st class stamp.

So we were offered the correct service initially in three out of ten cases, rising to ten out of ten after prompting.

Second class 'Signed For'

We said that we wanted to send a letter, which did not contain anything valuable, and that we did not mind when it arrived, but that we did need confirmation of delivery. We should have been offered the 'Signed For' 2nd class service, which costs £1.66. On five out of nine occasions we were offered the 'signed for' 1st class service instead, which costs £1.75. Although the difference in price is small, this was incorrect. In four instances, when we said again that we did not mind when the letter arrived, the 2nd class service was still not mentioned.¹³

So we were offered the correct service initially in four out of nine cases, rising to only five out of nine after prompting.

¹³ Interestingly, of the nine letters that we posted 'signed for' 2nd class, more than half arrived at their destination the following day.

Access to cash

We went to the post office counter in seven different post offices with a bank card and asked if we could withdraw £5. We also asked if there was an upper limit on the amount that we could withdraw. We were able to withdraw £5 on every occasion, but the staff seemed uncertain about the upper limit on withdrawals. Most said that this depended on the limit allowed by the card, one said it was £300 and one confessed to not knowing but guessed it might be £200.

So we were able to access £5 in cash on all seven occasions, though there was some uncertainty about the maximum amount we could withdraw.

Paying for utility services

Pre-paid meter cards

We asked in seven different post offices if we could top-up a pre-paid gas or electricity meter card held with one of the UK's major utility companies. We were told in one case that this was not possible, but staff in the other six post offices said that we could. They all said, correctly, that we could only do so using cash, but then told us how we could get cash using a debit card if necessary. And they all said that there was no minimum top-up amount. One said there was a £20 maximum.

So we were able to access this service in six out of seven post offices.

Paying utility bills

We asked in seven different post offices if it was possible to pay a bill from one of the UK's major utility companies, and if so how. In every case, we were told, correctly, that it was possible to pay a utility bill, providing it had a barcode on it. All the post offices said that we could pay by cash or debit card and all but one said we could also pay by cheque.

So we were able to access this service in all seven post offices where we tried.

Post office changes

The St Albans District has experienced its fair share of change to post office services in recent years. While there are currently 15 post offices in the District, including one Crown Post Office, another eight have closed their doors in the last ten years.

In 2008, the Post Office announced the proposed closure of five post offices in St Albans: those situated in Waverley Road, Prospect Road, Bernards Heath, Smallford and Park Street. In addition, the Station Road North post office in Harpenden was also to close. This process was subject to a consultation exercise and the public and local politicians fought a campaign to save these branches, but to no avail and the closures went ahead. Concerns about the consultation process and the impact of the closures were raised by Anne Main, the MP for St Albans, among others.¹⁴

Around the same time, the Southdown Post Office in Harpenden came under threat when the lease on the premises it shared with Balfours Store came up for renewal. The Co-op, which owned the lease, did not want to renew it. There was strong local opposition to closure and pressure was put on the Co-op. In 2010, Southdown Post Office was relocated into the newly-refurbished Co-op supermarket.

Although there has been no national programme of closures since 2009, there have been short-term temporary closures in the last few years. This has affected the St Albans District.

In 2015, the How Wood Post Office was closed when the postmaster resigned and withdrew his premises from postal use. Post Office Limited has since been under considerable pressure to restore services to the area but so far it has failed to find a suitable retail partner.

In January 2016, Post Office Limited announced its intention to franchise a number of its Crown Post Offices, including the one in Harpenden. Following months of negotiation and consultation, the post office was relocated to WH Smith's premises in the High Street in October 2016. It was argued that this would benefit customers due to the store's very central location and longer (seven days a week) opening hours.

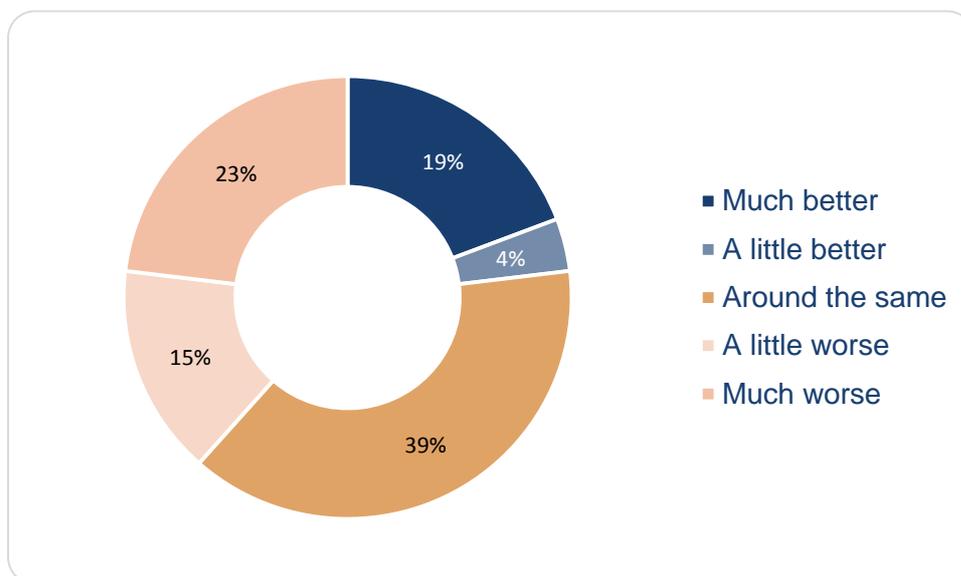
¹⁴ <http://www.annemain.com/content/post-office-closures-done-deal-outset>

Most recently, a post office situated within St Albans, in a retail outlet in Beech Road, closed on 16 April 2017. This followed the resignation of the postmaster and the withdrawal of the premises for post office use. In a letter explaining the closure, Post Office Limited explained it was temporary and said that it is looking for potential retail partners to run a post office in the same area, though there appear to be a very limited number of suitable alternative options in Beech Road and the surrounding area.

Lastly, in July 2017, Post Office Limited announced that, following a consultation exercise, the post office branch in Redbourn would move a short distance to be located in Weymans Nisa Local store.

Unsurprisingly, all these upheavals and closures have affected people's perceptions of the service provided by post offices in the St Albans District. Just over half (53%) of those people we surveyed thought post office services had not changed for them. But of those who did think services had changed, 38% thought they had become 'a little worse' or 'much worse', compared to only 23% who thought they had become 'a little better' or 'much better' (with the rest thinking they were 'about the same').

Figure 3: St Albans Citizens Advice clients' rating of whether post office services have got better or worse



Source: CASTAD survey of clients conducted in April and May 2017¹⁵

¹⁵ Excludes those who said services haven't changed or replied 'don't know'

A typical comment made by one of those who responded to the survey and was unhappy with the changes was:

“[My] local post office recently closed. The next nearest is very slow and always has queues.”

And someone else said:

“I have to drive to a post office now.”

There are some, though, who have seen the benefits of change:

“Sunday opening ... is extremely helpful.”

Watford Road Post Office

This local post office is situated near a bus stop on a fairly busy main road between St Albans and Watford in the suburb of Chiswell Green. It is not one of the local post offices that offer extended opening hours for consumers – its opening hours are 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday, and 9am to 12.30pm on Saturdays – and it offers a limited range of services.¹⁶

There are several parking spaces in the road adjacent to the bus stop, though they are often all occupied. The post office facility is located at the very back of a fairly small shop that is also a general/grocery store and newsagent. Although access to the shop is not impeded by steps, there is a relatively steep concreted slope up from the road by the bus stop to the shop entrance. This sloped area tends to be occupied by several parked cars, making potential wheelchair access to the shop entrance a little difficult but by no means impossible.

The post office part of the store is a small self-contained lockable cabin-like structure that the postmistress operates from single handed. The postmistress herself is locally well known for being particularly helpful and well thought of by her customers. The service provided has won local recognition certificates which are proudly displayed in the facility.

¹⁶ According to Post Office Branch Finder, the key available services are Parcelforce Express services, selling euros, National Express tickets, current account servicing and savings application forms.

Some people in the area are concerned that the opening of a nearby mini-supermarket later in 2017 could threaten the existence of the store in which the post office is located, and thus the post office itself. If the post office were to close, local residents would have to make a five-mile round trip to use the Crown Post Office in the centre of St Albans, using a route served by three buses. This would not be a major inconvenience for most people, though it could be more difficult for some groups, including those with disabilities or very young children.

Redbourn Post Office

The local post office in Redbourn, a smallish village to the north-west of St Albans, was relocated in July 2017, moving 230 meters along the High Street. This followed a consultation exercise conducted by Post Office Limited.

Previously, the post office was situated in a moderately large supermarket-style store with two counters available for post office services located in the front part of the store. It was only open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Saturday, and offered a limited range of services, though these were the ones most likely to be used frequently by customers. Access to the store was difficult, or near impossible, for anyone using a wheelchair because the shop doorway was narrow and there were two steps up to enter from the pavement in the High Street.

The post office is now located in a convenience store. Access is much easier: level and with a wide door at the entrance. Post Office Limited says that the majority of products and services will still be available. Opening hours have been improved, with services available from 6am to 9pm every day, including Sundays. It appears, therefore, that, post office services in the village will be improved considerably.

Conclusions

The number of post offices in the St Albans District has shrunk by a third in the last ten years and the distribution of the remaining branches is very uneven, leaving some areas well served while people in other areas face a relative long journey to access post office services.

Where there are local post offices, about half offer significantly longer opening hours than the traditional 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday, plus Saturday morning, but the other half do not. While the changes of the last decade have resulted in increased opening hours across the network for the whole country, and for the St Albans District as a whole, this is not necessarily the case in every town or village.

In general, access to post offices in the District for people with disabilities is good, but more could be done in some smaller post offices to improve access.

A large majority of those surveyed in St Albans rate the post office services they receive as 'good' or 'very good', though when we tested the knowledge of the staff in several local branches we did not always receive the correct answer to our queries. This appeared to be most likely when the post office counter did not have a dedicated staff member.

Recommendations

1. Post Office Limited should continue to work with local retailers and the appropriate local authorities to restore post office services to those areas of the St Albans District where they have been lost in recent years.

2. Post Office Limited and individual post office operators should review staff knowledge and training to ensure customers are provided with the correct product and pricing advice.

Appendix A: Post offices visited as part of the mystery shopping exercise

Post office name	Location	Type	Mystery shopping visits
St Peter's Street	St Albans	Crown	Thurs 18 th May & Thurs 18 th May
London Road	St Albans	Local	Thurs 27 th April & Fri 28 th April
St Stephen's	St Albans	Local	Tues 18 th April & Thurs 27 th April
Fleetville	St Albans	Main	Fri 21 st April & Sat 22 nd April
The Camp	St Albans	Local	Fri 21 st April & Wed 26 th April
Marshalswick	St Albans	Main	Tues 25 th April & Weds 26 th April
Jersey Farm	St Albans	Local	Weds 24 th May & Weds 31 st May
Colney Heath	Colney Heath	N/C	Fri 21 st Apr & Weds 3 rd May
Watford Road	Chiswell Green	N/C	Tues 18 th April & Fri 28 th April
Redbourn	Redbourn	Main	Tues 18 th April & Fri 21 st April

N/C = Not converted

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