

Postal Services Bill, Second Reading briefing, for Wednesday 27th October 2010

The Post Office

The decline in local services over the past few decades, characterised by closures of banks, post offices, pubs, garages and local stores has caused real problems for many older people, particularly those who face additional barriers of declining mobility, poor health, low incomes and limited social contacts. We therefore welcome the recognition in the Postal Services Bill of the importance post offices play in their local communities and the social value they give. We know how much older people, in particular, value their local post offices and so are pleased to see the commitment that there will be no further closures.

However, we feel too often in the past the social value of post offices has not been taken into account when government departments have been deciding on the allocation of contracts. We believe too much emphasis is placed on value for money and, while it is accepted by Government that the post office network plays an important part in social cohesion, this is never given an economic value. With regard to winning government contracts, we think social cohesion should be given an economic value which should be taken into account when different government departments are deciding on the allocation of contracts. It makes no sense for one government department to be funding a rural subsidy to the post office network in recognition of its contribution to social cohesion while others are taking access to their services away from the network on the basis of economic value for money.

More generally, we believe that over the next five years the Government must be able to demonstrate they have successfully redressed the decline in access to local services. We believe they should clearly lay out a new vision for the future of the Post Office and for local services in general, making clear the minimum levels of service all communities should have a right to expect.

Scam mail

Scam mail is an issue that we would like to see the Postal Services Bill addressing. Consumer scams are big business but are very hard to counter. The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has commissioned considerable research in this area and estimates that consumers lose well over £3 billion a year to scams (not just mail ones). Their research also shows there is clear evidence that once a person has responded to one postal scam, their name and address is circulated to other scammers. The danger then is that some of them become chronic scam victims getting bombarded with scam mailings. Older people who repeatedly fall for scams are generally socially isolated, suffering from dementia and over trusting, but chronic victims can be any age. The OFT has some striking photographs of the homes of chronic scam victims which give some understanding of the sheer volume of post they receive.

There are no easy solutions in trying to reduce this problem whether the scam is made by email, text, phone, internet or post. However, in the case of the latter we have always thought the postman would be in a position to identify addressees who were chronic scam victims because of the type and sheer volume of mail they receive. We understand that there have been numerous conversations with Royal Mail by agencies such as the OFT and the Serious Organised Crime Agency over the years but with little success. This is because ultimately, Royal Mail say they are unable to help because they have a legal duty to deliver all mail to the address on the envelope and are specifically prohibited from interfering with it.

We would like to see if a route could be identified whereby a formal request to stop the delivery of scam mail can be made to Royal Mail in order to curb chronic cases of it.

Annual report on post office network and the definition of 'elderly individuals'

Section 11 of the Bill refers to 'Annual reports on post office network'. This report to parliament will include information on the accessibility of the post office network to a range of people, including 'elderly individuals'. Age UK welcomes the recognition of the importance for older people of being able to access a local post office. It would be useful to be clear about the definition of 'elderly' to ensure the scope of the report is wide enough (see 11(3)).

If you would like to discuss any issue mentioned in this briefing further, please contact Camilla Williamson, Public Affairs Adviser, Parliamentary (Camilla.williamson@ageuk.org.uk; 020 8765 7274).