

Post

The state of the sector in 2022

The logo for Citizens Advice, featuring the organization's name in a blue, sans-serif font inside a white speech bubble shape.

citizens
advice

Introduction

In uncertain times, people come to Citizens Advice to ask for help with their problems. In the last year, we helped 2.7 million people in person, by phone, email or webchat on a wide range of issues. There were 40 million visits to our website.¹

We're uniquely placed to see how problems intersect, and to provide early warnings on emerging issues.

Citizens Advice is the statutory advocate for post. We speak out on postal services issues on behalf of consumers, applying insights from our work with clients, research studies and consumer surveys.

We are here to make sure people in vulnerable circumstances get a fair deal - guaranteeing that those most likely to suffer harm can easily access good value essential products and services.

This briefing reviews the state of the postal sector at the start of 2022. We look at trends across England, Wales and Scotland over the previous 3 years, with a focus on developments during the last year.

These trends should be seen in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic which has had a significant impact on the post sector.

Whilst letter volumes declined in 2020-21 due to reduced business activity and a further move to online services, millions continued to rely on letter post.

At the same time, UK parcel volumes rose by almost 50% compared to the previous year. This was mainly due to an increase in online shopping.²

Overall UK post office numbers remained steady at around 11,600 branches. But access has been affected by a rise in part-time outreach services and high numbers of temporary closures.

Between January and December 2021 we saw almost 450,000 visits to our web pages providing advice on post-related problems.

During this period our Consumer Service helpline assisted almost 26,000 people with parcel issues.

The data and case studies in this document come from a range of sources including the Consumer Service helpline, local Citizens Advice case management information, unique views of online advice content, a telephone survey of 4,000 adults and analysis of Post Office Ltd data.

Here we set out the main issues we've seen and consider the trends going forward that will affect the experience of consumers throughout the post sector.

¹ Citizens Advice, [Impact Report 2020/21](#)

² Ofcom, [Annual Monitoring Update on the Postal Market 2020-21](#)

1. Letters

Letters remain important in people's everyday lives

Despite the ongoing fall in letter volumes, people still regularly send and receive letters. Our research shows 3 in 4 adults (76%) received at least one letter in the last month. This includes greetings cards, personal letters from friends and family and formal letters from organisations (e.g. bills).

Almost 6 in 10 (59%) sent a letter in the last month. Older people are more likely to send letters than younger people. For example, 72% of people aged over 65 sent at least one letter in the last month, compared to 41% of 18-24 year olds.

People who are digitally excluded are also more likely to send letters. 66% of people who use the internet less than weekly sent a letter in the last month.

Chris lives in shared accommodation and finds that his post often goes missing. He does not have a phone or Internet access, so relies heavily on post. The DWP has stopped his benefits as they were unable to contact him.

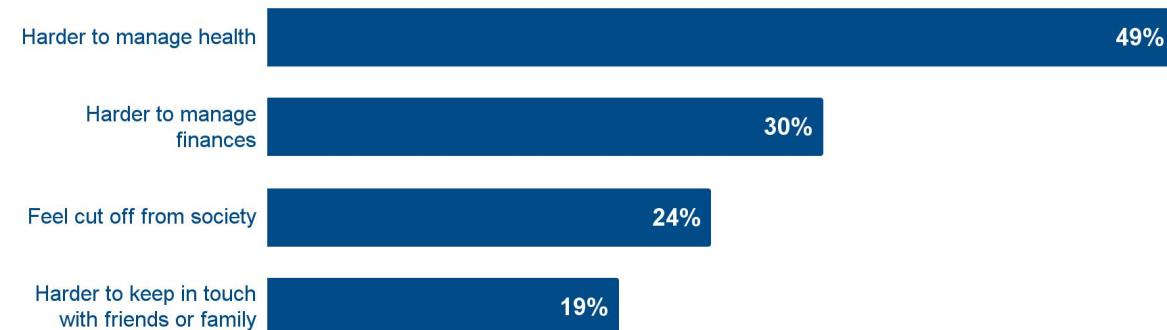
Over 7 in 10 (72%) say it is helpful (40%) or essential (32%) to receive letters. Some groups are more likely to say it's essential to receive letters through the post.

Groups most likely to say that receiving post is essential



Almost 5 in 10 people (49%) say it would be harder to manage their health and 3 in 10 (30%) say it would be harder to manage their finances if they could not receive post. A significant minority say they would find it more difficult to stay connected with others.

Impact if could not receive post



Many people experienced issues with reliability or affordability

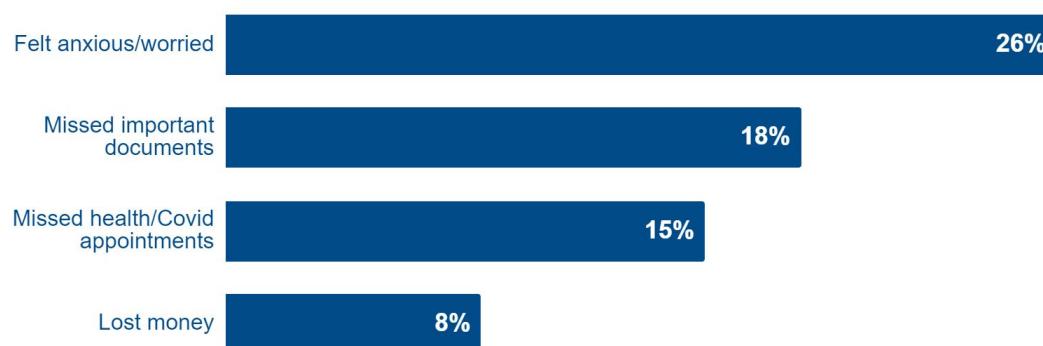
In 2021, many people reported problems with letter deliveries. Over the year, we saw 235,000 visits to Citizens Advice's web pages for advice on problems with sending and receiving letters. These web pages cover damaged, lost and delayed post, junk mail and collection and delivery times.

At both the beginning and the end of 2021, letter delays were widespread across the country. During the 2021 Christmas period almost 15 million people (28%) were left waiting for post. Of those, over half (54%) reported going at least a week without letters.

Delayed or missing letters can lead to a wide range of problems for people. We found 1 in 14 UK adults (7%) experienced serious negative consequences of struggling to receive post. This doubled to 1 in 8 (14%) for those who were self-isolating or shielding.

For people who experienced letter delays, 1 in 4 (26%) reported feeling anxious or worried. Almost 2 in 10 (18%) missed important documents (such as insurance letters) and 1 in 7 (15%) missed a Covid-related or other health appointment.

Consequences of postal delays



- Royal Mail's **redirections service** allows movers to forward their post to a new address. This reduces the risk of identity theft and losing important documents.
- Our research shows only a minority of home movers use the service. Of those who had moved and not redirected their post, 3 in 10 (30%) said it was because they couldn't afford it or they thought it wasn't worth the money.
- Citizens Advice has long been calling for the existing concessionary scheme for the service to be improved.
- In November 2021, Royal Mail expanded the redirections discount scheme to include people receiving Universal Credit.
- This is a welcome improvement to help people on low incomes with the cost of redirecting post. But we are still concerned about the affordability of this service.

2. Parcels

An increasing number of parcels are being sent and received

The number of parcels people have sent and received has been increasing in recent years - reflecting the rise in internet shopping.

But since the start of the pandemic, the surge in online retail has led to an unprecedented growth in parcel volumes. As well as the expected annual peaks around Christmas, parcel numbers rose during Covid-related lockdowns.

During 2021, each month



33% of people sent
at least once parcel

People **sent 1.5**
parcels on average



83% of people
received at least
once parcel

People **received 8.1**
parcels on average

- The groups who send and receive most parcels are very different to those who send and receive the most letters.
- People on higher incomes are more likely to have sent a parcel in the last month than those on lower incomes. 39% of people with an annual household income of over £21,000 sent a parcel, compared with 26% of those with an income of £21,000 or less.
- Women (37%) are more likely to have sent a parcel in the last month than men (29%). And middle aged people (aged 35-54, 38%) are more likely to have sent a parcel than younger (aged 18-24, 23%) or older people (aged 75+, 20%).
- There are also significant demographic differences in the number of parcels people receive each month. Older people, people on lower incomes and people who do not use the internet every day receive fewest parcels every month.



People have experienced more parcel problems since Covid

As parcel volumes rose during the pandemic, more people have been coming to us about problems they've been experiencing with parcel deliveries. This includes parcel deliveries from the range of parcel companies, including Royal Mail.

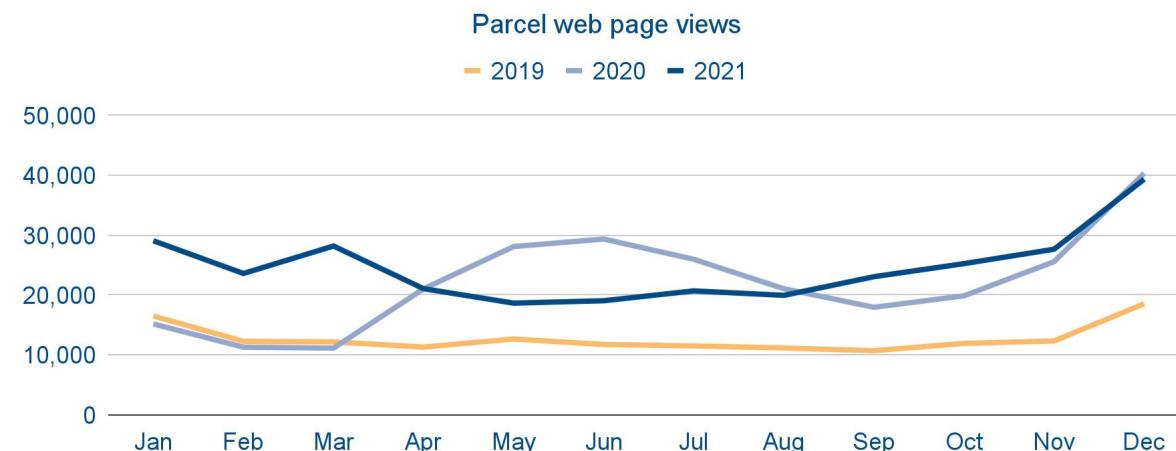
Between the start of the pandemic in April 2020 and December 2021, we saw over 500,000 visits to our parcels advice web pages. With over half of these visits (295,700) in 2021.

In December 2021 almost 30,000 people turned to our web pages for advice on orders that hadn't arrived.

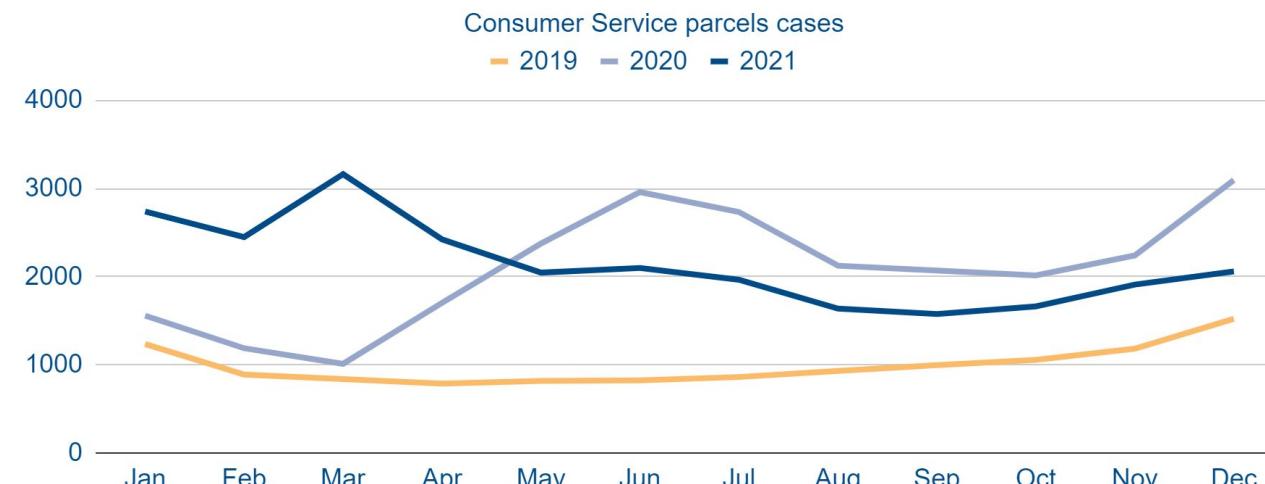
We have also seen a significant increase in the number of people ringing our Consumer Service helpline for advice about parcel-related problems.

In 2021, the Consumer Service provided parcels advice to 25,700 clients. This averages at over 2,100 cases a month. However case numbers in the second half of 2021 were slightly lower than during the same period in 2020.

Traffic to our parcels advice web pages has been significantly higher since the beginning of the pandemic in spring 2020. We logged sharp rises during the periods of greatest Covid restrictions as well as during the peak Christmas season.



The Consumer Service helpline has also seen more parcel problems since the start of the pandemic, with further increases during lockdown and times of restrictions.



A majority of online shoppers have experienced a delivery problem

Our research confirms high use of online retail and widespread delivery issues throughout the population.

86% of adults in Britain bought something online in the last 3 months. And almost 7 in 10 (69%) of those who bought an item online experienced a delivery-related problem with their purchase. Fewer than 1 in 3 (31%) had no delivery problems.

People experienced a wide range of problems from being inconvenienced by having to stay at home to receive a parcel to the parcel arriving late or not at all.

In a significant number of cases the driver left before the recipient had a chance to get to the door or the parcel was left in an insecure location. Citizens Advice research has found that these problems are particularly acute for disabled people - many of whom are especially reliant on online shopping.



Mary ordered some items online and was given a time slot for delivery which did not work for her. Although she rearranged the delivery time, the parcel company still tried to deliver the items when she wasn't in and left them at the end of her drive. Mary is disabled and she struggled with the parcels. When she contacted the delivery company to ask for an explanation, they had no response.

Ram's delivery was left in a shed that's shared with other flats, and the parcel was lost. He had to visit a store and explain the story around 30 times to different people when trying to resolve the issue, and is still £140 out of pocket.

Josh made an online purchase, and was notified that his parcel had been photographed and left on the doorstep. When he got home, the item wasn't there and he believes it was stolen. The item was essential for his disability needs so Josh contacted the retailer, but they said there's nothing they can do.

There are consistent problems across the parcel delivery sector

Citizens Advice's first annual parcel company league table confirms consistent problems across the sector.

The league table, which compares the top firms against criteria like customer service, delivery problems and accessibility, shows that no delivery company received more than 3 out of 5 stars overall.

We are using this data to press Ofcom to increase regulation in the parcels market.

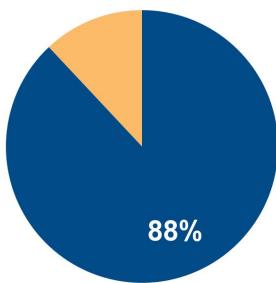
Rank	Company	Cost	Customer problems	Accessibility	Customer service	Trust	Overall score
1	Amazon Logistics	1 N/A	3.25 	2.25 	2.75 	4.25 	2.75
2	Royal Mail	1.75 	3.00 	2.00 	2.50 	4.00 	2.50
3	DPD	2.75 	1.50 	2.25 	2.50 	3.75 	2.25
4	Yodel	1 	2.25 	1.25 	1.75 	2.00 	1.75
5	Hermes	1.75 	1.00 	2.00 	2.25 	2.00 	1.50

Notes: There is not data available for all companies for all data points. Amazon logistics does not have a C2C service so is excluded from the Cost metric. Twitter data is used to form part of the Customer problems and Customer service metrics, Royal Mail is excluded from this as not all their twitter activity is related to parcels. Parts of the Accessibility metric are made up from data on consumer perception and as such should not be seen as a judgement on whether or not these options or services are actually available.

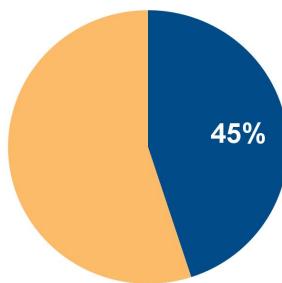
3. Post offices

Almost everyone uses post offices

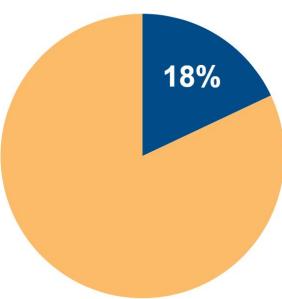
Nearly 9 in 10 adults (88%) use a post office at least once a year. Almost half (45%) visit a post office once a month or more often.



At least yearly

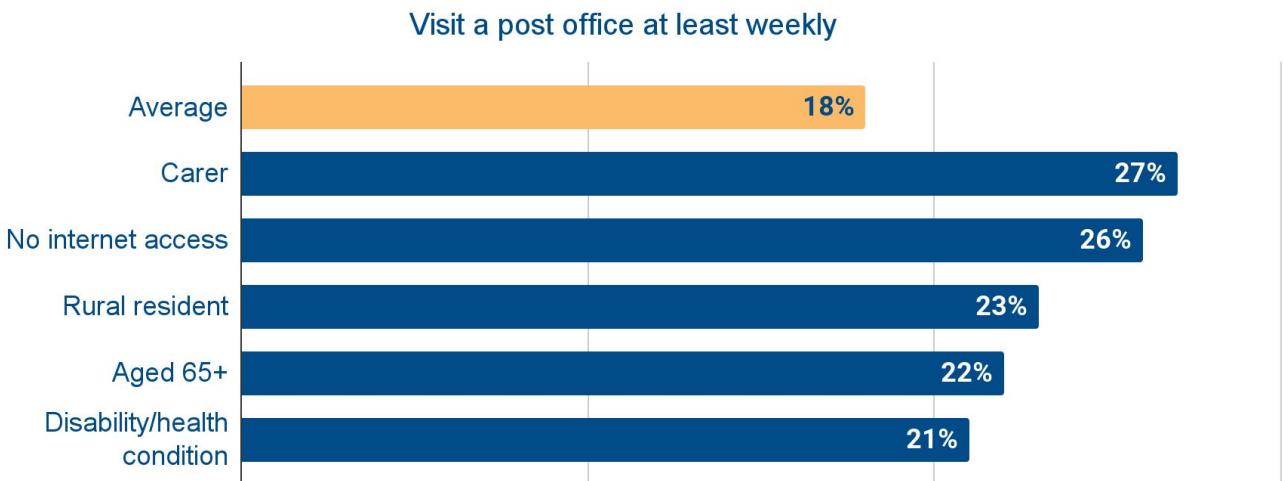


At least monthly



At least weekly

- Some groups make much more use of post offices.
- People in rural areas are more dependent on post offices. Nearly 1 in 4 (23%) rural residents visit a post office at least once a week, compared with fewer than 1 in 5 (17%) urban residents.
- Unpaid carers who care for someone living in their household also use post offices far more than average. Similarly, people with disabilities and/or with longstanding physical or mental health conditions are more likely to use a post office at least once a week.
- Older age groups visit post offices more frequently than younger people. For instance whilst 22% of people aged 65+ use a post office weekly, only 7% of those aged 18-24 do so. People who have no internet access and people who aren't frequent internet users also visit post offices more often than average.



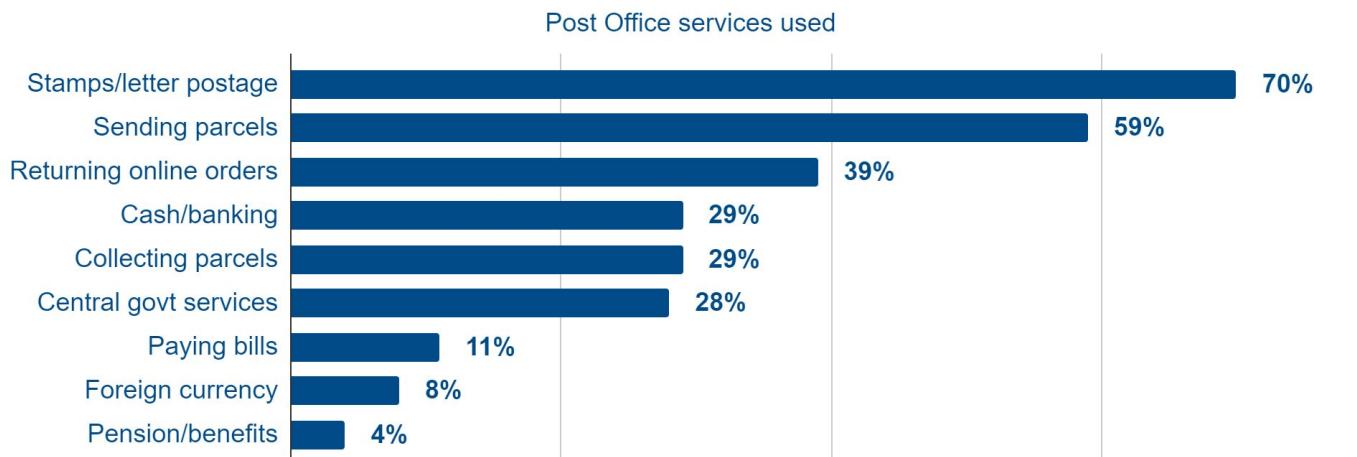
People use a wide range of Post Office services

Post offices provide a very wide range of services, including mail services, access to cash and everyday banking, bill payments and government services.

Buying stamps and paying for letter postage remains the most commonly used Post Office service - 70% of all adults have used this service at least once within the last 12 months. Similar to our findings around the groups that value or use letter post most (p.5), our research shows older people are more likely to purchase stamps and letter post (87% of people aged 45+, compared with 52% aged 18-24s). More rural residents (78%) than urban residents (68%) buy stamps at a post office.

Parcel services are also very widely used. Again, reflecting wider trends in parcel use (p. 8), we find people with higher household incomes (over £21,000), daily internet users and women make most use of Post Office parcel services.

People aged 35-54 send more parcels than other age groups. The age profile of online returns is slightly lower, with 25-44s making most use of the returns service. People aged 18-44 use parcel collection services most.



Almost 3 in 10 people (29%) have used a post office to withdraw cash from their bank account or to pay in cash or cheques. **Post Office banking** is used most by people living in rural (36%) and remote (46%) areas.

People on lower incomes (36%, up to £21,000) use the banking service more than those on higher incomes (28%, £21,000+). Older people also use the service more (34%, aged 65+).

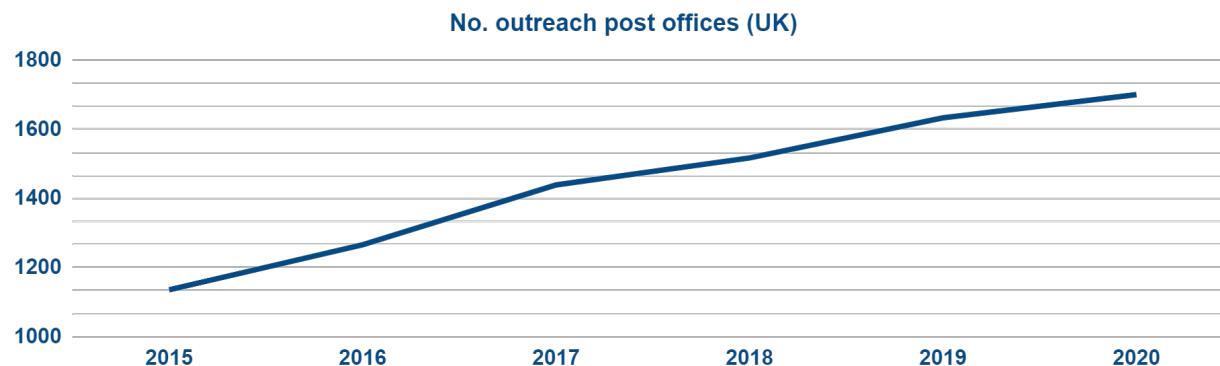
Bill payment services include payment and pre-payment for gas, electricity, water, phone and council rent. These services are used most by people with no access to the internet (25%) and people on low incomes (18%). Carers (20%) and people living in remote areas (19%) are also more likely to pay a bill at a post office.

Many people (28%) used a central **government service** - such as driving licences, passports, vehicle tax - within the last year.

But there are growing gaps in the post office network

Although the post office network remains widely used, in recent years we've seen sharp increases in the number of temporarily closed post offices and part-time outreach services. Despite total post office numbers remaining steady, these changes have led to significant and growing cracks in coverage.

Our analysis reveals 1 in 3 rural post offices in Britain are now provided as part-time outreach services. These are open for an average of 5.5 hours a week, although many are only open for 1 hour.



In addition by September 2021, 1,291 post offices across Great Britain were temporarily closed, nearly twice as many as 5 years ago. And many 'temporary' closures last a significant period of time - more than 8 in 10 are shut for over a year. In reality many of these post offices are permanently closed.

New Citizens Advice research confirms that when full-time post offices close or are replaced with outreach services it becomes significantly harder for many individuals and small businesses to access services. The increase in closures and outreaches is particularly acute in rural areas - the communities which rely on post office services the most, as well as the social hubs and sources of support post offices provide.

"I think that the Post Office is beyond just being a letter service. It does so much more now for people, particularly with banking or with helping people out with forms etc. It has a wider net now because so many things have closed down and they're a really important part of the community."

Female, aged 35-54, West Midlands

"I don't know how I would return parcels without it. I would say it's a really important part of the community."

Female, aged 18-35, Inner Hebrides

"It is like a little hub of village life."

Male, aged 55-64, Mid Wales

"I wouldn't have believed back along, how much it would affect my life not having a post office... I took it all for granted... If it's someone's birthday coming up oh, I'll just nip up the post office. I might need £200, I'll just nip to the post office and draw it out. It was just so convenient and easy..."

Female, aged 35-54, SW England

Looking forward

We will continue to apply our unique insights through 2022

The start of 2022 sees mounting pressure on Royal Mail over letter delivery delays. Throughout the coming year we'll continue to monitor delivery performance and the **impact of delays** on consumers.

Too many people already find postal services unaffordable - from stamp prices to the redirection service. These problems are likely to get worse with the growing cost of living crisis.

In the year ahead we'll be pressing the regulator Ofcom to ensure Royal Mail delivers **an affordable and reliable postal service** for all.

We're also advocating for a solution (**Address & Collect**) specifically for people in unsafe, precarious, or non-traditional living situations who struggle to receive their mail.

Parcel volumes have rocketed since the start of the pandemic and are expected to remain high. We'll **track the parcel problems** people are bringing to us over the coming year.

We will continue to press Ofcom to take a **new approach to regulating the parcels market**. We'll be calling for minimum standards to reduce the amount of detriment experienced by consumers.

Parcel pick and drop off points (PUDOs) providing people with alternative delivery options when they are not at home are likely to become increasingly important. This year we will be looking at **how people use PUDO services** currently and potential future benefits.

As the impact of Brexit becomes clearer, Citizens Advice will investigate its impact on access to and use of **European parcel delivery services**. We will also undertake research into how **micro businesses** use the postal sector more broadly.

We can expect post offices to continue to play a vital role providing access to essential services as other providers withdraw from the high street. Ongoing bank branch closures are likely to result in a steady or rising use of Post Office banking services.

As the post office network expands its parcel collection and returns services to include other carriers such as Amazon and DPD, we will look at how people are using these services.

Over the coming year we will maintain our **monitoring of the post office network**, including trends in service usage and the number of closures and outreach services.

Citizens Advice will continue to work with stakeholders, including government and Post Office Ltd, to develop solutions to address the problems of **rising part-time provision and post office closures**.

Appendix

This report draws on data from a range of sources including -

Consumer survey of postal service and post office use - nationally representative telephone survey of 4,015 GB adults by Yonder Data Solutions. Fieldwork 7-28 Feb 2021 and 2-18 Aug 2021.

Web views - unique page views of Citizens Advice webpage advice content.

Consumer Service - data from Citizens Advice consumer helpline cases Jan 2019 - Dec 2021. Parcel case studies are from Consumer Service cases.

Local Citizens Advice case management information - letter problem case studies are from local Citizens Advice cases.

Letter delay research - online survey of 2,094 UK adults from Yonder Data Solutions. Fieldwork 8-9 Nov 2021.

Redirections research - online survey of 4,004 GB adults by Opinium, with a boosted sample of 1,000 people who moved since March 2019 and did not take out a mail redirection service. Fieldwork 22 Feb - 2 Mar 2021.

Parcels league table data - derived from Citizens Advice, Consumer Service, social media complaints. Also online survey of 6,000 UK adults by Opinium, fieldwork 21 Oct - 5 Nov 2021.

Study of impacts of temporary post office closures and outreach services - qualitative interviews with 54 people in 10 villages in GB by Community Research. Fieldwork May - June 2021. Post office case studies are from this research.

Post Office Ltd branch data - for analysis of temporary closure and outreach post office numbers.

Also see our recent research reports and consultation responses:

[Millions without mail](#) - millions of people face significant harm because they don't have access to their post.

[Response to Ofcom's call for inputs](#) - Citizens Advice response on the review of postal regulation, June 2021.

[Sorry we missed you](#) - how pressure on delivery drivers impacts outcomes for parcel delivery.

[Parcels league table](#) - ranks the largest five parcel delivery companies across various metrics.

[Gaps in the network](#) - the impact of outreaches and temporary closure on post office access.

Free, confidential advice. Whoever you are.

We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

We're here for everyone.



[citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

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