

# Help Yourself?

Current and  
future use of self  
service at post  
offices



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# Summary

Post office queues cause frustration for consumers. Queues are on average longest in large branches, and our research shows that self service kiosks (SSKs) can significantly speed up service. Customers queueing for self service kiosks (SSKs) save an average of 3 minutes compared to staffed counters and are 3 times less likely to have to queue at all.

There are currently SSKs in around 220 of the UK's 11,500 post offices. Most people who use SSKs have a good overall experience. Self service is particularly popular with younger consumers, and increasingly expected and provided in other retail and service outlets. But our research shows that habit and lack of confidence stop many consumers from using self service in post offices.

Whilst face to face services must be preserved, providing more SSKs and helping more people to use them can reduce queues and improve public perception of the Post Office. Expanding SSK provision can also free up staff to spend more time assisting consumers who need or want a more personal service.

However, our research also shows consumers experience some problems with the machines, including navigating options, identifying equipment, and posting items. Some consumers also have problems waiting for or finding staff assistance to complete SSK transactions.

We recommend 4 improvements to maximise consumer benefits. **Post Office Limited (POL) should:**

**1. Significantly increase, by at least double, the number of post offices with SSKs, and retain SSKs in Crown branches that go on to be franchised.** We would expect SSKs to be available in the largest branches.

**2. Improve consumer awareness of SSKs in branch.** POL should improve signposting and ensure operators are providing assistance to increase consumer awareness of SSK services, and help customers complete transactions.

**3. Make the current stock of SSKs easier to use and improve reliability.** Addressing machine breakdown, making it easier to find supporting equipment and simplifying screen processes would improve consumer confidence and speed up transactions.

**4. Develop new generation machines that are significantly more intuitive for consumers.** These could make kiosks easier to use for more complex services, and potentially give consumers 24 hour access to postal services.

# Introduction

The post office network is a crucial access point to the public postal service as well as banking services, bill payment and a range of central and local government services. There are around 11,600 post offices in the UK, with a unique reach across all parts of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Use of post offices and high streets in general has declined over recent years. However the government has invested £2bn in the post office network which still has 17 million<sup>2</sup> visits a week. Queues remain a major consumer complaint about post offices, and our research shows on average customers queue for over 4 minutes in the larger high street post offices.<sup>3</sup>

Like many other retailers and service providers - from train operators to supermarkets - the Post Office has introduced self service facilities for customers. Through self service, industries hope to achieve a reduction in customer waiting times alongside financial savings for businesses.<sup>4</sup> But important questions need to be answered about whether self service is providing consumers with what they need, and whether it works for everyone.

Self service machines, or kiosks are currently available in 220 post offices.<sup>5</sup> This includes 160 Crown post offices (directly run by POL) and 60 WH Smith post offices. Post Office self service machines offer around 90% of all mail transactions available at a post office counter. The machines also allow customers to make some bill payments, top up mobile phones and purchase retail items such as envelopes and packaging.

This report is the first publicly available research into the UK Post Office's self service provision. Based on mystery shopping of post offices with self service machines and interviews with 2,057 consumers, Citizens Advice has gained a detailed understanding of how well SSKs meet consumers needs and how they could do so in future.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Post Office Ltd, [Network Report](#), 2017

<sup>2</sup> [Post Office Ltd figures](#)

<sup>3</sup> Citizens Advice, [The State of the Post Office Network](#), 2017

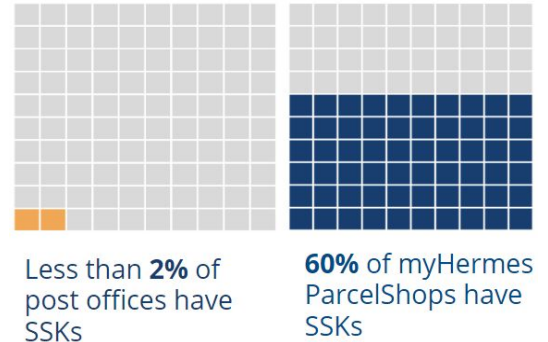
<sup>4</sup> For example, Abdelaziz et al., [Study of Airport Self-Service Technology](#), 2010

<sup>5</sup> Total at time of research, spring 2018

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix for details of research method

# 1. How and why consumers use Post Office self service

Post office self service machines or kiosks (SSKs) are currently only located in a limited number of larger post office branches - all of which are in Crown offices run by POL or WH Smith branches. With SSKs available in around 2% of post offices, it's unsurprising that only 1 in 8 of all consumers (12%) say the post office they use most often has self service. In contrast, 60% of myHermes ParcelShop outlets have SSKs.<sup>7</sup>



## A significant minority use SSKs, if available

Almost 4 in 10 (38%) of all consumers have used a post office SSK at some point.<sup>8</sup> But fewer than 1 in 10 (9%) consumers are frequent users.<sup>9</sup>

However, where consumers are using post offices that have SSKs, a significant minority use them frequently. 3 in 10 consumers (29%) whose post office has SSKs use one frequently.

## Londoners and young people use SSKs most

Apart from availability, the key drivers for SSK use are age, London residency and ethnic group. Whether or not SSKs are available at consumers' post offices, they are most likely to be used by Londoners, under 35s and people from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Older people and people who are digitally excluded<sup>10</sup> are least likely to use SSKs.

Our mystery shopping research also suggests that younger people are more likely to favour self service than older people. After using both a SSK and a counter for the same postal transaction, younger mystery shoppers tended to prefer the SSK, whilst older people were more likely to prefer the counter.

The groups who use SSKs at post offices closely mirror self service use in other UK retail and service sectors. Our research also finds younger people (under 45), people from BAME backgrounds and those from higher socio-economic groups (AB) are the most frequent users of self service at supermarkets, banks and train stations. As in post offices, people without internet access and older people use self service least in these sectors.

<sup>7</sup> Data from myHermes

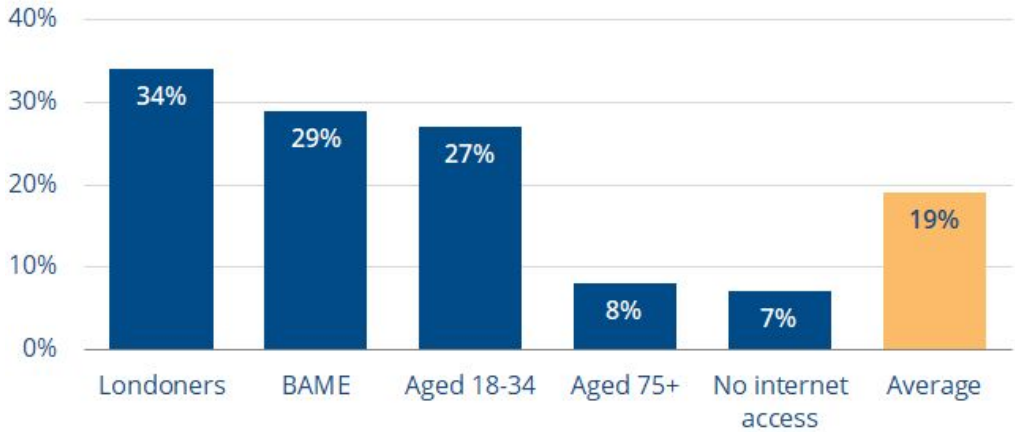
<sup>8</sup> 58% of consumers have never used a post office SSK

<sup>9</sup> Frequent users use SSKs - always, almost always or very often

<sup>10</sup> Defined here as people without access to the internet

**Figure 1. SSKs are used most by Londoners and least by digitally excluded**

*Percentage consumers using SSKs at least 'sometimes'*

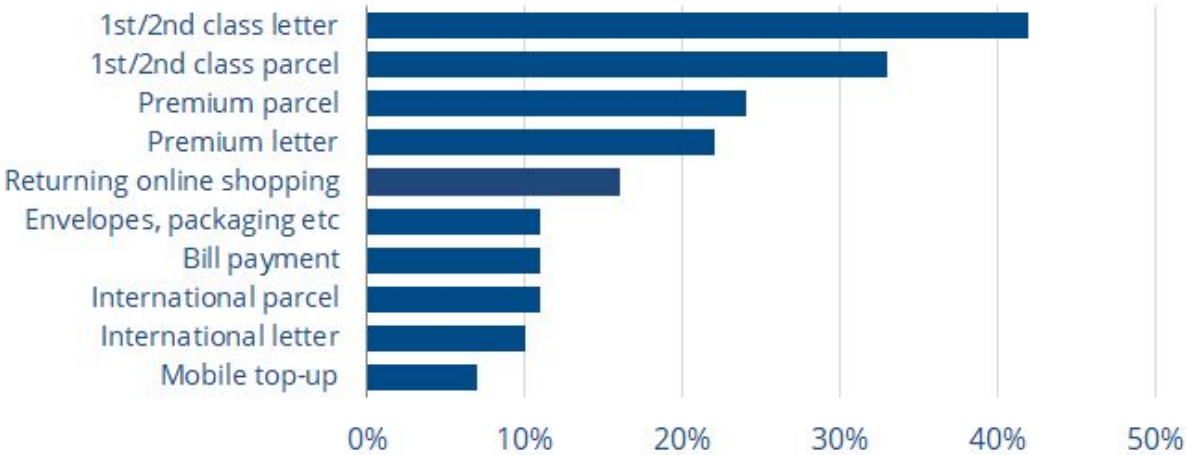


**People use SSKs more for 1st/2nd class mail**

As figure 2 shows, consumers use First and Second Class letters and parcel services more than any other services at SSKs. Only a small number of consumers use SSKs for other services such as buying retail items (eg envelopes and packaging), bill payment or mobile phone top-ups.

**Figure 2. Consumers make most use of SSKs for 1st and 2nd class post**

*SSK services used by consumers who have used SSK within the last 12 months*



Not only do consumers use 1st and 2nd class mail services most at SSKs, but consumers also say they would be most comfortable using a SSK for these simpler transactions. This is supported by our mystery shopping which finds that generally shoppers undertaking simpler transactions preferred using a SSK. But shoppers undertaking more complex transactions, such as posting a parcel, preferred the post office counter.

## Most SSK users have a good experience

Satisfaction levels amongst people who have used a SSK are generally high. Over 8 in 10 mystery shoppers (83%) who used a SSK said they were satisfied (44%) or very satisfied (39%) with their experience of using the machine.<sup>11</sup> Whilst overall satisfaction is high, this reduces when we look at particular aspects of SSK use (see chapter 3).

## Speed is the main reason people use SSKs

3 in 4 consumers (73%) who use a SSK say they choose to use self service because it is quicker. Speed is particularly important for younger people and those in higher socio-economic groups. A minority say they use a SSK because it is more convenient, they are asked to use it by post office staff, or they prefer using a machine to talking to staff.

## Consumers don't use SSKs due to habit and preference for dealing with staff

Apart from lack of availability, the top reasons consumers give for not being likely to use a SSK are habit (36%) or because they prefer to speak to a member of staff (36%). The importance of human interaction was echoed by the mystery shoppers. 15% of all shoppers made an unprompted reference to their preference for personal service or human interaction when asked about their preferred channel.



1 in 5 (22%) consumers specifically say they need support of the counter staff or wouldn't be confident using a SSK without staff help (consumers are more likely to use SSKs if staff are available and our research finds staff are not always present, see chapter 3). A small minority (9%) believe they'd be more likely to receive the right product from counter staff.

<sup>11</sup> 12% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4% were dissatisfied, 1% were very dissatisfied

# 2. Speed of service

For years, long queues have been a major source of consumer concern, particularly in the larger town centre post offices.<sup>12</sup> Our findings confirm that self service can be a key way of addressing queuing problems.

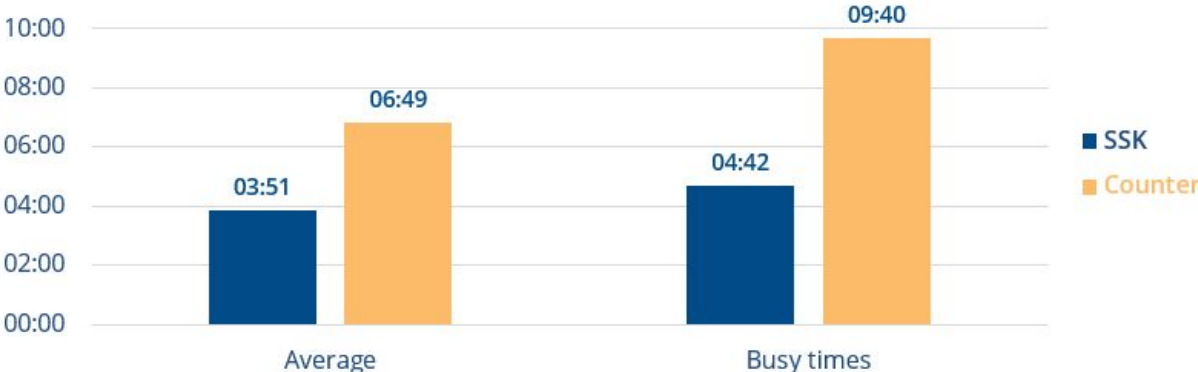
## Overall it's quicker to use a SSK than the counter

Mystery shoppers undertook one transaction at a SSK, followed by an identical transaction at the counter in the same post office at the same time. Shoppers were over 3 times as likely to have to queue at the counter than at a SSK.<sup>13</sup> For those who did have to queue, queues moved much more quickly at SSKs (average wait was 02:36 minutes) than at counters (05:14 minutes).

Overall, mystery shoppers found the whole process, queuing and transaction, almost 3 minutes on average (02:58) faster at the SSK than at the counter. When the post office is busy, it's twice as fast to use the SSK (see figure 3).

**Figure 3. SSK service is faster than counters, especially at busy times**

*Queuing and transaction time (min:sec) at SSK and counter*



## Transactions take longer on SSKs, especially for older people

Despite the overall faster time for SSKs, undertaking the transaction at a machine takes longer than being served by a member of staff at a counter. For mystery shoppers, average transaction time was approximately half a minute longer at a SSK (03:04 minutes) than at a counter (02:27).<sup>14</sup>

This is unsurprising, as we might expect counter staff to be quicker at processing transactions than consumers who undertake them significantly less often.

<sup>12</sup> Citizens Advice, [The State of the Post Office Network](#), 2017  
<sup>13</sup> Only 25% of shoppers queued to use a SSK, whilst 83% had to queue to use the counter service  
<sup>14</sup> Average times based on the 7 scenarios undertaken in the mystery shopping survey (see Appendix)



Consumers using SSKs sometimes also need to wait for staff assistance in order to complete the process.

Older people take longer than others to carry out SSK transactions. Mystery shoppers aged 65+ took almost 5 minutes on average (4:43) to carry out a transaction on a SSK, compared with around 3 minutes for younger age groups.<sup>15</sup> This is not mirrored in counter transactions - older shoppers took no longer at the counter than younger shoppers.

## Simpler transactions and card payments are quickest at SSKs

The simpler transactions are quickest to undertake at a SSK. Mystery shopping revealed stamp purchases are fastest (2:02 minutes) and parcel transactions take longest (between 3:41 and 4:16 minutes)<sup>16</sup>. These findings also align with consumer preferences for using SSK for the simpler services, and counters for more complex services.

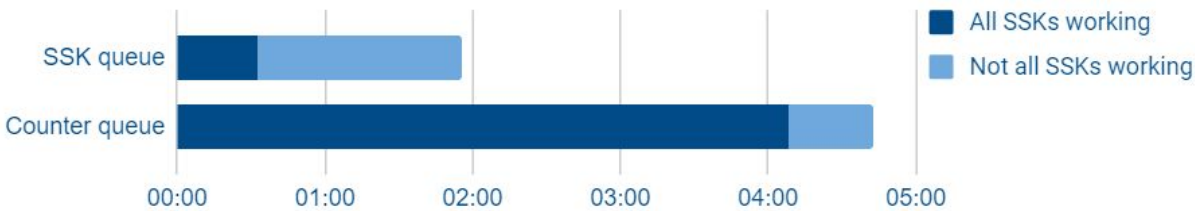
At SSKs, transactions paid for in cash took longer (3:16 minutes) than transactions paid for by card (2:56). However, this was reversed at the counter, where cash transactions were quicker.

## Functioning SSKs reduce queuing times in all parts of a post office

In almost 1 in 4 visits (23%), shoppers found that some of the SSKs in the post office were not functioning. Mystery shoppers commented that queues had built up where SSKs were out of use.

SSKs can have a positive impact on queuing times both at the counter and at the SSKs themselves. When all SSKs in the post office were working, the average machine wait for shoppers was 0:33 minutes, and the average counter wait was 4:08. But when some or all of the SSKs were not working, queue times increased both at the SSK and at the counter (average SSK waits were 2.5 times longer<sup>17</sup>).

Figure 4. Queuing times increase when SSKs aren't working<sup>18</sup>



<sup>15</sup> 2:43 to 3:06 minutes for shoppers aged under 65

<sup>16</sup> Time excluding queuing

<sup>17</sup> Average counter waits increased by 0:26 minutes

<sup>18</sup> Average queuing times shown include times for shoppers who didn't have to queue

## 3. Ease of use and accuracy

Most consumers won't use self service unless they find it easy and believe they've bought the right service. Our research shows consumers generally find Post Office SSKs easy to use. SSK service accuracy levels are similar to those at the counter, although consumers are less confident that they have purchased the correct product.

### Most shoppers found SSKs easy to use

Post Office SSKs include a touch screen, scanner, payment PIN pad, postal scales, stamp printer and a receipt printer. Consumers posting letters and parcels may also need to use a sizing template to gauge the dimensions of their item, as postage prices depend on both size and weight.

Overall, the majority (82%) of mystery shoppers who used the SSKs said they found the SSKs very or quite easy to use. In particular shoppers said the instructions were easy to read, the weighing process was straightforward, the order of instructions was logical and the barcode scanner worked well.

'Everything was explained after I pressed start and the screens guided me through the transaction.'

Female shopper, aged under 35

### But 1 in 5 shoppers did not find SSKs easy to use

However, 18% of shoppers did not find SSKs easy to use. 9% said it was difficult or very difficult (9% said they found it neither easy nor difficult).

Older age groups were more likely to find SSKs difficult to use than younger people. For example, those aged 44 or over were 4 times as likely to find the machines difficult to use as the under 44s (12% v. 3%).

Shoppers who use a pc, laptop, tablet or smartphone less than daily were also more likely to find the machines difficult to use than those who use a digital device at least daily (12% v. 7%<sup>19</sup>).

### It's not initially clear to everyone what the SSKs can be used for

Before starting their SSK transactions, it wasn't clear to 24% of mystery shoppers what the machines could be used for. Shoppers gave the main reason as lack of

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<sup>19</sup> Low base

signs or lack of comprehensive signs. Some shoppers said it was only clear after the start screen.

'I did not feel that it was clear what I could use the machines for, until I started to use the touchscreen. Apart from size guides there was very little other information in the self service machine area.'

Female shopper, aged 55-64

## **Main difficulties include posting items, identifying and finding equipment and labels**

Although overall most shoppers found SSKs easy to use, a number of specific issues were raised by shoppers. The top difficulties include finding where to post items after using the SSK and the large number of options and menus on the machine. Shoppers raised issues with finding and identifying labels, and finding and using the sizing templates to measure the dimensions of letters and parcels. Some shoppers also reported problems finding where the stamps were dispensed from the machine or where to insert cash.

'The machine was not easy to use as it was a long winded operation with lots of questions.'

Male shopper, aged 45-54

'I noticed the templates but these were not suitable for the size of my parcel. I could not see a box sizing guide.'

Female shopper, aged 45-54

A significant minority of shoppers (15%) said the wording used on the SSK wasn't clear. This included scanning instructions, insufficient or unclear information on delivery terms and lack of clarity on dangerous items. Shoppers also specifically mentioned confusion over the difference between 'buying stamps' and 'posting an item' and the meaning of 'finish and go'.

## **Consumers are more likely to use a SSK if staff are available**

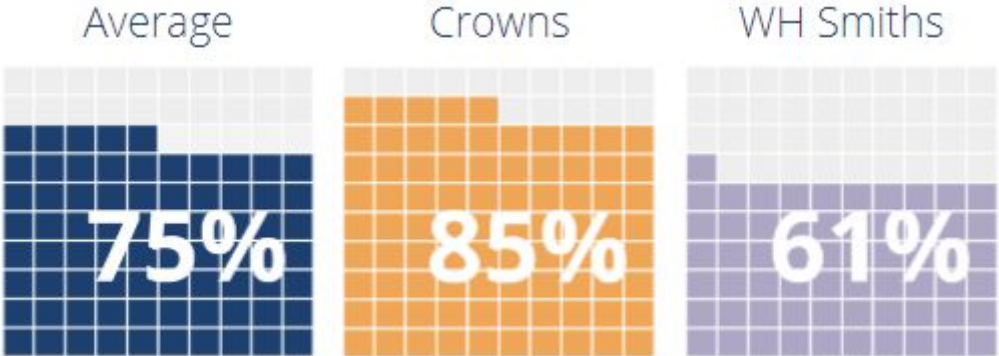
Post office staff play a key role assisting consumers to use SSKs. Partly their role is to encourage consumers to use the SSK. Post office operators confirm that a good 'host' is important for 'customer conversion' to SSK use.

Consumers are more likely to use a SSK if staff are available. Almost 6 in 10 consumers (56%) say they are more likely to use a SSK if a member of staff is there to help.

Our mystery shopping research found that generally, staff are available. There were staff present near the machines in 75% of visits, but staff were

less likely to be present in WH Smith post offices (85% of Crown office visits, and 61% of WH Smith visits). This is a particular concern as POL has recently announced that it will be franchising an additional 41 Crown branches to WH Smith.

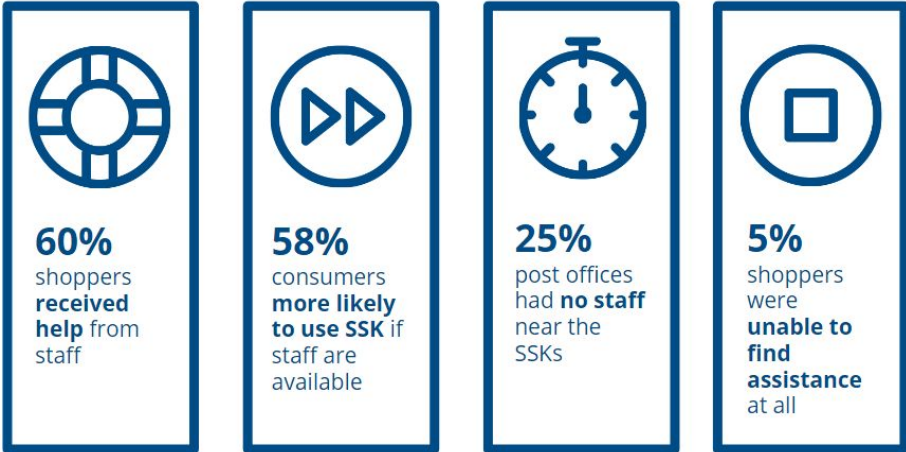
**Figure 5. Staff are less likely to be near SSKs in WH Smith post offices**



### Most shoppers receive staff assistance to complete a transaction

Many SSK mail transactions require input from a member of staff to validate the item that is to be posted, these include ‘Signed For’ services and parcels of high value that require additional insurance. In some cases customers must wait for a member of staff to collect the item from them for posting.

Our research indicates that staff help is critical for a high proportion of SSK users. 6 in 10 (60%) mystery shoppers received assistance when using the SSK. 2 in 3 (66%) of those who received assistance didn’t think they could have completed the transaction without it.<sup>20</sup>



Of all shoppers who used a SSK, almost 1 in 4 (24%) reported that they were

<sup>20</sup> Based on mystery shops of 7 scenarios (see Appendix)

required to seek staff intervention as part of the transaction. Other reasons for shoppers receiving staff assistance were because they asked for it as they were unsure or something went wrong (17%), for example the stamp got stuck inside the machine. Some shoppers (18%) were spontaneously offered help.

Although staff are usually available to help customers use a SSK, a number of shoppers said they found it frustrating to wait for a member of staff to take their postage item. But, overall, only 5% of shoppers were unable to find assistance, although this rose to 10% in WH Smith post offices (1% in Crown post offices).<sup>21</sup>

## SSK service is as accurate as counter service

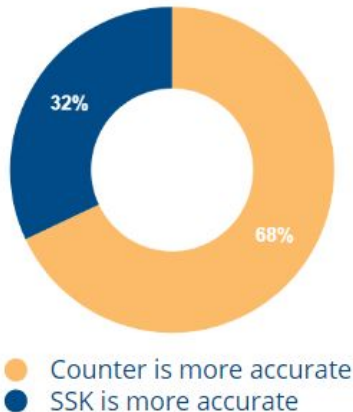
Our mystery shopping research indicates that consumers are as likely to receive the right service from a SSK as from a post office counter. Shoppers were given identical postal transactions to carry out at a SSK and a counter. Over 7 in 10 (71%) of shoppers paid the expected postage price at a SSK, and a similar number (73%) paid the expected price at the counter.

However, shoppers were slightly more likely to underpay for their postage at a SSK.<sup>22</sup> The outcome may be that consumers do not purchase a postal service that fully meets their needs (for example, in terms of insurance, tracking or speed of service) at a SSK than at a counter. It is important that SSKs clearly show information about products, ensuring that consumers are easily able to understand the features of the service they are choosing.

## Consumers are less confident about SSK service accuracy

Although our findings indicate service is as accurate at a SSK as a counter, consumers tend to think the counter service is more likely to provide them with the correct product.

**Figure 6. Shoppers believe counter service is more accurate**



Where shoppers paid different postage for the same item at machines and counters, almost 7 in 10 felt more confident with the counter service. Only around 3 in 10 were more confident that they'd got the right service from the SSK (figure 6).

These findings are supported by our consumer survey, which also found consumers are more likely to think they'll get an accurate service at a staffed counter than at a SSK.

<sup>21</sup> % of shoppers who needed assistance and were unable to find it

<sup>22</sup> 18% of shoppers paid too little at SSK, 11% paid too little at counter

## 4. Future of post office self service

Our research clearly shows that SSKs can speed up post office service provision for consumers. SSKs may also free up staff time to provide more support to consumers with complex transactions, and help for more vulnerable consumers at the counter.

Operators have told us that SSKs could lead to efficiency savings for larger post offices by reducing staffing costs. In the context of a challenging environment for post office operators, the benefits of efficiency savings from SSKs would be a welcome move for them and the sustainability of the post office network.<sup>23</sup>

### Many consumers would like to see more post office SSKs

Consumers are generally positive about the idea of post office SSKs. Over 4 in 10 (43%) consumers think SSKs should be available in all or most post offices - a significant increase from the 2% of post offices that currently host them.<sup>24</sup> SSKs particularly appeal to younger people, 68% of 18-24s would like to see SSKs in all or most branches.

Currently, SSKs are only available in some Crown and WH Smith post offices. However, as POL continues to franchise its Crown post offices, transferring them to independent management, Citizens Advice is concerned that SSKs are retained in these branches.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst a significant number of consumers would like to see a major increase in SSKs, there may be some limitations to any future expansion. Some post office operators have told us that the present model of SSK could only be of economic benefit in larger post offices. SSKs are less likely to yield staff savings in small or medium sized post offices, if the machines need to be 'hosted' at all times. Other issues include the physical space taken up by SSKs, particularly in smaller post offices, and the costs to operators of leasing the machines.

### Consumers would benefit from SSK improvements

As we have seen, shoppers raise a range of issues about the current Post Office SSKs. Many shoppers felt there are too many menus and pieces of equipment. A number of shoppers said they found the terminology confusing or unclear. Some had difficulty finding items. Shoppers also expressed their frustration at having to wait for staff in order to complete their transaction. Some post office operators have also told us that technological improvements need to be made to

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<sup>23</sup> Citizens Advice, [Transformation Health Check](#), January 2017

<sup>24</sup> 67% of consumers think SSKs should be available in at least some, most, or all post offices

<sup>25</sup> Numbers of Crown post offices have reduced year on year. Crown offices totalled 254 in June 2018, compared with 285 in 2017, 315 in 2016. Franchise of a further 74 Crown offices were announced in October 2018.

SSKs, describing the current technology as 'clunky' or awkward to use.

A number of post office operators felt consumers could benefit from a post office SSK that was integrated with retail self service machines based within the host store (such a supermarket). This would enable consumers to use a single self service point to purchase retail goods alongside Post Office services.

Some operators also thought POL should extend the range of Post Office services on SSKs. For example, in the context of bank branch closures, banking services could be an important addition.

## 24 hour access would be a draw to SSKs for some consumers

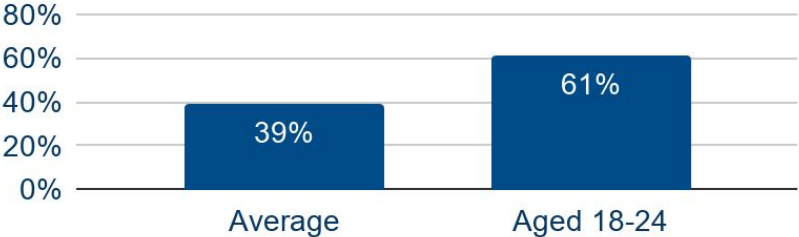
Post Office SSKs currently require staff intervention for a significant number of transactions. In practice, for SSKs to operate on a standalone basis, without staff support for customers, the machines would need to become easier to operate (more 'intuitive'). Additionally POL procedures would need to be altered, removing the need for staff intervention on any SSK transactions and resolving issues around the safe storage of mail.

Standalone SSKs have already been developed, and are available in some overseas post offices. For example, Canada Post has recently opened 'self service parcel shipping stations' offering 24/7 access and including a parcel hatch for posting.<sup>26</sup>

We asked consumers about their views on a hypothetical standalone UK self service machine, which may be located away from a post office and would not have staff available to assist. The majority of consumers said that if their local post office permanently closed only 32% said they would be more likely to use a standalone SSK instead of visiting another post office. However, if a standalone SSK offered 24 hour access to some Post Office services, the number of consumers who said they would use a SSK rose to 39% (61% of 18-24 year olds).

### Figure 7. Young people are most likely to use a 24 hour standalone SSK

*Percentage of people more likely to use a 24 hour standalone SSK than an existing post office branch*



<sup>26</sup> Postal and Parcel Technology International, [Canada Opens Self-Service Shipping Stores, 24/7/18](#)

# Conclusion and recommendations

The Post Office's self service machines can play an important role for consumers. Our research shows SSKs can significantly reduce queuing times. Most consumers find SSKs easy to use, although some experience difficulties with certain aspects of the machines. Self service is particularly popular with younger people, and SSKs could help post offices meet the needs of this age group.

While self service is not for everyone, SSKs can free up staff to assist those who need or want a more personal service. SSKs may also help make the larger post offices more financially sustainable, and able to provide service to consumers into the future.

Despite these clear benefits, and high satisfaction rates amongst shoppers who used SSKs, the majority of consumers have never used Post Office self service. We recommend 4 improvements to maximise consumer benefits from post office self service. POL should

## **1. Significantly increase, by at least double, the number of post offices with SSKs, and retain SSKs in Crown branches that go on to be franchised**

Currently SSK provision is fairly limited, available in around 220 Crown and WH Smith branches only. This equates to around 2% of the post office network, compared with 60% SSKs in the myHermes parcel shop network. This indicates that the provision of SSKs is largely based on the type of operator running the branch, rather than primarily by customer need. We are concerned that, as POL continues to franchise Crown branches, provision of SSKs could reduce just at the point that they should be increasing.

Citizens Advice suggests that POL develops an appropriate operator contract, so that SSKs can be retained where Crown branches have transferred to franchise operators. This includes retaining SSKs in the 74 Crown branches that POL has recently announced will be franchised.<sup>27</sup> We also recommend that POL considers an initial extension of SSKs to the busiest post offices. For example installing SSKs in branches with over 2,500 customer sessions per week, could expand self service provision by more than double.

*After viewing an advance draft of our recommendations, POL informed us that they are starting a trial to extend SSKs in around 30 additional post offices. The trial, which ends in April 2019, will include agency (individual operator) and multiple retailer (large retailers such as supermarkets) post offices. POL's annual report 2017/18 also states they are developing their 'proposition for retail partners', including self service technology.<sup>28</sup> Citizens Advice will be reviewing the trial in summer 2019, and working with POL on future SSK development ensuring*

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<sup>27</sup> In October 2018, Post Office Ltd announced 74 Crown post offices would be franchised

<sup>28</sup> Post Office Ltd, [Annual Report and Financial Statements 2017/18](#), September 2018



*that SSKs can best meet consumer needs.*

*In addition, POL has confirmed that as part of the forthcoming 74 Crown changes, branches currently with SSKs will retain SSK machines after being franchised.*

## **2. Improve consumer awareness of SSKs in branch**

Our research shows that habit or lack of confidence is a key barrier to many consumers accessing the benefits of SSKs. POL needs to improve signage alerting consumers to the range of services available at the SSKs and, in particular, should introduce signs to highlight the key consumer benefit of a quicker service.

POL should also ensure post office operators are providing assistance to increase consumer awareness of SSK services, and help consumers complete transactions. Our findings show in a significant minority of cases (25%) staff are not present near SSKs, although staff presence is important for consumers using machines. This is a particular concern with the expansion in the number of post offices franchised to WH Smith - our research finds staff are less likely to be present near machines in WH Smith branches than in Crown offices.

*POL confirmed that they are currently undertaking a review of post office signage. This includes signage for self service and covers the services offered through a SSK. Citizens Advice will follow up on POL's actions, after the review has been completed in summer 2019.*

*POL told us they aim to ensure 'a consistency of service across branch types', and will continue to work with operators 'to encourage the provision of hosts/staff to support customer usage of SSKs'. Citizens Advice will follow up with POL on the training and support provided to post office operators at the conclusion of the expansion trial review in summer 2019.*

## **3. Make the current stock of SSKs easier to use and improve reliability**

There are a number of areas where improvements to the machines would lead to better customer outcomes.

Citizens Advice recommends POL improves the reliability of the SSKs by addressing the underlying issues that are causing machine breakdown, and ensuring machines are fixed quickly when not working.

POL should make it easier for consumers to identify and find equipment (such as sizing templates) and labels. POL should also reduce the numbers of steps on the screens where possible, reframe confusing descriptions and add clarifying images.

*Since we shared the results of this research with POL, POL has investigated and fixed the main issues leading to a machine going into a frozen state or requiring a reboot. POL informs us that SSKs are now significantly more reliable and any problems can now be resolved more quickly. Citizens Advice understands from*

*other operators that there has been a noticeable improvement in SSK reliability within recent months.*

*We welcome this important improvement in the operation of SSKs. It is critical that POL continues to monitor SSK reliability and implements modifications where necessary, to ensure consumer confidence in the machines is maintained and queuing times are reduced.*

*POL also reports that it is currently undertaking work to simplify the product journeys, making improvements to SSK transactions for customers and improving the sizing guides. Citizens Advice welcomes these planned improvements and will follow up on progress with POL after the implementation of the changes in early 2019.*

#### **4. Develop new generation machines that are significantly more intuitive for consumers**

In the longer-term Citizens Advice would like to see SSKs that are easier to use. Like Canada Post, POL should develop kiosks with parcel sensors that automatically calculate parcel dimensions and weight, and print postage labels. This could make SSKs more appealing for consumers needing to purchase the more complex products, such as parcels and premium services.

A more intuitive SSK, provided alongside parcel hatches for posting, could enable POL to offer consumers 24/7 access to mail services via standalone kiosks. Our research indicates that 24 hour access to SSKs would be popular with some consumers.

*POL informs us that they may be looking at the next generation of machines within the next 18 months to 2 years, providing there is a commercial case to support this. POL also plans to test the concept of standalone SSKs towards the end of 2018, or early in 2019.*

*Citizens Advice will follow up with POL on progress with developing standalone SSKs during our early review of SSK progress in 2019, and over the next 2 years.*

# Appendix - research method

Unless otherwise referenced, the findings referred to in this report are from the following research studies.

## **Consumer survey**

Citizens Advice commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake a face to face survey of 2,057 GB adults between 16 March 2018 and 12 April 2018. The sample was weighted for demographic factors.

The survey examined how consumers use self service at post offices and in other sectors. Consumers were also asked about post office self service use in hypothetical scenarios.

## **Mystery shopping**

Citizens Advice commissioned Newlann Mystery Shopping to undertake a mystery shopping survey of 299 post offices with SSKs. 299 mystery shoppers were selected to represent a spread of gender and age groups, a spread of previous SSK use and a spread of post office usage frequencies.

Shoppers were instructed to visit post offices and purchase two postage products using identical needs based on one of seven scenarios (2nd Class Large Letter, Signed for 2nd Class Small Parcel, Signed for 2nd Class Letter, International Parcel, International Letter, 2nd Class Medium Parcel, 2nd Class stamp). Shoppers were not given the name of the postage product, but simply given a set of needs which should have led them to buy these products. Each shopper was instructed to purchase their first postage at the SSK and their second at the counter.

Visits took place between 2 February 2018 and 15 March 2018. Visits were spread across Crown post offices (174 visits) and WH Smith post offices (125 visits). The sample was also spread across days of the week and times of day.

# We help people find a way forward

Citizens Advice provides free, confidential and independent advice to help people overcome their problems.

We advocate for our clients and consumers on the issues that matter to them.

We value diversity, champion equality and challenge discrimination.

We're here for everyone.



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