

Ofcom review of postal users' needs consultation

Response from Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

1. About us

As the largest organisation of blind and partially sighted people in the UK, RNIB is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

We are a membership organisation with over 10,000 members who are blind, partially sighted or the friends and family of people with sight loss. 80 per cent of our Trustees and Assembly Members are blind or partially sighted. We encourage members to be involved in our work and regularly consult with them on government policy and their ideas for change.

As a campaigning organisation of blind and partially sighted people, we fight for the rights of people with sight loss in each of the UK's countries. Our priorities are to:

- Stop people losing their sight unnecessarily
- Support independent living for blind and partially sighted people
- Create a society that is inclusive of blind and partially sighted people's interests and needs.

We also provide expert knowledge to business and the public sector through consultancy on improving the accessibility of the built environment, technology, products and services.

2. The importance of the postal service for blind and partially sighted people

Blind and partially sighted people face many barriers to accessing information and to inclusion in society. To overcome these in the field of reading, they need information in “accessible formats” such as Braille.

Braille is bulky. A short novel, such as *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, takes up four Braille volumes, each A4 size, and about 2cms thick.

Producing Braille is expensive and the quantity produced is limited. The provision of free reading material for blind students, professionals or ordinary individuals wanting access to information or leisure reading became and has continued to be largely the responsibility of non-profit organisations. The dispersal of blind people over wide geographic areas meant that standards of access to information and library services set for the general population could not be easily and cheaply extended to blind people.

Recognising these inherent inequities, Royal Mail has long provided an exemption from postal charges for "Articles for the Blind" to permit access to literacy and learning which would otherwise be too expensive.

These days, articles for the blind include newer formats such as sound recordings and CDs, since the same problems relating to distribution and access continue to apply regardless of format. Royal Mail's modern "Articles for the Blind" service therefore now applies to a wider variety of items which are specifically designed to ensure that blind and partially sighted people can access information and overcome other barriers in society.

Along with the barriers to accessing information that blind people face, the majority of blind and partially sighted people also have greater difficulty in getting around than the rest of the population. Blind people often find travel more costly than others, given that many rely on taxis or public transport which cost more per mile than driving.

Aside from the importance of the Articles for the Blind scheme, many online shops use Royal Mail to deliver goods. Given the mobility problems blind and partially sighted people have, many prefer to shop online.

The postal service therefore fulfils a vital role in bringing goods and accessible information to blind or partially sighted people, so that they do not need to go to the goods or information.

3. RNIB's responses to the consultation questions

RNIB asked blind and partially sighted people to give their views about this consultation and we quote these where appropriate.

We have also limited our responses to those questions we deem to be of greatest relevance to blind and partially sighted people.

Question 7.1. Do you have any views on the results presented on general satisfaction and use of post?

RNIB notes that page 52 of the consultation document states that "disabled people were those most likely to say they would feel "cut off" without the post (71%)".

RNIB agrees with this statement. Furthermore, for the reasons expressed in section 2 of our response above, we believe that the danger of exclusion without the post would apply particularly to blind and partially sighted people.

In terms of general satisfaction with the postal service, we have certainly not been deluged with complaints. In response to our consultation of blind and partially sighted people, we did however, receive such comments as:

"I receive a local Talking newspaper on a memory stick once a week via the Articles for The Blind. This is reportedly posted on a Monday afternoon and I receive it Wednesday lunchtime. I then send the memory stick back in post for it to be collected by my local Talking Newspaper on a Friday. Therefore the memory stick spends more time in the post than me playing it even though its approx 5 miles to my nearest postal sorting office!"

"Sorry I can not trust the postal services in England as my mail has got lost a few times even with articles for the blind and also stamped envelopes as I was waiting for days and it never came. When I asked for it again it was recorded delivery as I put a complaint into the organisation who sent me important documents through the post."

“The speed and frequency of the deliveries is - as a general rule - acceptable, but I do have an issue with the postal workers themselves. They fold things clearly containing articles for the blind labels so as to shove them through the letterbox, damaging them and making parts of the braille difficult to read (they do this with other items too, but for the purpose of your campaign it's the braille items that matter). They leave my gate open so that my neighbours have to help me find my dog when he gets out, and - despite my constant reminders of my lack of vision - they practically throw my post at me. In fact, before now I've had to crawl around by my front door searching for dropped items of post because they've literally thrown them past me through the open doorway then walked off. Now, we have had some decent postal workers, but this is the kind of thing I have to deal with most of the time. It's frustrating and upsetting, but when I complained I was told nobody could do anything because I couldn't identify which specific postal worker it was. Well, of course I can't, I'm completely blind so can't see them.”

“I do not trust postal system in England and I go round to family, friends and local businesses personally as I know they will get it safely. For others who live or work further away I sent recorded delivery so I know the important things have arrived safely with them and ask them to email me if they have or have not received it. I usually use email for mailing people locally and further away as it is easier to do that on the computer.”

We also received this comment:

“It's splendid and should be left alone in public hands!”

And we recognise that it is possible that those who are disgruntled with the postal service are more likely to respond to our call for comments than generally satisfied customers.

Packet services

Question 8.1. Do you have any views on the results presented in relation to packet delivery services?

RNIB believes that, since many blind and partially sighted people prefer to shop online and receive deliveries at home via packets, the packet service is of particular importance for them. We would therefore be interested to hear about Ofcom's deliberations on the possibility of making packet services more flexible for users. Given the importance of this service, we do not believe that it should be reduced in scope.

Next day delivery (questions 9.1-9.5)

Some blind and partially sighted people have told us that next-day delivery is important to them.

Since blind and partially sighted people have greater difficulty than most in getting around, and incur greater costs when they do so, a speedy postal service is of greater value to them than to many other users.

“I find it important for post to be delivered the day after posting and I would like to keep the first and second class service.”

Number of collection and delivery days (questions 11.1-11.4)

RNIB believes that, given their greater reliance than most on postal services, blind and partially sighted people would benefit from the continuation of the six collection and delivery days per week.

These respondents were very clear on the matter:

“Yes, the requirement for six collection days meets my needs and also for six delivery days”

“Six days a week collection and delivery is good and I am happy with delivery and collection times to remain as they are.”

Collection and delivery times (questions 12.1-12.7)

We did hear from a couple of respondents that they are not happy about the tendency towards later deliveries over these past years, such as:

“The collection from my local post box does not matter so much as long as it gets to the destination in the time as per the postage paid. The delivery to my door is already too late in the day. A few years ago it used to be first thing in the morning. Then it got to mid morning. Now I’m lucky if I receive it by 1.00 pm. I find this an inferior service if you're expecting medical appointments in the form of a letter which needs to be changed quickly and I'm out for the day or receiving payments by cheque.”

Delivery to the door (questions 13.1-13.3)

RNIB agrees with the comment in 13.21:

“13.21 Users have a strong preference for delivery to the door and alternative delivery points are unlikely to meet postal users’ needs. Given this, we have not sought detailed information on the costs of delivery to the door. We expect that there are likely to be some cost savings, but also additional costs incurred for alternative delivery points.”

In line with the reference in 13.21, it is important for blind and partially sighted people that their post is delivered to their door.

One said:

“It is extremely important for post to be delivered to my door”

And another:

“Yes, it is important for post to be delivered to my door. There is too much vandalism and theft to have an outside mailbox. And it would be time consuming to collect it from a sorting office.”

Conclusion

Though certainly, blind and partially sighted people are to some extent following the national trends towards substitution of physical post for alternative means such as email, postal services remain particularly important to them. This importance is reflected by the continued popularity of the free “Articles for the Blind” service which blind and partially sighted people still use and value.

Furthermore, given the fact that the majority of the UK’s blind and partially sighted people are older people, section 1.6 of the consultation document is relevant. It states: “older users are more likely to rely on the universal postal service for communicating with others”.

RNIB will therefore continue to closely follow Ofcom’s work on the needs of postal users and the application of the universal service, and we will be happy to provide further information to help Ofcom’s work in this area. We would certainly wish to carefully examine any Ofcom proposals to change the regulatory framework for the universal postal service.