



**Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on
Communications, Climate Action and Environment**

17 January 2017

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Good evening Cathaoirleach and to the other members of the committee.

Age Action is Ireland's leading campaign organisation for older people and on ageing issues, providing services to tens of thousands of older people every year, and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Communications Regulation (Postal Services) (Amendment) Bill 2016

I would like to begin by making a few remarks regarding the Communications Regulation (Postal Services) (Amendment) Bill 2016 and to record our concern at the likely impact of this legislation on older people.

I think it is recognised by all that older people are more likely to make use of the postal service for sending and receiving letters. An increase in the price of the stamp could, according to some media reports, see the price of a national stamp rise to between 90 cent and a euro.¹

I can tell committee members with absolute certainty that an increase of that magnitude, 25 per cent at the lower end, will certainly be noticed by someone whose sole income is the State Pension.

It will mean older people making a conscious decision to send fewer letters with a corresponding knock-on effect for postal volumes. I would expect that a potential increase of this nature would not have been considered without detailed research to assess its likely impact on existing mail volumes.

I think it would be helpful to the debate if that research was published and, if it has not been carried out, I believe it should be commissioned as it would be a mistake to proceed with removing the price cap in its absence.

I would also recommend to the committee that it considers amending section two of the Bill to ensure that a review of the consequences of any repeal of the price cap should start no later than a year after the commencement of the Act.

As currently drafted it would – optimistically assuming no delays – be two and a half years after the repeal of the price cap before a review was delivered to the minister by the Commission for Communications Regulation, with a further delay before it is made public and then possibly another delay before any necessary corrective measures could be implemented.

If it turns out removing the price cap is a mistake, then the sooner we can identify any problem and correct it the better.

Report of the Post Office Network Business Development Group

¹ <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/price-of-a-stamp-set-to-hit-1-under-emergency-measures-to-save-an-post-434040.html>

I would like to make some brief comments on the report prepared by the Post Office Business Development Group. I welcome the report's recognition that the post office is an "essential service for facilitating communication and interaction in local communities".²

It is especially important for older people who use the post office to collect pensions, access cash, pay their utility bills, save money, buy stamps and, most importantly, meet their friends.

One Age Action member described their local post office as, "the most sociable place in town" and for many pension day is the highlight of their week.

Other members with whom we spoke in advance of this meeting told us that the post office is the "only place to meet each other for a catch up" and that closing post offices helped to "isolate the elderly".

The closure of post offices in rural communities forces older people to rely on a rural transport system that is not fit for purpose or the kindness of friends and family members to get to the next town.

In the west Galway village of Cleggan, for example, the local post office closed in September 2015.³ The closure means that Cleggan's 260 residents must now travel 3 kilometres to Claddaghduff for postal services. A local resident explained that, "...pensioners and others with disabilities will struggle...to pick up their benefits".

And while the issue of post office closures is often seen as a rural one, urban communities are also affected. In advance of today's meeting one Age Action supporter told us that since the closure of the post office in Sandymount some older people are hiring taxis to get to other post offices to conduct their business.

While undoubtedly the importance of a post office is greater for more rural communities, we should not lose sight of the centrality of this service in our larger towns and cities as well.

Rise of online communications

The report touches frequently on the increasing use of online communications. With the rise of email there is a corresponding decline in postal volumes. As a society, we are certainly becoming more digitally focused, but it is important to appreciate that not everyone is moving at the same pace.

A September 2015 Eurostat report found that only 37 per cent of Irish people aged between 65 and 74 use the internet, which compares unfavourably with Britain where the figure is 70 per cent.⁴ Across the EU as a whole, the average for internet use among that age group is 42 per cent.

² Report of the Post Office Network Business Development Group, page 45

³ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/irish-lives-fight-for-a-postal-lifeline-1.2340598>

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7012459/3-29092015-AP-EN.pdf/0b823ac4-cbcb-46b0-a248-0acfb91626a7>

These figures take no account of people aged 75 and over. The most recent figure for them comes from the National Digital Strategy, published in 2013, which found that, “internet use among those aged 75 and over is negligible at only about 3 per cent”.⁵

This is not because older people are incapable of learning. Over 10 years Age Action's Getting Started Programme, which is funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, has provided free one-to-one training in computers to almost 30,000 older people. We know that older people are as capable of mastering new technologies as anyone else.

But we also see the nervousness about learning something new. We see the frustration of someone leaving our classes only to return home to a broadband blackspot, unable to put to use what he or she has learned.

For these people, despite the rise in the use of email, a robust and sustainable post office service and network remains essential for communicating with friends and family, and for carrying out one's daily business.

Post offices and financial services

We strongly support the recommendations in the report to provide expanded banking and financial services. We look forward to the introduction of the new payment account highlighted by An Post's Mr John Daly in his statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs.⁶

The report notes that banks are moving away from providing financial services in rural communities but I am not certain committee members fully appreciate the frustration felt by many older people with their current banking providers.

Research carried out in 2014 by the County Wicklow Network for Older People found that many older people are very critical of the service provided in their banks. They are frustrated by restrictions on counter services, by pressure from bank staff to use automated services and by the continued efforts of banks to move services online.

It is a recurring complaint that our staff hears from older people across the country who prefer to carry out their financial business face-to-face, dealing with people they know, trust and on whom they rely. I believe there is an enormous opportunity here for An Post, one that I suspect many older people will be eager to avail of.

I would like to thank committee members for their time.

ENDS

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<http://www.dccae.gov.ie/communications/Lists/Publications%20Documents/National%20Digital%20Strategy%20July%202013%20compressed.pdf> Page 6

⁶

<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/committeetakes/RG22016110900002?opendocument#C00100>