

Cross Party Group in The Scottish Parliament on Postal Issues

Minutes of the meeting on 17th June 2014 at 17:30

Present:

MSPs

Kenneth Gibson MSP (Co-convenor and Chair)

Hugh Henry MSP (Co-convenor)

External Organisations

Sarah Beattie-Smith – Citizens Advice Scotland

Ian McKay – Ofcom Advisory Panel

Hannah Frodsham – Competition and Markets Authority

Claire Mack – Ofcom

John Brown – Communications Workers' Union

Rob Gowans – Citizens Advice Scotland

Andy Burrows – Citizens Advice (England and Wales)

Connie Hewitt – Post Office Ltd

Greg Black – Citizens Advice Scotland (minutes)

Apologies

Patricia Ferguson MSP

Jamie McGrigor MSP

Rod Campbell MSP

Felicity Macfarlane – Royal Mail

Julie Pirone – Royal Mail

Colin Borland – Federation of Small Businesses

Mairi MacLeod – Communications Consumer Panel

Vicki Nash – Ofcom

1. Welcome

Kenneth Gibson MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting and AGM, introductions were made.

2. Approval of minutes from meeting of 21 January 2014

Minutes were approved without alteration.

3. Short introduction to Consumer Futures as part of Citizens Advice Scotland

Sarah Beattie Smith, Consumer Futures Scotland Manager from CAS, gave an outline of how Consumer Futures will work both as a part of CAS and with colleagues across GB in London and Cardiff. She highlighted the joined up responsibility for regulated industries, and agreed to circulate Consumer Futures 2014/15 workplan to CPG members. Ms Beattie-Smith noted that while Consumer Futures' capacity would be replicated within CAS, the team has just been recruited, and will not be in post until the end of this month.

Ms Beattie-Smith also focused on recent CAS work around rural parcel deliveries, in particular the report by Rob Gowans 'The Postcode Penalty: The Business Burden', which was published in April, and agreed to feedback to the next CPG about a meeting she is hoping to have with Fergus Ewing, Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism, about parcel deliveries. Ms Beattie-Smith also touched on ongoing work with the British Retail Consortium about rural deliveries; and planned business education work with the Federation of Small Businesses and the Scottish Retail Consortium to spread good delivery practices.

4. AGM: Election of office bearers

Hugh Henry MSP and Kenneth Gibson MSP were re-elected as co-convenors for another year.

Patricia Ferguson MSP, Jamie McGrigor MSP and Roderick Campbell MSP all indicated in their apologies that they are happy to remain as members for another year.

Citizens Advice Scotland has taken over secretariat duties from Consumer Futures; the group will also move from 5 to 4 meetings a year.

5. Post Office transformation and diversification

Andy Burrows, Head of Post Office Services at Citizens Advice, gave an informative and in depth presentation on Post Office Transformation and Diversification. He also spoke about role of, and research undertaken by, Citizens Advice in this area. He indicated that the changes Post Offices are undergoing are likely to continue until 2017 or 2018. He spoke about the changes as an attempt to end the structural decline of Post Offices, linked to the lower number of people using them as well as a way to end the need for such major government subsidies. Mr Burrows explained that this had the potential to bring consumer benefits, such as longer opening hours.

Mr Burrows explained that Post Offices are now entering into a new phase of transformation, and there is now an element of compulsion for Post Offices to change, or another suitable partner would be found in the area to provide Post Office services. However, 'last shop in the village' type services were being ring-fenced and protected to ensure the continuation of a universal service. He also explained the role of Citizens Advice in this transformation was to scrutinise and review proposals, with potential escalation routes if CA feels its views are not being listened to. However, ultimately it does not have the power of veto. Nonetheless, Mr Burrows was keen to stress that until now, The Post Office has been by-and-large a listening and flexible partner.

Members of the CPG were interested to hear that issues including the range of products and services offered by a Post Office are taken into account during the review process. Some members considered greater weight should be given to these considerations during the review process, and also raised concerns about staff knowledge and physicality of the Post Office location within a shop.

Particular concerns raised by CPG members over the Diversification and Transformation also included the results of CA's "secret shopping" and ability of convenience store staff to effectively operate the Post Offices' functions, given the higher likelihood of staff churn and the greater range of tasks/responsibilities. It was mooted that this might be taken as an opportunity to simplify the Post Office's range of products.

Ms Hewitt, from the Post Office, pointed out that full training is provided to new operators of post offices and that in addition to the secret shopping conducted by CA and referred to in Mr Burrows' presentation, Post Office carries out its own research and secret shopping.

6. Themes for future meetings and dates

The next meeting will be at 5:30pm on Tuesday 19th August 2014.

Possible future themes include:

- Hearing more about the impact on businesses of parcel delivery charges.
- TNT to give update on how their delivery network will look and its roll out of services.
- Ask Royal Mail to give an update on its research into its competition.