
For Written Answer on : 07/09/2018
Question Number(s): 1063 Question Reference(s): 36826/18
Department: Communications, Climate Action and Environment
Asked by: Brendan Smith T.D.

QUESTION

[Ref No.: 36826/18]

* To ask the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the measures he plans to implement to secure the post office network in view of its importance throughout the country with particular reference to the needs of rural communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. - Brendan Smith.

* For WRITTEN answer on Friday, 7th September, 2018.

(1885 Received on 3rd September, 2018.)

REPLY

As Minister, I am responsible for the postal sector including the governance of An Post. I am acutely conscious of the value placed by communities in both rural and urban areas on services provided by post offices and am committed to ensuring that a sustainable post office network is available to all our citizens for the medium and for the long term.

The post office network has been facing many challenges for some years now with a continuing decline in transaction numbers primarily driven by the move to online payments and online banking, as well as eSubstitution. Standing still is not an option for the network.

In April this year An Post announced a renewed vision for the post office network which centres around the availability of new services in a modernised, revitalised network. The announcement was supported by an agreement reached between An Post and the Irish Postmasters Union (IPU) executive following months of intensive negotiations, and was subsequently endorsed by 80% of IPU members. In its negotiations with An Post, Postmasters sought both the modernisation of the network and a voluntary redundancy package for those who wanted to leave the business.

The agreement represents a necessary first step in reinvigorating our national post office network and making it a viable sustainable, modern and vibrant network for the future, capable of adapting to the changing environment in which it operates by providing a service that meets the needs of communities across the country, particularly in rural areas.

As part of its strategy for modernising the post office network, An Post has established a dedicated business unit within An Post, An Post Retail. Additional services that An Post propose to introduce through the network include a better range of Government services, financial services and e-commerce services for shoppers and small businesses. There is already a rapid expansion of banking services happening with the Smart Current Account and enhanced foreign exchange facilities. Post offices will have credit card services and will be able to provide loans to small business and personal loans. An Post is committed to ensuring that our post offices will be equipped with the range of services that will attract and retain footfall but these measures are meaningless unless the public use the services provided. Key to the survival of this renewed network is the willingness of all citizens to use it.

Government business is the backbone of the network. In April this year the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection renewed her Department's contract with An Post to provide pensions, child benefit and other social welfare payments at post offices.

While Government policy is to offer Government services online, there is always likely to be a segment of the population that is not comfortable or proficient accessing online tools or services. The post office network is the obvious choice as the "offline gateway" for citizens with its nationwide network and existing strong relationship with offline citizens. Government funding of €80,000 has been allocated to roll a pilot scheme for Digital Assist which will see 10 post offices equipped to help citizens with online Government interactions. The 10 pilot schemes are being currently rolled out in rural post offices.

In addition, I have secured Government approval to explore how further services might be made available to our "offline citizens". This would be delivered via a centralised procurement framework. A Working Group comprising representatives across Government Departments is to be established to consider this issue and will report back by the end of year.