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Behind the scenes at An Post: What does it take to offer new postal social services during COVID-19?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An Post reacted quickly to the current COVID-19 pandemic, implementing six new social services to support communities. Ideas for these services were sourced from customers, staff, unions and the national government. Staff have been operating in emergency mode, implementing new projects without additional external resources. Significant reorganization has taken place within An Post to adopt new working arrangements, coordinate various initiatives, and support the national response to the pandemic. A willingness to listen to customer needs and to work closely with the communications team appears to have been key to the success of these projects.

Amongst the many Posts diversifying their services in response to the pandemic, Ireland's An Post stands out for the speed, variety and visibility of its actions. While ensuring the continuity of core postal business, An Post has established six new initiatives to support and promote the wellbeing of communities. More details can be found in the recent UPU news article about An Post, and on the UPU webpage devoted to new postal [social](#) and [financial](#) services.

The focus of this commentary is to highlight some of the internal organizational processes to consider when establishing new postal social services in response to COVID-19. Details and insights have been drawn from interviews with An Post managers directly involved in the rollout of new services. Its purpose is to explore practical actions that could enable Posts to play a major national role in reducing the social impacts of the pandemic. However, every Post is unique; differences in resources, cultural norms, organizational structure and relationships with national governments will influence the process of offering new social services. Nonetheless, sharing the experiences of an individual Post is intended to start a broader discussion about how Posts can react quickly, efficiently and effectively to support the public.

The social impacts of the pandemic are numerous, yet many Posts are well-placed to address those impacts. A

major concern is that government policies promoting social distancing also result in significant and widespread [psychological impacts](#). Additional sources of anxiety and stress include the threats associated with illness, job insecurity, home-schooling, remote working, and difficulties in accessing essential products and services. For many people, regular postal deliveries may be the only direct social contact they have had since lockdown measures were imposed, even in urban areas. For vulnerable citizens, who are encouraged to observe the greatest level of social distancing, [home check-in services](#), such as that recently established by An Post, may be particularly valuable.

Aside from direct contact with mail carriers, Posts can reduce the social impact of the pandemic in other ways. This is exemplified by An Post initiatives to keep people connected to friends, family, communities and government institutions. Guidance issued by the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) on mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak encourages the public to connect with people in their local community who may need extra assistance. Families are also encouraged to provide practical and emotional support to older relatives and people with underlying health conditions. An Post initiatives to encourage communities to stay connected can be viewed as a direct response, such guidance; every household in Ireland has received free [postage-](#)

paid postcards, and letters are also being collected at no charge directly from the homes of vulnerable people. The WHO guidance also emphasizes the potential impact on people's mental health of a "near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak". Again, the role of Posts can be crucial for providing the public with clear information from trusted sources; many Posts, including An Post, have delivered government advice documents directly to people's homes. An Post has also recognized the potential stress associated with home-schooling, home-working and the loss of daily routine; new initiatives include the doorstep delivery of newspapers, reduced price postage for books, and free children's activity books.

When faced with so many positive examples, it is useful to examine various aspects, such as the readiness of An Post for this challenge, and potential key success factors in its delivery of new services. During the interview, An Post staff recognized that before the pandemic, new projects could take some time to become established. However, a strong culture of mail carriers providing informal support to the community was also reported, which, combined with recent initiatives to support the homeless community, may have placed An Post in a particularly strong position to implement new social services during the pandemic. An Post also began a revision of its business continuity plan in late 2019, which might have enhanced its ability to react quickly. The source of ideas for new postal social services during the pandemic provides another indication that An Post is well prepared. Many ideas have been suggested by customers directly to mail carriers, who have then worked with representatives from the Communications Workers' Union and the An Post management team to put some of these in place. In addition, strong government connections have meant that An Post has become part of the national response effort – prioritizing the continued function of the network and its financial services. An Post has featured in several of the government's daily press conferences.

At the start of the pandemic, the transition of large numbers of office-based staff to home-working represented a major change within the organization. This raises the interesting question of whether the urgent shift in typical working practices has led to greater openness for innovation, and less emphasis on the need for new

social services to be justified by a business case. An Post has also reported high levels of goodwill amongst both its customers and staff; sickness leave has actually dropped during the pandemic, and many staff have voluntarily postponed their leave/holidays. This perhaps explains how An Post has been able to continue to hit its key performance indicator (KPI) targets for its core business, while also expanding its social services, without additional revenue or funding.

Another key change within An Post has been the establishment of a COVID-19 Response Team, to ensure efficient sharing of information within the organization. Led by Ms Paula Butler (Chief Administrative Officer and Company Secretary), it has met regularly via videoconference. It is composed of: the Chief People Officer; Group Chief Information Officer; Facilities Manager; Director of Operations, Mails and Parcels; Network Transformation Director (Retail); Head of Corporate Communications; Strategy Implementation Manager; Head of Mail Operations Support; Head of Risk Management and Internal Audit; Safety Manager; Financial Director (Retail); Head of Employee Relations; a Software Engineer; an Occupational Health Advisor; Head of Service Delivery; Chief Regulatory Affairs Officer; and Director of HR Business Partnering, Retail and Corporate Matters. The role of the communications team appears to have been particularly important, in terms of both informing the public that post offices and home deliveries will continue to function, and that new services have been introduced. Communication activities have included active media engagement, mainstream advertising, and the use of social media. Information on new social services has also been grouped together in a [dedicated webpage](#).

As the initial shock from remote-working subsidies, and the new postal services become established, attention is turning to what will happen in the next few months. The pandemic appears to have accelerated many of the existing trends within the postal industry; the high parcel volumes being processed by An Post might never return to pre-pandemic levels, and the public may still expect some of the newly introduced social services to continue. It is, therefore, unclear how these new services will be sustained during the years ahead, as staff levels, goodwill and energy return to normal.

CONCLUSIONS

Key success factors for the rapid service implementation by An Post appear to be:

- A willingness to listen to the needs of customers;
- Leveraging previous experience in delivering social services;
- Strong connections with the national government office responsible for the response to COVID-19;
- An organization-wide recognition of the need for change and flexibility;
- A dedicated pandemic response team;
- A well-integrated communications team.