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-
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.

CONCLUSIONS