



Department for  
Business & Trade

# Early Insights Evaluation of Postmaster Engagement

June 2026

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## Joint Foreword

Postmasters sit at the heart of the Post Office network. They keep Post Office branches open in communities across the country, provide valued and trusted services, and play an essential role in maintaining a system that millions rely on every week.

Ensuring that the relationship between the Post Office and postmasters is strengthened following the Horizon IT scandal is an essential component of Government's ongoing work. Furthermore, ensuring postmasters are genuinely valued, heard and supported is an essential priority for Government, the Post Office, and the groups which exist to represent the voices of postmasters. This commitment is reflected in the Government's Green Paper which lays out the vision for the future of the Post Office. This vision includes the continued provision of critical services, supporting and having a visible presence on the high street, and embedding a positive culture in which postmasters are recognised as integral partners in the long-term success and financial sustainability of the business.

Central to these priorities is ensuring postmasters are engaged in a meaningful way over the decisions that impact their businesses and livelihoods. Recent years have seen important steps taken in the engagement of postmasters through the establishment of representative groups, governance forums, and collaboration between stakeholders. These reforms taken by the Post Office in recent years have marked significant progress toward a more transparent, equitable and representative approach to working with postmasters. However, all parties recognise the need to continue evolving to achieve the cultural and operational transformation that postmasters expect and deserve.

As called for by the Post Office and postmaster representative groups, the Department for Business and Trade commissioned this independent evaluation into the existing landscape of postmaster engagement initiatives. The Post Office and the Department acknowledge the need for an independent assessment of whether current arrangements truly ensure that postmasters are heard and factored into decision making and provide reliable insight into postmasters' own experiences and perceptions of these initiatives. DBT extended the scope of the evaluation to examine how the Post Office compares to best practice in similar, distributed organisations. The objective was to build a shared evidence base between stakeholders to understand what is working, where things remain unclear or inconsistent, and where the next phase of improvement should focus.

The evaluation provides an early, independent view of reforms that are in the early stages of establishment, with many of the structures examined being less than two years old. This piece of research should therefore be viewed as a lens into the varied postmaster experiences which can be learned from, and a way to identify realistic opportunities to strengthen engagement. This starting point and the learnings taken from this are essential if Government and the Post Office are to meet the Green Paper's ambitions and represent the genuine interests of postmasters.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to every postmaster and stakeholder who took the time to participate in the survey, interviews and discussions that underpin this report. Your honesty, candour, and willingness to share experiences, both positive and challenging, have shaped the findings and provided a powerful foundation for future improvement. We know that engagement requires

time, and that it is often undertaken around the demanding operational realities of a postmaster. The opinions and experiences shared by postmasters will directly support better policy, clearer governance, and a more effective partnership between Government, Post Office and the postmaster network and representative groups.

As this report makes clear, postmasters and stakeholders want engagement that is effective, ongoing, transparent, and rooted in genuine partnership. Postmasters want clear feedback about how their input influences decisions, representation that is visible and trusted, and recognition that commercial sustainability is essential for any engagement to feel meaningful. These messages are consistent across the postmaster landscape, and give all of us across Government, the Post Office and postmaster representative groups a clear mandate for action.

This is the beginning of the next phase of engagement. We encourage postmasters across the network, those already engaged and those who have not yet taken part, to continue sharing views, participating in initiatives, and helping shape the future direction of the Post Office. Rebuilding trust and strengthening engagement will take sustained effort, open dialogue, and mutual respect. We are committed to that journey, and this evaluation provides a vital foundation for the progress we need to make together.

*Department for Business and Trade*

*Post Office Limited*

*National Federation of SubPostmasters*

*Communication Workers Union*

*Voice of the Postmaster*

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Post Office Limited (Post Office) operates one of the largest retail networks in the UK, with around 11,500 branches serving communities across the country. Most branches are run by independent postmasters who own and operate their branches as a franchise under contract with Post Office.

The Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry revealed deep failings in the relationship between Post Office and postmasters. These failings extended beyond Horizon (the Post Office IT system at the centre of the scandal) to a broader culture in which postmasters' concerns were not consistently heard or acted upon.

In response to these findings, Post Office has set out a wider transformation plan through its 'New Deal for Postmasters', including a commitment to strengthen postmasters' voice within the business and improve how their views inform decision-making. As part of this, Post Office has introduced a set of engagement initiatives. These include formal governance forums, such as the Consultative Council and Postmaster Panel. These forums bring together Post Office leadership, postmaster representatives and government stakeholders. The initiatives also include ways of working together on day-to-day issues, such as Adopt-a-Function. This involves postmasters directly in the design and improvement of specific operational areas. Wider communication and feedback channels are also in place.

Taken together, these initiatives work at different levels of the organisation. Some shape strategic decisions, such as the governance forums. Others support communication and feedback across the network. Others build postmasters' views directly into how the business is run day-to-day. These are collectively described by Post Office as the Postmaster Inclusion Framework. These initiatives are intended to provide structured routes for postmasters to influence decision-making and improve two-way engagement between Post Office and the network. These reforms form part of a broader plan of change. They also sit within a wider policy context, including the Department for Business and Trade's (DBT) 'Green Paper: Future of Post Office' (July 2025).

This report presents the findings of an independent early insights evaluation of those initiatives, commissioned by DBT and carried out by [TONIC](#) between December 2025 and March 2026.

The evaluation is described as an early insights evaluation because many of the engagement initiatives are still new. They were introduced in the past 12 to 18 months and are still embedding across the organisation. The aim is therefore not to provide a final judgement on how effective they are. Instead, it is to gather evidence on how they are working so far, and to identify ways of strengthening postmaster engagement in the future. The findings are intended to inform DBT's wider policy on how the Post Office network is governed and run.

## Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data with qualitative interviews and a desktop comparative review of best practice.

**Document review:** Review of Post Office governance materials and relevant government policy documents.

**Postmaster survey:** 539 postmasters engaged with the survey, of whom 348 completed at least half of the main questions and were included in the analysis. Those excluded had typically opened the survey without progressing beyond the first one or two questions (140 people) or had identified themselves as not currently serving as a postmaster (51 people).

**Postmaster interviews:** The evaluation included 30 in-depth interviews with postmasters. They represented a range of branch types, sizes and regions, as well as members of the National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP), Voice of the Postmaster (VOTP) and the Communication Workers' Union (CWU).

**Stakeholder interviews:** 17 in-depth interviews with stakeholders from Post Office and the government, including DBT and UK Government Investments (UKGI). Throughout this report, 'stakeholders' refers to these participants.

**Comparative review:** Examination of engagement structures used by comparative organisations including McDonald's UK, Subway, Domino's UK and Australia Post.

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and interview data were grouped by themes. Findings from each strand were then brought together to give a combined view of postmaster engagement across the network.

## Fieldwork findings

### Awareness and understanding of engagement initiatives

Awareness of engagement initiatives varied considerably across the network. More established communication channels such as the annual postmaster survey and regional postmaster meetings were widely recognised by postmasters. Awareness was lower for the newer mechanisms introduced as part of the Postmaster Inclusion Framework, including the Consultative Council and Postmaster Panel, as well as newer collaborative mechanisms such as Adopt-a-Function.

The research suggested that many postmasters were aware that engagement initiatives existed. However, they were uncertain about how the different forums and channels connected to one another, or how feedback fed into decisions. This lack of clarity points to the need for a more joined-up and structured framework that clearly links different engagement mechanisms and demonstrates how feedback flows through to decision-making.

Accessibility was also an issue. While some postmasters found existing channels easy to use, a larger proportion felt they were difficult to access or unclear in purpose.

Stakeholders tended to interpret this as a normal feature of engagement structures that were still developing, whereas postmasters often experienced it as a lack of clarity about how engagement worked in practice.

## **Experiences of engagement in practice**

Across the wider network, postmasters remained uncertain about whether engagement led to meaningful change.

Most postmasters reported limited visibility of how feedback was used within decision-making processes. As a result, engagement was often judged primarily by whether it led to visible outcomes at branch level.

Among those directly involved in the governance forums, experiences were generally more positive. Participants highlighted the value of bringing senior Post Office leadership, postmaster representatives and government stakeholders together within the same discussions. However, the wider network often had little visibility of these discussions or their outcomes.

Adopt-a-Function, which involves postmasters working directly with specific Post Office functions to inform improvements, was widely identified by both postmasters and stakeholders as the most positively experienced engagement initiative. It allowed postmasters to contribute directly to operational improvements and provided clearer evidence of how front-line expertise could influence decision-making.

Overall, the evidence suggested the central issue was not simply taking part in engagement activities. It was how visible and consistent their impact was. The findings indicated that both awareness of engagement mechanisms and understanding of their impact were limited, and that these two factors together shaped postmasters' motivation to engage. The findings also indicated that engagement was often judged in the context of wider operational and commercial pressures. Where postmasters faced significant concerns about remuneration, workload or contract terms, engagement activity alone might not have been sufficient to change overall perceptions of the relationship with Post Office.

## **What good engagement looks like**

Postmasters consistently described good engagement as part of a broader commercial partnership in which independent business owners were recognised as operational partners in the Post Office network.

Postmasters emphasised the importance of:

- ongoing involvement in decisions that affect their businesses
- direct communication with government
- clear and transparent engagement processes
- trust in who is representing them

Stakeholders similarly emphasised the importance of a more professional relationship between Post Office and postmasters. However, they tended to frame engagement as consultation and fair challenge within the financial, regulatory and governance constraints under which Post Office operated.

Both groups agreed that transparency and visible follow-through were essential. Engagement was judged credible not by the existence of forums alone, but by whether postmasters could see how their input had influenced outcomes.

## **Alignment of postmasters' needs and government objectives**

A key government objective for Post Office is financial sustainability — making sure the business can keep going financially. Across both groups, this emerged as a central factor shaping views of engagement.

Many postmasters described commercial viability of their branches (whether they can make money) as the foundation of any meaningful partnership with Post Office. Where pay levels, transaction fees or contract terms were seen as unsustainable, postmasters viewed engagement initiatives as secondary to these more basic commercial concerns. Engagement was not seen as a substitute for addressing them.

Stakeholders similarly recognised the importance of financial sustainability. However, they tended to frame it in terms of maintaining a viable national network, that is, making sure the whole network stays open and serves people. They focused less on the viability of individual branches.

The evidence highlighted an underlying difference between these two views. Postmasters judged alignment mainly through conditions at branch level. Stakeholders tended to judge it through the sustainability of the network as a whole. Here, 'alignment' means how well engagement structures reflect and respond to postmasters' day-to-day realities at branch level, while also supporting wider government objectives for a sustainable national network.

## **Gaps and future opportunities**

Both postmasters and stakeholders identified several areas where the current engagement framework could develop further. Alongside this, the evidence highlighted the limitations of engagement initiatives in isolation. Many of the concerns raised by postmasters related to longer-term structural issues, including financial viability, contract terms and workload pressures. Improvements to engagement processes alone were therefore unlikely to resolve these concerns without wider change.

Questions were raised about whether current representatives have the right mandate and how answerable they were to the wider network of postmasters. This applied to two types of arrangement. The first is formal structures within the Postmaster Inclusion Framework, such as governance forums where postmasters were selected or appointed to take part in discussions. The second is external representative bodies, such as NFSP and other groups. These sit outside Post Office governance but represent postmasters' interests.

Concerns related to how representatives were selected or elected, and how answerable they were to the wider network. Participants also raised concerns about whether both types of structure reflected the full range of postmasters, including rural postmasters, newer entrants and multi-branch operators.

Participants across both groups also highlighted the uneven distribution of participation across the network. Engagement activity often involved a relatively small group of individuals already active in network discussions, while a wider 'silent majority' of

postmasters (those who do not regularly take part in discussions) remained less connected to formal engagement channels.

Both groups agreed on another priority: making the Postmaster Inclusion Framework clearer and easier to follow. Participants emphasised the need for clearer feedback showing how postmaster input influenced decisions. They also called for the growing number of engagement channels to fit together better, so that the system as a whole would be easier to understand and navigate. Suggestions included clearer communication of how forums connect, more consistent feedback loops, and greater visibility of outcomes from engagement activities.

## **Culture, trust and the direction of change**

Perceptions of Post Office culture remained mixed across both postmasters and stakeholders, reflecting both recognition of recent engagement reforms and continued caution about their long-term impact.

Many postmasters acknowledged that engagement activity had increased and that new forums represented a positive shift from previous arrangements. Stakeholders similarly described current initiatives as part of a broader programme of organisational reform, including planned culture change initiatives aimed at improving openness, transparency and engagement with postmasters.

However, confidence in the organisation's commitment to involving postmasters in decisions remained cautious. While postmasters could see changes occurring, many were not yet convinced these changes represented a sustained shift in how their views influenced decisions.

Both groups emphasised that rebuilding trust after the Horizon scandal would require continued demonstration that engagement leads to real, visible results at branch level. Stakeholders also emphasised that postmasters would need to be actively included in, and experience the impact of, wider culture change initiatives for these to be credible.

## **Comparative insights**

The comparative review of engagement models used by other distributed networks identified several principles associated with effective operator engagement.

Across the organisations examined, engagement systems appeared most credible where:

- representatives had a clear and recognised mandate from the wider network
- operator expertise was drawn on early in the development of proposals
- engagement outcomes were communicated consistently back to the wider operator population

The review also identified a common challenge: formal engagement structures often involved a relatively small and self-selecting group of participants. This reflected a structural feature of large distributed networks rather than an issue unique to Post Office.

## **Strengthening postmaster engagement: evidence, principles and future directions**

The fieldwork and comparative review showed that the Postmaster Inclusion Framework has laid important foundations for engagement. The next phase of development is less about introducing new mechanisms and more about strengthening existing ones into a joined-up system. However, the evidence also showed that strengthening engagement is necessary but not enough on its own to address all of the challenges identified by postmasters. Engagement mechanisms can improve communication, transparency and participation in decision-making, but their impact is shaped by the wider commercial and contractual environment. As a result, engagement reforms are likely to be most effective when considered alongside broader changes to the operating model.

Within this context, the following priorities emerged from the evidence.

### **Strengthening feedback loops and transparency**

Postmasters need clearer visibility of how their input influences decisions and explanations where change is not possible.

### **Involving postmasters earlier when developing new initiatives**

Initiatives such as Adopt-a-Function demonstrated the value of drawing on postmasters' expertise during the development of proposals.

### **Strengthening trust in how postmasters are represented**

Confidence in engagement structures depends on representatives having a clear and widely recognised mandate from the postmaster network. This applies both to formal governance forums within the Postmaster Inclusion Framework and to external postmaster representative bodies, and includes clarity on how representatives are selected, who they represent, and how they are held accountable to the wider network.

### **Broadening participation across the network**

Increasing engagement may depend less on creating new forums and more on ensuring that existing mechanisms are visible, accessible and connected to the wider network.

### **Recognising the role of commercial viability**

How credible engagement seems is closely linked to whether postmaster businesses can keep going financially.

### **Supporting long-term cultural change**

Trust in engagement structures will develop gradually through consistent practice and real, visible results over time.

# 1. Introduction

## About this report

Post Office Limited (Post Office) is one of the largest retail networks in the UK, with around 11,500 branches serving communities across the country. Unlike many large businesses, most Post Office branches are run by independent postmasters who own and operate their branches as a franchise under contract with Post Office.

In recent years, the way in which Post Office works with postmasters has come under serious scrutiny. The Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry revealed deep failings in the relationship between the organisation and the people running its branches. These failings were not just about the Horizon IT system. They also reflected a broader culture in which postmasters' voices were not heard, their concerns were not taken seriously, and they were not treated as genuine partners in the business.

In response to these findings, Post Office set out a wider transformation plan through its 'New Deal for Postmasters', including a commitment to strengthen postmasters' voice within the business and improve how their views inform decision-making. A range of engagement and governance reforms have been developed and introduced over the past 12 to 18 months. These form part of this wider programme of change. They also sit within a broader policy context, including the DBT 'Green Paper: Future of Post Office' (July 2025).

These reforms include new governance forums, mainly the Consultative Council and the Postmaster Panel. They also include expanded opportunities for working together on design and day-to-day operations, most notably the Adopt-a-Function programme. Post Office collectively refers to these initiatives as the Postmaster Inclusion Framework. In this report, this term is used as shorthand to describe these related initiatives. It does not mean a formal or fully defined framework with fixed structures or delivery requirements.

The background section of this report describes these initiatives in detail. This evaluation provides an early, independent assessment of how they are working in practice.

## Purpose of this evaluation

This report presents the findings of an independent early insights evaluation of Post Office's current postmaster engagement initiatives. The evaluation was commissioned by DBT and carried out by TONIC between December 2025 and March 2026.

The evaluation is described as an 'early insights' study because these engagement reforms are still relatively new. The aim is not to provide a final assessment on whether they have worked. Instead, it is to gather evidence on what is and is not working so far. It is also to identify realistic options for improving and strengthening postmaster engagement going forward.

## About TONIC

[TONIC](#) is an independent social research consultancy with 19 years of experience leading central and local government research. TONIC's work focuses on criminal justice, public health and social care. It aims to improve practice and give a strong voice to service users,

stakeholders, partners, providers and commissioners in shaping future service design. TONIC's research, analysis, insights and reporting provide a strong evidence base for decisions affecting many of the most vulnerable groups in society.

## Research questions

The evaluation was designed to answer five main research questions:

1. What does good engagement and inclusion of postmasters look like for postmasters, Post Office and government?
2. What engagement initiatives currently exist and how are they intended to work?
3. How are these initiatives working in practice?
4. To what extent are they meeting postmasters' needs and government objectives?
5. What gaps and future opportunities exist for strengthening postmaster engagement?

These questions are explored across the report using evidence from a survey of postmasters, in-depth interviews with postmasters and stakeholders, and a review of best practice in comparable organisations.

## Report structure

The remainder of this report is structured into six chapters:

**Chapter 2 – Methodology:** Sets out the mixed-methods approach used in the evaluation, including the document review, postmaster survey, qualitative interviews and comparative review. It also outlines the analytical framework, ethical considerations and governance arrangements that supported the research.

**Chapter 3 – Background:** Provides an overview of the policy and organisational context for postmaster engagement. It describes the development of the Postmaster Inclusion Framework, the wider system of postmaster representation, and the strategic and operational environment in which current reforms have been introduced.

**Chapter 4 – Fieldwork findings:** Presents evidence from the survey and interviews on postmasters' and stakeholders' awareness, experiences and perceptions of engagement in practice. It examines definitions of good engagement, views on alignment with postmasters' needs and government objectives, and reflections on culture, trust and the direction of change.

**Chapter 5 – Comparative review:** Summarises the findings of the comparative review of engagement models in other franchise and postal organisations. It identifies cross-cutting principles, areas of alignment and difference, and insights relevant to the Post Office context.

**Chapter 6 – Strengthening postmaster engagement:** Draws together evidence from across the evaluation to assess how current engagement arrangements operate as a system. It identifies priorities for further development, including transparency, representation, participation, working together on operations, and the wider commercial and cultural factors shaping engagement.

**Annexes:** Provide detailed supporting material, including the full comparative review, the postmaster survey, and the interview guides used in the evaluation.

## 2. Methodology

### Overview

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach. It combined a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews. It also included a desktop review of Post Office and government policy documents as well as a best practice review of comparative organisations. This allowed the team to gather both broad evidence about patterns across the network and deeper insight into how engagement is understood and experienced in practice.

The research was conducted between December 2025 and March 2026. The evaluation was conducted in line with established ethical standards for social research. Particular care was taken in relation to fieldwork with postmasters, given the sensitivity of the wider context.

Participants were given clear information about the purpose of the research and their role within it. Informed consent was obtained before participation. Participation in all elements of the research was voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw at any stage.

All data were anonymised. Data were handled in line with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, to ensure confidentiality and appropriate data security. Ethical considerations were reviewed as part of the project governance process before fieldwork began.

The research drew on four main sources of evidence: a document review, a postmaster survey, in-depth interviews with postmasters and stakeholders, and a best practice review of comparable organisations. The document and literature review began in December 2025. Fieldwork, including the postmaster survey and interviews, took place between January and February 2026. Analysis and reporting were completed in March 2026.

The evaluation was supported by an Advisory Board constituted for the duration of the project and chaired by the Deputy Director for Post Office Policy at DBT. Membership included DBT Post Office policy and analysis officials, two representatives from Post Office, one representative from UKGI, and one representative each from the NFSP, CWU and VOTP.

The Board met three times: at inception, at emerging findings stage, and at draft final report stage. It provided advice on evaluation design, research tools, ethics and risks, and the analysis and interpretation of emerging evidence. The Board also helped with access to information and contacts during fieldwork. Its role was advisory rather than executive. Final decisions on the scope, design, analysis and dissemination of the research were made by the DBT team that commissioned the evaluation.

### Document review

A review of relevant documentation was undertaken before fieldwork began. Its purpose was to establish a clear understanding of the policy context for postmaster engagement and the intended design of current engagement initiatives.

The review included internal documentation provided by Post Office relating to the structure and operation of its postmaster engagement mechanisms. This included material relating to the Consultative Council, the Postmaster Panel and the Adopt-a-Function

programme, as well as governance documents and communications relating to the broader Postmaster Inclusion Framework. These documents were provided for this evaluation. They are internal to Post Office and not publicly available. Key documents reviewed included the 'Consultative Council Charter', 'Postmaster Panel Terms of Reference', and 'Postmaster Panel Role Description'. These set out the purpose, scope and governance position of the main engagement initiatives, and the roles postmasters play within them.

The review also considered relevant government policy documents, including the DBT 'Green Paper: Future of the Post Office' and the 'Government Response to the Future of the Post Office Consultation'. The review also examined publicly available Post Office publications and corporate materials. These included the 'Post Office Network Report' and information published on Post Office corporate webpages relating to organisational strategy and governance, including the 'Post Office Transformation Plan'.

This review informed the background section of the report and helped establish a shared understanding of the intended design of each initiative, the wider policy context for strengthening postmaster engagement, and the structure of the Post Office network before fieldwork began.

## **Postmaster survey**

An online survey of postmasters was conducted. The survey covered awareness of engagement initiatives, perceived accessibility, views on influence over decision-making, and postmasters' definitions of good engagement.

The survey was promoted through the Post Office weekly newsletter, which reaches all postmasters in the network, as well as through postmaster groups and stakeholder networks. Postmasters could also sign up for a follow-up interview at the end of the survey.

The survey received 539 responses in total. Of these, 348 met the inclusion criteria and form the basis of this analysis. To be included, respondents had to reach at least Question 4 (the attitudinal question blocks). This represents about half of the main questions in the survey. Of the 191 responses excluded, 140 had opened the survey without going beyond the first one or two questions. A further 51 had identified themselves as not currently serving as a postmaster. Demographic questions sat at the end of the survey and showed a typical drop-off in completion. Non-completion of these questions was not used as an exclusion criterion.

Participation in both the survey and interviews was voluntary. No quotas were set for particular demographics. The aim was to hear from as diverse a range of voices as possible, but the sample is self-selecting. The data are valuable in showing what those who responded think. However, findings should be treated with some caution when generalising to all postmasters across the network.

## **Who took part in the survey**

The survey achieved good representation across the network. Most respondents were aged between 45 and 64 (52%), with smaller proportions aged 25 to 44 (16%) and 65 to 74 (12%). Under 1% were aged 75 or over. Half (50%) of respondents were male, 27% were female and under 1% identified as non-binary. In terms of ethnicity, 43% identified as

White and 29% as Asian or Asian British. It is worth noting that a number of respondents did not answer the demographic questions, which is common in surveys of this kind.

Where comparable data are available, the survey sample broadly reflects the wider postmaster population. This is captured in Post Office's own annual Postmaster Sentiment Survey (2025, 2,196 respondents). That survey is also self-selecting, but it achieved a response rate of about 30% of the estimated 7,000-strong independent postmaster population. It is the most comprehensive available baseline for postmaster demographics. Comparisons should be treated with caution. Both samples are self-selecting, and demographic questions in both surveys were voluntary.

**Table 1a: Survey sample by age**

Age group	Count	This survey (%)	Post Office Postmaster Survey 2025 (%)
25 to 44	56	16%	29%
45 to 64	182	52%	55%
65 to 74	43	12%	10%
75+	1	Under 1%	2%
Prefer not to say or no response	66	19%	4%

**Table 2b: Survey sample by ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Count	This survey (%)	Post Office Postmaster Survey 2025 (%)
White	149	43%	38%
Asian or Asian British	102	29%	52%
Mixed	6	2%	1%
Other	4	1%	1%
Prefer not to say or no response	87	25%	8%

**Table 3c: Survey sample by gender**

Gender	Count	This survey (%)	Post Office Postmaster Survey 2025 (%)
Male	174	50%	N/A
Female	95	27%	N/A
Non-binary	1	Under 1%	N/A

Prefer not to say or no response	78	22%	N/A
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Note: Post Office's Postmaster Survey 2025 did not collect gender data. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Over half of all survey respondents (56%) had been a postmaster for more than ten years. This means many will have direct experience of the period around the Horizon scandal. This is important context when interpreting how they feel about engagement and trust.

**Table 4: Survey and interview sample by number of branches operated**

Number of branches	Survey	Interviews	Post Office Postmaster Survey 2025 (%)
Single branch	202 (58%)	19 (64%)	79%
2 to 4 branches	64 (18%)	7 (23%)	16%
5 or more branches	17 (5%)	4 (13%)	3%
Prefer not to say or no response	65 (19%)	N/A	2%
Total	348	30	2,196

Note: Survey percentages are based on the 348 respondents who met the inclusion criteria. Interview percentages are based on 30 participants. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The survey achieved good representation from postmasters operating across a range of branch sizes. Most respondents operated a single branch (58%), while 18% operated between two and four branches and 5% operated five or more. The survey sample broadly reflected the national profile of branch types. Main branches were the most common type among survey respondents (52%). In the wider network, local branches are more common (37%), which means main branch operators are slightly over-represented in the sample.

**Table 5: Survey sample by region compared to national network profile**

Region	Branches in survey	Survey (%)	National (%)	Difference (percentage points)
North East	15	3.80%	4.30%	-0.5pp
North West	30	7.70%	10.00%	-2.4pp
Yorkshire and The Humber	59	15.10%	8.50%	+6.6pp
East Midlands	41	10.50%	7.40%	+3.1pp
West Midlands	40	10.30%	8.20%	+2.1pp

East of England	30	7.70%	10.20%	-2.5pp
London	18	4.60%	6.60%	-2.0pp
South East	40	10.30%	12.00%	-1.8pp
South West	42	10.80%	10.50%	+0.3pp
Wales	18	4.60%	7.60%	-3.0pp
Scotland	43	11.00%	10.50%	+0.5pp
Northern Ireland	14	3.60%	4.10%	-0.5pp
<b>Total branches</b>	<b>390</b>			

Note: National network percentages are based on the total Post Office branch network. Survey percentages are based on 390 branches reflecting multiple branch operators where region was identified. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding. pp = percentage points.

Regionally, the sample was broadly representative of the national network across all 12 regions of the UK. Yorkshire and the Humber was slightly over-represented, at 15.1% compared to 8.5% nationally. All other regions fell within the expected margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points (at a 95% confidence level). This means the sample is statistically representative of the wider national network.

**Table 6: Survey sample by branch location type compared to national network profile**

Branch location type	Branches in survey	Survey (%)	National (%)	Difference (percentage points)
Urban	96	47.8%	45.9%	+1.9pp
Urban deprived	13	6.5%	13.6%	-7.2pp
Rural	92	45.8%	40.5%	+5.3pp
Total	201			

Note: National network percentages are based on Post Office Limited's network data. Survey percentages are based on 201 branches where location type was identified. Not all survey respondents provided location data, which accounts for the difference between the 201 branches here and the 348 respondents in the overall sample. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Postmasters were asked to provide the first part of their branch postcode so branch location type could be identified. Around half of the postcodes provided (52%) could be matched to a single location type. Of the matched postcodes, the spread of location types

was broadly representative of the national profile. Urban branches accounted for 47.8% of the matched sample (national: 45.9%), rural branches 45.8% (national: 40.5%), and urban deprived branches 6.5% (national: 13.6%). Urban deprived branches sit just outside the expected margin of error of plus or minus 7 percentage points for this subset. This should be borne in mind when interpreting findings for this branch type.

## **Postmaster interviews**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 postmasters. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Postmasters received a £30 gift voucher as a thank-you for taking part. The interviews provided detailed qualitative insight into how engagement initiatives are understood and experienced in practice. They allowed postmasters to describe in their own words what good engagement means to them.

Interviewees were recruited through the survey and the Advisory Board. Recruitment aimed to ensure a diverse range of branch types, sizes and regions. Interviewees also included members of different postmaster representative bodies, including the National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP), Voice of the Postmaster (VOTP) and the Communication Workers' Union (CWU). The sample also included both single-branch and multiple-branch operators, and both rural and urban postmasters.

Of the 30 postmasters interviewed, 22 were male and 8 were female. Twenty identified as White and 10 as Asian or Asian British. Age data were not collected for interviewees.

## **Stakeholder interviews**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 stakeholders from Post Office and government, which included stakeholders from DBT and UKGI.

Interviews were used to gather perspectives on three areas: how engagement initiatives are designed and intended to work; how they are performing in practice; and what stakeholders believe would strengthen postmaster engagement going forward.

## **Best practice review**

A desktop review of postmaster and franchisee engagement practices was conducted alongside the fieldwork. This review covered comparable organisations operating franchise or distributed network models. The insights from this review are integrated into the report when examining future opportunities for the development of the Postmaster Inclusion Framework. Comparator examples are used to provide contextual insight and to illustrate how similar engagement mechanisms operate in practice. Further detail on the methodology for this review is set out below.

## **Fieldwork analysis**

### **Analytical approach**

The evaluation combined quantitative analysis of survey data with thematic analysis of qualitative interview data. Findings from both strands were brought together and cross-checked to produce a comprehensive assessment of how postmaster engagement initiatives are understood and experienced across the network.

Triangulation (cross-checking evidence from different sources) was central to the analytical design. Survey data provided breadth, showing how common different views and experiences were across a representative sample of postmasters. Qualitative interview data provided depth, allowing the team to explore the meaning, context and detail behind those patterns. Where both strands pointed in the same direction, this strengthened confidence in the findings. Where they diverged, or where the qualitative evidence complicated a pattern identified in the survey, this is noted and explored in the analysis.

## **Thematic analysis**

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically. This followed an established qualitative method (Braun and Clarke, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. The steps were: getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis.

Postmaster and stakeholder interviews were coded separately in the first instance, to preserve the integrity of each group's perspective and allow for meaningful comparison. Emerging themes were then mapped against the evaluation's research questions, with particular attention to identifying both shared priorities and points of difference between groups.

A key strength of this approach is that it surfaces areas where postmasters' and stakeholders' views matched and where they differed. Where both groups hold broadly similar views, this provides a stronger evidence-based foundation for conclusions. Where postmasters and stakeholders interpret the same mechanisms or experiences differently, this is analytically significant in its own right. It surfaces underlying tensions in how engagement is understood, designed and experienced. It also points to where further development is most needed. Key insights were triangulated with survey responses to strengthen the consistency and depth of the analysis.

## **Survey analysis**

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics (counts and percentages). Findings are presented as proportions of respondents answering each question. Variation was examined across key subgroups, including branch type, number of branches operated, region and location type. This allowed the analysis to identify whether experiences and perceptions of engagement differ systematically across different parts of the network. Examples include differences between rural and urban postmasters, or between single-branch operators and multiple-branch operators managing several sites.

## **A note on the data**

Throughout the report, survey findings are presented as percentages of respondents who answered each question. Not all respondents answered every question, so base numbers vary. Where percentages are given, they may not always add up to 100% due to rounding. Qualitative findings from interviews are presented using illustrative quotes. These are not intended to be representative of all postmasters and stakeholders, but to give detail and depth to the patterns identified in the survey data.

## **Best practice review methodology**

### **Purpose**

The best practice review was carried out to identify effective approaches to stakeholder engagement and culture change in organisations comparable to Post Office. The aim was to understand what has worked elsewhere. The review then considered what lessons might be relevant for strengthening postmaster engagement and supporting longer-term culture change within Post Office's governance framework.

### **Selection of organisations**

The review focused on organisations with a significant network of geographically distributed branches or outlets. In these organisations, the relationship between a central body and its local operators is central to how the business works. Specifically, the review covered organisations that rely on franchisees or licensed partners to deliver services at a local level. These are comparable in structure to Post Office's relationship with postmasters.

Three main criteria guided selection. First, the review prioritised organisations classified among the most profitable or well-regarded franchises in the UK, drawing on published rankings including those produced by Franchise UK<sup>2</sup>. Second, the review prioritised organisations that are members of the British Franchise Association (BFA)<sup>3</sup> or a comparable body. BFA membership requires adherence to the European Code of Ethics for Franchising<sup>4</sup>. This code sets standards for how franchisors should treat their franchisees, including commitments to transparency, fairness and constructive dialogue. Third, where an organisation was not a BFA member, the review considered it for inclusion if it had its own publicly available best practice guidelines covering its relationship with franchisees or licence partners.

Several of the organisations selected operate in the hospitality sector. They were chosen because they are structurally similar to Post Office and have well-documented engagement models, not because of sector-specific features. Retail franchise models were considered but were less directly comparable, as they often involve different ownership and governance arrangements that do not align as closely with the Post Office model.

Using these criteria, the review includes McDonald's, Subway and Domino's UK, which are among the most profitable franchises in the UK. The review also includes Australia Post as an international comparator. As a large national postal operator with a significant licensed post office network, Australia Post offers directly relevant lessons on how a comparable organisation has approached franchisee engagement, culture change and the relationship between a central operator and its local branch network. Further detail on the organisations included and the rationale for their selection is provided in the Comparative review chapter.

### **Organisations excluded from the review**

Some organisations were considered but not included. Starbucks is not a traditional franchise. It mainly operates company-owned stores, and its relationships with third-party operators are licensing arrangements rather than franchises. Greggs has limited and non-standard franchising arrangements. KFC, while historically involved in founding the BFA,

does not appear to be a current member and has no publicly available guidelines on how it conducts itself in relation to its franchisees. Greene King was suggested as a comparable organisation. However, it is currently facing significant financial challenges, which makes it difficult to draw settled lessons from its current arrangements.

## **What the review examined**

For each organisation, the review examined publicly available information on how it structures its relationship with franchisees or local operators. The review focused on four main areas:

- formal engagement structures, such as franchisee advisory councils or consultative forums
- mechanisms that give local operators meaningful influence over decisions
- approaches to building trust and managing conflict
- how organisations have approached culture change, particularly following periods of difficulty or mistrust

The review also drew on the British Franchise Association's Code of Ethics and the European Franchise Federation's ethical guidelines. Both set out principles for good practice in franchisor-franchisee relationships.

## **Limitations**

The review is based on publicly available information. Where organisations do not publish detailed information about internal engagement structures or governance arrangements, the review reflects what is visible from outside the organisation. The review is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. Its purpose is to identify relevant lessons and principles that can inform the development of postmaster engagement at Post Office, not to provide a comprehensive audit of every comparable organisation.

## **Equality, diversity and inclusion**

The evaluation considered whether experiences and perceptions of engagement differed across demographic groups. Analysis of survey responses by age, gender and ethnicity found limited variation across most measures. One consistent pattern emerged. Female postmasters reported somewhat less positive views than male postmasters across several survey questions. Examples include perceptions of Post Office culture (20% positive among women compared to 31% among men) and confidence that Post Office is genuinely committed to involving postmasters (18% compared to 28%). The reasons for this difference are not fully explained by the survey data alone and would benefit from further exploration. No meaningful differences were found between White and Asian or Asian British respondents, who together make up most survey respondents. Age did not produce consistent patterns across the measures examined.

The following chapter presents the combined findings from the postmaster survey and qualitative interviews. It draws on both strands of evidence to provide a comprehensive assessment of how postmaster engagement initiatives are understood and experienced across the network.

## 3. Background

### Context

This chapter presents findings from the review of relevant documentation undertaken before fieldwork began. It sets out the policy context for postmaster engagement and the intended design of current engagement initiatives.

Understanding the current approach to postmaster engagement requires some context about the scale of the challenge Post Office faces and the policy framework within which current reforms are being implemented. This section sets out three things. First, the key policy developments that have shaped the current engagement landscape. Second, the initiatives that make up the Postmaster Inclusion Framework. Third, the organisations involved in postmaster representation.

DBT's 'Green Paper: Future of Post Office'<sup>5</sup> and the subsequent public consultation showed strong cross-sector interest in ensuring postmasters have genuine input into decisions affecting their businesses<sup>6</sup>. In its response, the government committed to commissioning an independent evaluation of Post Office's postmaster engagement initiatives. This recognised that improving engagement is a key part of the organisation's wider cultural transformation.

Alongside these policy developments, Post Office has begun implementing a broader programme of organisational reform through its Transformation Plan<sup>7</sup>. This aims to modernise the network, strengthen operational performance and rebuild the relationship between the organisation and postmasters through what has been described as a 'New Deal for Postmasters'.

Key elements of the Transformation Plan include:

- increasing postmaster remuneration
- improving operational standards and systems
- strengthening support for branches
- involving postmasters more directly in decision-making

As part of this wider transformation programme, Post Office has introduced a range of initiatives designed to strengthen engagement with postmasters and ensure that postmaster perspectives are more systematically considered within organisational discussions.

### The Postmaster Inclusion Framework

The initiatives described in this section are referred to collectively by Post Office as its Postmaster Inclusion Framework. This term is used to describe the overall approach to improving postmaster engagement, rather than a formal programme with defined rules, timelines or delivery milestones. Based on internal documentation provided by Post Office and interviews with relevant Post Office stakeholders, the initiatives have evolved over time. They operate in different ways across the organisation.

To date, there is no single documented framework or underlying theory of change setting out how these initiatives are expected to work together. Instead, they represent a set of related mechanisms that aim to increase postmaster involvement across governance, communication and operational processes.

This evaluation therefore focuses on the individual initiatives that make up this approach. It examines how they are intended to operate, how they are experienced in practice, and the extent to which they contribute to more meaningful inclusion of postmasters in decision-making.

The initiatives have been introduced at different points and operate in different ways across the organisation. For clarity, the main initiatives are described below across three broad and overlapping areas:

1. governance and representation
2. network engagement and communication
3. working together on operations and design

This structure is used for descriptive purposes to support understanding of how different mechanisms operate in practice.

## **Governance and representation**

These initiatives relate to how postmasters' views are brought into organisational oversight and strategic discussions.

Key initiatives include:

### **Postmaster Non-Executive Directors (NEDs)**

Two serving postmasters sit on the Post Office Board as NEDs. They are elected by postmasters through a formal, network-wide ballot process, providing them with a direct mandate from the network. Their role is to bring postmaster perspectives into board discussions. They also contribute to strategic oversight and ensure that issues affecting the network are considered within corporate governance processes.

### **Consultative Council**

The Council provides a forum through which postmaster perspectives can be raised ahead of Board discussions. The Council brings together representatives from Post Office leadership, postmaster NEDs and recognised postmaster representative organisations, including the National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP), the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) and Voice of the Postmaster (VOTP). Representatives within the Council are nominated by their organisation, not directly elected by the wider postmaster network. The Council meets ahead of Board meetings so that issues discussed can be raised with the Board through the Postmaster NEDs. Its role is advisory, providing input on policy, strategy and governance issues affecting postmasters. The Council is chaired by one of the Post Office NEDs.

### **Postmaster Panel**

The Panel provides a complementary mechanism focused on operational issues affecting postmasters. It reviews policies, operational processes and service performance indicators that affect the network. Panel members are serving postmasters drawn from across the network. Members are typically identified through postmaster representative organisations (NFSP, CWU and VOTP). Additional postmasters are also selected to reflect a range of branch types, locations and operational experience. The Panel operates in an advisory capacity and provides recommendations to Post Office leadership. The Panel is chaired by an appointed Chair. This Chair is headhunted, and the appointment is agreed by the Post Office Chief Executive Officer and the Post Office Chair.

## **Network engagement and communication**

Alongside governance structures, a second area of the Postmaster Inclusion Framework focuses on activities that are intended to generate engagement with the wider postmaster network.

These initiatives aim to ensure that engagement extends beyond formal representative forums and provides broader opportunities for participation. They are primarily intended to:

- share information about organisational developments
- gather feedback from across the network
- support dialogue between postmasters and Post Office teams

Examples include:

- national and regional engagement events
- postmaster business and town hall updates
- regional engagement meetings with Post Office teams
- network-wide surveys and feedback exercises

These mechanisms support breadth of engagement across the network, although their role in decision-making is generally indirect compared to formal governance forums.

## **Operational collaboration and co-design**

The third area of the Postmaster Inclusion Framework focuses on initiatives that build postmasters' expertise directly into the development of day-to-day operations. The most prominent initiative within this area is the Adopt-a-Function programme, through which postmasters work with specific Post Office business functions, such as technology, branch operations or service development.

Participation is voluntary, with postmasters joining groups linked to operational areas. These groups meet regularly with Post Office teams to:

- discuss operational issues
- test proposed changes
- provide feedback on policies and systems before implementation

This approach is intended to involve postmasters earlier in the development process, allowing operational insight to inform design and delivery rather than being limited to consultation at a later stage.

## **A developing set of engagement reforms**

Taken together, the initiatives within the Postmaster Inclusion Framework represent a significant expansion of structured engagement between Post Office and the postmaster network.

However, many of these mechanisms have been introduced relatively recently, within the past 12 to 18 months. They remain in the process of embedding across organisational systems and practices. The Postmaster Inclusion Framework should therefore be understood as a developing set of engagement reforms that continues to evolve as part of Post Office's wider Transformation Plan.

This evaluation examines how these mechanisms operate in practice, how they are experienced by postmasters and stakeholders, and how they may continue to develop.

The evaluation also considers how other large UK franchises and international postal operators structure engagement with franchisees or local operators. The comparative review examines models used by organisations such as McDonald's, Domino's UK, Subway and Australia Post. This provides contextual insight for understanding how engagement frameworks can evolve over time.

## **Postmaster representative organisations**

Alongside the engagement initiatives introduced by Post Office, several organisations exist to represent the interests of postmasters. These organisations sit outside the formal governance structure of Post Office but participate in discussions and engagement forums relating to the operation of the network.

The principal organisations involved in postmaster representation include:

- National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP)
- Communication Workers' Union (CWU)
- Voice of the Postmaster (VOTP)

These organisations differ in their membership structures, governance arrangements and funding models. Together they form part of the wider representation landscape through which postmasters may collectively raise issues and contribute to discussions about the operation of the network.

### **National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP)**

The NFSP is the established organisation representing postmasters. Membership is open to postmasters who operate Post Office branches under contract with Post Office. The organisation operates through a regional structure across the UK, with postmasters represented through local branches and regional representatives.

### **Governance and selection of representatives**

The NFSP is governed by a board composed primarily of serving postmasters representing different geographic areas of the network. Representatives are elected by NFSP members through the organisation's internal governance processes.

### **Funding**

The NFSP does not currently charge membership fees to postmasters. It receives funding from Post Office through a grant framework agreement which supports its activities in providing representation and support services to postmasters.

### **Role within the representation landscape**

The NFSP functions as a professional association representing the interests of postmasters in discussions with Post Office, government and other stakeholders. Because it combines elected representation of postmasters with funding from Post Office, it occupies a distinctive position within the wider representation landscape.

## **Communication Workers' Union (CWU)**

The CWU is a national trade union representing workers across the communications and postal sectors. Most CWU members are employees of organisations such as Royal Mail and Post Office. However, the union also represents some postmasters and branch operators.

### **Governance and selection of representatives**

The CWU operates under a democratic governance structure in which representatives and leadership positions are elected by union members through formal electoral processes.

### **Funding**

The union is funded through membership subscriptions paid by its members.

### **Role within the representation landscape**

The CWU represents the interests of its members in discussions relating to the operation of Post Office branches and wider issues affecting the postal sector.

## **Voice of the Postmaster (VOTP)**

VOTP is a newer organisation, formed in 2022 to provide a platform for postmasters to share experiences and raise issues relating to the operation of the Post Office network.

### **Governance and selection of representatives**

VOTP operates more as an advocacy and support platform than a formal membership association with an established electoral governance structure.

### **Funding**

VOTP operates independently of Post Office funding and is supported through voluntary contributions and other forms of support from participating postmasters.

### **Role within the representation landscape**

The organisation aims to provide an additional channel through which postmasters can raise concerns, share operational experiences and contribute to discussions about the future of the network.

## **Position within the wider engagement system**

Although these organisations operate independently of Post Office governance structures, representatives from these bodies take part in several engagement forums set up by Post Office. These include the Consultative Council and other engagement mechanisms. In addition, these organisations engage directly with government departments and public bodies, reflecting their role in representing postmaster interests beyond Post Office's internal governance structures.

Together they form part of the wider representation landscape for postmasters. Differences in their funding arrangements, governance structures and membership models mean that they occupy distinct roles within this landscape. Understanding how these organisations interact with Post Office engagement structures and with government is therefore important when assessing the effectiveness and credibility of the Postmaster Inclusion Framework.

The following chapter presents the fieldwork findings from the postmaster survey and qualitative interviews.

## 4. Fieldwork findings: how postmaster engagement initiatives are understood and experienced

This chapter presents findings from the postmaster survey and qualitative interviews with postmasters and stakeholders. The survey provided an overview of awareness, perceptions and experiences of current engagement practices across the network. The interviews offered deeper insight into how engagement initiatives were understood by postmasters. Together, they show how postmaster engagement is working in practice.

The analysis moves through a clear sequence. It begins with postmasters' awareness and understanding of engagement initiatives, then looks at how engagement is experienced in practice. It then considers how postmasters and stakeholders define good engagement. It also looks at how well current arrangements meet postmasters' needs and the government's objectives for Post Office, and where there are opportunities to improve. The chapter ends by examining perceptions of Post Office culture and confidence in change.

The findings are structured as follows:

- awareness and understanding of engagement initiatives [**research question 2**]
- experiences of engagement in practice [**research question 3**]
- what good engagement looks like [**research question 1**]
- alignment with postmasters' needs and government objectives [**research question 4**]
- gaps and future opportunities [**research question 5**]
- culture, trust and the direction of change [**research question 3 and research question 4**]

Where relevant, the analysis highlights where postmasters and stakeholders agree and where their views differ. It also considers variation across the network. This includes differences between independent postmasters running a single branch and those operating multiple branches, known as scale partners (defined here as postmasters operating two or more branches). Strategic partners — corporate business partners typically operating 25 or more Post Office branches — are not included in this analysis. Variation is also considered across rural and geographically isolated areas.

### Awareness and understanding of engagement initiatives

#### Uneven reach across the network

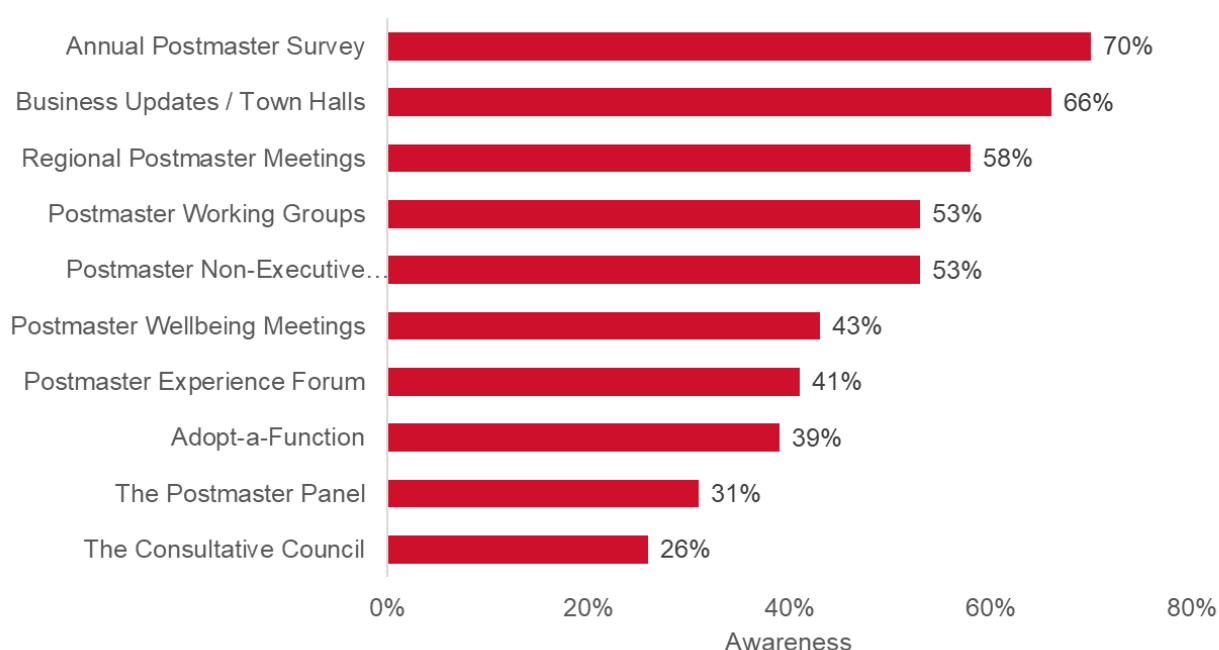
Survey findings indicated that awareness of engagement initiatives varied significantly across the network. Postmasters reported higher levels of awareness of more established communication channels, including the annual postmaster survey (70%), postmaster business updates and town halls (66%), and regional postmaster meetings (58%).

In contrast, awareness was lower for the newer engagement initiatives introduced as part of the Postmaster Inclusion Framework. Adopt-a-Function was recognised by around 39% of respondents. Awareness was lower still for the governance forums, with only 31% reporting awareness of the Postmaster Panel and 26% recognising the Consultative Council.

Over half of respondents (51%) said they were not aware of the Consultative Council at all. Around 40% were not aware of the Postmaster Panel, and 35% were not aware of Adopt-a-Function.

A further proportion of respondents had heard of each initiative but did not know what it involved. These were 22% for the Consultative Council, 24% for Adopt-a-Function and 28% for the Postmaster Panel. This means that for each initiative, most respondents either had no awareness or only a surface-level familiarity.

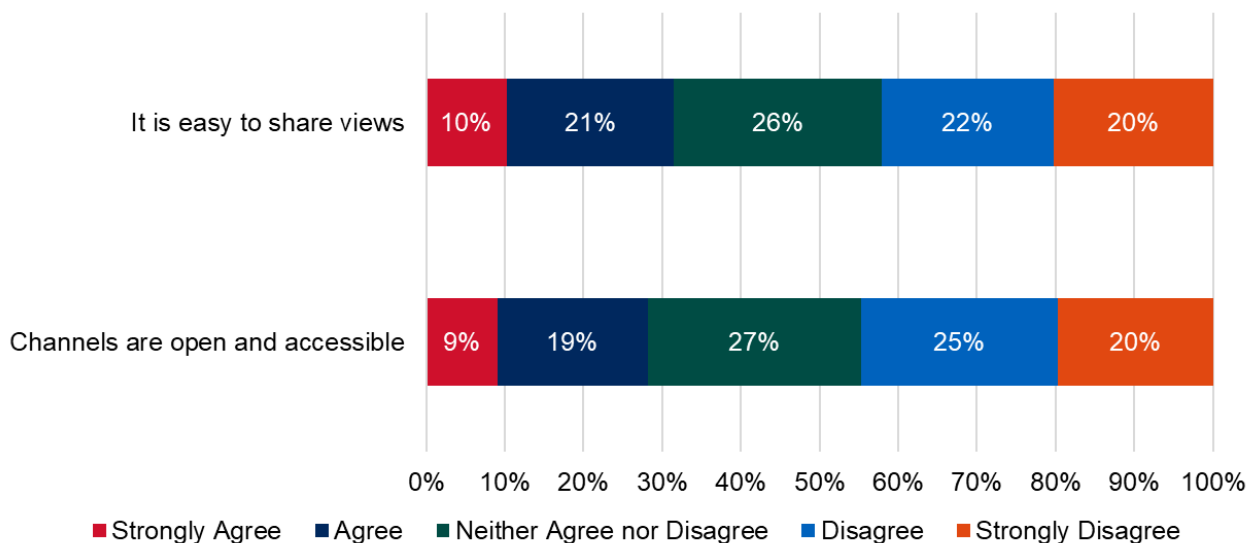
**Figure 1: Percentage of survey respondents aware of each engagement initiative**



These findings showed that while engagement activity had expanded in recent years, awareness of newer initiatives remained uneven. Postmasters were more familiar with longer-standing ways of communicating with Post Office than with newer governance and co-design forums.

The survey also asked postmasters how easy it was to share their views through existing engagement channels. Around a third (31%) agreed it was easy to share their views, and 28% agreed that channels were open and accessible. Around a quarter gave neutral responses (26% and 27% respectively). Over 40% disagreed with both statements.

**Figure 2: Survey respondents' views on access and ease of engagement**



For many postmasters, the barrier is not simply awareness but whether the channels that exist feel genuinely accessible and worth using.

Stakeholders similarly recognised in interviews that engagement initiatives had not yet reached all parts of the network evenly, noting that large parts of the network had not yet engaged with formal engagement structures.

“The remaining 70% of the network we just never hear from. Large tracts of the network we never hear from.” – Stakeholder, Post Office

### **Awareness and accessibility of governance forums**

Interview findings reinforced this pattern of uneven awareness and accessibility, particularly for the newer governance mechanisms, including the Consultative Council and the Postmaster Panel.

Some postmasters who were closely involved in engagement initiatives were familiar with these forums. Many others, however, described limited understanding of how they operated in practice, including what issues were raised and discussed and how discussions influenced decisions.

"You hear about panels or groups, but you're never quite sure how they operate or influence decisions." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main and Local

Postmasters were also often unsure about how participants were selected or how individuals could get involved. In some cases, this limited visibility led to a view that the process lacked transparency and that participation in governance forums involved a relatively small and recurring group of postmasters.

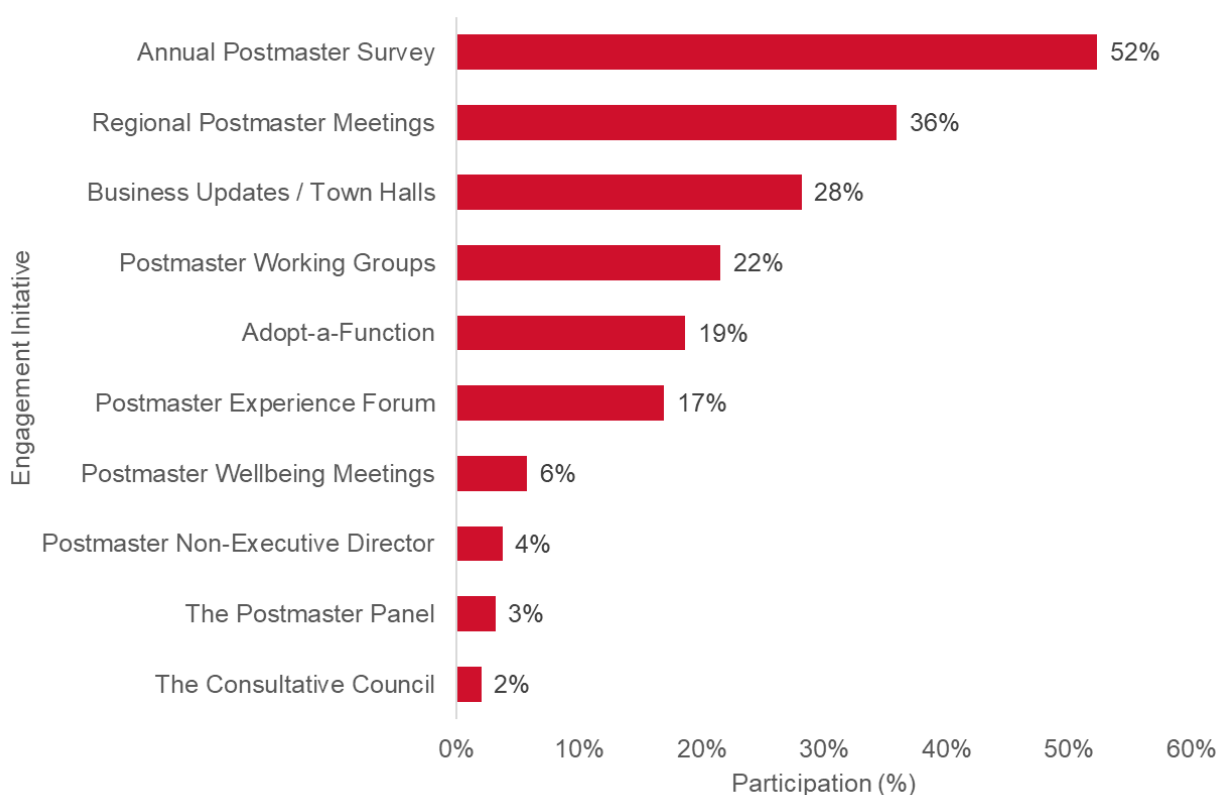
"It does seem to be a fairly select few that get told about these things and invited on to them." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Urban)

Stakeholders similarly highlighted that participation in these forums tended to involve a relatively small group of individuals who were more actively engaged with the organisation, raising questions about how representative these voices were of the wider network.

"The danger is we design things around a very small cohort of postmasters rather than the wider network." – Stakeholder, Government

These findings suggest that governance forums represent an important development within the engagement framework. However, awareness of how these forums operate, how representatives are selected and how discussions are communicated across the wider network remains limited for many postmasters.

**Figure 3: Percentage of survey respondents who have personally taken part in each engagement initiative**



The survey data reinforced this picture. As Figure 3 shows, participation rates fell across a wide range, from 52% for the Annual Postmaster Survey down to 2% for the Consultative Council, with most initiatives falling between these two ends of the scale.

Awareness of an initiative did not always translate into participation, though for governance forums this reflects the nature of those mechanisms rather than a lack of engagement. Bodies such as the Consultative Council and Postmaster Panel are designed to operate through a small number of representatives rather than network-wide participation. Therefore while 26% of respondents were aware of the Consultative Council, only 2% had participated directly, which is broadly expected given its limited membership.

The key question is whether those who do participate are representative of the wider network, which is a theme addressed later in this chapter. More broadly, around a quarter of survey respondents (85 out of 348) had not personally taken part in any of the

engagement initiatives covered by the survey. This suggests that a significant proportion of postmasters remained on the periphery of formal engagement activity.

## **Variation in awareness across operator and location types**

Interview findings suggested that scale partners generally showed higher awareness of engagement initiatives than single-branch postmasters. This was often attributed to their greater operational involvement with Post Office systems and the scale of their businesses.

Multiple-branch operators consistently noted that operating several branches meant that decisions affecting remuneration, systems or operational processes could have significant cumulative effects on their businesses.

"When you run multiple branches, any operational change affects several businesses at once, so you naturally pay more attention to the discussions that are happening." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

Survey data confirmed this pattern. Awareness of governance forums was notably higher among postmasters operating multiple branches. Awareness of the Consultative Council was 21% among single-branch operators, rising to 33% among those operating two to four branches and 41% among those operating five or more. A similar pattern was visible for Adopt-a-Function and the Postmaster Panel. This suggests that the concentration of engagement among a smaller group, noted by both postmasters and stakeholders in interviews, was partly a function of scale. Multiple-branch operators were more aware of formal engagement structures.

Location type also shaped awareness in one area, Adopt-a-Function. Rural postmasters showed slightly lower awareness of Adopt-a-Function (32%) compared to urban postmasters (42%), indicating a modest difference rather than a clear divide. This suggests that awareness in rural areas is somewhat lower overall, but not uniformly absent, and may reflect more uneven or partial awareness rather than consistent disengagement.

"I run a pretty rural branch, and to be honest I've heard about the Adopt-a-Function, but I haven't really heard much more about how it's meant to work." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Community (Rural)

This type of account helps explain the pattern seen in the survey data. While some postmasters may report being 'aware' of initiatives, interview evidence suggests this often reflects recognition of their existence rather than a clear understanding of their purpose or how to engage with them in practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that awareness of engagement mechanisms varies across the network according to both operational scale and geographical context. Larger operators may follow organisational developments more closely because of the wider business implications of policy changes, while rural branches may experience greater distance from some engagement communications.

## **Time and capacity as barriers to engagement**

Both postmasters and stakeholders highlighted the practical demands of running a branch as a key factor shaping engagement. Postmasters described time pressures, staffing constraints and financial responsibilities as barriers to both awareness and participation.

"When you're running a branch day to day, you don't always have the time to follow everything that's happening or get involved in forums." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

Stakeholders also broadly recognised these pressures, framing them as a structural challenge when engaging a large and geographically dispersed network of independent business owners.

"Awareness will never be uniform. We're dealing with thousands of small business owners who are focused on running their own businesses." – Stakeholder, Post Office

This suggests that participation in engagement initiatives may partly reflect practical capacity rather than willingness to engage. Postmasters who have the time or resources to participate may therefore be more visible within engagement structures, while others are focused more on the day-to-day demands of their branch. While postmasters operating five or more branches showed higher awareness of engagement initiatives than single-branch operators, their participation rates did not consistently follow the same pattern.

"I'd like to get involved in more of the discussions, but when you're responsible for several branches and teams it's difficult to step away from the day-to-day running of the business." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main and Outreach

This evidence suggests that differences in engagement across the network may reflect variations in time and operational capacity as much as differences in awareness or interest.

## **Clarity and coherence across the Inclusion Framework**

Interview findings also suggested that the way the Inclusion Framework is structured and communicated presented an additional barrier for some postmasters, on top of the practical pressures already described.

Postmasters acknowledged that the volume of communication and engagement opportunities had increased in recent years, but many described the overall framework as complex or difficult to navigate.

"There's a lot of information coming through now, but it can be difficult to keep track of where things are happening." - Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Local (Urban)

Postmasters were often unsure how the different forums, updates and engagement channels connected to one another, or how feedback fed into decisions. Some were also unclear about how individuals were selected to participate in forums and how these groups operated in practice. These are two distinct but related concerns.

"There are lots of different channels and groups, but it's not always clear what each one does or how they link together." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Community (Rural)

Stakeholders recognised the same challenge but framed it differently. From their perspective, the structures in place represented significant reforms that were still embedding across the organisation, with governance processes and operational pathways continuing to evolve.

"These structures are substantive reforms, but they're still in their infancy and evolving." – Stakeholder, Government

"The Postmaster Inclusion Framework was really about creating a starting point for those conversations...we can always go further." – Stakeholder, Post Office

Stakeholders also noted that the advisory nature of some forums was not always clearly understood across the network. Forums were often misunderstood as decision-making bodies.

"Some people assume these groups are there to make decisions, when actually they're designed to provide input and challenge." – Stakeholder, Government

From the stakeholder perspective, this misunderstanding was partly linked to the evolving nature of the engagement framework. As new mechanisms have been introduced alongside existing channels, the purpose, scope and roles of different forums have not always been clearly distinguished. Stakeholders acknowledged that while this expansion has increased opportunities for engagement, it has also created some overlap or ambiguity in how different forums are understood in practice. The purpose, scope and influence of different forums may not yet be fully understood across the wider network.

Overall, these findings show that while the Inclusion Framework has expanded, it is still maturing. Both postmasters and stakeholders recognised this, though they saw it differently depending on their perspective. Postmasters found it fragmented and difficult to navigate, while stakeholders saw it as a natural part of the reforms that were still embedding.

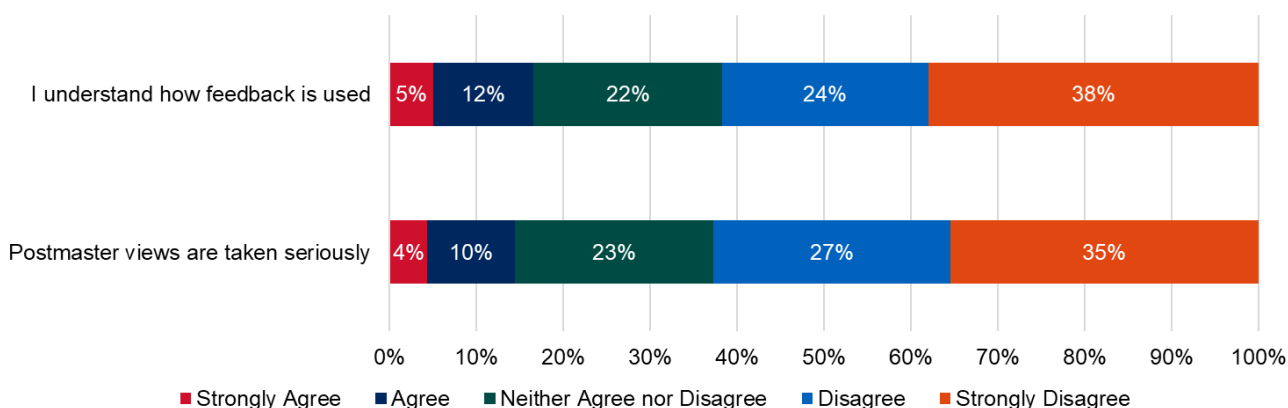
The next section examines how postmasters and stakeholders experience these engagement initiatives in practice.

## **Experiences of engagement in practice**

### **Seeing the impact of engagement**

Survey findings showed that most postmasters were uncertain about whether engagement made a difference to decisions. Only 17% of respondents said they understood how postmaster feedback was used by Post Office, and just 14% felt that postmaster views were taken seriously by the organisation. For both statements, around 62% disagreed, suggesting that perceived influence remained low across the network. Around a quarter selected neutral responses (22% for the first statement, 23% for the second), suggesting uncertainty rather than firmly negative views for some respondents.

**Figure 4: Survey respondents' views on whether their feedback makes a difference**



These findings suggest that the key issue is not simply whether postmasters participate in engagement initiatives, but rather how visible and consistent the impact of participation is.

Interview findings provided further context. Postmasters often described their engagement experiences as inconsistent, with the credibility of engagement judged largely by whether feedback led to visible outcomes.

"They seem to listen, but nothing gets actioned. They end up with exactly what they had originally wanted." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

Postmasters suggested that engagement felt most meaningful when feedback was acknowledged, outcomes were communicated clearly, and decisions were clearly connected to earlier consultation. Where this link was not visible, engagement felt more like listening without acting.

"It would help if we could see what actually changed as a result of the feedback that's been given." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Rural)

"If you can see that something has changed because people raised it, then it feels worthwhile taking part." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Urban)

Stakeholders broadly recognised this issue but framed it differently. From their perspective, demonstrating visible impact from engagement was an operational challenge. They acknowledged that communicating outcomes back to the wider network was not always consistent, and that where feedback loops were unclear, engagement could appear procedural rather than meaningful. Several stakeholders emphasised the importance of explaining clearly where suggestions were not adopted and improving how outcomes were communicated.

"Even when you can't implement something, explaining why is important. Otherwise people assume their input hasn't gone anywhere." – Stakeholder, Post Office

"If the outcome isn't visible, people understandably question whether the engagement made any difference." – Stakeholder, Government

Stakeholders also noted that feedback did not always translate uniformly into visible outcomes. The extent to which input influenced decisions often depended on the nature of the issue. Operational matters were more readily incorporated into design processes than

broader strategic decisions, which are shaped by regulatory, commercial or delivery constraints.

"Some mechanisms feed directly into operational design, but others sit within wider governance processes where the outcomes are less immediately visible." – Stakeholder, Post Office

This points to an important difference in how engagement is understood. Postmasters tended to judge engagement by visible outcomes at branch level. Stakeholders, by contrast, often emphasised challenges relating to implementation and communication, particularly the consistency of feedback loops and the visibility of outcomes. However, some of the issues raised, including questions around representation and influence, suggest that challenges may not relate to implementation alone.

The evidence also suggests that perceptions of engagement were shaped by the wider conditions in which postmasters operated. Where financial pressures, workload and contract terms were significant, engagement was often judged against these more immediate business realities.

## **Experience of governance forums**

Formal governance forums, particularly the Consultative Council and the Postmaster Panel, were raised frequently in interviews as important parts of the evolving engagement framework.

Among postmasters directly involved in these forums, experiences were often positive. A key feature highlighted by participants was the composition of these discussions. They brought together senior Post Office leadership, postmaster NEDs and representative bodies in the same forum. This created opportunities for more structured dialogue than had existed previously. Postmaster voices were heard alongside executive decision-makers and representative organisations in a formal setting for the first time.

"The Consultative Council I feel is working well because of the representative bodies being present, sitting alongside Exec members and Postmaster NEDs." – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

Stakeholders similarly saw the introduction of governance forums as an important step in strengthening the postmaster voice. From their perspective, these forums provided a formal route through which postmaster perspectives could be raised directly with senior leadership.

"These groups are there so postmasters can challenge and feed into discussions at different levels of the organisation." – Stakeholder, Post Office

However, among the wider postmaster network, understanding and visibility of these forums was more limited. Many postmasters reported limited visibility of what was discussed in these forums or what came out of them.

"You don't really hear what comes out of those meetings or what changes because of them." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Community (Rural)

This lack of visibility was particularly evident in relation to the Postmaster Panel. Some participants described it as having a less clearly defined and less visible role within the overall engagement framework.

"The Postmaster Panel is a bit of an enigma. It hasn't really been meeting its terms of reference and clearly needs to evolve." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Urban)

This reflected wider concerns among postmasters. These included the clarity of the Panel's role and how consistently it was operating in line with its intended purpose. Postmasters also questioned the extent to which its discussions led to visible outcomes or were communicated to the wider network.

Across interviews, postmasters emphasised that the credibility of these forums depended largely on whether discussions led to visible outcomes for the wider network.

"You can have all the engagement channels in the world, but if you're not seeing that turn around at the pace it's been promised, you're not going to feel it." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

## **Adopt-a-Function and structured co-design**

Both postmasters and stakeholders identified Adopt-a-Function as one of the most positively experienced engagement initiatives across the network.

Postmasters valued the initiative because it built directly on their front-line knowledge and focused on clearly defined areas of Post Office operations. This allowed postmasters to contribute directly to improvements and see the practical results of their input.

"The Adopt-a-Function is a fairly new way for postmasters to get involved in different areas of the Post Office. So, I'm on two of those and it does give us a way to talk directly to the Post Office through those channels." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main and Outreach

Postmasters also highlighted the wider value of this approach. Closer collaboration between postmasters and different parts of Post Office could help break down organisational silos and improve mutual understanding.

"Adopt-a-Function has a very strong potential to work across POL [Post Office] departments and break down cultures, allowing POL colleagues to have direct contact with postmasters on a frequent basis." – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

Stakeholders similarly viewed Adopt-a-Function as a strong example of structured co-design that embedded front-line knowledge directly into operational design. From their perspective, this model helped bridge the gap between corporate strategy and front-line experience and showed how engagement could lead to tangible improvements.

"Instead of everything going to one group, each function now has postmasters involved for different areas like contracts or tech. That's working really well because you can bring postmasters into the areas they're interested in." – Stakeholder, Post Office

Stakeholders also pointed to the wider opportunity this model represented. They noted that there was significant untapped expertise across the postmaster network. Structured co-design approaches could help bring this expertise into organisational decision-making.

"Across the network we've got people with real expertise, so hopefully that's where those voices get used." – Stakeholder, Post Office

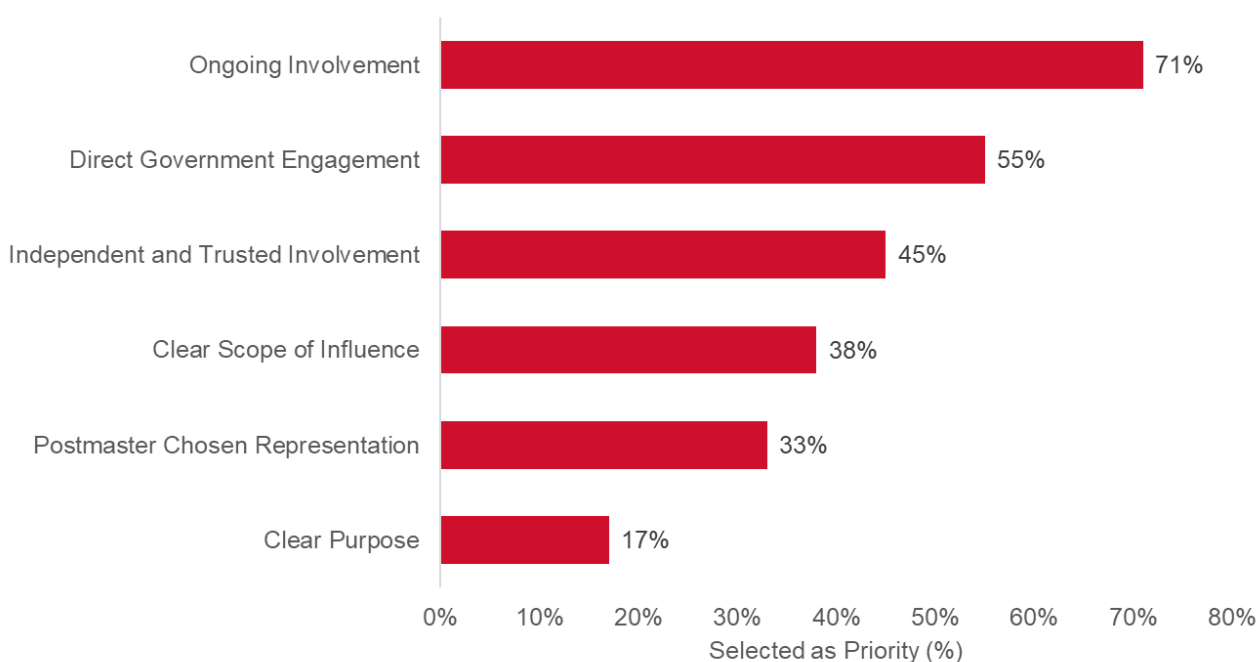
Overall, these findings suggest that engagement is most credible when postmasters can see their knowledge being used to change how things work.

The next section considers how postmasters and stakeholders define what good engagement looks like.

## What does good engagement look like?

Survey respondents were asked to select their top three priorities for good postmaster engagement. The results showed that ongoing involvement was the most commonly selected response, chosen by 71% of respondents. More than half (55%) said that government should hear directly from postmasters. Other priorities included independence and trust in engagement mechanisms (45%), clarity about what postmasters could and could not influence (38%), the ability to choose their own representation (33%), and forums having a clear purpose (17%).

**Figure 5: Postmasters' most frequently selected priorities for good engagement**



The finding that 55% of postmasters wanted government to hear directly from them was the second most selected priority across the survey. Further analysis showed that the desire for direct government engagement was strongest among longer-serving postmasters. Sixty percent of those who had been in the role for more than ten years selected this response as one of their top three priorities. This compared to 35% of those who had been postmasters for less than two years. This suggests the view that government should hear directly from postmasters grows with experience of the network. It

may reflect a longer-term perspective on how engagement has worked, or not worked, through existing structures. Location type made little difference to this response, with urban and rural postmasters selecting it at broadly similar rates.

The following sections explore each of these priorities in more detail, drawing on both survey findings and interview evidence.

## Influence within decision-making

Survey findings showed that most respondents currently felt they had little or no influence over the decisions that matter most to their businesses. Over half (53%) reported having no influence at all over government decisions about Post Office, and 47% said the same about decisions on contracts and remuneration. Perceived influence was slightly higher for day-to-day operational decisions, though 30% still reported having no influence at all and a further 34% said they had very little.

**Table 7: Postmasters' views on their current level of influence over decisions**

Level of influence	Operational decisions affecting day-to-day running (%)	Decisions about contracts and remuneration (%)	Decisions made by government about Post Office (%)
A great deal	4%	3%	4%
Quite a lot	6%	3%	4%
Some	25%	11%	12%
Very little	34%	35%	28%
None at all	30%	47%	53%

Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Rural postmasters were slightly more likely than urban postmasters to report having no influence at all over government decisions about Post Office (62% compared to 52%), consistent with the broader pattern of rural branches feeling more distant from organisational decision-making.

“Feeding into government almost seems impossible. As an individual postmaster, I don’t feel like I could influence anything at that level.” – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Community (Rural)

When asked how much influence they would like in the future, postmasters were clear that this was an area that needed to change. Around 89% wanted more influence over government decisions about Post Office and day-to-day operational decisions, while 88%

wanted greater say over contracts and remuneration. Across all three areas, 5% or fewer said they would like less influence than they currently had.

**Table 6: How much influence survey respondents would like over key decisions**

<b>Desired level of influence</b>	<b>Operational decisions affecting day-to-day running (%)</b>	<b>Decisions about contracts and remuneration (%)</b>	<b>Decisions made by government about Post Office (%)</b>
Much more influence	73%	74%	75%
A little more influence	16%	14%	14%
About the same as now	9%	8%	6%
Less influence	3%	4%	5%

Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Interview findings reinforced this point. Postmasters frequently emphasised the importance of being involved early enough in decision-making for their operational expertise to inform policy before decisions were finalised.

"I should feel like a business partner in the decisions that are made and know where the business is going in the future." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

"Postmasters should be involved from start to finish in all decisions and at all levels." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Traditional/Outreach

These findings suggest that postmasters are not primarily seeking influence over formal governance processes, but over the decisions that most directly affect their day-to-day businesses and long-term livelihoods.

"I think the government and Post Office have to realise the vested interest that postmasters have in their businesses and appreciate that each office has a value which seriously affects the future livelihood and retirement plans of each postmaster." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Urban)

Stakeholders similarly emphasised the value of engagement but framed its role differently. Engagement was often described as consultation and constructive challenge within defined financial, operational and regulatory parameters, rather than shared decision-making authority.

"Engagement is about listening and constructive challenge, but it doesn't mean shared governance." – Stakeholder, Government

Stakeholders also emphasised that what was possible through engagement was shaped by governance, regulatory and financial constraints.

"Engagement helps inform decisions, but there are limits around what is structurally negotiable." – Stakeholder, Post Office

Overall, these findings suggest that the key difference is not engagement activity itself, but the depth of influence within decision-making. Postmasters want early, meaningful input into the decisions that shape their businesses. Stakeholders frame engagement as consultation within defined organisational constraints. Bridging this gap is likely to be central to building trust in engagement arrangements over the longer term.

## **A partnership approach**

Both postmasters and stakeholders highlighted the importance of the relationship between Post Office and postmasters in shaping what good engagement looks like. Postmasters frequently described good engagement as part of a broader commercial partnership. In this partnership, independent business owners are recognised as operational partners, rather than recipients of centrally determined decisions.

“Good engagement would mean Post Office working with postmasters as business partners, rather than decisions being made centrally and simply handed down to the network.” – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

As shown in Figure 5, credibility and representation also emerged as important priorities within this relationship. Nearly half of respondents (45%) said that engagement mechanisms should be independent and trusted. A third (33%) emphasised the importance of postmasters being able to choose their own representation.

These findings suggest that independence and representation are central to how postmasters judge whether engagement arrangements are fair and legitimate.

Stakeholders similarly emphasised the importance of developing a more professional, business-to-business relationship grounded in dialogue, operational insight and mutual respect. They highlighted the need to move away from top-down approaches. They called for a relationship in which postmasters are treated as credible partners whose expertise can inform decision-making.

“A more mature relationship means recognising the expertise within the network and making sure that perspective informs discussions.” – Stakeholder, Government

“Postmasters run businesses in their own right, so the relationship has to recognise that and treat them as partners in how the network operates.” – Stakeholder, Post Office

In sum, these findings suggest that both postmasters and stakeholders want a more professional and collaborative relationship. They want a relationship that feels less like top-down communication and more like a genuine working partnership.

## **Transparency and visible impact**

Both survey and interview findings highlighted transparency and visible impact as key indicators of successful engagement. As shown in Figure 5, around 38% of respondents said it should be clear what postmasters could and could not influence within current engagement arrangements.

Interview participants frequently linked successful engagement to the visibility of outcomes and the transparency of decision-making processes. Postmasters emphasised that engagement was credible when feedback led to real, visible change, or where there was a clear explanation of why change was not possible.

"It's not just about being heard, it's about being told the 'why' behind decisions." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main and Local

Stakeholders similarly emphasised the importance of demonstrating how postmaster input had informed discussions and decisions. Successful engagement was frequently described as ensuring that postmasters could see how their feedback had been considered. It also involved clear explanations where suggestions could not be implemented due to financial, regulatory or operational constraints.

"Successful engagement is when postmasters can see how their input fed into the discussion, even if the final decision is different." – Stakeholder, Post Office

"Clear feedback loops so people understand how the input from engagement feeds into decisions." – Stakeholder, Government

From the stakeholder perspective, maintaining clear feedback loops between consultation and outcomes was viewed as essential. It helps build trust and ensures that engagement processes are seen as credible across the network.

This suggests that transparency and follow-through are not considered optional features of good engagement. Rather, they are the means by which postmasters judge whether engagement is working at all. However, the evidence also suggests that this partnership cannot be understood in isolation from the commercial model within which postmasters operate. Where remuneration, workload and contract terms were perceived as unsustainable, expectations of engagement were shaped primarily by these conditions. In this context, engagement may be seen as important, but secondary to the more immediate challenge of running a viable business.

The next section examines how well current engagement arrangements aligned with postmasters' needs and government's objectives for Post Office.

## **Alignment of engagement initiatives with postmasters' needs and government objectives**

### **Financial sustainability as the starting point**

Across both groups, financial sustainability emerged as the central factor shaping perceptions of alignment between postmasters' needs and the government's objectives for Post Office. However, postmasters and stakeholders referred to financial sustainability at different levels. Postmasters focused on the viability of individual branches, while stakeholders more often referred to the sustainability of the network as a whole.

Postmasters frequently described commercial viability as the starting point for any meaningful engagement. They emphasised that if remuneration, transaction fees and contract terms did not support the financial sustainability of their individual branches, engagement initiatives risked losing credibility.

"If the branch isn't viable, then none of this engagement means anything." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main and Business Hub (Urban)

This view was echoed in survey responses, with one postmaster writing:

"We are given all these avenues to have a voice but we don't have time because we lack the remuneration to be able to pay both ourselves and our staff the national living wage." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main and Outreach

For many postmasters, branch-level financial sustainability was seen as a prerequisite for meaningful engagement. Where the commercial model did not support viable operations, engagement reforms could feel secondary to the more immediate challenge of maintaining a sustainable business.

Stakeholders also recognised this and emphasised that remuneration and financial stability were fundamental to the credibility of engagement reforms.

"Remuneration is the gateway. If we don't get that right, everything else is almost irrelevant." – Stakeholder, Post Office

However, stakeholders tended to frame this within the wider objective of maintaining a financially sustainable national network. While acknowledging pressures on individual branches, they emphasised that financial decisions had to also consider long-term network viability and public funding constraints.

"Any solution has to work for the network overall, not just individual branches." – Stakeholder, Post Office

Overall, both groups agreed that financial sustainability mattered above all else, but they measured it differently. Postmasters were concerned with whether their own branches could survive, while stakeholders focused on the sustainability of the network as a whole.

## **Recognising social and community value**

Beyond financial considerations, postmasters also highlighted the wider social role played by local branches. Many described post offices as community hubs that provided informal support networks, particularly in rural or vulnerable communities. Several suggested that this "social capital" was not fully reflected within the current commercial model.

"We're not just running a shop. We're often the place people come to for help, advice or support." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Traditional/Legacy (Rural)

This point was also raised in survey responses, with one postmaster writing:

"I still think they need to look at the role of the postmaster within communities, what value they add, what services they could provide now and in the future." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Local (Rural)

From the postmaster perspective, alignment with their needs requires greater recognition of the community role their business plays, particularly through how this is reflected in remuneration models and the broader support arrangements that are available to them. This includes ensuring that payment structures take account of the time and resources involved in delivering socially valuable services. This applies especially in rural or vulnerable communities, where post offices often act as critical access points for essential services.

Rural postmasters in particular emphasised the social and community role of their branches. For example, in many areas, post offices provided access to essential services where the nearest alternative might be many miles away.

"In rural areas the context is completely different. If a service changes or disappears, the nearest alternative could be miles away, so it has a real impact on the community." – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

Participants described their branches as playing an important role in maintaining access to financial services, government services and parcel services in areas where other infrastructure might be limited.

"Post offices are not just businesses. In many cases they are a lifeline to people who live in remote areas, or who are isolated." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Traditional/Legacy (Rural)

Stakeholders also acknowledged the social and community importance of the network, though they tended to frame this in terms of maintaining nationwide access to services rather than the role of individual branches alone.

"The value of the network is that it provides access in communities across the country. That's something we're very conscious of preserving." – Stakeholder, Government

While the two perspectives emphasise different aspects of this role, both recognise that the social value of the network is an important part of its wider public function. This has implications for how postmaster inclusion is understood and designed in practice. In particular, it suggests that inclusion initiatives need to account for the differing operational and community contexts in which postmasters operate.

For rural branches, post offices often play a critical role in maintaining access to essential services. Inclusion in these contexts may require more tailored approaches that reflect these wider responsibilities and constraints. Without this, there is a risk that engagement mechanisms do not fully capture the perspectives of postmasters operating in more geographically isolated or community-dependent contexts.

## **The tension between branch and network sustainability**

The most consistent difference between postmaster and stakeholder perspectives related to how alignment between postmasters' needs and the government's objectives for Post Office was understood and assessed.

Postmasters generally assessed this alignment in terms of whether the commercial model supported the financial sustainability and fairness of conditions at individual branch level. Several described a perceived imbalance in the structure of the business model. While engagement reforms increasingly framed postmasters as commercial partners, many reported operating under tightly defined contracts. They had limited influence over fee structures, product allocation or core commercial terms.

"There's talk about partnership, but the reality is we're carrying the risk without having much say in the business model." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

This is one of the sharpest points to emerge from the fieldwork. Being called a partner while having little say in the terms of the relationship was a contradiction that postmasters felt directly. Engagement reforms that do not address this underlying tension risk being seen as a change in tone rather than a change in practice.

Stakeholders recognised this tension but tended to frame alignment differently. From their perspective, alignment was assessed in terms of whether decisions supported the sustainability and viability of the Post Office network as a whole, rather than the commercial position of individual branches.

"You have to consider the impact on individual postmasters, but you also have to think about what keeps the network viable overall." – Stakeholder, Post Office

Stakeholders emphasised that reforms frequently required balancing the needs of individual branches against the stability of the wider system. Decisions designed to strengthen network sustainability may therefore have uneven impacts across different types of branches.

"There are always trade-offs. Some changes might help the network overall but affect certain branches more than others." – Stakeholder, Post Office

The next section examines where gaps existed and what opportunities there were to strengthen postmaster engagement in the future.

## **Gaps and future opportunities**

### **Strengthening representation and legitimacy**

Both postmasters and stakeholders identified the existing approach to representation as one of the most significant areas for future development. This includes how representatives are selected and how forums operate.

Forums such as the Consultative Council and the Postmaster Panel were widely recognised as positive steps towards strengthening postmaster voice in governance discussions. However, several participants raised questions about how representatives were selected and how well these forums reflected the wider network.

Survey findings reinforced this concern. When asked whether they felt confident that postmasters' interests were represented fairly in decisions made by Post Office, 49% disagreed while only 18% agreed.

The Consultative Council draws largely from representative organisations, postmaster Non-Executive Directors and Post Office leadership. The Postmaster Panel is recruited through an application and selection process rather than election.

For some postmasters, this created uncertainty about how representatives were chosen and how accountable they were to the wider network.

"More transparency is needed in the election and selection process." – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

"They cherry pick a handful of postmasters they want to interact with." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Rural)

Some postmasters also suggested that legitimacy was closely linked to whether the wider network recognised those involved in engagement structures as credible representatives.

“Representation is probably the biggest structural gap. Until people feel the system is legitimate, it’s difficult for the engagement structures to fully work.” – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

Stakeholders similarly recognised representation as a structural issue. They emphasised that engagement structures could only work effectively if postmasters saw those involved as credible representatives of the network.

“Whatever the future model looks like, it has to be something the network recognises as credible and representative.” – Stakeholder, Post Office

“For engagement to work effectively, postmasters need confidence that the structures in place genuinely reflect their views.” – Stakeholder, Government

Some stakeholders suggested that strengthening legitimacy would require moving beyond existing structures. They pointed to hybrid models of representation. These could combine democratic selection with mechanisms that bring in a breadth of operational perspectives from across the network.

“There may be a case for a hybrid model. Some elected voices, but also bringing in expertise from different parts of the network.” – Stakeholder, Post Office

## **Broadening participation across the network**

Both postmasters and stakeholders raised concerns about the uneven distribution of participation across the network. Engagement activity often involved a relatively small group of participants who are already active in network discussions.

From the postmaster perspective, this created a perception that large parts of the network remain disconnected from engagement processes.

“The issue with postmaster representation has to be examined with some urgency. Possibly 7,000+ postmasters are not really engaging with POL [Post Office] or their representative groups. That needs to improve.” – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

Postmasters also reflected on the way participation could become concentrated among a relatively small group of individuals who are regularly involved in engagement activity.

“There were about 20 postmasters who would turn up to all of these groups...so the Post Office view was really just taken from 20 postmasters.” – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Rural)

Stakeholders similarly described what several referred to as a 'silent majority' within the network — a large group of postmasters whose views are rarely heard through formal engagement channels.

“One of the challenges is that we tend to hear from the same voices. We need ways to reach the parts of the network that aren't currently engaging.” – Stakeholder, Post Office

"The challenge is ensuring that the perspectives being heard reflect the breadth of the network." – Stakeholder, Government

Interviews further highlighted the diversity of operators across the network, which could further complicate efforts to broaden participation. Postmasters described a wide range of business models and levels of engagement with the organisation. This reflected the varied ways in which individuals came into the role and operated their branches.

"Postmasters are not one homogeneous group...there are accidental postmasters, lifestyle operators and those running multiple sites at the other end of the spectrum."  
– Representative from Postmaster Organisation

Stakeholders suggested that certain groups are currently less visible within engagement forums, particularly newer entrants and operators managing multiple branches.

"What wasn't represented in the room were the newer cohort of postmasters...entrepreneurial operators or scale partners." – Stakeholder, Post Office

Participants also emphasised that operational pressures limited the ability of many postmasters to participate in formal engagement forums.

"A lot of postmasters just don't have the time to sit on committees, but that doesn't mean they don't have views." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

These findings suggest that broadening participation is less about creating additional forums. It is more about ensuring that existing mechanisms are accessible to a wider and more diverse cross-section of the network.

## **Consolidating and maturing the engagement framework**

Interview findings from both groups also emphasised the importance of improving the clarity and coherence of the engagement framework.

Postmasters frequently highlighted the need for stronger feedback mechanisms that clearly showed how input had influenced decisions.

"You need to be able to see what came out of it. What changed and what didn't." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Urban)

Participants suggested that engagement was most credible when there was visible reporting of three things: what feedback was received, what changes resulted, and where suggestions could not be implemented. This kind of structured follow-through — sometimes described in public sector engagement practice as 'You said, we did' communication — was identified by both postmasters and stakeholders as an area for development.

Stakeholders similarly emphasised the importance of clearer feedback loops and more consistent communication of outcomes.

"Closing the loop is critical. People need to understand how their input fed into the final decision." – Stakeholder, Post Office

Stakeholders also identified an opportunity to consolidate the growing number of engagement mechanisms into a more coherent and navigable framework. Stakeholders suggested that clearer articulation of each mechanism's purpose, scope of influence and reporting pathways could improve transparency and reduce confusion across the network.

"We've created a lot of different engagement routes over time, but the next step is making sure the system is coherent and people understand how the pieces fit together." – Stakeholder, Post Office

## Expanding opportunities for co-design and collaboration

Both postmasters and stakeholders identified opportunities to expand practical co-design approaches that build postmasters' expertise directly into operational improvement.

Postmasters frequently pointed to initiatives such as Adopt-a-Function as examples of engagement that felt practical, time-limited and directly connected to improving how the network operates.

"Where postmasters are involved in actually shaping how things work, that's when engagement feels most meaningful." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

Stakeholders similarly recognised the value of this kind of practical collaboration, noting that engagement focused on operational improvement often provided a clearer connection between postmaster input and decisions.

"When you bring postmasters into the design of systems or processes, you tend to get better solutions because they understand how things work on the ground." – Stakeholder, Post Office

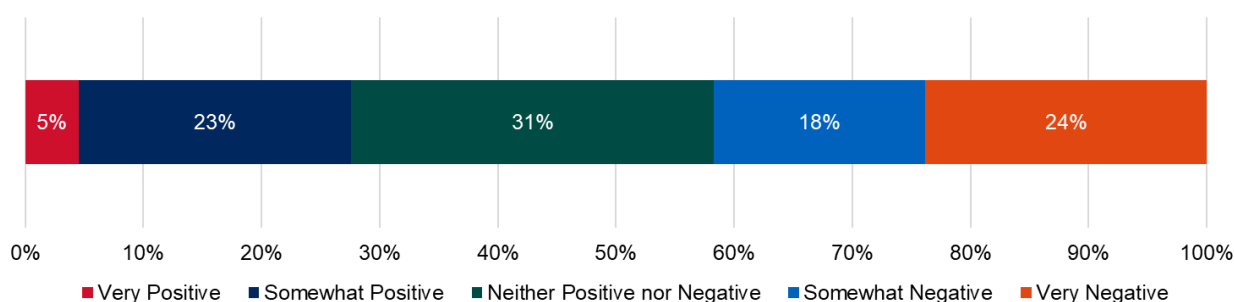
The final section of this chapter examines postmasters' perceptions of Post Office culture and their confidence in the direction of change.

## Culture, trust and the direction of change

This section examines how postmasters perceived the broader culture of Post Office and whether they felt confident that things were changing for the better.

When asked to rate the culture of Post Office, survey responses were mixed. Around 28% of respondents rated the culture positively, while 42% rated it negatively. Around 31% reported neutral views, suggesting that for a significant proportion of postmasters, perceptions of culture were not yet firmly established.

**Figure 6: How survey respondents rate the culture of Post Office in recent years**



Interview findings suggest that these perceptions are shaped in part by the legacy of the Horizon scandal, which has had a long-term impact on trust between postmasters and Post Office. Several participants described a history of limited influence and strained relationships that continued to shape how current initiatives were interpreted.

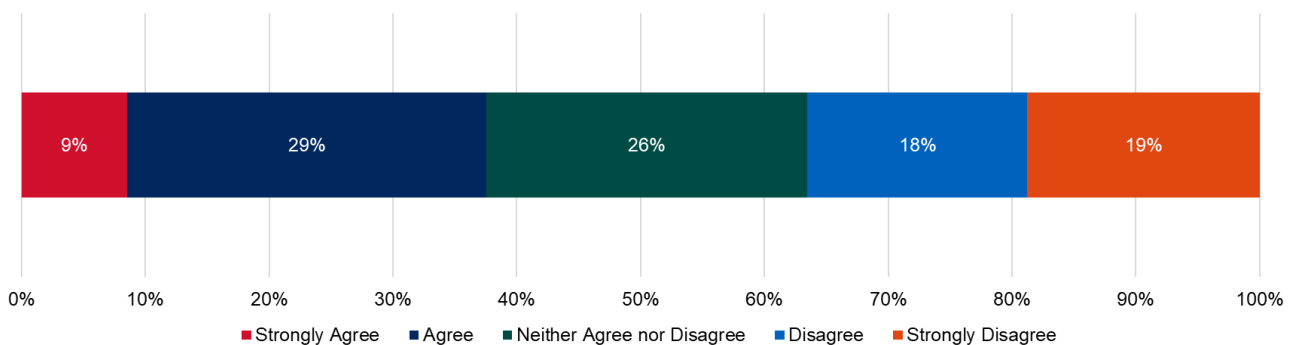
"The culture used to be very much divide and rule...nobody was supposed to know what anyone else was doing, and that created a lot of mistrust." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Community

At the same time, some participants acknowledged that aspects of engagement had begun to improve in recent years.

"I feel the Post Office have made a decent effort since the scandal to be more understanding with postmasters." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main

A second survey question asked whether the way Post Office worked with postmasters had improved in recent years. Responses here were more evenly balanced between those who answered positively and those who answered negatively. Around 38% agreed that improvements had occurred, compared with 37% who disagreed, while 26% remained neutral.

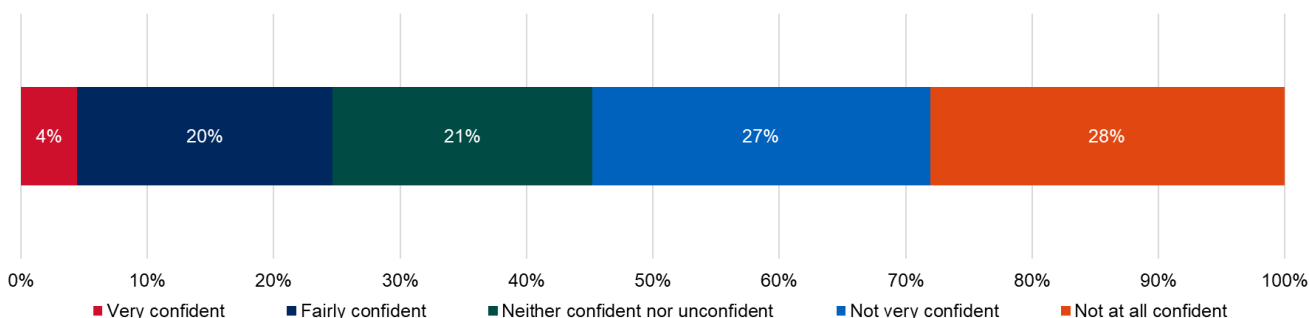
**Figure 7: Survey respondents' views on whether Post Office has improved in recent years**



These findings suggest that a meaningful proportion of postmasters are beginning to recognise changes in how Post Office engages with the network.

When asked directly whether Post Office was genuinely committed to involving postmasters in decisions, responses were more sceptical. Just under a quarter of respondents (24%) said they were confident, while 55% said they were not. A further 21% were neither confident nor unconfident.

**Figure 8: Survey respondents' confidence that Post Office is genuinely committed to involving them in decisions**



This gap between recognising that engagement had improved and trusting the underlying commitment behind it was a significant finding in the survey. It suggests that while postmasters can see changes happening, many are not yet convinced those changes reflect a genuine and lasting shift in how Post Office values their involvement. This scepticism was also reflected in responses to a related statement. When asked whether postmasters' views were considered when decisions were made, 60% disagreed, while only 13% agreed.

### **Cautious optimism as the framework embeds**

Despite the mixed picture on culture and trust, both postmasters and stakeholders recognised genuine signs of progress in how engagement is developing. Postmasters widely acknowledged that engagement activity has increased and that the introduction of structured forums represents a positive shift from previous arrangements.

"I spoke against the Post Office more than anybody else...but I'll tell them when it's good as well. And at the moment they're doing their best." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Local

Several postmasters pointed to changes in leadership tone as a positive sign, suggesting there was now greater willingness to listen to operational concerns.

"The new executive team is completely different from what it used to be. There is still resistance in parts of the organisation, but the highest decision makers do listen now." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Rural)

"My personal opinion is it's definitely changing for the better...there's a whole heap more trust in the new leadership team than there was before." – Representative from Postmaster Organisation

While these developments were viewed positively, confidence remained cautious and was tied closely to whether engagement led to real, visible results.

Stakeholders similarly described engagement initiatives as part of a broader programme of reform aimed at strengthening the postmaster voice. The Consultative Council and Postmaster Panel were seen internally as significant steps towards giving postmasters a more formal role in governance discussions.

"The purpose of those groups is to bring in the postmaster perspective so decisions are better informed." – Stakeholder, Post Office

At the same time, stakeholders emphasised that many forums remained transitional. Governance processes, representative participation and operating norms were still developing, and these structures were continuing to build legitimacy over time.

"There have been huge strides taken over the past couple of years, but these are still relatively new mechanisms. Processes are embedding and it takes time for them to mature." – Stakeholder, Government

However, interviews indicated that confidence remained cautious. Many participants emphasised that while some changes were visible, rebuilding trust after previous experiences would take time.

"It probably hit the bottom a while ago and it might slowly be getting better, but it will take a long time to rebuild trust." – Postmaster, Single-Branch Operator, Main (Rural)

This helps explain the sizeable group of respondents who reported neutral views in the survey. For many postmasters, views about cultural change are not yet firmly established.

"We've been told a very good story before about things improving, but often nothing actually changed." – Postmaster, Multiple-Branch Operator, Main

Perceptions of Post Office culture remained mixed. More postmasters recognised that things had improved than those who did not. However, confidence was cautious, and the large number of neutral responses reflected genuine uncertainty rather than satisfaction. Many postmasters are watching to see whether the changes they are beginning to notice hold. Rebuilding trust after the Horizon scandal will require continued demonstration that engagement leads to real, visible results.

## 5. Comparative review: engagement in comparable organisations

This chapter provides a brief overview of the comparative review of engagement models conducted alongside the fieldwork as part of this evaluation. The review examined how selected franchise organisations and postal operators structure engagement with their franchisees or local operators. The aim was to identify approaches, models and principles that may inform thinking about postmaster engagement at Post Office.

The review focused on organisations with large, geographically distributed network of branches or outlets, where the relationship between a central organisation and its local operators is central to how the business works. Four organisations were selected. McDonald's UK and Subway are both large UK franchise networks with established engagement structures. Domino's UK has a franchisee association model that offers relevant evidence on independent representation. Australia Post is a government-owned postal operator with a large network of independently operated licensed post offices, making it the most directly comparable organisation to Post Office in structural terms.

While several of the franchise comparators operate within the hospitality sector, they were selected on the basis of structural comparability and the availability of well-documented engagement models, rather than sector-specific characteristics. Retail franchise models were considered less directly comparable, as they often involve different ownership and governance arrangements.

The review draws on publicly available information. Where organisations do not publish detailed information about internal engagement structures or governance arrangements, this is noted in the full review (Annex A). The comparative evidence is intended to be illustrative rather than prescriptive. It does not provide models that can be transferred directly into the Post Office context. However, it does highlight principles that appear to support effective engagement in large, distributed networks. These principles are relevant to several of the themes emerging from the fieldwork.

While the review is grounded in publicly available information, it is important to note that this does not always fully reflect how engagement operates in practice within organisations. In some cases, internal working arrangements, informal practices and the day-to-day operation of representative bodies may differ from what is visible in the public domain. The analysis should therefore be understood as reflecting the formal and published structures of engagement. It does not give a complete account of how influence and decision-making operate in practice.

**Table 7: Summary of engagement models in comparable organisations**

Organisation	Network type	Who represents operators	Key engagement mechanisms	What appears to work well
McDonald's UK	Large franchise network of independently owned restaurants operating under	Elected franchisee representatives on the Executive National Leadership	Exec NLG governance meetings Quarterly Finance Committee reviews	Peer-elected representation embedded in governance discussions

	a central brand and operating model	Group (Exec NLG) Elected members of the franchisee Finance Committee	Plan to Win co-design Regional roadshows and live calls with leadership Operational consultants	Operator input incorporated early in strategic and operational decisions Continuous engagement supported through structured communication and operational liaison roles
Domino's UK	Franchise network of independent franchise partners operating under a central brand	Domino's Franchise Association (DFA), an independent membership-funded body governed by franchise partners	Regular franchisee meetings and network briefings Consultation processes on operational initiatives Ongoing engagement between DFA and corporate operational teams	An independent representative body provides a collective voice for challenge and negotiation outside corporate structures Engagement is channelled through the representative body
Subway	Highly decentralised franchise network with strong regional operational support structures	Elected franchisee representatives through the Franchise Advertising Fund (FAF) boards	FAF boards Regional development offices and field representatives Specialist franchisee sub-committees for operational issues	Layered participation model combining local engagement, specialist committees and governance oversight Operator expertise drawn into decision-making through specialist committees, strengthening the integration of operational insight into system development
Australia Post	National postal network combining corporate and independently operated	LPO Group, an independent membership-funded body Elected representation involvement	National and State Licensee Advisory Council (LAC) meetings Consultation between Australia	Multi-level advisory structure, allowing issues to be raised locally and escalated nationally Elected licensee representatives

	Licensed Post Offices (LPOs)	within formal consultative forum (LAC)	Post and the LPO Group Regional engagement through network management teams	gather feedback from across the network Structured consultation with Australia Post leadership on operational and strategic changes
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## Cross-cutting observations from the comparative review

Across comparator organisations, engagement is typically structured through a combination of formal representative bodies, issue-specific working groups and communication mechanisms. These are designed to connect central decision-making with a geographically dispersed operator base. While the specific structures vary, several common features are evident:

### Multi-layered engagement structures

Comparator organisations use a combination of representative forums, specialist committees and direct communication channels, enabling both formal representation and targeted input into specific operational or strategic issues. Evidence suggests that these systems are often deliberately layered. They combine a relatively small representative core with wider, lighter-touch participation routes such as roadshows, live calls, local support roles or operational forums. This allows organisations to broaden participation without requiring universal direct involvement across the full network.

### Legitimacy of representation

Credibility is closely linked to the perceived legitimacy of representatives. Peer-elected or independent representative bodies are a common feature and appear to play an important role in establishing trust and providing a recognised channel for operator voice. Comparator evidence also suggests that legitimacy is strengthened not only through how representatives are selected, but through clarity about their role. In several models, representative bodies are linked to defined governance processes or specific areas of activity, which helps to reinforce their mandate and role within the wider system.

### Integration with operational processes

Engagement is often linked to operational and business planning processes, with operators contributing to the development of proposals, operational improvements and system changes. In some models, this includes structured involvement at earlier stages of development. Operator input feeds into planning, testing or refinement processes before final decision-making.

### Clarity of structures and roles

Comparator models generally define the purpose and scope of engagement mechanisms, including how different forums operate and how input is expected to feed into organisational processes. In several cases, this includes clearer articulation of different types of influence, such as consultation, oversight and, in some cases, negotiation. Evidence suggests that these distinctions are often linked to specific structures or functions. Some bodies are associated with defined areas of oversight or decision-making. Others contribute through structured consultation or input into planning processes before decisions are finalised. However, the available evidence does not always provide a complete picture of how these boundaries operate in practice. The precise point at which influence ends and decision-making begins is not always explicitly explained.

## **Alignment and difference in engagement challenges**

The comparative evidence indicates that many of the engagement challenges identified within the Post Office network are not unique. They reflect wider structural features of large, distributed operator networks, alongside some important differences.

### **Concentration of participation**

Engagement is typically channelled through representative structures and organised forums, with participation often being mediated through a smaller group of active or elected representatives. This aligns with findings from the Post Office network, where engagement often involves a small cohort of postmasters. This reflects a common structural feature of large, distributed networks, where engagement is designed to operate through representative and mediated forms of participation rather than direct involvement from the full operator base. As a result, engagement systems are typically not intended to achieve universal participation, but to provide structured routes through which views can be aggregated and communicated. The evidence also suggests that comparator organisations manage this through layered engagement approaches. They combine representative structures with broader, lower-burden participation routes, rather than requiring widespread direct engagement across the network.

### **Role of representative bodies and data sources**

Several comparator systems include independent or membership-based representative bodies that generate insights on operator views alongside corporate mechanisms, creating multiple sources of evidence across the network. In contrast, Post Office primarily relies on internal engagement mechanisms, which may limit the diversity of evidence available on operator views. In comparator models, the presence of multiple, and sometimes independent, channels of representation can support the perceived legitimacy of engagement by providing alternative routes for operator voice. This highlights a potential area of difference in how representativeness is established and evidenced across the Post Office network.

The evidence reviewed also provides additional insight into what representation covers within comparator organisations. Across comparator models, representative structures are not only general channels for operator voice but are typically linked to defined areas of activity. These include:

- strategic direction and business planning
- oversight of pooled funds and specific decision domains

- participation in commercial negotiation and profitability frameworks
- consultation or collective negotiation on operational and contractual changes

This suggests that comparators tend to define the scope of representation more explicitly, linking engagement to identifiable categories of decision rather than framing it solely as a general feedback mechanism. This does not necessarily imply that comparator organisations provide greater overall influence to operators. However, it does suggest that the scope and route of influence are often more clearly defined.

## **Scope of engagement and influence**

Comparators most clearly embed engagement within operational and planning processes. Within the Post Office context, postmasters often express expectations of influence over a broader set of issues. This represents a key difference in how engagement is understood and experienced. Across comparator models, representative structures are typically linked to defined areas of activity. Examples include business planning, oversight of specific funds, participation in commercial discussions, and consultation on operational or contractual changes. This helps to clarify how operator input connects to organisational processes.

Evidence suggests that operator influence is generally strongest in defined operational or functional areas, while strategic and cross-network commercial decisions remain the responsibility of the central organisation. While this does not necessarily imply greater overall influence, it does indicate that the scope and route of influence are often more clearly delineated. This clearer explanation of where influence applies, even where decision-making remains centralised, may help support more consistent expectations about the purpose and limits of engagement.

Full details of each organisation's engagement model, including the structures and mechanisms they use, how these influence decision-making, and known limitations, are set out in Annex A.

## **Applying comparator insights to Post Office context**

The comparative review highlights that many of the features observed within the Post Office engagement approach are consistent with those found in other distributed network organisations. In particular, the use of representative forums, structured engagement mechanisms and links to operational processes reflects common approaches across comparator models.

At the same time, the comparative evidence helps to contextualise some of the challenges identified within the Post Office network. In franchise-based systems, engagement is typically advisory in nature. Influence is focused primarily on operational and service delivery issues. Strategic and cross-network commercial decisions remain the responsibility of the central organisation. This suggests that some of the tensions observed in the Post Office context may reflect broader structural characteristics of similar network models.

The evidence also highlights areas where comparator approaches appear more clearly defined or consistently applied, particularly in relation to how engagement structures are communicated and how their role within decision-making processes is understood. This

includes clearer articulation of what representation covers, how representative bodies link into decision-making processes, and how different types of influence are distinguished in practice. These differences provide important context for interpreting the Post Office findings and highlight areas for further consideration. It also suggests that, in comparator models, clearer definition of where influence applies and where decision-making authority remains can play an important role. This helps in managing expectations and supporting trust in engagement arrangements.

The following chapter draws on this comparative evidence alongside the fieldwork findings to consider what the combined evidence suggests about the current state of postmaster engagement and the potential directions for future development.

## 6. Strengthening postmaster engagement: evidence, principles and future directions

This chapter draws together the findings from the postmaster survey and qualitative interviews with evidence from the review of engagement models in comparable organisations. Its purpose is to consider what the combined evidence suggests about the current state of postmaster engagement and the directions in which the Postmaster Inclusion Framework may continue to develop.

The two sources of evidence are complementary. The fieldwork provides a detailed picture of how engagement is currently experienced across the postmaster network and where the principal tensions lie. The comparative review identifies features that support engagement in large, distributed networks. It provides a wider context for interpreting the fieldwork findings and highlights both areas of alignment and important differences in the Post Office context. This includes clearer insight into how representation is structured, how decision-making processes are defined, and how participation is managed across large, distributed networks.

Across both sources, there is a clear degree of alignment in the overall structure of engagement. In particular, three features are consistent with approaches observed in comparator organisations: the use of representative forums, the concentration of participation among a smaller group of actively engaged individuals, and the advisory nature of engagement mechanisms.

At the same time, the comparative evidence highlights important differences in how the scope of engagement is defined. Across comparator organisations, engagement is most clearly embedded within structured operational and planning processes, supported by defined representative roles and multiple engagement mechanisms. These models also tend to distinguish more explicitly between different types of influence, helping to define how operator input connects to decision-making processes. Operator influence is typically most direct in relation to operational and service design decisions, while strategic and cross-network commercial decisions remain the responsibility of the central organisation.

Within the Post Office context, engagement is shaped by a broader set of expectations, including influence over remuneration, commercial arrangements and network-level decisions. This creates a more complex engagement environment, where expectations of influence extend beyond those typically evidenced in comparator models.

Taken together, this suggests that some of the tensions identified in the fieldwork may reflect more than just how engagement mechanisms operate in practice. They may also reflect differing assumptions about the scope and purpose of engagement within the Post Office network. Comparator evidence indicates that, in other large network models, clearer explanation of where influence applies and where decision-making authority remains can help to align expectations about the role of engagement.

### Visibility and impact

#### What the fieldwork showed

Both postmasters and stakeholders agree that engagement is only meaningful when it leads to visible outcomes. Where feedback is acknowledged, outcomes are communicated clearly and decisions are linked back to earlier consultation, engagement feels credible. Where this connection is not visible, engagement risks being seen as listening without acting.

The tension lies in how visibility is understood and who is responsible for it. Postmasters judge engagement primarily through outcomes at branch level and whether something changed as a result of their input. Stakeholders tend to frame the issue as an implementation and communication challenge. They note that the link between engagement and outcomes is not always straightforward, particularly for strategic decisions shaped by regulatory, commercial or delivery constraints.

Without clear communication of outcomes, even well-designed engagement structures risk being experienced as a process that happens around postmasters rather than with them.

## **What the comparative evidence suggests**

Across the organisations reviewed, engagement systems appear most credible where three features are present. First, regular communication about outcomes is combined with clear explanations of how operator input has been considered. Second, information about outcomes reaches the wider network rather than only those directly involved in governance forums.

McDonald's combines engagement input mechanisms with a structured system for communicating outcomes across the franchise network. This includes weekly franchisee communications, leadership roadshows and dedicated operational consultants who communicate decisions directly to operators.

Subway maintains continuous communication through locally embedded field representatives who explain operational changes within operators' day-to-day context. Domino's demonstrates how an independent representative body can act as a communication bridge, translating the outcomes of discussions between franchise representatives and corporate leadership into visible outcomes for the wider network. Australia Post similarly appears to rely on communication through both representative and operational channels.

A feature that appears across all of these models is the distinction between communicating that engagement has taken place and communicating what it produced. Engagement systems appear most credible where the latter is consistently visible across the network, including where operator input has not led to change and where a clear explanation of why is provided. This is particularly important in advisory systems, where forums do not necessarily make the final decision themselves but contribute to how decisions are shaped, reviewed or escalated. In these contexts, credibility depends heavily on whether operators can see the pathway from issue raised, to issue considered, to outcome communicated.

Taken together, this suggests that strengthening engagement at Post Office may depend less on introducing additional mechanisms. It may depend more on improving the consistency and reach of outcome communication. In particular, there may be value in ensuring communication about engagement outcomes is systematic and clearly linked to earlier input. It should also reach the wider network beyond those directly involved in

engagement forums. Comparator evidence also suggests that visibility of outcomes is closely linked to clarity about how decisions are made and where input has influenced those decisions. This is particularly important in advisory systems where final authority sits elsewhere.

## **Influence and partnership**

### **What the fieldwork showed**

Both postmasters and stakeholders want a more professional, collaborative and business-to-business relationship between Post Office and the network. There is broad agreement that postmasters should be treated as credible operational partners whose front-line expertise informs organisational decisions, rather than recipients of centrally determined outcomes.

The tension lies in the depth of influence this implies. Postmasters want early, meaningful input into the decisions that most directly affect their businesses, including remuneration, contracts and operational processes. Stakeholders frame engagement as consultation and constructive challenge within defined financial, regulatory and governance constraints, rather than shared decision-making authority.

This gap between postmasters' expectations of influence and stakeholders' framing of engagement as consultation within constraints is one of the most consistent tensions in the findings. Bridging it is likely to be central to building trust over the longer term.

The Postmaster Inclusion Framework already includes several initiatives aligned with this approach. Adopt-a-Function is widely seen as the most positively experienced example of engagement that connects directly to operational improvement. The Postmaster Experience Forum and operational working groups also provide opportunities for postmasters to contribute to discussions on operational performance and service delivery. While these initiatives were generally viewed positively, participants noted that their long-term impact may depend on two things. One is how consistently they are integrated into organisational development processes. The other is how clearly their outputs are connected to wider organisational discussions.

### **What the comparative evidence suggests**

Across the organisations reviewed, operator influence tends to be strongest where participation is embedded earlier in development and decision processes rather than after proposals have been substantially formed. McDonald's incorporates franchise operator insight through its Plan to Win process during the development phase of strategic initiatives. Subway's specialist sub-committees bring operator expertise into proposals before wider implementation. Domino's Franchise Association (DFA) provides a mechanism through which franchise partners can scrutinise and negotiate on proposals affecting operational performance before they are implemented. Australia Post's Licensee Advisory Council appears to provide a consultative route through which operational issues can be raised before implementation. This is particularly the case where issues move from local-level to national advisory discussions.

The same pattern appears here. There is a distinction between two types of involvement. Consultation, where operators are asked for views on proposals already substantially

shaped. And earlier involvement, where operator expertise informs what is proposed in the first place. The comparator evidence suggests that the perceived depth of influence is shaped by two factors. These are when operator input is sought in the process, and how clearly that input is connected to forums that influence final decisions.

The comparator evidence also suggests that different representative structures are linked to different types of decision process. Some bodies appear to have a direct decision-making or oversight role in specific areas, such as Subway's Franchise Advertising Fund (FAF) boards in relation to marketing expenditure. Others appear to shape decisions indirectly by providing structured challenge, scrutiny or consultation before decisions are finalised. Examples include McDonald's Executive National Leadership Group and Plan to Win processes, Domino's Franchise Association and Australia Post's advisory structures. This indicates that what representation covers, and how influence operates in practice, is often more explicitly defined in comparator systems than in the current Post Office context.

However, the available evidence does not always fully specify where influence ends and formal decision-making begins. In practice these boundaries may be shaped by organisational context, governance arrangements and informal working relationships.

This suggests that, within the Post Office context, strengthening perceptions of influence may depend on two things. One is how early postmasters are involved in the development of proposals. The other is how clearly those contributions are connected to decision-making processes. While the scope of influence is shaped by regulatory and commercial constraints, the timing and visibility of input appear to be important factors in how engagement is experienced. It also suggests that clearer explanation of the boundaries between consultation, oversight and decision-making may help to align expectations about the role of engagement. This could support longer-term trust.

## **Legitimacy of representation**

### **What the fieldwork showed**

Both postmasters and stakeholders recognised that the credibility of engagement depends significantly on whether postmasters see those involved in formal governance discussions as credible representatives. This means having a genuine mandate to represent the wider network. While the Consultative Council and Postmaster Panel were widely acknowledged as positive developments, several participants raised questions about how representatives are selected. They also questioned how accountable representatives are to the wider network.

From the postmaster perspective, representation within current structures is largely based on nomination or selection processes rather than election by the wider network. While these approaches may support operational effectiveness, they can create uncertainty among some postmasters. This is about how representatives are chosen and how they are accountable to the wider postmaster community. Limited transparency in these processes contributed to a perception that participation in governance forums involves a relatively small and recurring group of individuals. Some participants questioned whether current representation structures reflect the diversity of the postmaster population, including rural postmasters, newer entrants and scale partners operating multiple branches.

Stakeholders similarly recognised representation as a structural issue, emphasising that engagement structures can only work effectively if postmasters across the network perceive those involved as credible representatives.

## **What the comparative evidence suggests**

Across the organisations reviewed, representative structures tend to combine formal governance participation with mechanisms that provide representatives with a recognised mandate from the wider network. In the McDonald's and Subway models, this takes the form of peer-elected representatives participating directly in governance discussions. In the Domino's and Australia Post models, it takes the form of independent membership-funded associations that operate separately from the central organisation's own governance structures.

The independence of representative bodies from the central organisation appears to be a significant factor in how legitimacy is perceived across the network. Where representation is perceived as credible, it tends to be because representatives are seen to have a clear mandate from the network they represent. This includes a recognised route through which that mandate was established, whether through election, membership representation or another recognised representative route.

Evidence also highlights that legitimacy is reinforced where representative groups have a clearer public remit. Across the comparator organisations, representation is often linked to defined areas of activity. Examples include strategic and business planning, oversight of pooled funds, consultation on operational changes, or participation in commercial discussions. This suggests that, for Post Office, strengthening confidence in representation may depend on two things. First, increasing the visibility and clarity of how representatives are selected, the mandate they hold, and how they are accountable to the wider network. Second, making clearer what they are there to do and what categories of issue they cover.

Comparator models indicate that perceived independence or election-based legitimacy can play an important role in strengthening trust in representative structures.

Taken together, this suggests that strengthening confidence in Post Office representation may depend on two things. Clearer selection and accountability arrangements, and making the role of representatives more visible across the network. This includes greater clarity about the types of issues representatives are expected to influence and how their input connects to organisational decision-making processes.

## **Breadth of participation**

### **What the fieldwork showed**

Both postmasters and stakeholders recognise that formal engagement mechanisms currently reach only a relatively small and self-selecting group of the postmaster population. There is broad agreement that a large proportion of the network, described by several stakeholders as a 'silent majority', remains disconnected from formal engagement structures.

From the postmaster perspective, limited reach reflects a lack of clarity about two things. These are how different engagement routes connect to one another, and how local participation feeds into wider organisational discussions. From the stakeholder perspective, it is partly the structural challenge of engaging a large, geographically dispersed network of independent business owners. They have varying capacity and motivation to participate.

Both groups recognise that broadening participation requires more than creating additional forums. It requires ensuring that existing mechanisms are accessible, transparent and seen as relevant by a more diverse cross-section of the network. This includes rural postmasters, newer entrants and multiple-branch operators.

## **What the comparative evidence suggests**

Across the organisations reviewed, broader participation appears to depend not only on having multiple engagement channels but on making those channels visible, connected and functionally distinct. Several comparator organisations combine accessible local interfaces with specialist or issue-based participation routes.

McDonald's maintains multiple participation routes, including regional engagement sessions, operational workshops and locally embedded operational consultants who provide a regular contact point for franchisees. Subway combines local development offices and field representatives with specialist sub-committees that allow operators to contribute expertise in specific areas of the business. Domino's UK combines governance representation through the DFA with wider network engagement through franchisee meetings, consultations and ongoing contact between the DFA and corporate operational teams. Australia Post appears particularly relevant here because it combines local operational contact, representative advocacy and a multi-level advisory structure in which issues can be raised locally and escalated nationally.

The fieldwork identified the concentration of participation among a relatively small group as one of the most significant challenges for the Postmaster Inclusion Framework. The comparator evidence suggests this is a structural challenge common to large, distributed networks, rather than one specific to Post Office. However, publicly available information does not allow a detailed assessment of how effectively each organisation has managed it in practice. What appears to matter is not simply the number of routes available. It is whether those routes are clearly linked. Local engagement, specialist participation and representative forums should form part of a coherent engagement system rather than a set of separate activities.

Comparator models also suggest a practical way of broadening participation without making engagement overly burdensome. Rather than relying on universal direct involvement, they typically combine a smaller representative core with wider, lighter-touch participation routes. These include briefings, engagement events, operational contact points and escalation channels. Publicly available information on precise membership or participation rates within comparator representative bodies is limited. As a result, the evidence does not support robust percentage estimates across all four models. However, the available material does indicate that these systems generally rely on layered participation approaches, rather than direct involvement from the full operator base.

This suggests that broadening participation across the Post Office network may depend less on creating additional engagement opportunities. It may depend more on ensuring

that existing mechanisms are clearly connected, accessible and visible to a wider cross-section of postmasters. The comparator evidence indicates that participation is shaped by how engagement routes operate as a coherent system rather than as separate activities. It also reinforces that participation in large networks is typically structured through representative and layered approaches, rather than universal direct involvement. Clarity of routes plays an important role in accessibility.

## **Commercial viability and trust**

### **What the fieldwork showed**

Both postmasters and stakeholders agree that financial sustainability is the foundation on which everything else rests. If remuneration, transaction fees and contract terms do not support viable branch operations, engagement reforms risk lacking credibility regardless of how well designed they are.

The tension lies in how financial sustainability is assessed. Postmasters evaluate it primarily through branch-level viability and whether their individual business is commercially sustainable. Stakeholders assess it through the sustainability of the network as a whole. They balance the needs of individual branches against the stability of the wider system and public funding constraints.

This difference in vantage point means that decisions designed to strengthen network sustainability can feel misaligned with postmasters' immediate commercial realities. Recognition of the social and community value of post offices, particularly in rural areas, adds a further dimension. In these contexts, branches may play a critical role in maintaining access to services and supporting local communities. This is often the case even where they are not commercially viable on a standalone basis. As a result, stakeholders may place greater emphasis on sustaining network coverage and community access. Postmasters are more likely to focus on the day-to-day financial viability of their individual branch.

### **What the comparative evidence suggests**

The comparative review does not address remuneration models or commercial sustainability directly. The comparator organisations reviewed operate under commercial and regulatory conditions that differ significantly from Post Office. No attempt has been made to draw comparisons where the evidence does not support them.

What the comparator evidence does suggest, in the context of this theme, is that engagement over matters with direct commercial implications for operators appears to require forms of involvement that go beyond advisory consultation. Several comparator organisations embed operator representation in discussions that directly affect commercial terms. Subway's Franchise Advertising Fund boards give franchisees direct oversight of shared marketing expenditure. The Domino's Franchise Association provides a mechanism for collective negotiation on commercial and operational issues. McDonald's Finance Committee also points to the importance of operator participation in reviewing business plans, cost structures and investment proposals, even where final corporate authority remains elsewhere. In the Australia Post model, licensee representatives participate in discussions on operational and network issues through the LAC, which operates at both state and national levels. Whether and how similar approaches might be

relevant in the Post Office context is a question the evidence from this review alone cannot resolve.

What the comparator evidence does highlight, however, is that in several models operator involvement in commercially sensitive areas is channelled through defined structures. Examples include finance committees or independent representative bodies, with clearly bounded roles in review, oversight or negotiation. In contrast, postmasters often express expectations of broader influence across commercial and network-level decisions. This reinforces the importance of clearly defining the scope and routes of engagement in commercially sensitive areas, both to align expectations and to support trust. It also underlines an important limitation. Improvements in engagement can strengthen voice, transparency and collaboration. However, they cannot in isolation resolve underlying commercial or structural challenges. The effectiveness of engagement is therefore closely linked to the wider operating environment in which postmasters work.

## **Maturity and cultural change**

### **What the fieldwork showed**

Both postmasters and stakeholders recognise that engagement has improved in recent years. The introduction of structured governance forums, the expansion of co-design initiatives such as Adopt-a-Function, and changes in leadership tone have all been acknowledged as positive developments. More postmasters now recognise that improvements have occurred than those who do not.

The tension lies in pace and depth. For stakeholders, current structures represent significant reforms that are still embedding, and it takes time for new governance processes and operating norms to mature. For many postmasters, progress feels slow against the backdrop of the Horizon scandal and a long history of strained relationships. Confidence remains cautious and closely tied to whether engagement leads to real, visible results that are evident at branch level. Rebuilding trust is likely to require sustained demonstration over time. Engagement must be seen to be genuine, it must lead to real change, and reforms currently embedding must continue to develop rather than stall.

### **What the comparative evidence suggests**

The comparator evidence does not offer examples of organisations recovering from failures of the scale and nature of the Horizon scandal. The trust-rebuilding challenge at Post Office is distinctive in important respects that the comparator models do not fully address.

What the comparator evidence does suggest is that trust in engagement systems tends to develop gradually where mechanisms consistently demonstrate credibility, transparency and practical value over time. Across the organisations reviewed, engagement structures have been in place for a number of years and have developed through iteration rather than being introduced as complete systems. This supports the stakeholder view that embedding takes time. It also suggests that the consistency and visibility of outcomes during the embedding period is likely to be a significant factor in how confidence develops across the network.

This suggests that, for Post Office, the continued development of engagement is likely to depend on the consistent operation of existing mechanisms over time. This will matter more than the introduction of new structures.

## **What the combined evidence suggests**

The fieldwork and the comparative review point in the same direction across the six areas considered in this chapter. The Postmaster Inclusion Framework has established the structural foundations for meaningful engagement. There is clear evidence of increased activity, more formalised structures and growing opportunities for postmasters to contribute to decision-making processes. Engagement appears more embedded within governance processes, and the range of mechanisms now in place provides a stronger basis for postmaster voice than previously existed.

The evidence from both sources suggests that the next stage of development is less about introducing additional mechanisms. It is more about how existing mechanisms operate together as a coherent, credible and visible engagement system. In this context, credibility is shaped not only by the presence of engagement structures, but by how clearly their role is understood and how transparently their influence is demonstrated in practice.

Comparator evidence also suggests that three things may be important features of more mature engagement systems. These are: clarity around what representation covers; how different decision processes operate; and how broader participation is enabled without over-burdening operators.

However, the evidence also indicates that strengthening engagement is necessary but not sufficient to address all of the challenges identified by postmasters. Engagement mechanisms can improve communication, transparency and participation in decision-making, but their impact is shaped by the wider commercial and contractual environment. Where issues such as remuneration, transaction fees or contract terms are perceived as unsustainable, engagement initiatives are often viewed as secondary. As a result, engagement reforms are likely to be most effective when considered alongside broader changes to the operating model.

Across both sources, the following areas emerge as priorities for the continued development of the framework.

### **Strengthening feedback loops and transparency**

Both the fieldwork and the comparator evidence identify the visibility of outcomes as a foundation of credible engagement. This is particularly important in advisory engagement systems where forums do not make decisions themselves. Ensuring postmasters can see how their input has informed decisions, and receive clear explanations where it has not, appears across both evidence sources as central to strengthening confidence in engagement arrangements. Comparator organisations typically place emphasis on structured communication of outcomes, including regular updates and 'You said, we did' style reporting. These approaches are designed to demonstrate how operator input has been considered and to maintain visibility of engagement activity across the network.

Comparator evidence also suggests that clearer explanation of how decisions are made supports these feedback loops. For example, several models distinguish between different types of engagement, helping operators to understand where and how their input is expected to influence outcomes. This clarity appears to support more consistent

interpretation of engagement activity across the network. This suggests that strengthening feedback loops may also depend on improving transparency around decision-making processes and how engagement inputs are considered within them.

## **Embedding operational collaboration earlier in development processes**

Both postmasters and the comparator evidence suggest that engagement is most meaningful where operator expertise is drawn on earlier in the development of proposals. This is more meaningful than engagement at the consultation stage. The Adopt-a-Function initiative is widely seen as a positive example of this approach.

Comparator evidence indicates that early-stage engagement is typically embedded within operational and planning processes, rather than concentrated in standalone initiatives. This engagement is usually structured through defined roles or forums linked to specific areas of activity, rather than relying solely on general feedback mechanisms.

This suggests that extending similar approaches more systematically may strengthen the consistency of engagement across the Post Office framework.

## **Strengthening the legitimacy and transparency of representation**

Both the fieldwork and the comparative review highlighted the importance of perceived legitimacy in representative structures. In comparator organisations, this is often supported through peer-elected representatives, independent or membership-based bodies, and clearly defined roles within governance processes.

Within the Post Office context, questions around representativeness continue to be raised by some postmasters, particularly in relation to how views are gathered and reflected across the network.

Comparator evidence suggests that legitimacy is supported not only by how representatives are selected, but also by how clearly their role is defined and understood. In several models, representative bodies are associated with defined areas of activity. Examples include strategic and business planning, oversight of specific funds, consultation on operational changes, or participation in commercial discussions. This clarity of scope appears to reinforce both the role and credibility of representative structures. The presence of multiple channels of representation, including independent or membership-based bodies alongside corporate mechanisms, also contributes to perceived legitimacy. It provides alternative routes for operator voice and reduces reliance on a single source of insight.

Taken together, this suggests that strengthening confidence in Post Office representation may depend both on clearer selection and accountability arrangements and on making the role of representatives more visible across the network.

## **Broadening participation across the network**

Both sources recognise that engagement currently reaches a relatively small proportion of the postmaster population. Comparator evidence indicates that participation is typically mediated through representative and indirect mechanisms rather than direct involvement from the full network. It also suggests that broader participation is often achieved through layered systems that combine representative structures with wider, lower-burden routes for

input and communication. This highlights the importance of ensuring that clear and accessible routes for input are available across the network, rather than focusing solely on expanding formal participation structures.

## **Supporting the gradual development of trust and cultural change**

Both sources recognise that trust develops through sustained and consistent practice over time rather than through structural reform alone. Comparator evidence indicates that the early operation of engagement structures is critical in shaping confidence, particularly where outcomes are consistently visible. This highlights the importance of consistency in delivery, as well as structure, in shaping how engagement is experienced across the network.

## **Recognising the role of commercial viability**

The fieldwork evidence is clear that financial sustainability is the foundation on which postmaster confidence in engagement rests. Where remuneration levels, transaction fees or contract terms are perceived as unsustainable, engagement initiatives are likely to be viewed as secondary to more immediate business concerns. This places a clear limit on what engagement mechanisms alone can achieve. Comparator evidence indicates two things about commercial matters. First, influence over commercial matters is typically more limited than in operational areas. Second, where commercially sensitive issues are discussed, operator involvement is often channelled through more clearly defined representative or oversight structures. This suggests that the relationship between commercial viability and engagement is more pronounced in the Post Office context and may require clearer explanation of the scope of engagement.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the evidence suggests that meaningful progress has been made in establishing the foundations for improved postmaster engagement. The current challenge is less about introducing new structures and more about ensuring that existing arrangements operate consistently, transparently and with clear purpose across the network.

Addressing this will be central to strengthening confidence in engagement over time and ensuring that postmasters' voices are effectively reflected within the governance and operation of the Post Office.

# Annex A: Comparative review of engagement models in franchise and postal organisations

## Purpose and scope of this review

This annex presents a comparative review of engagement models used by selected franchise organisations and postal operators. It was conducted alongside the fieldwork as part of the broader evaluation of postmaster engagement initiatives at Post Office.

The review focused on organisations with a significant network of geographically distributed branches or outlets, where the relationship between a central organisation and its local operators is central to how the business works. Specifically, it examined organisations that rely on franchisees or licensed partners to deliver services at a local level.

Three main criteria guided the selection of organisations. First, organisations classified among the most profitable or well-regarded franchises in the UK were prioritised, drawing on published rankings including those produced by Franchise UK. Second, organisations that are members of the British Franchise Association (BFA) or a comparable body, whose membership requires adherence to the European Code of Ethics for Franchising. Third, where an organisation was not a BFA member, it was considered for inclusion if it had its own publicly available best practice guidelines covering its relationship with franchisees or licence partners.

The review draws on publicly available information, including corporate publications, franchisee materials and sector reporting. Where detailed information on internal engagement structures or governance arrangements is not publicly available, this is noted within the relevant section. As a result, the descriptions below reflect how engagement structures are formally presented, rather than a full account of how they may operate in practice. The review is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. Its purpose is to identify approaches, models and principles that may support the development of longer-term, evidence-based engagement frameworks in large, distributed networks. The findings from this review are drawn on in the final chapter of the report. The four organisations reviewed are McDonald's UK, Subway, Domino's UK and Australia Post.

## McDonald's UK

### Network type and context

McDonald's UK<sup>8</sup> operates a large franchise network of independently owned restaurants in the United Kingdom. Franchisees own and operate their restaurants under a central brand and operating model, with the corporate organisation responsible for brand standards, supply chain, marketing and strategic direction. The relationship between the franchisor and its franchisees is framed through what McDonald's describes as a "three-legged stool" philosophy, positioning franchisees, suppliers and the company as interdependent partners within the system.

### Who represents operators

Franchisees elect representatives to participate in governance-level discussions with corporate leadership. Elected franchisee representatives sit on the Executive National Leadership Group (Exec NLG) alongside senior corporate leaders. Franchisees also elect members to a Finance Committee responsible for reviewing business plans, cost structures and investment proposals. The use of peer-elected representation provides franchisees with a clear democratic mandate for those participating in governance discussions. These elected governance roles provide franchise operators with a direct mandate to participate in discussions that inform key operational and financial decisions affecting the network.

## **Formal engagement structures**

McDonald's maintains multiple engagement mechanisms operating at different levels of the organisation. At the governance level, the Exec NLG brings together elected franchisee representatives and senior corporate leaders to discuss operational, financial and strategic issues affecting the network. This forum functions as a governance-level discussion body where franchisee input is considered before key decisions are finalised. The Finance Committee meets quarterly to scrutinise UK business plans and examine investment proposals.

Alongside governance-level structures, McDonald's operates a range of wider participation mechanisms across the franchise network. These include:

- regional roadshows where senior leadership meet franchise operators
- live calls and engagement sessions with the senior leadership team
- operational workshops where franchisees provide feedback on proposals
- dedicated operational consultants who maintain ongoing relationships with franchisees

Franchisees are also involved in the development of strategic and operational initiatives through the Plan to Win (PTW) process, which incorporates operator insight during the development phase of proposed changes.

## **Influence over decisions**

Franchisee representatives participate in governance discussions before key decisions are finalised, providing input on operational, financial and strategic matters. The Finance Committee gives franchisees direct oversight of business planning and investment proposals. The PTW process incorporates franchise operator insight into strategic and operational development prior to implementation. Publicly available information does not specify which categories of decision are subject to franchisee input and which remain the sole determination of corporate leadership. Publicly available information does, however, indicate that franchisee input is connected to defined areas of activity, including UK business planning, operational performance, and early-stage proposal development through structures such as the Exec NLG, Finance Committee and PTW process. This suggests that, while decision-making authority remains with the corporate organisation, the areas in which franchisee input is expected are more clearly defined than may initially appear. At the same time, the precise boundary between franchisee influence and final corporate decision-making is not fully specified in public sources.

## **Feedback loops and communication**

McDonald's combines engagement input mechanisms with a structured system for communicating outcomes across the franchise network. Communication channels include weekly franchisee communications providing updates on operational developments and organisational decisions, leadership roadshows and live calls where executives explain business developments and respond to questions from operators, a digital collaboration platform through which updates, documents and discussions are shared across the network, and operational consultants who communicate decisions and policy changes directly to franchise operators at a local level. Together these mechanisms are designed to ensure that franchise operators receive regular updates on decisions taken and how operator feedback contributed to those outcomes.

## **Trust, culture and conflict**

McDonald's frames its relationship with franchisees through the three-legged stool philosophy, which positions the franchisor, franchisees and suppliers as mutually dependent partners rather than as principal and agent. This framing is intended to embed a partnership orientation within the culture of the organisation. Publicly available information does not provide detailed information on formal dispute resolution mechanisms or specific protections for franchisees against unilateral changes to operational or commercial terms.

## **Known limitations and risks**

Publicly available information does not provide a detailed account of limitations or failure modes within the McDonald's engagement model. What is visible suggests that the scale and resources of the organisation underpin engagement mechanisms, such as dedicated operational consultants and digital collaboration platforms, that may not be directly replicable in smaller or more resource-constrained networks. It is also not possible to determine from public sources the extent to which elected franchisee representatives operate with full independence from corporate influence in governance discussions. Similarly, there is no detailed data on overall membership or participation rates within governance structures. Available information indicates that engagement is primarily channelled through elected or selected franchisee representatives rather than direct participation across the full network.

## **Subway**

### **Network type and context**

Subway<sup>9</sup> operates a highly decentralised franchise network with strong regional operational support structures. Franchisees own and operate individual restaurants under a central brand, with regional development offices and field representatives providing ongoing support and maintaining the primary operational relationship between franchisees and the central organisation.

### **Who represents operators**

Subway franchisees are represented through a combination of locally embedded field representatives and elected governance structures. At the regional level, development offices and field representatives maintain ongoing relationships with franchise operators. At the governance level, franchisees elect representatives to boards responsible for overseeing the Franchise Advertising Fund (FAF), a shared marketing fund to which all franchisees contribute. Board members are elected directly by franchisees, providing a clear democratic mandate for oversight of a shared financial resource.

## **Formal engagement structures**

Subway operates a layered participation model that combines local support structures, specialist participation routes and governance-level oversight. At the local level, development offices and field representatives act as the primary interface between franchisees and the central organisation, providing operational support, communicating organisational updates and providing a route through which operational issues can be raised. Specialist sub-committees bring together franchise operators with practical experience in specific areas of the business, including marketing, operations, technology and supply chain, to provide operational input on proposed initiatives before wider implementation. The FAF boards provide governance-level oversight of marketing strategy and expenditure, with elected franchisee representatives responsible for reviewing campaigns and determining the allocation of marketing funds. Where specialist committees relate to marketing activity, their discussions connect to the FAF boards, creating a link between specialist participation and governance oversight.

## **Influence over decisions**

Franchisees have direct oversight and decision-making authority over the allocation of marketing funds through the elected FAF boards. Specialist sub-committees provide input on proposed operational and system changes before wider implementation. Field representatives provide a route through which operational concerns can be raised and discussed with the central organisation. Publicly available information does not specify the full range of decisions subject to franchisee input or the extent to which franchisee input through specialist committees can alter or delay corporate proposals. Public material does indicate a more clearly bounded decision-making role in specific areas, particularly through the FAF boards, where elected franchisees have direct oversight and decision-making responsibility for marketing expenditure. This suggests that representation in the Subway model is linked to defined functional areas rather than general advisory input alone. However, outside these more clearly bounded areas, public information does not provide a complete account of where franchisee influence ends and final decision-making by the central organisation begins.

## **Feedback loops and communication**

Subway maintains continuous communication between the central organisation and franchise operators through a combination of structured updates and locally embedded support roles. Development offices and field representatives maintain ongoing relationships with franchise operators, providing explanations of operational changes and organisational decisions at a local level. Regular network communications and operational updates are shared with franchise operators. The locally embedded nature of communication structures means that operators receive explanations of decisions within their operational context rather than solely through centralised communications.

## **Trust, culture and conflict**

Publicly available information does not provide detailed information on Subway's formal dispute resolution mechanisms or specific protections for franchisees against unilateral changes to terms or operating conditions. The presence of locally embedded field representatives and development offices provides ongoing relational contact between operators and the organisation. The independence of FAF governance boards from direct corporate control over marketing expenditure provides franchisees with a defined area of autonomous decision-making over shared resources.

## **Known limitations and risks**

Publicly available information indicates that Subway's franchise model has faced notable scrutiny in some markets, particularly regarding the financial viability of individual units and the balance of commercial terms between franchisees and the franchisor. However, there is no comprehensive public account of how these issues have been addressed through formal engagement structures. The highly decentralised nature of the Subway system, comprising large numbers of individual franchise operators, creates inherent challenges for ensuring consistent and equitable engagement across the network. It is also not fully visible from public sources how far specialist sub-committees exert meaningful influence on decisions prior to implementation, as opposed to providing post-hoc input. Similarly, detailed data on overall membership or participation rates within governance structures is not available. What can be seen suggests that engagement operates primarily through representative bodies and specialist committees rather than direct involvement from the full franchisee base.

## **Domino's UK**

### **Network type and context**

Domino's UK<sup>10</sup> operates a franchise network of independent franchise partners who own and operate pizza delivery outlets under a corporate brand and delivery platform. Franchise partners operate under licence from the corporate organisation, which is responsible for brand standards, technology infrastructure, supply chain and marketing. The UK franchise network is one of the largest in the sector.

### **Who represents operators**

Franchise partners are represented collectively by the Domino's Franchise Association (DFA), an independent, membership-funded body governed by franchise partners. The DFA is elected by franchise partners and operates independently of the corporate organisation. Its independence from the franchisor is central to its function as a representative body, providing franchisees with a collective voice that is not dependent on corporate governance processes.

### **Formal engagement structures**

The DFA provides the primary formal structure through which franchise partners engage collectively with the corporate organisation. As an independent membership-funded body, it provides a collective voice for franchise partners, a mechanism for negotiating with the

corporate organisation, and a structured channel through which network-wide concerns can be raised and discussed. Alongside governance-level representation through the DFA, engagement across the wider franchise network is supported through regular franchisee meetings, operational consultations and ongoing engagement between franchise partners and corporate operational teams. Issues raised through different channels are aggregated through the DFA and discussed collectively with the corporate organisation.

## **Influence over decisions**

The DFA provides a formal mechanism through which franchise partners can negotiate with and challenge the corporate organisation on operational and commercial issues. Through this structure, franchise partners are able to scrutinise proposals affecting operational performance and network growth, negotiate operational and commercial matters with the franchisor, and engage with the design of initiatives prior to implementation. Operational issues relating to store development, delivery systems and digital infrastructure are discussed collectively between franchise representatives and the corporate organisation. However, publicly available information does not provide a comprehensive account of which decisions are subject to DFA input and which remain solely determined by corporate leadership. What is visible indicates that the DFA acts as a negotiating body on commercial and operational matters, including recent discussions on profitability and growth frameworks. This suggests a clearer and more formalised role for representation in negotiation and commercial dialogue than is evident in some other models. At the same time, public information does not fully specify where negotiation and challenge end and where final decision-making authority by the corporate organisation begins.

## **Feedback loops and communication**

The DFA plays an important role in communicating the outcomes of discussions between franchise representatives and corporate leadership to the wider franchise network. Because the DFA represents franchise partners collectively, discussions and their outcomes are communicated back across the franchise network. This creates visibility around negotiations on operational and commercial issues, strategic discussions affecting network development, and outcomes of disputes or major organisational decisions. The presence of an independent representative body therefore provides a communication bridge between engagement discussions and the wider network, helping translate discussions into visible outcomes for franchise partners.

## **Trust, culture and conflict**

The independence of the DFA from corporate governance structures provides franchise partners with a degree of confidence that representation is not subject to direct corporate influence. The collective negotiation function of the DFA means that disputes and commercial concerns can be raised through a recognised channel rather than through individual franchise partner relationships with the corporate organisation. Publicly available information does not provide a detailed account of formal dispute resolution mechanisms or specific contractual protections for franchise partners.

## **Known limitations and risks**

The effectiveness of an independent representative body such as the DFA depends on its ability to maintain the confidence of the wider franchise network and to negotiate effectively with the corporate organisation. The Domino's model, like others based on independent association structures, carries a risk that active participation becomes concentrated among a relatively small group of franchise partners, leaving others less connected to formal representation processes. Publicly available information does not provide a detailed account of how the DFA manages this risk in practice. Detailed data on membership levels or participation rates is not publicly available, although the DFA is understood to represent a substantial proportion of franchisees within the UK network.

## **Australia Post**

### **Network type and context**

Australia Post<sup>11</sup> operates a national postal network combining corporate-run post offices and independently operated Licensed Post Offices (LPOs). LPOs are operated by licensees under contract with Australia Post and are responsible for delivering postal and related services at a local level across the country. The network includes a significant proportion of rural and remote outlets. Australia Post operates as a government-owned corporation with a statutory obligation to maintain universal service delivery across the national network.

### **Who represents operators**

Licensed post office operators are represented by the LPO Group, an independent, membership-funded association that advocates on behalf of licensed operators. The organisation operates independently of Australia Post and engages directly with the postal operator, government and parliamentary committees, and regulatory bodies on issues affecting the network. The independence of the LPO Group allows licensees to raise concerns and provide challenge while maintaining dialogue with the postal operator.

### **Formal engagement structures**

Engagement between licensees and Australia Post takes place through a combination of representative and operational mechanisms. At the national level, the LPO Group provides a collective representative voice for licensed operators and raises operational and contractual issues affecting the network. At the operational consultation level, a Licensee Advisory Council (LAC) provides a formal forum where licensee representatives discuss operational issues and proposed changes with Australia Post. The LAC operates through both state and national advisory meetings, allowing operational issues raised locally to be escalated to national discussions with senior Australia Post leadership. At the operational level, licensees also interact with regional and area network management teams, who provide operational support, monitor branch performance and address operational issues affecting individual outlets. Together these mechanisms create a multi-level engagement structure combining local operational contact, representative advocacy and formal consultative forums.

### **Influence over decisions**

The LPO Group engages with Australia Post on operational and contractual issues, with government and parliamentary committees on policy affecting the network, and with regulators on issues relating to franchising code and network sustainability. The LAC provides a formal consultative forum through which licensee perspectives on operational changes can be raised before implementation. State-level advisory discussions allow issues raised by licensees to be discussed locally, while national advisory meetings provide an opportunity for those issues to be escalated to senior leadership discussions. Regional network management teams provide an operational route through which branch-level concerns can be raised and addressed. Publicly available information does not provide a comprehensive account of the extent to which licensee input through these channels can alter or delay organisational or policy decisions. Public regulatory material indicates that collective negotiation involving licensee representatives has been authorised in specific areas of operational and contractual change. This suggests that representation in this model may extend beyond consultation into more formalised negotiation in defined circumstances. However, public materials do not provide a complete picture of how these boundaries operate in practice or the extent to which consultation or negotiation changes final organisational decisions.

## **Feedback loops and communication**

Australia Post maintains communication with LPOs through a combination of operational management structures and representative channels. Operational updates are distributed through regional network management teams. Communication between Australia Post and the LAC provides a formal channel through which developments affecting the network can be discussed with licensee representatives. The LPO Group communicates network issues and operational developments to licensees through its representative functions. Publicly available information does not provide detailed information on the consistency or frequency of feedback communications across the network.

## **Trust, culture and conflict**

The LPO Group's independence from Australia Post provides licensees with a channel through which concerns can be raised collectively without dependence on the postal operator's own governance structures. The organisation's engagement with government and regulatory bodies provides an additional external dimension to licensee advocacy that is not solely dependent on the bilateral relationship between licensees and Australia Post. Publicly available information does not provide detailed information on formal dispute resolution mechanisms or specific contractual protections for licensees against unilateral changes to operating conditions.

## **Known limitations and risks**

The evidence base for the Australia Post model is thinner than for the UK franchise comparators, as publicly available information on internal engagement arrangements is less detailed. The publicly available record does not provide a comprehensive account of how the LAC operates in practice, how representative the LPO Group is of the full diversity of licensees across the network, or how effectively operational concerns raised through local management structures feed into wider organisational discussions. As with other independent association models, there is a risk that participation in formal representative structures becomes concentrated among a relatively small or self-selecting group of licensees. Publicly available information does not provide detailed data on participation

rates or membership coverage of representative bodies, although engagement is understood to operate through organised representative groups rather than direct participation from the full network.

## **Cross-cutting observations**

Across the four organisations reviewed, several features appear consistently in engagement models described in publicly available sources as functioning effectively.

On representation, the organisations reviewed tend to combine formal governance participation with mechanisms that provide representatives with a recognised mandate from the wider network. In several cases this takes the form of elected representation, either directly within governance structures as in the McDonald's and Subway models, or through independent membership-funded associations as in the Domino's and Australia Post models. The independence of representative bodies from the central organisation appears to be a significant factor in how legitimacy is perceived across the network.

On participation, broader participation appears to depend not only on having multiple engagement channels but on making those channels visible, connected and functionally distinct. Across the comparator organisations, models that appear to work well combine accessible local interfaces and specialist or issue-based participation routes. Several organisations describe mechanisms intended to connect local engagement with wider governance discussions, though publicly available information does not always allow a detailed assessment of how effectively these connections operate in practice.

On operational collaboration, comparator organisations tend to involve operators in the development of operational and strategic initiatives before decisions are finalised rather than solely through post-hoc consultation. Specialist working groups or sub-committees bring front-line expertise into operational development processes at an earlier stage.

On feedback loops, engagement systems appear most credible where organisations communicate regularly about the outcomes of engagement discussions, provide explanations of how operator input has been considered, and ensure that information about engagement outcomes reaches the wider network rather than only those directly involved in governance forums.

Across the comparator organisations, publicly available information provides greater clarity on the areas that representation covers than on the scale of participation. While detailed membership or participation rates are not consistently available, the evidence indicates that most models rely on a relatively small number of elected or representative participants, supported by wider but less intensive engagement routes. This suggests that effective engagement in large, distributed networks does not depend on universal participation, but on clearly defined representative roles combined with accessible channels for wider input.

Evidence also suggests that representative mechanisms are linked to different types of influence, including consultation, oversight and, in some cases, negotiation. However, the precise boundary between influence and formal decision-making is not always fully explained in public materials. This means that comparator models often provide clearer structural description of roles and processes than they do a complete account of how influence operates in practice.

On risks and limitations, a consistent risk across all four models is that formal engagement structures can become dominated by a relatively small and self-selecting group of participants, with large parts of the network remaining less connected to formal engagement processes.

A general limitation of this review is that it is based on publicly available information only. Where organisations do not publish detailed information about internal engagement structures or governance arrangements, the review reflects what is visible from outside the organisation. Internal assessments of what works well, what does not, and why are rarely available through public sources. The review should therefore be understood as illustrative of structures and principles rather than as a comprehensive evaluation of each organisation's engagement practice. This is particularly relevant when interpreting how clearly the boundaries between operator influence and organisational decision-making are defined, as these may be shaped in practice by internal working relationships and informal processes that are not visible in published materials.

## Annex B: Postmaster Survey

This survey was administered online between January and February 2026 to postmasters across the Post Office network. It was promoted through the Post Office weekly newsletter, which reaches all postmasters, and through postmaster groups and stakeholder networks. A total of 348 postmasters completed the survey in full or answered enough questions for their responses to be included in the analysis. The survey was designed by TONIC in consultation with DBT and covered awareness of engagement initiatives, experiences of participation, views on influence and decision-making, and perceptions of Post Office culture and trust.

### Section 1: About this survey

Respondents were shown the following introductory text before completing the survey:

This survey is about how postmasters have a say in how Post Office works, and how current ways of listening to postmasters' views are working in practice. Postmasters are currently able to share their views in different ways - for example, by helping to shape the future direction of Post Office, as well as by giving feedback on day-to-day services and ways of working. In this survey, we want to understand your views on what works well and what could be improved in the way postmasters are currently involved in how Post Office works. The Department for Business and Trade (DBT) has commissioned TONIC, an independent research organisation, to carry out this research. Your answers are confidential and will be analysed anonymously.

#### Which of the following best describes you?

- I am currently a postmaster or scale partner
- I am not a postmaster

### Section 2: Awareness of ways postmasters can have their say

Respondents were shown the following introductory text: There are different ways postmasters can share their views or have a say on how Post Office is run. Some focus on future plans for Post Office, while others are about day-to-day services or sharing feedback on how things are going.

#### How aware are you of the following ways postmasters can share their views or be included in decision-making?

*Response options for each item: I know it well / I know a bit about it / I have heard of it but do not really know what it involves / I am not aware of it at all*

- Adopt a Function
- Annual Postmaster Survey
- Postmaster Experience Forum
- Postmaster Business Updates and Town Halls
- Postmaster Wellbeing Meetings
- Postmaster Working Groups
- Regional Postmaster Meetings

- Serving as a Postmaster Non-Executive Director
- The Consultative Council
- The Postmaster Panel

**Which, if any, of the following have you personally taken part in? Please select all that apply.**

- Adopt a Function
- Annual Postmaster Survey
- Postmaster Experience Forum
- Postmaster Business Updates and Town Halls
- Postmaster Wellbeing Meetings
- Postmaster Working Groups
- Regional Postmaster Meetings
- Serving as a Postmaster Non-Executive Director
- The Consultative Council
- The Postmaster Panel

### **Section 3: Your views on how this works in practice**

Respondents were shown the following introductory text: Postmasters can share their views with Post Office in different ways, such as through formal groups, meetings, surveys, or direct feedback. Thinking about these ways of sharing views, please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?**

*Response options for each item: Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree*

- It is easy for postmasters to share their views with Post Office through the formal channels available, for example meetings, surveys or engagement groups.
- The ways postmasters can share their views through these channels are open and accessible to people like me.
- Postmasters' views on how Post Office is run are taken seriously by Post Office.
- I feel confident that postmasters' interests are represented fairly in decisions made by Post Office.
- I understand how Post Office uses feedback it receives from postmasters.

### **Section 4: Influence in decision-making**

Respondents were shown the following introductory text: Postmasters can be asked for their views in different ways, and these can have different levels of influence on decisions about how Post Office is run.

**How much influence do you feel postmasters currently have over the following decisions?**

*Response options for each item: A great deal / Quite a lot / Some / Very little / None at all*

- Operational decisions affecting the day-to-day running of branches, for example processes, systems, products or ways of working.
- Contracts and remuneration, for example contract terms, pay, fees or financial arrangements.
- Decisions made by government about Post Office, for example funding, contracts, or the future direction of Post Office.

**For each of the following areas, how much influence would you like postmasters to have in the future?**

*Response options for each item: Less influence / About the same as now / A little more influence / Much more influence*

- Operational decisions affecting the day-to-day running of branches.
- Contracts and remuneration.
- Decisions made by government about Post Office.

**Are there any other types of decisions you think postmasters should be involved in?**

*Open text response*

## **Section 5: What does good involvement look like?**

Respondents were shown the following introductory text: People may have different views about what good involvement should look like when postmasters are asked for their views.

**Thinking about good engagement with postmasters, which of the following matter most to you? Please select up to three options.**

- Ways of involving postmasters should be ongoing, not just one-off.
- Groups or forums for postmasters should have a clear purpose.
- Postmasters should choose their own representation.
- Government should hear directly from postmasters.
- It should be clear what influence postmasters can and cannot have on how Post Office is run.
- Ways of involving postmasters should be independent and trusted.

## **Section 6: Culture, trust and relationships**

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?**

*Response options for each item: Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree*

- There has been improvement in how Post Office works with postmasters in recent years.
- Trust between postmasters and Post Office is increasing.
- Changes to the culture of Post Office are not just talked about, but actively put into practice.
- Postmasters' views are considered when decisions are made.

**Overall, how would you describe the culture of Post Office in recent years following the Horizon IT scandal? For example, how postmasters are treated, listened to, and respected.**

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

**Please tell us why.**

*Open text response*

**Overall, how confident are you that Post Office is genuinely committed to involving postmasters in decisions that affect their work and the future of Post Office?**

- Very confident
- Fairly confident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Not very confident
- Not at all confident

**Is there anything else you would like the government or Post Office to understand or consider about how postmasters should be involved in the future?**

*Open text response*

## **Section 7: About you and your branch**

Respondents were shown the following introductory text: The following questions help us understand whether experiences differ across different types of branches. Your answers are anonymous and will only be used to look for patterns across groups.

**How many branches do you operate?**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

**How would you describe your branch type? Please tick all that apply.**

- Main
- Local
- Outreach
- Traditional/Legacy
- Drop and Collect
- Other

**What is the first part of your branch postcode? If you have more than one branch, please include all postcodes.**

*Open text response for up to five postcodes*

**How many years have you been a postmaster?**

- Less than 2 years
- 2 to 5 years
- 6 to 10 years
- More than 10 years

**In the past 12 months, have you been actively involved or engaged with any of the following groups? Tick all that apply.**

- NFSP (National Federation of SubPostmasters)
- CWU (Communication Workers Union)
- Voice of the Postmaster
- Prefer not to say
- Other

**What is your age range?**

- Under 24
- 25 to 44
- 45 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or over

**How would you describe your gender?**

- Male
- Female
- Non binary
- Prefer not to say

**How would you describe your ethnicity?**

*White*

- British
- Irish
- Other White background

*Asian or Asian British*

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Any other Asian background

*Mixed*

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other mixed background

*Black or Black British*

- Caribbean
- African
- Any other Black background

*Other ethnic group*

- Chinese
- Any other ethnic group
- I do not wish to disclose my ethnic origin

## **Annex C: Postmaster interview guide**

This guide was used in semi-structured interviews with 30 postmasters conducted between January and February 2026. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with an information sheet and privacy notice outlining the purpose of the evaluation, how their data would be used, and assurances around confidentiality, to ensure informed consent and compliance with data protection requirements. Interviews were carried out by telephone or video call and lasted between 45 and one hour. The guide is organised into thematic sections reflecting the evaluation's research questions. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, not all questions were asked in every interview. Interviewers used their judgement to follow the most relevant lines of enquiry for each participant, based on their role, experience and responses during the conversation.

### **Introduction and context**

- 1) Can you briefly tell me about your branch and how long you have been a postmaster?
- 2) How would you describe your role in relation to other postmasters, for example, just your own branch, or a wider group?
- 3) What kinds of contact or engagement do you usually have with Post Office or government, if any? For example, formal groups or meetings, surveys, informal contact, local or national.

### **Awareness and experience of current initiatives**

- 4) What ways are you aware of for postmasters to share views or be involved? For example, the Postmaster Panel, Consultative Council, regional meetings, surveys, working groups.
- 5) Have you personally taken part in any of these? What was that experience like, or what has made it difficult or off-putting to get involved?
- 6) Thinking about the ways postmasters are asked for their views that you are aware of or have taken part in, how do these work in practice from your point of view? For example, how easy or difficult is it to get involved, who tends to take part and who does not, how are views and feedback gathered, and how clear is it what each group, meeting or forum is meant to do?
- 7) How clear do you feel about what influence these different initiatives are meant to have, if any?

### **Voice and influence**

- 8) In practice, where do you feel postmasters currently have the most influence? For example, day-to-day running of branches, local issues compared to national decisions, formal routes compared to informal routes.
- 9) Where do you feel postmasters have the least influence?

- 10) Do you feel differently about influencing decisions made by Post Office compared with decisions made by government? What feels easier or harder, and where, if anywhere, do you feel influence is possible?
- 11) Some people talk about trade-offs between influence and responsibility. If postmasters were offered more influence over decisions but were also asked to take on more responsibility, how would you feel about that?

### **Trust, culture and the wider context**

- 12) How would you describe the current relationship between postmasters and Post Office, for example how it feels day to day, whether it feels collaborative, distant, strained or improving, and whether experiences differ for different postmasters?
- 13) Thinking about the last few years, do you feel trust between postmasters and Post Office is improving, staying about the same, or getting worse?
- 14) How do communications from groups like the Postmaster Panel or the Consultative Council affect trust across the wider postmaster network?

### **What good engagement looks like**

- 15) When you think about good involvement of postmasters, what does that mean to you?
- 16) What would tell you that involvement is genuinely working well in practice? For example, feeling listened to compared to having real influence, who is represented and who is not, trust and transparency, and whether anything changes as a result.
- 17) Does independence matter to you in how postmasters are involved? If so, why?
- 18) Are there any clear red lines, things that would make involvement feel meaningless or untrustworthy to you?

### **Looking ahead**

- 19) If the way postmasters are involved in decisions was strengthened in the future, what one or two changes would matter most to you?
- 20) Thinking about your day-to-day role as a postmaster, what would feel different if involvement in Post Office was working well?
- 21) Is there anything else you would like to add that you think the government or Post Office should understand or consider about postmaster involvement?

## **Annex D: Stakeholder interview guide**

This guide was used in semi-structured interviews with 17 stakeholders from Post Office Limited, the Department for Business and Trade, and UK Government Investments, conducted between January and February 2026. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with information about the evaluation, including its purpose, how their data would be used, and assurances around confidentiality, to ensure informed consent and compliance with data protection requirements. Interviews were carried out by telephone or video call and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The guide is organised into thematic sections reflecting the evaluation's research questions. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, not all questions were asked in every interview. Where relevant, questions were adapted to reflect each interviewee's organisation and role.

### **Introduction and role**

- 1) Can you briefly describe your role and your connection to postmasters and Post Office engagement?
- 2) How long have you been involved in this area?
- 3) From your perspective, what is your organisation's role in relation to postmasters and engagement with them?

### **Purpose and intent of current initiatives**

- 4) From your perspective, what are the main aims of current postmaster engagement initiatives?
- 5) How are initiatives such as the Consultative Council and the Postmaster Panel intended to work?
- 6) How are these initiatives expected to fit within wider governance and decision-making arrangements?

### **How engagement works in practice**

- 7) Based on what you see, how do current engagement arrangements work in practice?
- 8) What aspects seem to be working well?
- 9) What has been more challenging or harder to implement than expected? For example, accessibility and who tends to participate, representativeness across different types of postmasters, how feedback is gathered and responded to, and how clear the remit and limits of influence are.

### **Influence and decision-making**

- 10) In practice, where do you think postmasters currently have influence?
- 11) Where do you think influence is limited or constrained? For example, where does your organisation expect postmaster input to shape decisions, and where not, and how does postmaster engagement interact with board-level decision-making?

12)How do you balance postmaster influence with operational delivery?

### **Trust, culture and the wider context**

13)How would you describe the current relationship between postmasters and Post Office?

14)Do you think trust is improving, staying the same, or deteriorating?

15)How visible do you think cultural change feels to postmasters themselves?

16)How has the wider history of Post Office shaped expectations of governance and engagement today?

### **Defining good engagement**

17)When you think about good engagement with postmasters, what does that mean to you?

18)What would tell you that engagement is genuinely working well? For example, being heard compared to shaping outcomes, whose voices are included and whose may be missing, how open and credible arrangements feel, and whether and how decisions change as a result of engagement.

19)Where do you think your view of good engagement aligns with postmasters' views, and where do you think it may differ?

### **Gaps, tensions and red lines**

20)Where do you see gaps or weaknesses in current engagement arrangements?

21)Are there any tensions between engagement, accountability and delivery?

22)Are there any clear red lines, things that should not happen if engagement is to remain credible and legitimate?

### **Looking ahead**

23)Looking ahead, what would success look like for postmaster engagement over the next few years?

24)What needs to stay the same, and realistically what needs to change?

25)What risks do you see if engagement arrangements are not strengthened or lose legitimacy?

26)Is there anything else you think is important for us to understand about postmaster engagement or inclusion?

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**Department for Business and Trade**

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