Unite the Union

Consultation Response – Access to Banking Review
July 2026

This response is submitted by Unite the Union. Unite is the UK's largest trade union, representing over one million members across all sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, financial services, transport, food and agriculture, construction, energy and utilities, information technology, service industries, hospitality, health, local government, and the not-for-profit sector. Unite also represents agency workers across both the public and private sectors.

Unite welcomes the opportunity to respond to HM Treasury's consultation on access to banking.

This document is submitted on behalf of Unite the Union. For further information, please contact:
Saba Edwards – Senior Communications Officer

Summary

Unite the Union believes that in-person banking remains essential, particularly as financial services become more complex and risks such as fraud continue to increase. While all customers benefit from face-to-face services, they are especially important for vulnerable groups, older people, and those at risk of digital exclusion.

The continued closure of bank branches is already limiting access to essential services, particularly in rural areas, and is contributing to financial exclusion. This shift towards digital banking is disadvantaging millions—especially the 2.4 million older people who are digitally excluded.

Since 2015, nearly 6,800 bank and building society branches—around two-thirds of the network—have closed. Unite contends that this has driven changes in customer behaviour by removing choice, rather than reflecting reduced demand for in-person banking.

Alternatives such as banking hubs, Post Offices, and mobile branches do not currently provide adequate replacement services due to limitations in accessibility, capacity, and service range.

While Unite supports digital innovation, it must complement—not replace—in-person provision, which remains essential to meeting the needs of consumers and small businesses.

Unite Response

Unite the Union is clear that in-person banking services are not only essential, but a vital component of overall banking provision. As consumers and businesses navigate increasingly complex financial environments, maintaining access to face-to-face services is more important than ever—particularly given the growing sophistication of financial fraud and scams.

In-person banking is especially critical for vulnerable customers, older people, and those at risk of social exclusion. However, it is also important for all customers, who benefit from the support of a trusted and experienced workforce able to provide expert, face-to-face guidance when needed.

As the financial services sector continues to reduce its local presence, many communities are already experiencing the consequences of diminished access to in-person banking. This is leaving some groups—particularly elderly and disabled people—struggling, and in some cases unable, to access essential banking services. The impact is particularly acute in rural areas, where long distances between available branches further restrict access and deepen financial exclusion.

It is widely reported that cash use in the UK has declined sharply over the long term, falling from 48% of payments in 2014 to just 9% in 2024. However, more recent data from LINK indicates a degree of stabilisation—and in some cases, modest resurgence. Cash remains widely used, with around 75% of adults using it at least once a fortnight and over half using it weekly. There is also evidence of rising ATM withdrawals and transaction volumes in recent years, linked in part to people using cash to manage their budgets during the cost-of-living crisis. Unite's view is that cash also plays a critical resilience role, with widespread payment failures reinforcing its importance as a reliable backup when digital systems do not work.

The loss of in-person banking services is causing clear consumer detriment. Evidence of widespread digital exclusion highlights how the sector's shift towards a predominantly digital model disproportionately disadvantages large segments of society. In July 2025, Age UK warned that 2.4 million digitally excluded older people are at risk of being left behind in an increasingly digital world.

According to consumer group Which?, around 6,795 bank and building society branches have closed since 2015—amounting to approximately 69% of the UK's branch network. Unite believes this long-term reduction in access has actively shaped customer behaviour by limiting choice, rather than reflecting a genuine decline in demand for face-to-face banking services.

The decline of in-person banking services is closely linked to reduced access to cash, which remains a vital payment method for many individuals and businesses. A resilient financial system must ensure that consumers are not forced into digital-only solutions—particularly during periods of economic uncertainty. This is especially important in the current climate, as many households face rising financial pressures and cost of living challenges, reinforcing the need for accessible, inclusive banking services.

While the financial services sector highlights alternatives such as banking hubs, Post Offices, and mobile branches, Unite does not consider these to be credible replacements for full-service bank branches in their current form. The services provided are more limited, and operational arrangements—including restricted opening hours, geographic coverage, and staffing—severely constrain accessibility. As a result, these alternatives are often unable to meet customer needs to an acceptable standard.

Looking ahead, Unite's principal concern is the trajectory of current policy and industry direction. While the union recognises and supports innovation in digital banking, this must complement—not replace—in-person service provision. There is no evidence to suggest that digital banking alone can meet the full range of needs of consumers and small businesses in an increasingly complex financial landscape.

Unite believes that urgent action is required to protect access to in-person banking services. This should include stronger regulatory oversight of branch closures, a requirement for meaningful community impact assessments, and enforceable guarantees of access to face-to-face banking provision. Any replacement services must meet equivalent standards in accessibility, service range, and capacity.

The continued reduction in branch networks also has significant implications for the workforce. The loss of experienced, customer-facing staff diminishes the sector's ability to deliver high-quality, personalised support and undermines the overall resilience of banking services. Protecting in-person provision is therefore critical not only for consumers, but also for sustaining skilled employment across the sector.

Crucially, it is this workforce that plays a vital role in helping to protect customers from fraud and scams. In an increasingly complex and high-risk financial environment, the expertise, judgement, and vigilance of trained staff provide an essential line of defence that cannot be replicated through digital channels alone.

Reduced access to local banking services also has a detrimental impact on small businesses and local economies. Many small firms continue to rely on branch services for cash handling, financial advice, and relationship management. The loss of local branches can weaken high streets and hinder local economic activity.

Conclusion

Unite is clear that the current trajectory towards reduced in-person banking provision is unsustainable and risks deepening financial exclusion across the UK. Digital innovation must not come at the expense of accessibility, inclusion, and trust.

A balanced approach—where digital services complement a strong and accessible network of in-person provision—is essential to ensure that the financial system works for everyone.

The sector has not provided sufficient evidence to demonstrate that demand for in-person banking has diminished to an extent that justifies the scale of branch closures seen in recent years.

Contact

For further information, please contact:
Saba Edwards
Senior Communications Officer