There is a good reason the new Irish “building identification code” (GADA’s term) is not referred to by its designer as either “address” or “postcode” but as an “Eircode”. The new system is not even intended to be a “postcode system”, if by this we mean the building identification system used for mail delivery. In fact, An Post has said they will not use the code for deliveries. So although it’s not a postcode system, it is another line in the Irish addressing system, and it attracts our interest. What does it do, and does it make life easier?

**Not a postcode system**

It is most definitely not a postcode system as most posts and postal customers envision such systems. One important specification for the project makes this clear, and makes it puzzling, in fact. This is that “it will not require change to the current postal addresses and addresses shall not need to be numbered or streets named where currently this is not the case”.

We repeat, most definitely for emphasis: *No street will be named or sequential street addresses generated in making this code system.*

So, no street names, and buildings won’t have sequential street numbers. How very curious. But in fact it makes sense in a country where the urban bits, at least, tend to have street names and numbers already, to which people are accustomed. And we use “tend” intentionally. In the countryside, as many lost foreign visitors will attest, buildings tend not to have addresses, road signs are puzzling or non-existent, and sometimes the entire village will have one address. Such a “shared address” is referred to as “non-unique”, and somewhere near 35% of the addresses in Ireland are non-unique and represent more than one building/residence!

**Structure and content for the Post**

This we learned from an interview with Liam Duggan, Business Development Director of the code’s development at Capita, the winning bidder of the government tender to introduce and maintain the Eircode. Capita is a major government services outsource provider with headquarters in London, England. Liam generously agreed to meet us at their offices in Dublin, Ireland on June 11.

Liam explained that an Eircode consists of two parts. Suppose your house’s code is **A65 F4E2**. The first 3 character bit is a “routing key”; it is meant to generally identify a geographic area, one of delivery/sortation functionality for the Post. It is apparently not as strictly a defined area as an American “Zipcode”, a system which is quite “determinate” geographically and functionally. Rather, when a new building is constructed, An Post will decide what “key” it belongs to depending on the shape of their postal delivery routes in that area. And with that decision, An Post exits the story of this “postcode”.

Houses bearing this key are delivered from the same delivery office or sortation center from which the postmen begin their “walks”. However, the official website says,
“The routing key will be used to help sort mail, however it is not directly linked to counties, towns and geographic features.” How very puzzling. There are some 137 of these routing keys, each of which stretches across 200 sq miles on average. That would certainly seem to be pretty clearly postal, and geographic, but it is not. One of the keys, the Limerick area, contains an enormous number of houses – 86,000. By any stretch, that’s a couple of sort centers.

The unique address “bit”

Now, turning to the second part of an Eircode, in this case F4E2, we confront what makes this code a puzzle on a number of levels, as well as very strange in one respect, and a wonderful advance, in another.

The last four “bits” of the code identify a building in which there are people or businesses who receive mail. This is called a “unique identifier”. Every building will have one. As noted above, this is not a minor advance for Ireland, since something like 35% of the ‘traditional’ addresses now in use are “non-unique”, which is to say they reference more than one building. It is not unknown for an entire village of 12 or 13 houses to have one address. With the issuance of the new codes, every inhabited building will have its own unique identifier.

And on top of that every apartment/living unit will have a “unique identifier”.

On one hand, this latter point is a very nice advance. No need to write “Apt. 74” when you send your cousin a birthday card. B83 G6M4 specifically refers to his 7th floor flat. On the other hand, this is something no signage anywhere will disclose, unless the building management decides to “translate” the apartment designations. This would look something like “B83 G6M4 = Apt. 74, 7th floor”.

And the problems are…

Recall that the specifications required that there be no “sequential” numbering. Recall that your address is A65 F4E2, with F4E2 being your house’s “number”. But none of your nearby neighbors will be F4E3 or F5E2 or anything else that could appear to the viewer to be considered “contiguous” or “sequential”. Similarly in the apartment building. These “addresses”, including yours, will appear to be random. Which is why they are not called “addresses”, but “unique identifiers”.

So, Ireland ends up with something that can’t really be called a postcode system, except in part for the first bit. The second bit appears to be a system for random scattering of unrelated letters and numbers, which aren’t even posted on buildings.

Sadly, it appears there were no address experts involved in the final design process. One is reminded of the old adage about a camel being a horse designed by a legislative committee.
**The launch is imminent**

Liam informed us that the codes have been allocated and letters will be sent to every coded address in Ireland in July to inform the householder or business of their new address/unique identifier. This mailing will consist of 2.2 million letters and is being managed by An Post.

The mailing will serve both unique and non-unique addresses. Recall that current “unique” addresses apply to one building or apartment, so these will be windowed letters with the new “address” displayed. These will not bear the home/apartment owner’s name, which An Post does not possess. To communicate with the currently non-unique addresses, the envelopes will be closed since the letter will contain the name of the resident and a description of the building, this being necessary to assure delivery to the right building.

Going forward, aside from the first part of the code, it appears An Post personnel won’t use the new codes for delivery, or for anything else, for that matter. They’ll still rely on “local knowledge”. In fact, the talk in Dublin was that the postal union made it very clear that labor would not support any system that they perceived would threaten their employment numbers, and sequential numbering, publically displayed in a coherently named system of street signage was perceived to be such a threat.

**OK it’s what we’ve got so let’s make do**

There will be no street signage or consecutive numbering of buildings for this code, only this unique identifier. Nevertheless, if this is the system, I know that I would want one on the house of my 86-year old aunt who insists on living alone where she has lived for 62 years. The likelihood of the need for me to call the emergency services is high, and I want them to get it right the first time. And when I call in her “code”, how do they find her? How do I find my cousin’s new apartment?

To learn your neighbor’s “code”, get the ambulance to your aunt, or find the location of your cousin’s new apartment, you and the emergency services will have to consult the database, in map form, created for this purpose. Although not yet live, the beta version I was shown is a standard Google view with the “unique identifiers” printed on each building. This is what everyone, including emergency services, will use to find my aunt. This is what you’ll look for on your mobile when driving to your cousin’s new home. (This is what I’ll put outside on my aunt’s house, just to be sure…)

And with a digital device or other Internet-connected computerized tool, it should be an easy matter to punch in the UI and get a view of the destination on the map. But, forget trying to use a paper map, like the one tourists use or the Automobile Club gives out. Those are unlikely to be printed with Eircodes!
No free lunch or address

And forget free. You’ll have to have a digital tool with the Codes loaded, or accessible. And Google and Garmin and TomTom and all the others in the commercial world will make this available to you for a price. They will have to charge because they will have to pay to access the Eircode database and fit its data into a commercial product. You can see how much they’ll have to pay, and get back from the public, here: https://www.Eircode.ie/business/products-and-services

As long as there’s no blackout of the internet (or the digital location tool can run independent of the internet, which is quite feasible), and everyone has easy (free?) access, the “unique identifiers” will work to show us where our destination is.

But, even with the digital assist, as a route planning tool for those who need it – private couriers, bus companies, school buses, delivery companies, An Post – it’s not functional.

Some public policy issues

As we approach the end of this discussion, we would suggest there is a pretty profound public policy question raised by government’s choice of this postcode design (which I hesitate to call a “postcode”) and how this system will be made public and be funded.

If an address is something required by all our institutions and by all people in their daily lives, is it not a critical component of a civilized society and a healthy economy? And if it is a critical component, why is there a charge to use it? Why it is not paid for out of general tax revenues? And why will Unique Identifiers not be made publically visible?

We suspect that the adoption period for this code by the public will be long, hard, and painful for civil society and politically. With the apparent usefulness for the citizen being, shall we say, “opaque”, the likelihood of a widespread public yawn of rejection is quite possible. Capita is aware of this and has created a contact center for information. It is also launching a community outreach program. 26 “Eircode Champions” (one for each county) will hold briefing sessions and be available for questions. They will pay particular attention to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, non-IT literate and those in remote locations.

Notwithstanding these efforts, doubtless there will be cases where emergency response was seriously delayed by a mistaken UI, or a misreading of it. Many people will misremember their code and will cause their mistakes to be entered in numerous institutions, whose records will be incorrect - government agencies, airlines, banks, department stores, pharmacies…

Possibly better than anticipated, but…
On the other hand, once correctly captured into a business’s customer file it will serve to distinguish clients with identical names. Much else in daily life that used to be haphazard will be improved. And of course we can be sure that the Digital Generation will adapt to this system in about 3 days.

Utilities, insurance companies, retailers, petrol companies, government planning departments for locating hospitals and schools and other services, will use these “residential identifiers” for planning purposes.

But, until the people who will be affected by this project get their “addresses” correct in the records that make up their social, political, employment, health and working lives, which is just about everyone, Ireland will be in for a messy adjustment period.

For a country that has been at this project for something like 10 years, we admit to being puzzled and disappointed. No doubt, an expensive street name/signage/sequential numbering solution would have been ideal. Short of that, given the incidence of “non-uniques” and large rural area, we feel that a coherent self-explanatory geocode system that provided sequential functionality for route planning and location identification would have been far more desirable. In fact, Ireland would have been the first country in the world to install such a system.

But the choice was made, and is ready for implementation. Good luck, Ireland. You are known for luck! Unfortunately, a fair amount of it has been bad….

Charles Prescott, Executive Director, Global Address Data Association