

Debate Pack

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Royal Mail and the future of the universal service obligation

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Summary

A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for 12 January 2023 at 1.30pm on Royal Mail and the future of the universal service obligation. The debate will be opened by Kate Osborne MP.

1 Background

1.1 Universal Service Obligation (USO) definition

Royal Mail Group is the UK's largest postal operator, the only postal operator currently providing UK wide end-to-end letter delivery services, and the UK's universal service provider.

The universal postal service is essentially the 'one price goes anywhere' principle of affordable postal services to all UK addresses. It requires Royal Mail (the universal service provider) to deliver letters to every address in the UK, six days a week, at a uniform price, and parcels five days a week.

The legal basis for the universal service is the [Postal Services Act 2011](#) and the [Universal Postal Services Order](#).

Minimum requirements

The [Postal Services Act](#) required Ofcom to make a Universal Postal Services Order. The Universal Postal Services Order defines what should be considered part of the universal postal service and sets standards with which Royal Mail, as the universal service provider, must comply.

Specifically, the [Postal Services Act](#) sets out the minimum requirements that the Universal Service Provider must deliver:

- at least one delivery of letters every Monday to Saturday to every address in the UK and at least one delivery of other postal packets every Monday to Friday
- at least one collection of letters every Monday to Saturday and at least one collection of other postal packets every Monday to Friday
- a service of conveying postal packets from one place to another by post at affordable, geographically uniform prices throughout the UK
- a registered items service at affordable, geographically uniform prices throughout the UK
- an insured items service at affordable prices
- free end-to-end services for legislative petitions and certain services to blind and partially sighted people

The [Universal Postal Service Order](#), produced by Ofcom, provides more detail about the minimum requirements set out in the Postal Services Act 2011 and includes some additional requirements upon Royal Mail as the universal service provider, for example to provide redirection services.

1.2 Five-day delivery proposal for letters

Royal Mail have approached Government seeking a move to a minimum five-day delivery service for letters, in place of the current six-day delivery service guaranteed by the universal service obligation.¹

Royal Mail proposed this strategy to help “protect the long-term sustainability of the one-price-goes-anywhere universal service”.² They pointed to data from Ofcom, which suggests that a five day a week delivery service for letters would still meet the needs of 97% of residential and SME users.³ They state that the five-day universal service comes at “significant structural cost” to Royal Mail, and increases the “threat to the sustainability of the Universal Service”.⁴

Ofcom, the regulator, in their Review of Postal Regulation, stated that the “overall scope of the USO remains appropriate” while noting that “the requirement for the delivery of letters to homes and businesses six days a week falls under the minimum requirements of the universal service set by Government and Parliament”.⁵

The Government have said that it does not currently have plans to change the minimum requirements as set out in law:

The Government has no current plans to change the statutory minimum requirements of the universal postal service which are set out in the Postal Services Act 2011.

¹ [International Distributions Services plc Results for the half year ended 25 September 2022](#), 17 Nov 2022

² [International Distributions Services plc Results for the half year ended 25 September 2022](#), 17 Nov 2022

³ Ofcom, [Review of postal users' needs: An assessment of whether the minimum requirements of the universal postal service reflect the reasonable needs of the users of postal services in the United Kingdom](#), 26 Nov 2022

⁴ [International Distributions Services plc Results for the half year ended 25 September 2022](#), 17 Nov 2022

⁵ Ofcom, [Statement: Review of postal regulation](#), 18 July 2022

There is a clear and transparent process for how changes to the universal postal service should be considered and any change would need to be made through secondary legislation and agreed by Parliament.⁶

The Professional Publishers Association (PPA), a membership network for magazine media and business information publishers, has expressed concern over the move to a five-day delivery service without letter deliveries on Saturdays. They point to a range of challenges for the industry including delays to time-sensitive titles and financial loss.⁷

1.3

Performance of Royal Mail

Royal Mail targets

As Royal Mail is the Designated Universal Service Provider, Royal Mail's performance is measured against Quality of Service (QoS) targets which are set out by Ofcom. Some of these targets are formalised in the [Designated Universal Service Provider \(DUSP\) Condition](#), and Royal Mail may face a fine from Ofcom for failing to meet these targets.

[Royal Mail is currently not hitting most of the Quality of Service targets](#). The table below shows a five-year comparison of their yearly results against their targets.

⁶ [Question for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: UIN 102844](#) accessed 6 Jan 2022

⁷ PPA, [PPA calls on Government to prevent Royal Mail abandoning Saturday letter deliveries](#), 17 Nov 2022

Royal Mail performance against quality of service targets, yearly results 2017/18-2021/22						
	Target	2017/18 result	2018/19 result	2019/20 result	2020/21 result	2021/22 result
First Class delivery	93.00%	91.60%	91.50%	92.60%	74.70%	81.80%
Second Class delivery	98.50%	98.40%	98.60%	98.70%	93.70%	95.40%
Post Code Area (PCA) target: First Class	91.5% in 118/118	72/118	75/118	105/118	0/118	0/118
Special Delivery	99.00%	98.10%	98.20%	98.50%	87.70%	93.90%
Collection points served daily	99.90%	99.39%	99.85%	99.90%	99.73%	99.74%
Delivery routes completed daily	99.90%	98.88%	99.55%	99.52%	91.57%	94.09%
Items deemed correctly delivered	99.50%	99.74%	99.76%	99.70%	99.70%	99.71%

Source: Royal Mail annual adjusted quality of service report, 2017/18-2021/22

Royal Mail also publishes quarterly quality of service reports throughout the year. The [most recent report](#), for Jul-Sep 2022, shows that Royal Mail delivered 72.6% of First Class mail the next working day, and 91.3% of Second Class mail being delivered within 3 working days. This is below the current [Royal Mail delivery targets](#), which are set at 93% of First Class mail being delivered the next working day, and 98.5% of Second Class mail being delivered within 3 working days.

Royal Mail also [completed 89.87% of delivery routes daily](#), below their target of 99.9%.

Other Quality of Service targets include 99.5% of items deemed correctly delivered, which the Royal Mail consistently meets, with 99.7% of items deemed correctly delivered in the [latest data](#).

Royal Mail publish [quarterly reports](#) on their performance against these targets, the most recent of which covers the second quarter of 2022/23 (Jul-Sep 2022). Ofcom also publishes research regarding Royal Mail's performance against these targets in their [Annual monitoring update on the postal market](#). Chapter 5 of this goes into more detail regarding the Quality of Service targets.

Ofcom investigation into delivery delays

Ofcom carried out an [investigation into Royal Mail's performance in 2021/22](#) after Royal Mail missed targets in 2021/22.

Ofcom stated “it would not be appropriate to find Royal Mail in breach of its Quality of Service (QoS) targets for the 2021-22 regulatory period” because “we accept that, for much of 2021-22, Covid-19 continued to have a significant, pervasive, and unprecedented impact on Royal Mail’s operations”. This took into account factors such as unexpected changes in traffic mix, increased and unpredictable staff absences, and challenges posed by social distancing measures.

Ofcom has stated that they “[do not expect Covid-19 to have a continuing, significant impact on the company’s service levels](#)” and that they are “unlikely to consider” the impact of the pandemic to be “exceptional and beyond its control in the future”. As the pre-pandemic Quality of Service targets have not yet been met, Ofcom has said that Royal Mail must take steps to restore service levels.

Citizens Advice said that stronger action may need to be taken if delays continue:

Ofcom is letting Royal Mail off the hook for substantial mail delays. Failure to hit a single quarterly target for over two years is simply unacceptable.

We know the strain Royal Mail is under - but people must be able to rely on their post arriving in good time, including vital medical letters and urgent bills. At some point, enough has to be enough.

If delays like that continue, Ofcom must consider stronger enforcement action and fines or risk sending a message that letting customers down is okay.⁸

Delivery delays through the autumn and winter

Citizens Advice have recently been monitoring the impact of the Royal Mail postal delays. Their data shows that between 22% and 50% of those surveyed reported experiencing letter delays in the last week, for each week between the end of October up to Christmas.

Of those affected, between 21% and 31% experienced negative consequences. Examples of the negative consequences given by Citizens Advice include missed bills, missed hospital appointments or fines for not appearing in court. The table below shows this data week on week.

⁸ Citizens Advice, [Citizens Advice responds to Ofcom's investigation into Royal Mail's 2021/22 delivery performance](#), 2 Dec 2022

Percentage of individuals experiencing postal delays and subsequent negative consequences*		
Week Preceding	Letter delays	Negative consequences
31-Oct-22	27%	30%
07-Nov-22	26%	22%
14-Nov-22	23%	31%
21-Nov-22	22%	31%
28-Nov-22	26%	29%
05-Dec-22	36%	21%
12-Dec-22	40%	21%
19-Dec-22	49%	22%
23/12/2022**	50%	25%

Notes: Base sizes for the weekly survey data: 2078, 2085, 2064, 2073, 2097, 2098, 2070, 2076, 2065. Fieldwork has been carried out by Yonder Data Solutions via an online omnibus survey of UK adults aged 18 or over.

*"Serious negative consequences" includes respondents who chose any of the following: missed important documents, financial appointments, health appointments, Covid-19 vaccine or booster appointments, or who lost money or couldn't pay a bill.

** Fieldwork days took place Tuesday - Thursday rather than Friday - Sunday due to Christmas closures

1.4

Challenges facing Royal Mail

Financial Performance

The first half of this financial year (Apr-Sep 2022) has seen financial losses in Royal Mail and in the wider group (IDS).

Financial performance can be viewed at three levels:

- For the company now called International Distributions Services or IDS plc. This is a public limited company consisting of two principal operations: Royal Mail, a UK-based operation which also includes Parcelforce Worldwide, and GLS (General Logistics Systems), the company's international arm.⁹ This was previously known as Royal Mail

⁹ The GLS network covers around 40 countries and nation states, according to the [Royal Mail annual report and accounts 2021/22](#)

Group (RMG) plc, however the company announced it would change its name on 20 July 2022, and this officially took place on 4 October 2022.

- For Royal Mail, which is the UK based operation, including Parcelforce Worldwide.
- For ‘reported business’ - this is the part of Royal Mail which includes all the products provided through or in relation to the network that underpins the universal service. This is the part of Royal Mail that Ofcom focus on when monitoring its performance, and Ofcom have indicated that a 5-10% profit margin for this part of the business would be “consistent with a commercial rate of return” – this level of profits has not been achieved in recent years. This data is reported annually.

The table shows profit margins at these three levels. Each was making a profit in each year to 2021/22.

Profit margin for Royal Mail and group							
Figures for Royal Mail and the group are adjusted. All figures are on a consistent 52 or 26 week basis							
	Annual figures:					First half of year:	
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2021/22	2022/23
Group (IDS)	5.7%	3.6%	3.0%	5.6%	6.0%	6.7%	-1.0%
Royal Mail	5.1%	2.6%	1.5%	4.0%	4.9%	5.8%	-6.0%
Universal service network ('reported business')	4.4%	1.6%	0.4%	2.7%	3.6%		

Source: International Distribution Services (IDS) and Royal Mail annual reports, IDS plc half year results 2022; Royal Mail Regulatory Financial Statement 2021/22; Ofcom Annual Monitoring Update for Postal Service 2020/21

Notes: All figures are as a % of revenues for the relevant area. IDS was previously known as Royal Mail plc. The profit margin for the reported business is based on earnings before interest and tax (EBIT), calculated to include transformation costs and with pension costs restated on a cash basis.

In their half year results, IDS projected that the full year loss for Royal Mail would be between £350 million to £450 million (including the direct impact of 12 days of industrial action).

There has been a 15% decrease in the total volume of parcels handled by Royal Mail in the first half of 2022 compared to the first half of 2021, with volumes returning to 2019 levels.¹⁰

Industrial Action

Royal Mail has been facing industrial action by members of the CWU union, most recently on Christmas Eve.

¹⁰ [IDS trading update and full year performance estimate](#), 14 October 2022

The CWU say that they want to see “a pay rise that fully addresses the current cost of living”:

Our Royal Mail members have had an unagreed 2 per cent pay deal imposed on them.

This is at a time when RPI inflation is currently running at 11.8 per cent and when Royal Mail has announced Group profits of £758 million and when the company is paying out many millions to private shareholders.

In a national strike ballot over pay, our Royal Mail members voted by a 97.6 per cent majority to take action.¹¹

Royal Mail said in December that their offer for pay and change had been revised and included extensive improvements:

Following several months of talks between Royal Mail and Communication Workers Union, including ACAS facilitation, Royal Mail has shared a best and final offer for pay and change. The revised offer includes extensive improvements that have been made during the negotiations with the CWU, including an enhanced pay deal of 9% over 18 months and a number of other concessions to terms and agreements. The offer is subject to agreeing a programme of change with the CWU.¹²

The CWU and Royal Mail are now in a period of “intensive negotiations”, from 9 to 20 January. The CWU have put out [an update to its members](#) with further details.¹³

1.5

Regulation

Postal services was formerly a part-nationalised industry, with Royal Mail being state owned. However, following the Postal Services Act 2011 Royal Mail was privatised.

The Post Office is a separate business and remains entirely owned by the Government.

Government

The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has Government responsibility for postal affairs. The current Minister with this portfolio is [Kevin Hollinrake MP](#). The Government, with Parliament, is responsible for legislation on postal services.

¹¹ CWU, [Royal Mail Group Strike](#), accessed 6 Jan 2023

¹² Royal Mail, [Royal Mail strike](#), updated 25 Dec 2022

¹³ CWU, [To all CWU Members \(Royal Mail Group\)](#), 6 Jan 2022, via Facebook

Ofcom

Under the Postal Services Act 2011, Ofcom is the postal regulator. Under the Act, Ofcom must carry out its regulatory activity in a way that secures the universal postal service. Ofcom also has a duty under the [Communications Act 2003](#) to further the interests of citizens and of consumers, where appropriate, by promoting competition. Where there is a conflict between the two duties, the provision of the universal postal service takes precedence.

Citizens Advice

[Citizens Advice](#) (a charity network) has statutory responsibility to represent consumers of postal services in 2014, along with Citizens Advice Scotland and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.

Citizens Advice regularly publishes research and updates about the performance of postal services on its website. Their [postal services research](#) page is updated regularly.

POSTRS

[POSTRS](#): is an independent body that mediates disputes between customers and certain regulated postal operators and their customers following complaints about specific items of post. The scheme covers Royal Mail.

1.6

Ofcom's 2022 review of postal regulation

Ofcom conducted a [review of regulation of postal services](#) from 2022 to 2027 and set out their decisions following an initial consultation:

- To maintain the current overall framework for regulating Royal Mail with regards to basic universal service and quality of service standards.
- To introduce new targeted consumer protection for parcel services, including procedures and policies to better meet the needs of disabled consumers, and new guidance on complaints handling.
- To continue to ensure that Royal Mail has commercial flexibility in order to provide a sustainable universal service. This includes ensuring a greater understanding of the financial sustainability of the universal service, which requires Royal Mail to provide Ofcom with a view of this over a longer period than previously,
- To require Royal Mail to publish a five-year view of its efficiency plans and expectations, including a report of these against actual performance.

- To provide a stable regulatory framework, which includes retaining all current access regulatory safeguards and to maintain a “level playing field” of competition.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ofcom, [Statement: Review of postal regulation](#), 18 July 2022

2 Parliamentary material

2.1 Written questions

[Question for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: Royal Mail: Standards: UIN 112181](#)

Asked by Charlotte Nichols

Asked on 16 December 2022

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what assessment his Department has made of the performance of Royal Mail since its privatisation.

Answered by Kevin Hollinrake

Answered on 28 December 2022

Royal Mail is accountable to Ofcom, as the independent regulator for the postal sector, for its performance against its universal service obligations. Ofcom continues to monitor Royal Mail's performance to ensure it is providing the best service it can to customers, and publishes an annual report summarising its monitoring programme on its website:

[www.ofcom.org.uk/postal-services/information-for-the-postal-industry/monitoring_reports.](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/postal-services/information-for-the-postal-industry/monitoring_reports)

[Question for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: Postal Services: Universal Service Obligation: UIN 99852](#)

Asked by Ian Lavery

Asked on 30 November 2022

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether he has made an assessment of the potential implications for his Department's policies of the Royal Mail Group reducing the Universal Service Obligation to five days with no Saturday deliveries.

Answered by Kevin Hollinrake

Answered on 13 December 2022

The Government's objective continues to be ensuring the provision of a sustainable, accessible, and affordable universal postal service. The

Government has no current plans to change the statutory minimum requirements of the universal postal service which are set out in the Postal Services Act 2011.

[Question for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: Royal Mail: UIN 104119](#)

Asked Sir James Duddridge

Asked on 6 December 2022

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether he has taken recent steps to help support (a) the universal service obligation held by and (b) the financial sustainability of Royal Mail.

Answered by Kevin Hollinrake

Answered on 14 December 2022

The Government's objective continues to be ensuring the provision of a sustainable, accessible, and affordable universal postal service. Ofcom is the independent regulator for postal services and it has the power and responsibility under the Postal Services Act 2011 to regulate the provision of a financially sustainable and efficient UK universal postal service.

Ofcom has in place a monitoring regime that seeks to identify any threats or risks to the universal postal service and it publishes on its website an annual report summarising its monitoring programme which includes an assessment of Royal Mail's overall financial position:

www.ofcom.org.uk/postal-services/information-for-the-postal-industry/monitoring_reports

[Question for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: UIN 102844](#)

Asked by Sir James Duddridge

Asked on 5 December 2022

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether he plans to take steps to amend the Postal Services Act 2011 to allow Royal Mail to move to five-day letter delivery.

Answered by Kevin Hollinrake

Answered on 13 December 2022

The Government has no current plans to change the statutory minimum requirements of the universal postal service which are set out in the Postal Services Act 2011.

There is a clear and transparent process for how changes to the universal postal service should be considered and any change would need to be made through secondary legislation and agreed by Parliament.

[Question for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, UIN 114922](#)

Asked by Mike Amesbury

Asked on 31 January 2022

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of Royal Mail deliveries in Runcorn and Helsby.

Answered by Paul Scully

Answered on 8 February 2022

Royal Mail has publicly stated that it is aware of the reduction in service levels in some areas and is taking action to reduce delays to deliveries. Its contingency plans to mitigate disruption to postal services are overseen by Ofcom.

Ofcom continues to monitor Royal Mail's performance to ensure it is providing the best service it can to customers and has powers to investigate and take enforcement action if Royal Mail fails to achieve its performance targets.

2.2

Debates

[Christmas Adjournment](#), HC Deb 20 December 2022, c190-191, c198

[Covid-19 Pandemic: Royal Mail Services](#), HC Deb 19 April 2022

[Royal Mail](#), HC Deb 17 June 2021

[Royal Mail: South-east London](#), HC Deb 3 November 2020

[Royal Mail Delivery Office Closures](#), HC Deb 11 October 2017

2.3

Early Day Motions

[Royal Mail industrial dispute and the universal service obligation: EDM 534: tabled on 03 November 2022](#)

Primary Sponsor: Ian Lavery

That this House condemns the actions of Royal Mail which, it believes is threatening up to 10,000 job cuts from the postal service; notes that Royal Mail made £758 million in profit in the year to March 2022, but paid out most of that, around £567 million, to shareholders in dividends and a share buyback; further notes that Royal Mail reported record profits and is concerned of mismanagement of finances as they are now but the communities that they serve including small business owners; considers that Royal Mail is abandoning mutually agreed plans for modernisation, choosing instead to pursue what it sees as an asset stripping agenda; further believes that this threatens the future of the company and is an unacceptable attack on the terms and conditions of postal workers; and calls on Royal Mail to negotiate a fair offer with the Communications Workers Union that values their service and hard work.

3

Press material

[Rishi Sunak proposes talks with UK union leaders in effort to halt strikes](#)

Jim Pickard, Philip Georgiadis and Delphine Strauss

Financial Times, 6 January 2023

[Ex-boss blasts 'toxic' Royal Mail](#)

Oliver Shah

The Sunday Times, 31 December 2022

[Royal Mail staff warned company in 'fight for its life' as more strikes loom](#)

Oliver Telling

Financial Times, 22 December 2022

[Royal Mail may have lost £200m to strikes](#)

Tracey Boles

The Times, 13 December 2022

[Royal Mail's performance is falling well short, says regulator Ofcom](#)

Tom Saunders

The Times, 2 December 2022

[Royal Mail staff say parcels prioritised over letters](#)

Aled Scourfield

BBC, 30 November 2022

[Royal Mail seeks to cut back deliveries to five days a week](#)

Oliver Telling and Josephine Cumbo

Financial Times, 17 November 2022

[Royal Mail requests permission to stop Saturday letter delivery: Firm reports £219m half-year losses and asks government to let it move to weekday-only service to cut costs](#)

Mark Sweney

The Guardian, 17 November 2022

[Lessons for Channel 4 from Royal Mail's privatisation: Pros and cons of the government's proposal to end public ownership of broadcaster](#)

Cat Rutter Pooley

Financial Times, 19 April 2022

4

Further reading

[Consultation: Review of postal regulation](#)

Ofcom

1 November 2022

[Postal services](#)

House of Commons Library

11 May 2022

[Royal Mail services and the covid-19 pandemic](#)

House of Commons Library

13 April 2022

[Citizens Advice response to Ofcom's consultation: Review of postal regulation](#)

Citizens Advice

11 April 2022

[Post Office numbers](#)

House of Commons Library

21 February 2021

[The Post Office](#)

House of Commons Library

18 October 2021

[Performance of Royal Mail](#)

House of Commons Library

16 June 2021

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