

I have read or skimmed the consultation and am well aware of the background in which it is set i.e. the Royal mail's financial issues and the growing internationalisation of European domestic postal services. I am astonished at the low UK 2009 figure of 40p of direct spend on postal services per household. We use emails etc extensively but I'd estimate our household spend to be six to eight times that figure, probably more and estimated to rise during the next few years. I am also looking at it from a business angle as I am evaluating a small scale business opportunity to commence in the next financial year.

Firstly, I am glad that the USO is being considered, although I am not sure if you are defining it in the same way as I understand it. In contemporary terms, I would define it as including a national standard price range for first and second class letters and packets, including "Signed For" and "Special Delivery" type services and standard parcels up to the long-standing 22lbs/ 10kilos. I appreciate that there are sometimes logistical issues – for example, my nearest post office in [WITHHELD] has a last post of c0900 but the nearest town is c1400 - but the extra day that remote rural areas may require is usually compensated for by a very reliable service.

The general universal service is of great national importance. In political terms, it is part of the inherent strength of the country and the UK would be a poorer state without it. In economic terms, it provides the much-sought but rarely found level playing field for economic opportunity throughout the UK. Dilute that – for example, by making the USO apply to a restricted range of products or even just the minimum weight letter – and you would find more of the problems currently experienced with the non-Royal Mail elements of parcels and letters. Too many would-be parcels/courier organisations respond to perceived difficulties by exorbitant price increases, inefficiently delivered items or even a refusal to provide a service, in my experience.

Businesses vary immensely in how they treat their potential mail order customers with deliveries. Some seem to have deals with their carriers that rule out some areas. I tried to buy a laptop computer from a nationally-advertising company and was quoted their "international" rate, which was nearly 20% of the item's value. It was also nearly three times the "Special Delivery" rate for a service considerably slower. The sellers refused to use Royal Mail, quoting erroneously that it was "too expensive to use", "RM would not insure something of that value" and maintaining this even when referred to the RM website! Faced with such entrenched ignorance, I bought from another organisation. A more recent example is of an exchange of correspondence and documents with a bank which used some sort of non-Royal Mail post despite the resultant delivery time becoming about a week. For vital items that would have taken normal first class delivery times by Royal Mail, i.e. 1-2 working days, it stretched a couple of exchanges from just over a week to several weeks. For me, the slow response caused considerable confusion and frustration (it initially looked like a non-response) and it caused the sender and their carrier considerable reputational damage in our household!

From a business point of view, I am evaluating a small potential opportunity in the coming financial year for which the current mix of postal products from the Royal Mail

would be suitable and practical – first, second, letters/packets; a limited amount of standard parcels; certainly “Signed for” first class and Special Delivery at times. In short, a mix of premium and standard services where the premium paid for enhanced services is worthwhile due to the service standard. I cannot contemplate this opportunity if my letter post was delivered to the standards acceptable to the bank and the packets/parcels to the standards of the carrier used by that ill-informed/ill-listening computer supplier.

I conclude by emphasising the importance of a broadly defined USO and its economic, social and even political impact. I am extremely unimpressed by some aspects of the current alternatives used by some businesses to deliver letters and packets and would fear for their growth if the USO is diluted. The most obvious means of cost-cutting seems the Saturday delivery i.e. the 6 days a week USO which you say is unusual in Europe. I would hate it but it does seem the least-damaging way of making a rapid difference. It might need sorting offices/delivery offices to open on Saturdays for collection of large items and might need post offices to extend some of their weekday hours eg to 6pm to allow office workers to use them.

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