

THIRD CLASS POST?

Soon to be privatised, today's Royal Mail delivers a mixed bag of patchy service, unpredictable deliveries and a pricing system that few can fathom. We reveal the real experiences of thousands of customers



Royal Mail is failing many of its customers, delivering a patchy and inconsistent service, a Which? investigation has revealed.

We surveyed 2,500 British adults about their experiences with Royal Mail. The most common problem, experienced by 72%, was letters being delivered to the wrong address. More than half had faced problems with first and second class post failing to arrive when it was meant to, and half received a 'while you were out card' when they were at home.

We also asked members of our Which? Connect consumer panel to complete a 'mail diary' for two weeks to track their post and record their dealings with Royal Mail. Our 3,923 diarists completed more than 34,500 diary entries. In addition, around 500 Which? members responded to our 'Help wanted' request with their experiences of Royal Mail – most were negative.

More than one in ten survey respondents said they were dissatisfied with Royal Mail, but many individual posties were praised (see p59).

WAITING BY THE LETTERBOX

Only a quarter of our diarists' post arrived before 10am, with two thirds arriving between 10am and 1pm. And in our public survey, seven in ten had received post at a time they considered to be late in the day, with half saying this had happened four or more times in the last year.

Royal Mail doesn't promise to deliver first and second class post at any particular time. But those of you with longer memories may find previous, higher levels of service hard to forget. One member told us of posting a letter from Cambridge to Putney, one morning in the 1960s, and getting a reply by the next morning.

71% of people we asked had experienced post arriving late in the day. For some the effect is more marked, such as the self-employed businessman whose working day is nearly over by the time the post comes or the

magistrate without his court papers. And 41% of respondents said mail they were expecting didn't arrive, while 29% said that, in the past year, they had experienced sent mail not arriving at its intended destination.

FIRST CLASS PERFORMANCE?

Royal Mail promises to deliver first and second class post within one and three working days respectively. Its latest published performance figures (September to December 2010) show a 92% on-time delivery rate for first class stamped and metered mail, and a 98.3% on-time delivery rate for second class stamped and metered mail.

However, more than half of the people in our survey told us they had experienced first and second class post failing to arrive in the supposed delivery time in the past year.

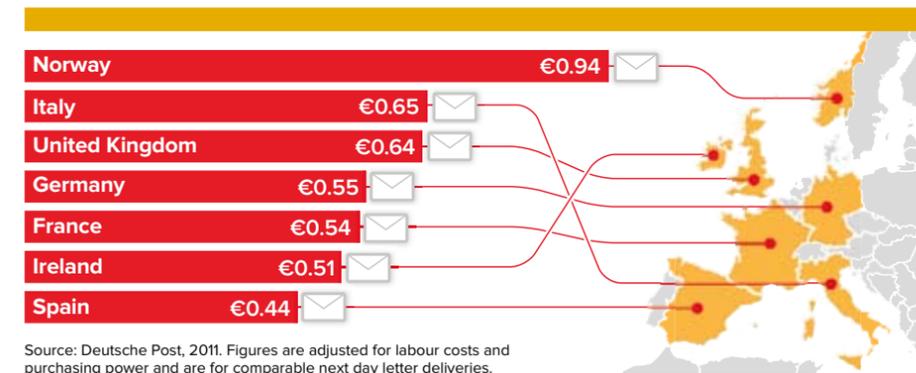
Over the two weeks our diarists watched their post, 7% reported post that failed to arrive, when they had good reason to expect it to be delivered.

WHILE YOU WERE OUT... BUT I WASN'T

Another common theme in our investigation was getting a 'while you were out' card despite being at home. Fifty one percent experienced this in the past year.

This was echoed by our diarists' experience. Over the two-week period, 16% of those who got a 'while you were out card' reported receiving one while they were at home. An eagle-eyed 6% actually saw the card arrive without receiving a knock on the door. Which? members who wrote to us about their experiences also complained about receiving 'while you were out' cards, with some reporting that the cards always come without a knock at the door. One example told of a postman who, when challenged, went back to his van to retrieve a parcel he hadn't brought to the door in the first place – and this wasn't the first time it had happened.

COST OF FIRST CLASS POST IN EUROPE



Source: Deutsche Post, 2011. Figures are adjusted for labour costs and purchasing power and are for comparable next day letter deliveries.

MEMBERS' VIEWS

POOR SERVICE AND LATE DELIVERIES



Website consultant Pete Sipple, 41, has had a PO box for his business since 2005. In 2010 he told Royal Mail to change the box's forwarding address. This didn't work

for 10 months. He complained to Royal Mail who, he says, 'made it almost impossible to get a complaint heard' and then to the Postal Review Panel, which failed to respond within 30 days – he was awarded £10 compensation. Pete finally took his complaint to the Postal Redress Service. Royal Mail apologised and offered him £62.88, but Pete wanted a refund or an extension for the 10 months the service didn't work. The Postal Redress Service ruled that Royal Mail should apologise for its failure to respond appropriately and that it should pay Pete £20 for stress, anxiety and inconvenience – although the box service itself is outside its scope. Pete issued proceedings in the small claims court and was offered an extra £192 in final pre-court settlement, which he is happy with.

PETE SIPPLE
Website consultant



London-based Chris Pszenicki, a 65-year-old retired journalist, gets a daily paper delivered from Poland. Copies of 'Gazeta Wyborcza' are dispatched on

the first plane of the day from Warsaw to Heathrow. Chris considers Royal Mail's service to be poor, and feels the paper should arrive the next day, being marked 'priority'. Tracking the arrival of his papers over 50 days in 2011, he reports that it was delivered just four times on the following day – excluding Saturdays. Delays of several working days are common, and the record was set by an issue that arrived an entire month late.

CHRIS PSZENICKI
Retired journalist

60
SECOND
GUIDE

72%

of survey respondents received post intended for a different address at least once in the last year

10%

of all mail is stamped, according to Royal Mail

20%

of survey respondents found Track & Trace to be inaccurate

203,151

Complaints received by Royal Mail September-December 2010

71m

Number of items in the Royal Mail's daily postbag

£1.37m

Compensation paid by Royal Mail September-December 2010

FIRST CLASS STAMP PRICES OVER THE YEARS*

- 1975 **8.5p**
- 1980 **12p**
- 1990 **22p**
- 2000 **27p**
- 2006 **32p**
- 2011 **46p**

ABSURD, COMPLICATED, CONFUSING
Royal Mail changed the way it prices post in 2006, switching to a system where both the size and weight of the item determine the price of postage. Since the introduction of this system, the price of a first class stamp has risen by 44% (see left).

One Which? member, who regularly posts small pamphlets, described the size and weight system as 'absurd, complicated and confusing' having discovered that it's cheaper for him to send two pamphlets separately at a cost of 72p than to send both together, which costs 92p.

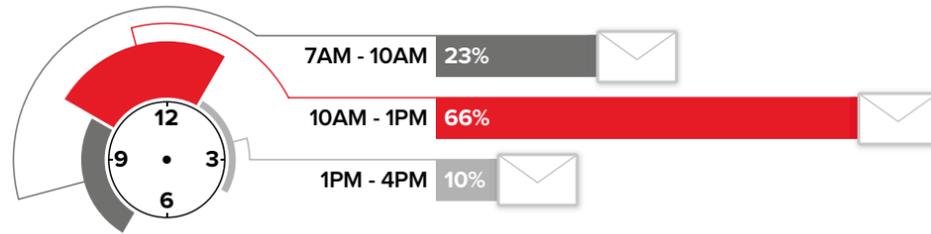
Nearly two thirds of those taking our survey had sent a batch of items in the last year, with nearly one in five of those finding that at least some of their items needed extra payment on delivery. However, two fifths of them admitted not checking the postage needed and simply using a first or second class stamp, hoping this would cover the cost. Other members complained of the £1 fee - charged in addition

to excess postage - when a sender failed to pay the correct amount. Another gripe was having to pay this at post offices rather than on the doorstep.

WHAT SHOULD THE COST OF THE STAMP GET YOU?

- First class - next-working-day delivery (no particular time) including Saturdays. From 46p
- Second class - delivery at no particular time by the third working day after posting, including Saturdays. From 36p
- Standard parcels - no time or day promise, free certificate of posting. Not available to the Channel Islands. From £4.41
- Recorded Signed For - as first or second class but with proof of postage and signature on receipt. 77p on top of first or second class postage
- Special Delivery Next Day - guaranteed before 1pm next working day. From £5.45 (9am is from £15.25; Sameday from £20).

WHEN OUR MEMBERS GOT THEIR POST



UNHAPPY CUSTOMERS	HAPPY CUSTOMERS
<i>'The parcel was left in full view on the gas meter outside the front door. There was no note put through the door to say a parcel had been delivered. Therefore had someone taken it, I would have had no idea it had ever been delivered'</i>	<i>'My postman thought someone had put the wrong house number on a postcard because he recognised my daughter's name. He was right - they had, and the postcard was for her.'</i>
<i>'The parcel arrived before 8am - a card was pushed through the letter box to say that it had been left in a wheelie bin.'</i>	<i>'I have a fantastic relationship with my postie. I am wheelchair-bound and he leaves any non-signed-for stuff inside the door. They are really considerate.'</i>
<i>'I am sick to the back teeth of Royal Mail. Recently I was sent flowers which were five days late and dead on arrival. A packet received today was posted nine days ago, and the plants in it are dead and irreplaceable.'</i>	<i>'If the aim of this exercise is to condemn Royal Mail, count me out. When the side roads were treacherous with solid ice, they still managed to deliver. Commitment in spades.'</i>

PRAISE FOR THE POSTIE

For all the gripes we heard, the news is not all bad. Members in rural areas paid handsome tribute to the efforts of their posties in last winter's snow. A clutch of stories described their postmen and women going the literal and figurative extra mile, with attitudes described as being reminiscent of the 1950s in 'service, dedication, friendliness and sheer public-spiritedness'.

Indeed, we found a widespread perception of Royal Mail as a service, rather than a business. An example of this was the postman who left a 'while you were out' card but then saw the householder's car on the drive at the end of his round and returned to deliver the item.

Praise for the individual, but damnation for the organisation was a common theme in our survey. As one Which? member put it, 'Royal Mail is hopeless. Our postmen are wonderful.' By contrast however, one member handles 1,000 items going out and coming in every day and says the service he receives is excellent.

And despite all the complaints and cause for complaints, two thirds of those who took part in our survey are satisfied with the service they get from Royal Mail with 18% very satisfied. 12% said they were dissatisfied.

MAKING A COMPLAINT

Royal Mail says it is the only UK postal company to publish its complaints data, with one complaint for about every 50,000 items posted. Of those complaints, Royal Mail says 53% got refunds. Only 423 cases were taken up by the Ombudsman in 2009-10, of which just over half were upheld in Royal Mail's favour.

Four stages to making a complaint

- 1 Complain to Royal Mail's customer services. If you are still unhappy:
- 2 Complain to Royal Mail's customer resolution team;
- 3 Complain to the Postal Review Panel;
- 4 Complain to the ombudsman, the Postal Redress Service. Details can be found online at www2.royalmail.com/customer-service/complaints-process

A HEAP OF JUNK

Complaints about unsolicited or 'junk' mail featured prominently among members and diarists. Half of our diarists had thrown away items without opening them, some of whom described annoyance at having to do so. This averaged five such items over the two weeks. Many of these unsolicited items of mail were from banks, telecoms and energy firms.

376 YEARS OF THE ROYAL MAIL

In the 1950s, Which? member Tone Bach wrote letters to 'My friend Tom, The house with the yellow blossom tree in the front garden, Berkeley Road, Greenford'. Tom always got his letters, but today's customers have mixed experiences. What would King Charles think of the postal service in 2011?

<p>1635</p> <p>King Charles I extends use of the Royal Mail to the public.</p>	<p>1830</p> <p>Mail is carried by a railway company for the first time, between Liverpool and Manchester. Railway companies are required to carry mail from 1838.</p>	<p>1840</p> <p>Advent of the penny post brings a national postage rate for the first time. Before that, post had to go to London, no matter how close the places it was sent from and to were, and both journey legs were charged for.</p>
<p>1856</p> <p>Sir Rowland Hill's plan to divide London into ten postal districts is authorised.</p>	<p>1974</p> <p>Postcodes rolled out nationally.</p>	<p>2003</p> <p>The 'rail mail' - London's underground mail railway - is closed.</p>
	<p>2002</p> <p>The end of the second delivery starts to be rolled out nationally. With Royal Mail losing £1.2m per day, second deliveries accounted for 20% of delivery costs but carried 4% of mail.</p>	

HOW TO STOP THE JUNK MAIL

There are two ways to partially opt out of junk mail:

1 Use Royal Mail's opt-out service. Send your name and address to Freepost RRBT-ZBXB-TTTS, Royal Mail Door to Door Opt Outs, Kingsmead House, Oxpens Road, Oxford OX1 1RX, or email optout@royalmail.com.

You will then get a form to sign and return which takes effect after six weeks and lasts for two years. The service stops unaddressed mail at an address. This will include material from the government that is unaddressed.

2 Join the Mail Preference Service. This stops you from receiving unsolicited mail sent by members of the Direct Marketing Association, and also tries to stop unsolicited mail from non-member companies. It does not stop unaddressed mail, mail from overseas or mail addressed 'to the occupier'. It takes up to four months to take effect. Register at www.mpsonline.org.uk or call 0845 703 4599.

WHICH? SAYS

Which? is a strong believer in clear and fair charging practices. The fact that nearly 40% of those who sent a batch of letters did not even check the price of postage, suggests that Royal Mail's fee structure is too complex - it appears to deter customers from calculating the postage required. Once a letter enters the system, Royal Mail has a monopoly over the price and service levels experienced by customers. The additional £1 charge seems unfairly balanced against those receiving letters. Royal Mail must rethink how its charges are structured and ensure they are fully and easily comprehensible to customers.

OUR RESEARCH

We conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,561 British adults in May 2011. 3,923 members completed 34,626 diary entries. 2,210 diarists completed all 12 days of our research period. Thanks to all who took part.

WHAT'S YOUR EXPERIENCE OF THE POSTAL SERVICE, GOOD OR BAD? If you want to share your experiences of Royal Mail log on to www.which.co.uk/conversation/royalmail and join the debate.

*2006 and 2011 figures are for 0-100g; the rest 0-60g. Figures not adjusted for inflation

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALAMY; ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL BUTT