

Responses by Europe's mail services differ widely

'La Poste is radically cutting back on package deliveries just as our sales are exploding'

FT REPORTERS

Handling of postal services and treatment of workers have differed widely across Europe as millions are trapped at home under quarantine.

As closures threaten to leave people stranded when they need the service most, France and Spain have sharply cut operations to protect workers, while in the UK, Germany and Italy, deliveries are running largely as normal.

Only about 10 per cent of post offices are open in **France**, and deliveries have been cut back to three days from six. It poses a problem for the estimated 1.5m older people and the poor, who rely on post offices to collect welfare. Unions have pushed the state-owned postal service to put workers' safety first, calling for closures despite the status of the posts as an essential service. "Our postal workers are working without masks or gloves, threatening their health with every delivery," Valérie Mannevy, a rep for the CGT union at La Poste, said. "We want to fulfil our public service mission but can only do so if the health protection measures are correct."

In **Spain**, postal staffing levels have been temporarily cut to 13,000 workers a day, a quarter of normal levels. Two unions have accused the state-owned post office of turning the fortnight-old lockdown into a "business opportunity", maintaining too high a level of activity and "obliging staff to work without protective equipment". They say more than 600 postal workers have tested positive for the virus. The Spanish post office says such figures are confidential and staff on duty are supplied with masks, sanitiser gel, and gloves. It says demand has fallen along with staffing levels, and it is still assuring services as required by law.

Postal staff in **Italy** are still working. Deliveries are being made as normal six days a week, though some of its smaller offices have closed. Amazon relies on the Italian posts for its deliveries, and is **Poste Italiane's** biggest client by postal volume. Italy's post

offices remain open to serve the 8m pensioners who collect their state pensions in person.

In **Germany**, Deutsche Post, which is publicly traded and only partly owned by KfW, a state-backed development bank, says letter and package deliveries are continuing as normal and full services are available in post offices. Steps have been taken to protect workers, such as equipping trucks with canisters of water for handwashing.

Royal Mail in **the UK** is still running a daily service. The Communication Workers Union is delaying planned strikes under a long-running labour dispute. But it said an appeal to reduce deliveries to three times a week and for employees to work on alternate days for the duration of the outbreak was rejected. "More than ever, people are relying on us," said the company.

The patchwork of approaches contrasts with those of companies such as UPS and DHL, which continue to deliver packages to European businesses and residents relatively smoothly.

UPS says that it still runs a regular service, except for in roughly 1 per cent of European postcodes where governments have suspended pick-ups and deliveries.

Since Europe entered lockdown three weeks ago, demand has risen not only for online groceries but for exercise equipment, office supplies, toys, and books, according to market researchers NPD and Kantar.

But with postal services being cut back, consumers risk longer delays, and businesses could miss out on a lifeline to keep activity going.

For example, newspaper and magazine publishers in France have criticised La Poste's position as an existential threat to their advertising and subscriptions.

"La Poste is radically cutting back on package deliveries just as our sales are exploding," said one executive at a national online retailer in France, who declined to be named. "Things are quite tense with fewer delivery workers than normal."

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Molto diversa la risposta all'epidemia da parte dei servizi postali europei

