

The future of Mail Rail

A report by the London Assembly's Public Services Committee

April 2003

Public Services

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Foreword



Deep under London's streets, Mail Rail may not be well known by Londoners. But it has for over 75 years transported four to twelve million postal items a year across London from Whitechapel to Paddington and intermediate points in between, possibly taking 80 van loads of mail off London's congested streets each day.

Londoners are used to hearing of urban post offices being closed across London as the government-controlled Royal Mail has struggled with financial difficulties. Now, in the same vein, Royal Mail is closing the operation of the Mail Rail, with the immediate pressure to find savings taking precedence over Royal Mail's own commitment to reduce the amount of mail transported by road.

Now the Post Office's decision to mothball this facility prompts the question, what can be done to keep this asset in use to the benefit of London and the Royal Mail's shareholder who is, after all, the taxpayer.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Pelling". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a long, horizontal, slightly curved line that serves as a decorative underline.

Andrew Pelling
Chair of the Public Services Committee

The Public Services Committee

The London Assembly established its Public Services Committee on 10 April 2002. It is one of eight Committees that, between them, cover the range of policy areas relevant to London government. The terms of reference of the Committee are:

To examine and report from time to time on -

- the strategies, policies and actions of the Mayor and the Functional Bodies
- matters of importance to Greater London

as they relate to the provision of services to the public (other than those falling within the remit of other committees of the Assembly) and the performance of utilities in London.

To take into account in its deliberations the cross cutting themes of: the health of persons in Greater London; the achievement of sustainable development in the United Kingdom; and the promotion of opportunity.

To respond on behalf of the Assembly to consultations and similar processes when within its terms of reference.

The members of the Committee are:

Andrew Pelling (Chair), Conservative
Diana Johnson (Deputy Chair), Labour
(from 3 March 2003)
Trevor Phillips, Labour (until 28 Feb 2003)

Elizabeth Howlett, Conservative
Jenny Jones, Green
Meg Hillier, Labour
Graham Tope, Liberal Democrat

Scrutiny Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for this scrutiny were agreed by the Committee on 26 February 2003. They are:

- To consider the value of the Mail Rail line as a sustainable means of transporting and delivering post and parcels in Central London;
- To consider the case for keeping the line in operation, from the point of view of the line as part of London's heritage and as a sustainable means of transporting London's mail;
- To investigate the reasons for the proposed closure of the line;
- To examine the extent to which Royal Mail has investigated alternative uses (including commercial delivery) for the line, and the nature and extent of discussions that have taken place with businesses and heritage and other groups as well as with the unions;
- To investigate what role, if any, has been played by the Mayor and TfL in any attempt to find alternative financially viable uses for the line (in the light of the Mayor's commitment to supporting sustainable transport in London).

Contact

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1 Introduction

- 1.1. Royal Mail is expected to announce imminently the closure of Mail Rail, central London's 6.5-mile underground mail delivery operation. The line has been in operation for over 75 years, carrying up to 12 million items of mail across London every day. But in the face of immediate pressures to reduce costs, and in the light of Mail Rail's high costs compared to road transport, Royal Mail has decided to 'mothball' the line at the end of May 2003 until a decision is taken on its long-term future.
- 1.2. The Public Services Committee was concerned to hear of this decision, and has carried out a short scrutiny to look at how Mail Rail can be put to effective use in the future. The Committee does not want to see Mail Rail closed indefinitely as a result of this decision; we believe it is in the interests of Londoners and the Royal Mail shareholder who is, after all, the taxpayer, to protect this important part of London's heritage.
- 1.3. We invited representatives from Royal Mail, the Communication Workers Union, and Transport for London to attend a meeting of the Committee in February 2003. The Royal Mail felt unable to come to the meeting, but its officers have indicated to us that they will be in a position to discuss the future of Mail Rail once a decision on its future use has been taken. Members visited the Mount Pleasant Sorting Office in February to talk to officials from Royal Mail and view the operation at first hand. We are grateful to those who contributed to our scrutiny and thank them for their work.

2 Royal Mail's Three-Year Renewal Plan

- 2.1. The difficulties of Royal Mail have been well-publicised: in its first year as a government owned public limited company, Consignia (now Royal Mail Group) reported losses of £484 million.¹ The company's 2001/02 annual report described its own situation as "perilous" and in need of "radical surgery".² Costs are rising faster than revenues, resulting in a rallying call from the Chairman to "stop haemorrhaging cash and deliver £1.4 billion of annual gross savings by April 2005".³ There is no doubt that the scale of the challenge facing Royal Mail is enormous.
- 2.2. Royal Mail (then called Consignia) announced in June 2001 that it was to conduct a review of its countrywide road, rail and air transport links "as part of its plans to reshape the entire network to meet demands for faster, cost-effective services in the future".⁴ The review was to be driven by the need "to ensure reliability and reduce operating costs", and would aim to "achieve the best possible integrated network, on the basis of cost, reliability, flexibility, growth potential and environmental factors".⁵

¹ Royal Mail Group plc, Interim Report 2002/03, pp. 2 and 39

² Royal Mail 2001/02 Review, Chairman's Statement, p. 2

³ Royal Mail 2001/02 Review, Chairman's Statement, p. 2

⁴ Consignia News Release, 20 June 2001, 'Consignia starts biggest ever review of road, rail and air links'

⁵ *Ibid*

- 2.3. The result of this review was a three-year renewal plan, which started in April 2002.⁶ The plan aims to put in place “a more integrated road-based regional hub and spoke system [which] will reduce the total number of road journeys undertaken by Royal Mail and help us deliver more letters on target”.⁷ Linked with this, Royal Mail aims to “cut vehicle numbers significantly, and in the process CO2 emissions will be cut by more than 35 per cent”,⁸ reducing emissions from over 900,000 kg per day to under 600,000 kg per day.⁹
- 2.4. London has seen declining quality of postal services for several years, as has been acknowledged by Royal Mail itself.¹⁰ The performance measure for first class stamped and meter posted items in the first three quarters of 2002/03 was 90.3 per cent for London, compared to 92.0 per cent for the rest of the country (although this does represent an improvement on the performance gap between London and the rest of the UK for 2001/02, which was 4.7 per cent, compared to 1.7 per cent gap in the first three quarters of 2002/03).
- 2.5. Royal Mail’s three-year renewal plan includes investments in London that are designed to close this performance gap. A new ‘global mail centre’ at Heathrow, a £48 million mail center to handle mail at Kingston and Twickenham, and a £37 million centre at Bromley-by-Bow to replace the Whitechapel depot are all included in Royal Mail’s plans over the next 12 months, with a new centre already opened in Greenford to serve Harrow and Uxbridge and north-west London. This is all part of the London Quality of Service Improvement Initiative; a “major investment programme to drive up the quality of mail services in and around the capital”.¹¹

3 Why Mail Rail Matters

- 3.1. Mail Rail is an important asset for London in its own right. The underground line, specially designed for mail transportation, runs 6.5 miles from Paddington in the west to Whitechapel in the East of London. The line now serves three stations. This compares to eight stations when Mail Rail was opened 75 years ago, and nine at its peak – the most recent station to close was at Whitechapel at the end of March 2003.
- 3.2. The line carries an average of four million letters and parcels per day, although the Communication Workers’ Union told us that its load was three times this number two years ago.¹² Royal Mail acknowledged this point when we visited the Mail Rail station at Mount Pleasant, and said that in its heyday Mail Rail carried up to 12 million items a day, but pointed out that this reduction was a result of Mail Rail no longer serving mail sorting offices due to their relocation away from the line over a period of years.

⁶ Consignia Annual Review, 2001-02, p. 2

⁷ Consignia Annual Review, 2001-02, p. 21

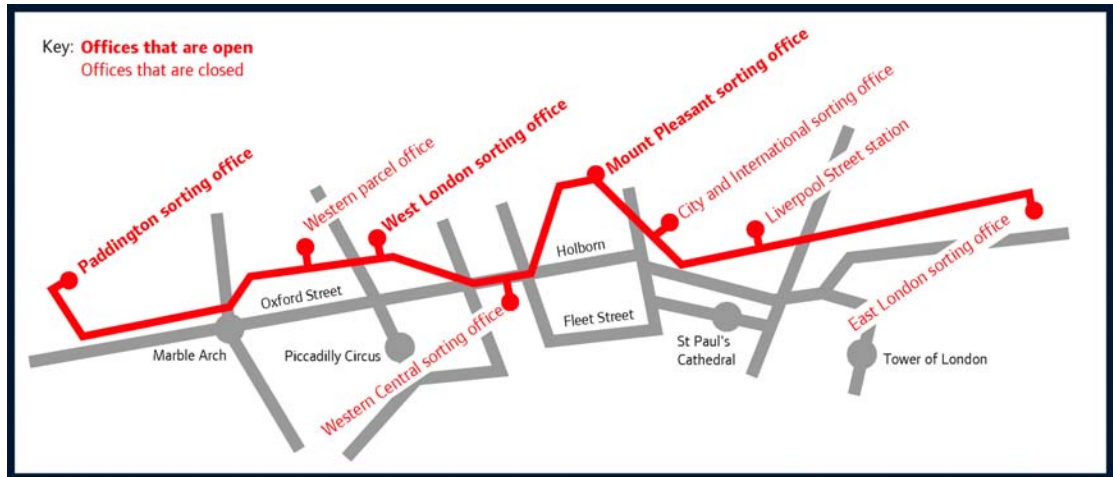
⁸ Consignia Annual Review, 2001-02, p. 2

⁹ Consignia Annual Review, 2001-02, p. 32

¹⁰ Royal Mail, National Report to Postcomm and Postwatch, Quarter October – December 2002, p. 9

¹¹ Consignia Annual Review, 2001-02, p. 25

¹² Minutes of Committee Meeting (available at www.london.gov.uk/assembly)



Indicative map of the Mail Rail line (source: www.mailrail.co.uk and Royal Mail).

- 3.3. The transportation of mail across central London on an underground rail line, rather than by road, has an environmental merit. The Committee was advised by Royal Mail officers at Mount Pleasant that if Royal Mail stopped using the line, an extra 80 van trips per week would have to be made to deliver the mail.
- 3.4. The Mayor, who is committed to supporting sustainable transport of freight in London,¹³ may have a role to play in ensuring the protection and continuing use of this key sustainable transport asset, whether for mail or some other freight. Given Royal Mail's commitment to a reduction in the numbers of vehicles used to transport mail, and to a reduction of 35 per cent in its CO2 emissions by April 2005, we would hope that this would have been a supportive argument for maintaining the Mail Rail line. Even if the addition of 80 van journeys per week will not add significantly to the sum of Royal Mail's CO2 emissions, Richard Wallis from TfL suggested looking at this issue from the point of view of the potential of the line to be part of a sustainable freight transport network, linked with other sustainable methods of distribution. This would obviously have a more significant environmental impact. Mail Rail is also an important part of London's transport and cultural heritage.
- 3.5. Mail Rail's current operation is, however, very costly compared to road transportation. In announcing its review of Mail Rail's future in November 2002, Royal Mail stated that transporting mail on Mail Rail cost five times more than by road. Representatives from the Communication Workers' Union questioned this, suggesting that the cost was more like three times as high.¹⁴ Either way, Members understand that there are high fixed costs associated with running Mail Rail, and the fact that it is carrying less than a third of its capacity means that the cost per item of mail is high compared to transportation by road.

¹³ See the Mayor's Transport Strategy

¹⁴ Minutes of Committee Meeting

Recommendation 1

Members do not want to see the mothballing of Mail Rail become a long term or default position. We recommend that Royal Mail move quickly to investigate ways of making the line cost-effective and with a view to putting it back into use (to carry either mail or other freight) for both its environmental merit and for the benefit of Royal Mail's shareholder who is, after all, the taxpayer.

4 Mail Rail's Future

- 4.1. There are several ideas on the table for the future use of Mail Rail. Intriguing possibilities suggested to us include: a victualler's delight in the form of transportation of wine (perhaps London is now more a city of drinkers rather than writers of letters); document exchange; commercial same-day mail delivery; delivery of high value small goods to shops on Oxford Street; linking up with London's airports (especially the new Global Mail Hub at Heathrow, which is of course already linked to Paddington mainline station by rail). Members understand that, for some of these to be taken forward, approval would have to be sought from Parliament, or major changes or expansion would have to be made to the line's infrastructure, which we were told by Royal Mail would be too expensive to be worthwhile. However, others of these, we heard, could be taken forward without such costs and / or delays.
- 4.2. David Chapman, Royal Mail's Programme Manager for London, stated that, in the context of Royal Mail's programme of investment in mail operations, the importance of the line had been "substantially reduced".¹⁵ It seems that this is because the line now only serves three stations out of the original nine, and because the development of new postal sorting offices away from the line makes it less suited to the over-ground mail operation.
- 4.3. The Communication Workers' Union was sceptical about this argument, suggesting that the line had been intentionally run down over recent years, and that this should be reversed, and more mail transported using the line, in order to reduce unit costs.¹⁶ Steve Jones, CWU London Divisional Official based at the Mount Pleasant Sorting Office, told us, "We think we could very, very quickly move to a break even. If you start bringing new work into the business, you could probably make a profit".¹⁷
- 4.4. Transport for London's Richard Wallis told us that TfL would prefer to see Mail Rail continuing to be run by Royal Mail, with its use expanded "in a way which would be commensurate with retaining the Post Office business and adapting it for expanded use with other commodities as well".¹⁸ He suggested that 'palletisation' of the vehicles on the line, to enable them to carry goods transferred from national rail, other than mail, might be a possible way forward.

¹⁵ Royal Mail News Release, 7 November 2002, 'Future of London's unique Post Office underground railway to be reviewed – options include mothballing Mail Rail

¹⁶ Minutes of Committee Meeting

¹⁷ Minutes of Committee Meeting, p. 9

¹⁸ Minutes of Committee Meeting, p. 11

- 4.5. Members were interested in the suggestion, made to us by the Communication Workers' Union, that the extension of the line out beyond the Congestion Charge zone should open up opportunities to transfer more mail onto the line so as to reduce the costs to Royal Mail of the congestion charge, and contributing to the Mayor's objective of reducing traffic congestion in central London. CWU suggested to us that there may be a new market for Royal Mail services in the Canary Wharf area after the introduction of the Congestion Charge, but argued that Royal Mail had given insufficient attention to this option. Royal Mail representatives told Members that in fact, paying the congestion charge for the additional 25 journeys a week that would take place during the scheme's hours of operation (out of a total of 80 journeys) was cheaper than continuing to run Mail Rail, so was not an important factor in their decision.

Recommendation 2

Public policy debate on this matter would be aided by Royal Mail stating publicly why Mail Rail has apparently been running at less than a third of its capacity and what the obstacles are to returning it to full use for mail transportation purposes in such a way as to make it as cost-effective as road delivery.

5 Consultation and GLA Input

- 5.1. Royal Mail's November 2002 announcement that the future of Mail Rail was under review included plans for a "period of intensive consultation" about the future of Mail Rail, not only with the unions but with businesses, heritage and other groups.
- 5.2. The evidence Members have received suggests that this consultation has not been as active as Members might have hoped. Representatives from the Communication Workers' Union told us of their concern that the decision to mothball Mail Rail appeared to have been taken very shortly after the announcement that it was to be reviewed, and that they had not had sufficient opportunities to feed in their ideas for making Mail Rail cost effective.
- 5.3. The comments made to Members by CWU representatives about the length of time allowed for consultation following the November announcement gives us cause for concern. We are also concerned at the revelation by Transport for London that it had only been in contact with Royal Mail (at TfL's behest) about Mail Rail for six weeks at the most, especially as this is such a large piece of transport infrastructure in the capital.
- 5.4. These concerns are only heightened by reports from CWU representatives that Royal Mail had agreed three months earlier, in August 2002, to keep the line in operation, and that the November announcement had taken CWU completely by surprise. Mark Baulch said, "at the moment, their policy is very short-term, to say the least. It really boils down to the policy of realizing as much asset

potential [ie sorting offices and buildings] as they possibly can over a short period of time¹⁹.

- 5.5. This account of events leading up to the decision to mothball Mail Rail gives us serious cause for concern if a very short term need to cut running costs and to realise asset values is compromising longer term business interests.
- 5.6. Transport for London told us that they only found out ‘formally’ about the review of Mail Rail’s future in January 2003, and that they had not been approached directly by Royal Mail for support or consultation purposes on Mail Rail. However, Members were pleased that Richard Wallis, from TfL, told us that TfL intended to “go back to Royal Mail in the middle of this year to see what progress has been made, what their views are on its future use and see whether we can explore further options for utilisation of this network”.²⁰
- 5.7. To assist the Mayor in his commitment to sustainable transport in London, Transport for London must be engaged in decisions that will have an impact on the achievement of that objective. TfL has a key role to play in influencing and supporting the protection and continuing use of sustainable transport assets.
- 5.8. The example of Mail Rail leads us to fear that Royal Mail’s decisions on the future of key sustainable transport assets may be being made purely in the interests of short-term savings, rather than in the context of their own long-term strategy, again especially as the shareholders are the taxpaying public. The mothballing of Mail Rail will mean that a team of 76 experienced members of staff will be broken up: if it is brought back into use, a whole new team will need to be recruited and trained.
- 5.9. Ultimately, we believe that decisions on London’s freight transport network will be best made if they are in the context of an overall strategy for sustainable freight distribution in the capital. We recommend that TfL’s Sustainable Distribution Partnership produce such a strategy, in consultation with key stakeholders. The future of Mail Rail should be included as part of that strategy. This will provide a basis for TfL’s future involvement in decisions on freight distributions, and will provide businesses with a clear understanding of that role and of the support they can expect from TfL. This might provide the necessary substance to the Mayor’s stated commitment to sustainable freight transport in our city.

¹⁹ Minutes of Committee Meeting, p. 5

²⁰ Minutes of Committee Meeting, pp. 16-17

Recommendation 3

Transport for London should take the initiative in helping Royal Mail to find a sustainable and viable use for Mail Rail in the future. In particular, we would like to see the Mayor supporting a call for parliamentary action should that be necessary in order to secure the future use of the asset to transport goods other than mail. Members look forward to a report back from Transport for London on progress made in exploring viable future uses for Mail Rail, and on what role it has played in the discussions and what support it has provided to Royal Mail.

Recommendation 4

The London Development Agency should also play a GLA family role in assisting Royal Mail in maximising the long-term sustainable value of the Mail Rail asset.

Recommendation 5

TfL should, in consultation with the Sustainable Transport Network, produce a strategy for sustainable freight distribution in London. This should include consideration of the future of Mail Rail, as well as steps to transport more freight in general by rail rather than road. We recommend that the Transport Committee follow up this particular issue in further detail.

Annex A: Summary of Recommendations

1. Members do not want to see the mothballing of Mail Rail become a long term or default position. We recommend that Royal Mail move quickly to investigate ways of making the line cost-effective and with a view to putting it back into use (to carry either mail or other freight) for both its environmental benefit and for the benefit of Royal Mail's shareholder who is, after all, the taxpayer.
2. Public policy debate on this matter would be aided by Royal Mail stating publicly why Mail Rail has apparently been running at less than a third of its capacity and what the obstacles are to returning it to full use for mail transportation purposes in such a way as to make it as cost-effective as road delivery.
3. Transport for London should take the initiative in helping Royal Mail to find a sustainable and viable use for Mail Rail in the future. In particular, we would like to see the GLA supporting a call for parliamentary action should that be necessary in order to secure the future use of the asset to transport goods other than mail. Members look forward to a report back from Transport for London on progress made in exploring viable future uses for Mail Rail, and on what role it has played in the discussions and what support it has provided to Royal Mail.
4. The London Development Agency should also undertake a GLA family role in assisting Royal Mail in maximising the long-term sustainable value of the Mail Rail asset.
5. TfL should, in consultation with the Sustainable Transport Network, should produce a strategy for sustainable freight distribution in London. This should include consideration of the future of Mail Rail, as well as steps to transport more freight in general by rail rather than road. We recommend that the Transport Committee follow up this particular issue in further detail.

Annex B: List of Witnesses

The following witnesses attended the Committee's meeting on 26 February 2003:

Steve Jones - Communications Workers Union

Lester Russell - Communications Workers Union

Paul O'Donnell - Communications Workers Union

Mark Baulch - Communications Workers Union

Richard Wallace - National Rail Liaison Manager, TfL

Paul Ross - Rail Co-ordination Manager, TfL

Annex C: Orders and Translations

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Annex D: Principles of Assembly Scrutiny

The powers of the London Assembly include the power to investigate and report on the decisions and actions of the Mayor, or on matters relating to the principal purposes of the Greater London Authority, and on any other matters which the Assembly considers to be of importance to Londoners. In the conduct of scrutiny and investigation the Assembly abides by a number of principles.

Scrutinies:

- aim to recommend action to achieve improvements;
- are conducted with objectivity and independence;
- examine all aspects of the Mayor's strategies;
- consult widely, having regard to issues of timeliness and cost;
- are conducted in a constructive and positive manner; and
- are conducted with an awareness of the need to spend taxpayers money wisely and well.

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