

Postal Services Policy



Title:

Postal Services Policy

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Executive Summary

NHS Lothian produces a high volume of both internal and external mail. The provision of the mail service plays an integral role in not only providing important information directly to patients (such as patient appointment letters), but also supports the coordination and delivery of all services via the internal mail.

All letters and packages handled by NHS Lothian staff will be maintained in a secure and confidential environment both during processing and while in transit. All external post that is paid for by the organisation must relate to the organisation's business and must be sent using the nationally contracted route.

This policy is intended to cover post (physical letters and packages) sent both externally via contracted service providers, which requires postage to be paid, and internally distributed by NHS Lothian staff. It does not cover communications which are sent electronically including services, such as 'hybrid mail.'

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1.0 Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to lay out the conditions relating to the delivery and use of the postage service and to support compliance with agreed guidance, and relevant legislation, promoting the safe and effective processing of all mail, ensuring that data protection and confidentiality obligations are met.

2.0 Policy statement

As an organisation, NHS Lothian produces a high volume of both internal and external mail. The provision of the mail service plays an integral role in not only providing information directly to patients but also supports the delivery of clinical services via the NHS Lothian internal mail.

All letters and packages handled by NHS Lothian staff will be maintained in a secure and confidential environment both during processing and while in transit.

All external physical post that is paid for by the organisation must relate to the organisation's business and must be sent using the nationally contracted route. Any letters or packages which are thought not to be associated with the business will not be posted and may be opened to check the contents and, if possible, returned to the originator.

All external letters and packages received which are undeliverable by the NHS Lothian mail room, for example due to address illegibility, will be opened in a secure and confidential environment. Where possible, every effort will be made to forward on to the intended recipient or returned to the originator. Items are tracked using Royal Mail barcodes which will ensure letters are returned to NHS Lothian. Departments should consider how their letters are made distinctive to ensure they are returned to the correct department thereafter.

Please note a Business Reply Envelope scheme exists alongside this policy for 2nd class external mail, and the Finance Department can be contacted for this service.

3.0 Scope

This policy is intended to cover post sent both externally via a contracted service providers which requires postage to be paid, and internal mail distributed by NHS Lothian staff.

Electronic communications via contracted service providers are out with the scope of this policy.

4.0 Definitions

Pricing in Proportion (formally known as sized based pricing) is how Royal Mail price products in relation to their size, weight and shape. Each of these aspects can impact the supply chain from production to delivery and the resource requirements to deliver them.

5.0 Implementation roles and responsibilities

Due to the high volume of mail produced by the organisation and the associated costs, it is important the most cost-effective service is used therefore ensuring that mail is delivered in good time for whatever it is intended for and at the minimum cost. Departments intending to use the postal service for time-sensitive information such as short-notice appointments should consider an alternative method of communication, such as a telephone call.

5.1 Patient Appointment Letters

Letters should be sent as follows for appointments booked:

- Received by the mailroom **5 or more days** prior to appointment: Send via standard mail
- Received by the mailroom **less than 5 days** prior to appointment: Do not send a letter. Contact patient by other means, such as telephone.

When sending a standard first appointment letter, it is best practice to send the letter at least 10 days in advance of the appointment.

Appointments booked fewer than 7 days in advance are considered to be short notice appointments. In order for the patient to accept, the appointment must be made in person or over the telephone.

Further guidance regarding the [sending of letters for scheduled care](#) is available on the NHS intranet.

Patient appointments should be sent out via 2nd class mail. More expensive Royal Mail services should only be used when every other communication avenue with patients has been explored, understanding that their service will be charged for this.

Royal Mail prices and expected timings can be found here:

<https://www.royalmail.com/sending/uk>

5.2 Patient Appointment Products, Equipment and Medicines

It is recognised that it is sometimes necessary in the interests of service efficiency and effectiveness, to send products to patients prior to their appointments. The postage of such products should be agreed between the service and the Facilities department in advance to ensure that they comply with the regulations relating to the postage and packaging of hazardous products and that there is sufficient budget to support this.

Any service changes which impact on local postage practices should be considered, justified, consulted with Facilities, and agreed prior to the start of the new process.

The sending of medicines through the post must comply with the [NHS Lothian Safe Use of Medicines Policy \(scot.nhs.uk\)](#)

Services should be aware that any products, equipment, or medicines which require any mail service will be recorded and charged back to originating departments.

5.3 Personal and other non-business post

The organisation will not pay for any personal post. Any letters or packages which are processed through NHS Lothian mailrooms and are suspected as being of a personal nature may be opened and examined under controlled and confidential conditions for verification. If these can be traced back to a member of staff, then this will be considered to be fraud and action including disciplinary action may be taken. **These items will not be posted.**

Post which is generated to promote non-core business activities such as conferences, research, polls, or other such events must be arranged in advance with Facilities and will require the provision of a budget code.

5.4 Presentation of mail

The correct presentation of mail is essential to ensure a cost effective and speedy delivery. All staff using the mail service should consult and follow the guidance contained within the [NHS Lothian Mail Guidance for staff](#).

5.5 Hazardous Materials

If hazardous materials, including laboratory packages or biological materials or batteries are included in any package, please consult your local Facilities department and follow the Royal Mail Guidelines here:

https://business.help.royalmail.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/867/~/~prohibited-and-restricted-items---advice-for-business-customers

5.6 Enveloping

Mail should always be sent using the most suitable envelopes for the purpose, as using larger envelopes than required envelopes attracts additional charges. **Envelopes for standard letters should be DL or C5 size and if possible, no bigger than 24cm in length, 5mm in thickness, 16.5cm in width and 100g in weight.**

Information on the 'Pricing in Proportion' guidance which covers envelope size and thickness can be found here: [Parcels, letters, envelopes, weight and size guide \(royalmail.com\)](#).

Packages which are above this size that have not been agreed with Facilities will be recorded and charged back to the originating department.

Further guidance is contained in NHS Lothian Mail Guidance for staff.

5.7 Patient Identifiable Information

Documents containing patient specific information should be considered confidential legal documents and should be handled with this in mind. Where envelopes are marked 'Confidential' they should only be opened by the individual to whom they are addressed or by those carrying the appropriate authority to do so.

All letters and packages handled by NHS Lothian staff will be maintained in a secure and confidential manner and environment both during processing and while in transit.

All external letters and packages received which are undeliverable by the mail room, will be opened in a secure and confidential manner and environment.

5.8 Monitoring of mail

The mailroom will monitor all items received for posting to ensure that guidelines are being adhered to and associated costs are controlled. Items will be recorded when they are collected from departments and will be checked for the envelope sizes being used, the volume of mail being sent, the mail products being used, including more expensive services such as recorded or next day delivery, and any non-standard items being posted. Departments that regularly post significant volumes of mail or whose postage bill is high, will be contacted to highlight this and may be asked to cover the costs of this separately.

All departments, upon producing the mail, are required to complete the Mail Count Form, which should be handed to the Porter collecting the mail, whereafter the information on the form will be collated by Facilities Administrative staff.

5.9 The use of franking machines and pre-paid envelopes

The purchase and/or leasing of mail franking machines by individual departments is discouraged. All mail service requirements must be discussed with the local Facilities department who are able to access the most efficient contract services and rates.

Regarding pre-paid envelopes, the Facilities department must be notified of their use and discussions should take place with the department prior to commencing use of them.

Specific arrangements are in place for the use of business reply envelopes. These can be accessed through the Procurement Department.

5.10 Internal Mail

Internal mail to other NHS Lothian providers will be sent internally through Lab Vans and NHS Lothian mailrooms. The use of external mail for this purpose is prohibited.

6.0 Associated materials

[NHS Lothian Confidentiality Policy](#) – Authorised by the information Governance Sub Committee, October 2021

[Safe Transfer of Health Records \(nhslothian.scot\)](#)

[Waiting Times SOP](#)

[NHS Lothian Mail Guidance for staff](#), March 2023

[Dealing with Suspicious Packages Mailroom Guidance](#), March 2023

Physical Security Policy (under development)

[Mail Count Form](#)

[NHS Lothian Safe Use of Medicines Policy \(scot.nhs.uk\)](#) – Authorised by Area Drug & Therapeutics Committee, February 2022

7.0 Evidence base

[Information Governance \(scot.nhs.uk\)](#)

[Mail Services \(scot.nhs.uk\)](#)

8.0 Stakeholder Consultation

Facilities colleagues have been consulted in the review of this policy, including the Facilities Policy Group. The policy was placed on the NHS Lothian Consultation Zone and circulated through the Business Manager network, providing NHS Lothian staff with the opportunity to provide comment/feedback.

9.0 Monitoring and review

The effectiveness of this policy may be monitored and evaluated using the outputs from:

- Complaint investigations
- Staff experience feedback
- Seeded mailshots (test mailshots)
- Monthly Finance reports
- The Royal Mail Online Business Account system
- Click and Drop
- Collection reports from staff responsible for the uplift and transfer of mail.

This policy will be reviewed, as a minimum, every three years, but may be subject to earlier review in the event of changes to guidance or legislation, or any other factors that may render the policy in need of review.