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Miss Anne McIntosh LLB MP
House of Commons
London
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Thank you for your letter of 16 January 2001 to Stephen Byers enclosing correspondence from your constituents, Geoffrey and Jean Newton of The Village Store and Post Office, GRO, concerning the future of their post office and computerisation of the rural post office network. I am replying as the Minister responsible for Post Office matters.

With regard to computerisation, the Post Office is equipping the entire counters' network with the fully automated Horizon system to replace the current out-dated and expensive manual systems. A key element of the Post Office's strategy to secure a long term viable future for the post office network as a whole is to use the Horizon system to attract new business, such as universal banking services and Government General Practitioner facilities, which will only be able to be operated on the computerised system. In addition, the new system provides a central, electronic accounting and management information system to deliver the traditional services offered by the post office network more efficiently, accurately and securely. It is essential therefore that all outlets, without exception, are connected to the central system.

To date, over 16,000 post offices have been successfully automated, with the vast majority of subpostmasters being extremely positive about the system and quickly seeing real benefits in operating the system. I understand that there have been no major breakdowns of the Horizon system and that comprehensive training and helpline facilities are provided. The technical helpline has 200 staff handling calls (currently running at 70,000 a month) with 96% of calls answered within one minute. The Post Office run the National Business Support Centre which handles calls relating to post office operational issues and last month the Centre answered 84% of all calls within 15 seconds.

Whilst I do fully recognise that many subpostmasters, like the Newtons, view the prospect of computerisation with considerable unease and trepidation, the Post Office's experience, with almost 90% of the network now automated, is that, whatever the age of the subpostmaster, the change proves to be much easier than anticipated. I very much hope that this will prove to be the case for Geoffrey and Jean Newton.