

4 December 2012

John Woodcock MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Thank you for your letter of 23 November 2012. I am sorry not to have replied sooner, but I was on Committee business last week and not at Westminster. I don't blame you for being a little confused on reading the letter sent by the Post Office, so let me explain.

I have had two constituents over recent years who have been accused of false accounting by the Post Office, whilst they have held positions as SubPostmistress and master at a local SubPost Office. My constituents claim that this is simply not true, and that the fault lies with the Post office, in particular with their Horizon software system, which each SubPost office uses. It turns out that this appears to be rather a common problem around the country, and a rather large number of individuals claim that they have been wrongly accused of the same or similar offences. Many have ended up in court, some now have criminal records. It struck me that there may well be something seriously wrong if a great many people protest their innocence publicly and loudly, all having the same jobs, most apparently involving the Horizon system, and so I decided to see if I could do something to help.

Earlier this year, I chaired a meeting with a number of MPs and their constituents, as well as senior personnel from the Post Office to discuss the matter. Following this, I persuaded the Post Office to appoint independent forensic accountants to investigate individual cases, and these investigations are now underway. There is also a group called the Justice for SubPostmasters Alliance, who is also aware of the investigations. I imagine that this is how your constituent came to be redirected to my office – the Alliance have let people know that I am leading on this matter, hence approaches to my office are directed first to the correct constituency MP.

2....

I am extremely keen to ensure that I am not treading on anyone's toes, so I am pleased to hear that Mrs Wall came back to you about this matter. My role is simply to act as conduit to the investigators at this stage. I am happy to do this, as everyone is going to benefit from investigations being undertaken independently and professionally, in this matter. Individuals want to see their cases handled objectively; the Post Office want to find out if there is a problem, and if there is, to resolve it; and MPs want their constituents dealt with fairly.

The process by which these investigations are being undertaken is as follows. Individuals must let their constituency MP know first that they wish their case to be investigated. With the MP's permission, their details are sent to my office (contact details, which SubPost Office they managed, and during which period), who pass it first to the Post Office. It is imperative that each individual is made explicitly aware that it is the Post Office who will see their details first. The reason for this is that the Post Office needs to collate data for forwarding to the investigators, but there may be some nervousness around this, understandably. The Post Office is not, and cannot, offer blanket immunity from prosecution should a given investigation find that individual guilty of a crime, and I should mention this is a possibility.

Once the data arrives with the investigators, the case can then be examined.

Do let me know if you would like me to act as above for your constituent. I am not screening any cases, just simply passing them on.

Although it would not be fair to say that I have been inundated with requests, I have had quite a few, and the investigators are looking into over a dozen, I believe, at the moment. It is going to be very interesting to see the results when they eventually are made known, and this process is one which will need very careful handling and coordination with all MPs involved.

I hope this is helpful, and do please come back to me if anything is unclear, and of course, if you would like Mrs Wall's details to be passed on.