

7 March 2013

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As you know, I am hosting a meeting on Monday 25 March at 5pm, in Room N at Portcullis House here at Westminster, about the SubPostmaster / mistress issue. The meeting is to take the form of an update from Ron Warmington and Ian Henderson of Second Sight on how their investigations are proceeding. I wonder if you might be free to attend, along with any of those of your colleagues you deem it is appropriate to invite? I have invited all MPs who have constituents who have raised this matter with them, Alan Bates, who heads the Alliance for Justice for SubPostmasters, and Kay Linnell, who is working with him. I do not propose inviting media.

Initially I thought that having representatives along from the Post Office might compromise the appearance of complete independence that MPs are looking for from the Second Sight investigations, but Ron and Ian have persuaded me that it is essential that the Post Office is represented. I would very much like you to be there.

They tell me that investigations are proceeding well, and that your ongoing support and willingness to continue funding their efforts is enormously appreciated. I am writing to MPs this week letting them know this, so that they are not under any illusion of your commitment to this process. It is very important that they see this, and I shall do my utmost to bring it to their attention.

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I would like to raise two matters here, and these are things that may need a conversation between you and me, either in person or by phone if that is easier, before the meeting. In my discussions with Ron and Ian, I gather that questions have been raised over the absolute integrity of Horizon, though without their being so fundamental as to say that the system is not fit for purpose. Since it is a system that remains in current use, there is the risk that existing SubPostmasters and mistresses may find themselves in exactly the same position as those whose cases are being investigated. I know that definitive results are not yet available, but I hope the Post Office would be ready to address this issue.

As I mentioned earlier, I am not inviting media to this meeting. Nevertheless, it would be expecting too much of MPs, if they were told that there were questions marks over Horizon, to demand that they keep their constituents in ignorance of a potentially promising outcome. It would damage the process we are all committed to if the Post Office were not well prepared with a ready solution to this problem, among others, that could be offered publicly in this meeting.

Finally, you know as well as I that MPs will want to voice strong defence of their constituents at this meeting. I will circulate a proposed agenda the week prior to the meeting, and chair the event, and would hope that this will keep things on track, but I would like to warn of the possibility that there will be very robust questioning of the Post Office by MPs on behalf of their constituents. I for my part will want to stress the points raised in the final paragraph of this letter.

I am more than happy to take this up with you before the meeting, and in fact it might be best if we could have a word. I am away during the week 11 March, but a meeting or phone call the next week might be a very good idea. My office knows your office may seek this, and will arrange.

I would like to say in conclusion that I am impressed beyond my expectations with not only how the investigations are proceeding, but of your continuing support. I cannot recall a more important campaign, nor one where the end result has been so consistently supported by all parties involved. You have my gratitude and admiration for how the Post Office is handling this.

Email to all Post Office MPs

Dear Colleague,

A reminder, if I may, of the update meeting to discuss the SubPostmaster / mistress problems with the Post Office, which will take place on Monday 25 March, at 5pm, in Room N, Portcullis House.

The two independent forensic accountants from Second Sight, Ron Warmington and Ian Henderson, will present their investigations thus far to us. These are, I understand, proceeding well, although they are taking longer and requiring much more work than was originally envisaged. The amount of data that must be collated and then analysed by the investigators in each case is enormous, the work painstaking, and so a leap to a result now already appears to be premature.

I would like us to be prepared for a longer haul. I am very conscious of the fact that each of us has a constituent who only wants to know whether evidence has been gathered that will prove their innocence, leaving them free to pursue this matter in whatever way they see fit. We are not quite at that stage yet.

The investigations taking place are, I gather, leading to thematic results which highlight issues rather than offer definitive evidence towards any individual's innocence or culpability. This is to be expected given the complicated nature of the investigations. Ian and Ron will explain how they are proceeding, and this will offer us greater insight into why individual results are not yet available.

The Post Office continues to both fully support and fund Second Sight's work, and this level of commitment should be acknowledged. I am inviting senior representatives from the Post Office to attend the meeting, prepared for questions we may raise.

I hope you can be there, as this is an important step along the way.

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Mr Alan Bates

GRO

I am looking forward to seeing you again on 25 March here at Westminster. I wanted to write and let you know that I have had some discussion with Ron and Ian about how things are going, and both tell me that they are overwhelmed with the support and help you, and Kay, are offering them. This is really good news. Do not think it is going unnoticed nor unappreciated. It is extremely important to the entire process, and I want to thank you for your contribution.

They tell me that the investigations are taking longer than they had hoped – data collation and analysis proving to be the main sticking points. The good news is that the Post Office continues to support and fund the process, and it is to its credit – and also in its interest – to do so.

I want to ask Post Office representatives to this meeting. Ron and Ian have persuaded me that they really ought to be invited, and I wonder if you are content with this? It will give MPs a chance to put what I suspect will be some fairly robust questions their way, but they ought to be prepared for this.

I look forward to hearing from you soon, and trust all is going well with your own case.