

Post Office – Horizon System

Statement by Jo Swinson, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Employment Relations and Consumer Affairs

With permission Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the Post Office Horizon System.

Yesterday evening an interim report into alleged problems with the Post Office Horizon computer system was published. The report was commissioned by Post Office Ltd from external forensic accountants, Second Sight.

The Horizon system records all transactions conducted at every post office counter across the country. The Government welcomes the publication of this interim Report and the Post Office's statement in response.

Although Post Office Ltd is 100% owned by Government, the company operates at arm's length as an independent commercial business. The Government does not play any role in operational matters.

It is important to note that the issues in the report have no impact on Royal Mail which is an entirely separate business.

It is also important to be clear that, contrary to misleading media reports, the review explicitly confirms that

"we have so far found no evidence of system-wide problems with the Horizon software"

The very small number of subpostmasters who have experienced issues with the Horizon system are a minute proportion of the tens of thousands of people who have been successfully using the system across the network of over 11,500 branches on a daily basis since 1995. Out of 68,000 users, only 47 cases have been put forward to the Review.

I want to emphasise that the interim report makes no comment about the safety or otherwise of any conviction of a subpostmaster for fraud, theft or false accounting.

Equally, even if it had done, the Government cannot intervene in the legal process to review or appeal past convictions. These are matters which can only properly be dealt with by the relevant judicial authorities.

The interim report published yesterday analysed 4 cases. It did find that there was scope for the Post Office to improve aspects of its support and training for subpostmasters. The Post Office has already taken steps to do so.

The Post Office has further proposed a number of measures to build on some of the points made in the Second Sight report about support and training for subpostmasters. I very much welcome these initiatives as, I understand, does my Rt hon Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (James Arbuthnot) who has played a key supporting role in identifying cases for examination in this Review.

The Post Office statement issued yesterday welcomed the broad thrust of the report's findings and outlined three initiatives to deal with the issues raised.

Firstly, they will set up a working party to complete the review of cases started by Second Sight. This will consider all 47 cases brought forward by the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance (JFSA) and MPs. The JFSA have been invited to join this working party.

Secondly, an independent figure will chair a review to determine how best to adjudicate disputed cases in future. Again the JFSA and other stakeholders will be invited to take part in this process.

And finally a new Branch User Forum will provide a channel for sub-postmasters and others to raise issues around business processes, training and support, at the highest level.

The company will be taking forward these proposals as an urgent priority. I commend this statement to the House.