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George Freeman MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary for Life Sciences
Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
1 Victoria Street
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26 June 2015

Dear Minister,

Adjournment debate: Postmasters and the Horizon system

I wanted to write to you ahead of Monday's debate.

I hope you are reassured, following the briefing from my team, about all the Post Office has done to address the concerns raised by a small number of (mainly former) postmasters several years ago. We have gone to great lengths to do so because I was determined that, if there were problems with the Horizon system, these had to be identified and resolved. This was essential as the Horizon system underpins our network – it is relied upon by 78,000 users in 11,500 Post Office branches serving communities across the UK.

The investigations over the past three years have underlined the confidence we have always had in Horizon -it has been found to work as it should - and I firmly believe that we have provided the small number of people who came forward with complaints, with a proper and reasonable avenue to have those fully investigated. They have all been rigorously investigated by the Post Office, independently reviewed by forensic accountants Second Sight and, where it is appropriate, people have been provided with the opportunity for independent mediation.

You will know that, more recently, the Post Office's conduct on legal matters, such as prosecutions, has been questioned and that there have been some extremely serious, untrue assertions made about this. We continue to refute these robustly, but without discussing the individual criminal cases involved because we are naturally respecting the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC), following applications they have received for a review of some of the cases. We also assured people who came forward to the Complaint Review and Mediation Scheme that they could do so in absolute confidence and we have honoured that throughout.



This issue has been difficult for us. It involves a very small number of people, from the nearly 500,000 people who have worked in our network since Horizon was introduced in 2001. While some of the cases are very sad, it cannot follow that the Post Office is responsible for these individual circumstances. I do of course have sympathy in such cases.

It is also, I think, worth saying that we are continuing to mediate and resolve cases. In some there are genuine grievances about the support the Post Office provided, such as training, and where there is evidence that we might have done more we are acknowledging this and discussing it with the people involved to see if we can reach a mutually agreeable solution.

It is, frankly, difficult to see what more the Post Office could be expected to do to ensure the rightful outcome of these cases, based on the evidence. We very much hope that those remaining in the scheme who are being offered mediation will engage with it. Mediation is being offered for all cases that are not subject to a previous court ruling (which mediation cannot overturn).

Through our own work, and that of Second Sight, we have found nothing to suggest that, in criminal cases, any conviction is unsafe. We take great care regarding our continuing duty of disclosure on all legal matters including full co-operation with the CCRC.

I regret that this is the first Post Office issue on which you are having to engage as a Minister and I am grateful for the time you are giving to it.

Please do not hesitate to let me know if there is any more information you would like on this, or on any other matter.

Yours sincerely,



GRO

Paula Vennells
Chief Executive