

Callard, Richard - UKGI

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From: Whitehead Mike (ShEx)
Sent: 04 October 2012 13:37
To: Swinson MPST
Cc: Gibson Will (ShEx); Batten Peter (ShEx)
Subject: POL Horizon system



JS POST OFFICE Lynxcase306899...
HORIZON IT SYS...

Claire

At a recent meeting with Jo, in the context of having signed off the attached pdf reply to John Pugh MP, she asked for a short note summarising the position with the Horizon issues referred to in the reply. This is now attached.

We are also currently dealing with a FOI request from an investigative journalist relating to our contacts with POL and meetings with/briefings for Minsters in the context of the integrity and performance of Horizon. We expect, in the next 2-3 weeks, to be seeking a S36 exemption (prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs) in respect of certain documents identified which we would be putting to Jo for consideration as the relevant 'qualified person' as regards their disclosure.

Mike

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GRO

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT SYSTEM

Post Office Ltd (POL) introduced the Horizon IT system throughout the network (c50,000 counter positions) in 2000. The Government provided c£500m to fund it. Horizon provides an automated accounting system which records every transaction effected over every post office counter position across the network.

Under their contracts with POL, subpostmasters (spms) are wholly responsible for safe custody of all cash, stamps and other post office stock with face value and this responsibility extends to the actions of all staff they employ. Since Horizon's introduction, there has been a small trickle of cases referred to Ministers from or on behalf of former spms who have had their contracts terminated by POL for financial 'discrepancies or shortages' (falling within the range of theft, false accounting or negligence) who have claimed that there are systemic faults with Horizon which have caused the losses rather than theft or other financial malpractice by themselves or members of their staff/family.

POL has consistently defended Horizon on the basis that the system has been in place for over 10 years; in a typical month Horizon conducts around 80 million customer sessions with 230 million transactions across the system. This is delivered through around 35,000 counter positions in nearly 12,000 Post Offices which perform weekly and monthly accounting balances. Around £175m per day is settled to over 700 client companies who use POL – a substantial flow of data to and from organisations with regularly audited accounts. Over its extensive period of operation the system has proved robust.

POL cites the cases identified by ex-spms where there is some kind of allegation in respect of Horizon as being a miniscule proportion of the many millions of accounting events that subpostmasters have undertaken since 2000. POL believes that if there were any systematic integrity issues within the system they would have been evident over the past 10 years. Both the NFSP and CWU have expressed full confidence in the system.

Accordingly POL has consistently and publicly expressed full confidence in the robustness, integrity and accuracy of Horizon and long resisted periodic calls from former spms for an independent review/audit of the integrity of the system. A lobbying campaign group 'Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance' (JFSA) was established in 2009 and claims a membership of around 100 members but details only 14 specific cases. The JFSA Chairman, Alan Bates, met Ed Davey in October 2010 and Norman Lamb in June 2012 to voice their concerns about Horizon.

In 2010, the JFSA 'sponsored' the initiation of legal action against POL by 5 former spms alleging wrongful termination of contract based on failings in POL's internal processes and the Horizon system. This legal process has proceeded extremely slowly with the solicitors acting for the claimants very dilatory in progressing them. Against this background, ED and NL adopted an essentially 'listening' mode emphasising that Government had no role in operational and contractual issues raised by the JFSA.

Shortly ahead of NL meeting the JFSA, there was a significant new development following a meeting between POL and a small group of MPs who have ex subpostmaster constituents claiming to be victims of faults with Horizon. The MP group was led by James Arbuthnot and included Oliver Letwin, Mike Wood, Annette Brooke, Tessa Munt, Andrew Bridgen + 3 MPs' (Graham Stuart, Jonathan Djanogly, Edward Garnier) researchers. At a meeting on 18 June, POL agreed to commission an independent external review of a small number of individual cases.

It was agreed that this review would be conducted by a firm of forensic accountants, with cases being selected and put forward for review by James Arbuthnot MP who agreed with POL that he would act as the conduit for cases referred by fellow MPs so that the choice was made independently of POL. However as POL are keeping an arm's length distance from the review, we do not have a clear indication of how many cases have been/will be put forward for review and what the expected timescale for the results is.

In response to any enquiries to Ministers/the Dept about individual cases being put forward for review, the replies explain that any cases should be referred to James Arbuthnot MP for consideration through their constituency MP.

BIS | Department for Business
Innovation & Skills

Jo Swinson MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary for
Employment Relations and Consumer Affairs

Dr John Pugh MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Our ref: 306899
Your ref: JDP/AP/it

17 September 2012

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter of 20 August to Norman Lamb, about the independent review by forensic accountants, of a number of individual cases raised by former subpostmasters, who raised concerns about the Post Office's Horizon system with their MP. I am replying as this matter now falls within my portfolio.

I should first note, that Post Office Ltd (POL) continues to express full confidence in the robustness and integrity of its Horizon system and related accounting processes. Over the past ten years, many millions of branch reconciliations have been carried out with transactions and balances accurately recorded on Horizon, by more than 25,000 different subpostmasters in total.

Nevertheless, in the light of discussions earlier in the summer with James Arbuthnot MP and a number of other MPs with ex-subpostmaster constituents, who had raised concerns about Horizon, POL agreed to an external review of a number of individual cases that had been raised with them by MPs.

The external review of specific individual cases is being undertaken by a firm of forensic accountants and, to ensure impartiality, James Arbuthnot has reviewed and approved the appointment. I understand that the review process is now under way and I have asked to be kept informed of developments.

GRO

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