



Department for
Business & Trade

Horizon Compensation Advisory Board

Report of twelfth meeting held on 28 February 2024

Members present: Prof. Christopher Hodges (Chair); Lord Arbuthnot; Kevan Jones MP; Prof. Richard Moorhead.

Also present: Carl Creswell, Rob Brightwell, Beth White, Eleri Wones (all Department for Business and Trade – “DBT”).

Matters arising from Select Committee hearing

1. Board members had followed with interest the previous day’s Business and Trade Select Committee evidence session and discussion of the letter sent to the Lord Chancellor by the Post Office’s Chief Executive. The Board considered whether there were any points of substance in this correspondence that merited addressing further and agreed that there were not.
2. They did not believe that charging parties for missing deadlines was a viable approach. It would require a further layer of investigation and adjudication.
3. The Board also noted that the Committee had discussed the re-introduction of statutory time limits on aspects of the redress process. Their strong view was that this would be a backward step. Such a limit had initially applied to the GLO scheme. Sir Wyn Williams had rightly recommended that it should be removed, in order to minimise any pressure on claimants. The Government had followed his recommendation in introducing what was now the Post Office (Horizon System) Compensation Act 2024. If Parliament were to reimpose such a time limit – or extend it to other schemes – the result would be that some claimants would be rushed into decisions on what they should claim or whether they should accept an offer. Some claimants might even be timed out of receiving redress altogether. These outcomes would be unacceptable.

Speeding redress

4. The Board’s own discussion with the Minister the previous week had been focussed on identifying practical steps to accelerate redress. They were glad to see that a number of these were already being taken forward and had been announced in the House of Commons on 26 February, including paying 80% of offers made under the GLO scheme if a postmaster chooses to challenge the offer. They would continue to monitor this issue and bring forward further practical ideas for improvement.
5. At the previous meeting they had agreed that it would be helpful for the Board to receive regular reports on progress and pinch-points in all three schemes from their respective case managers. These would build on the data which the Department already published monthly. The Board now further **recommended that these reports should be published and sent to the Select Committee**. DBT officials would ensure that formal letters issue to Dentons, Sir Ross Cranston and Sir Gary Hickinbottom to confirm these arrangements.
6. The Board agreed to meet lawyers advising postmasters in the schemes to discuss further options for improving redress.

Employees of postmasters

7. The Board asked about the treatment of people affected by Horizon who had been employed by a postmaster – whether that postmaster was an individual or a multiple retailer. Officials explained that the draft Bill currently in preparation would include these people in the group to be exonerated, so long as they met the other criteria. They undertook to report back on the

Post Office's approach to financial redress in respect of such people who had not been convicted. In particular they would describe how such people were to be made aware of the possibility of redress.

Charges for legal advice

8. The Board had learned with concern that a small number of claimants may be being charged for representation by their lawyers for work done under the GLO scheme either directly or out of any redress recovered.
9. There is a tariff under the scheme to ensure that the DBT pay appropriate legal costs. The tariff has been agreed with claimants' solicitors. Provision is also made for covering costs under the other schemes. In the Board's view, charging postmasters for legal advice on these schemes is, or is likely to be, highly inappropriate and may amount to professional misconduct. Many postmasters are vulnerable and all require proper representation. The Board has written to the Solicitors Regulation Authority and Bar Standards Board to encourage them to keep a close eye on these matters.
10. The Board's advice to any postmaster thinking of claiming redress is that it should not be necessary for a lawyer to charge anything for their work. It **recommends that GLO postmasters seek advice from one of the firms who participated in setting the scheme tariff (Freeths, Howe & Co, and Hudgells Solicitors). These firms were already advising postmasters on significant numbers of claims.**