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# THE SUNDAY TIMES

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## Post Office boss told: 'Stall payouts so Tories can limp into election'

**Oliver Shah and Harry Yorke**  
The former Post Office chairman says he was told by a senior civil servant to slow down sub-postmasters' compensation payments to allow the government to "limp into" the next general election.

Henry Staunton, who was sacked by Ken Budge last month amid the outcry over the Horizon scandal, said the request came soon after he took up the role in December 2022.

He also alleged that Nick Read, the chief executive of the Post

Office, tried last month to dissuade the government from proceeding with blanket exoneration of the sub-postmasters.

Staunton, a former chairman of WH Smith, said that the order to stall payments appeared to be an attempt by the government to reduce its financial liability before the country went to the polls. He added that the demand came from a senior civil servant in the Department for Business, which oversees the Post Office.

Early on, I was told by a fairly senior person to stall on spend on

compensation and on the replacement of Horizon, and to limp, in quotation marks - I did a file note on it - limp into the election," Staunton, 75, said.

"It was not an anti-postmaster thing, it was just straight financials. I didn't ask, because I said 'I'm having to part of it - I'm not here to limp into the election, it's not the right thing to do by postmasters. The word 'limp' gives you a snapshot of where they were.'"

The government denied Staunton's claim.

Between 2000 and 2015, 726

sub-postmasters were prosecuted over shortfalls in their branch accounts, using evidence from the Horizon accounting system, which was defective.

The scandal has been described as the biggest miscarriage of justice in British history. Problems were first reported in 2009 but the Post Office insisted the technology was not faulty and stopped the prosecutions only in 2015. Many sub-postmasters went to jail or died before seeing their convictions overturned. At least four took their own lives.

There are three compensation schemes. The group litigation order scheme was set up last March for the 555 sub-postmasters who took part in a High Court action against the Post Office in 2019. There is a shortfall scheme for those who did not participate and another for those whose convictions were overturned.

While almost £140 million of compensation has been paid out, many sub-postmasters are experiencing delays and maintain that the schemes are too bureaucratic.

Alan Bates, whose campaign to

secure justice for the sub-postmasters was portrayed in the ITV drama series *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*, said in response to Staunton's claims: "It has long been evident that the government, despite all its fine words, is doing everything possible to slow or stall payments in the [group litigation order] scheme, because in reality that is what is happening."

"These schemes need taking out of government's hands and I am sure there are numerous commercial organisations that could deliver fair and swift financial

redress to the victims in no time at all."

In an interview with *The Sunday Times*, Staunton said he had written to Alex Chalk, the justice secretary, when the government was discussing plans to push through emergency legislation to overturn the convictions.

He said Read's letter came with a legal opinion from the Post Office's solicitors at Peter & Peters, which suggested the organisation was confident many convictions could be defended on appeal. "Basically

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## FSB's 'Navalny jail visit days before death'

### Kremlin spies are accused of disconnecting CCTV as mother demands son's body back

**Marc Bennetts, Peter Conradi and Maria Sretelkova** Moscow  
Russian intelligence officers visited Alexei Navalny's prison two days before he died, campaigners claimed yesterday as the opposition leader's mother tried to find his body.

FSB personnel allegedly disconnected and dismantled security cameras and listening devices at the Arctic prison where Navalny was serving a 30-year sentence.

The claim was made in a timeline published on the Telegram channel of galaga.net, a human rights group. It said that the visit had been recorded in a report by the local branch of the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSN). Galaga.net was founded by the campaigner Vladimir Ouchbin and has a network of contacts among political prisoners, although its reports have not always proved accurate.

An inmate speaking to the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* said he had witnessed the arrival of vehicles in the prison grounds the night before the death was announced. "I think Navalny died much earlier than the time that was announced," he said.

Yesterday Navalny's mother, Lyudmila, 69, arrived at the Arctic mortuary where officials had said

her son's body was being held, only to find it was not there.

The and Navalny's lawyer had flown 1,200 miles from Moscow to Kharp, where temperatures sank to -28C, to try to visit the remote Polar Wolf prison camp. She was told that the body was in Sakhalin, a town about 30 miles away. However, staff at the mortuary said yesterday they had not received delivery of it, following his death on Friday.

The pair were handed a death notice and told he had succumbed to "sudden death syndrome" - a

vague term for cardiac failure. Originally, officials had blamed a blood clot, or thrombosis.

Navalny's team have laid the blame for his death firmly at the feet of President Putin. Navalny was his fiercest critic for more than a decade and had led demonstrations against his regime. "Alexei Navalny was murdered," said Kira Yarmysh, his press secretary, in a video posted online. He had spent about 300 days in punishment cells before his death and had been subjected to sleep deprivation, denied medical care and fed misery rations.

"The whole world knows that the president of Russia personally gave this order [for his murder], just as it knows that Alexei was never afraid of him, never stayed silent, and that he never stopped acting," Yarmysh said.

Russian officials said they would not hand the body to the family until they had completed their investigation into the death. His allies accused investigators of a cover-up.

Yesterday state security officers removed a pile of flowers that had been left at a makeshift shrine to Navalny, 47, in Moscow. But, under a by a heavy police presence, people brought new flowers, sweets and photographs of **Continued on page 2 >**

## THE FIGHT GOES ON



A man trying to put flowers in memory of Alexei Navalny is arrested in St Petersburg. President Putin's fiercest critic, who died in an Arctic prison on Friday, had urged his followers to keep fighting the regime

## Seize Russia bank assets, Cameron urges G7

**Harry Yorke**  
Deputy Political Editor  
Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton has urged G7 countries to seize Russian central bank assets held in the West to pay for reconstruction in Ukraine - and signalled that the UK would act in protest against Alexei Navalny's death.

The foreign secretary raised the proposal for the seizure of Russian sovereign assets with his opposite numbers at the Munich security conference in Germany yesterday.

Speaking following the death of Navalny, an arch-critic of Vladimir Putin, Cameron also indicated the UK could sanction Russian officials in response. The government had already been preparing to sanction more people and entities deemed to have assisted the Kremlin and Russia's war effort. This is expected to be announced to coincide with the second anniversary of the invasion on Saturday.

The government said it did not comment on sanctions prior to their announcement.

However, Cameron suggested that following Navalny's death in an Arctic penal colony, extra designations could be announced.

"His life revealed so much about the true nature of Putin's ghastly regime and his death has revealed all over again what we're actually dealing with," he told Sky News.

"There should be consequences when appalling human rights outrages like this take place, what we do is we look at whether there are individual people who are responsible and whether there are individual measures and actions that we can take. We don't announce them in advance, so I can't say any more than that. I'm clear we will be taking action and I would urge others to do the same."

In recent weeks, Foreign Office **Continued on page 2 >**

## NEWMAN'S VIEW



## William's £3m to build social housing in surf town

**Roys Nikkhan** Royal Editor  
The Prince of Wales is to build and fund a £3 million social housing development on his land to tackle homelessness.

William has overseen plans to construct 24 homes in Cornwall to be ready next year. They will provide high-quality accommodation in an area with one of the most acute homelessness problems in the UK.

The development in Nansledan, a new suburb of Newquay, the Cornish seaside town known for its surfing, will include a mix of four-bedroom houses and one-bedroom flats.

It will deliver on William's

pledge in an interview with *The Sunday Times* last year that he would put social housing on his Duchy of Cornwall land, the 130,000-acre property portfolio valued at £1 billion stretching from Cornwall to Kent, which he controls as the Duke of Cornwall.

The duchy, which provides the heir to the throne with an income, recorded profits of £24 million in 2022/23. It will supply the land for the project free of charge and cover all construction costs. It will also invest in local infrastructure, including a bus link and connections to electricity, water and superfast broadband.

The new low-carbon homes will feature slate roofs, granite lintels,

solar panels, heat pumps and colourful timber windows. It will be built in a "traditional Cornish seaside" style, designed by Adam Architecture and the local firm ALA Architects.

It is understood that William wants the development to "look and feel as homely as possible" to combat the stigma of social housing. The site will also be landscaped, with shrubs and wildflowers planted to encourage biodiversity.

Sources close to William, 41, said he wanted to "lead from the front" and encourage other landowners to build more social housing. He is considering further projects on his land.

The duchy is working on the project alongside the Cornish homelessness charity St Petrocs with the long-term aim of helping people move from temporary accommodation at Nansledan into permanent homes.

It will also provide residents with a range of "wraparound services", including mental health support, counselling, training and employment opportunities, in what Kensington Palace described as the duchy's "first innovative housing project to help address homelessness".

For future local developments, William has committed to increasing affordable housing from the 30 per cent national requirement to

40 per cent, with a focus on social housing, meaning an extra 200 affordable houses will be built in Nansledan, where there are 1,020 at present.

Over the past 20 years national planning policy has favoured affordable rented housing, which usually offers homes at up to 80 per cent of market rent, over social housing, which is 50 to 60 per cent of market rent and linked to a tenant's salary or local income.

Last year William, who is patron of the charities Centrepoint and the Passage, launched Homewards, a five-year initiative to tackle homelessness. It will provide £3 million from the royal Foundation of the Prince and Prin

cess of Wales - £500,000 to six locations across the UK where groups of housing experts, businesses and councils will work on plans to end homelessness in their areas.

Experts from Homewards will also work on the Nansledan project with the hope that its success can be replicated nationwide.

Kensington Palace said: "The prince is delighted that the Duchy **Continued on page 3 >**

