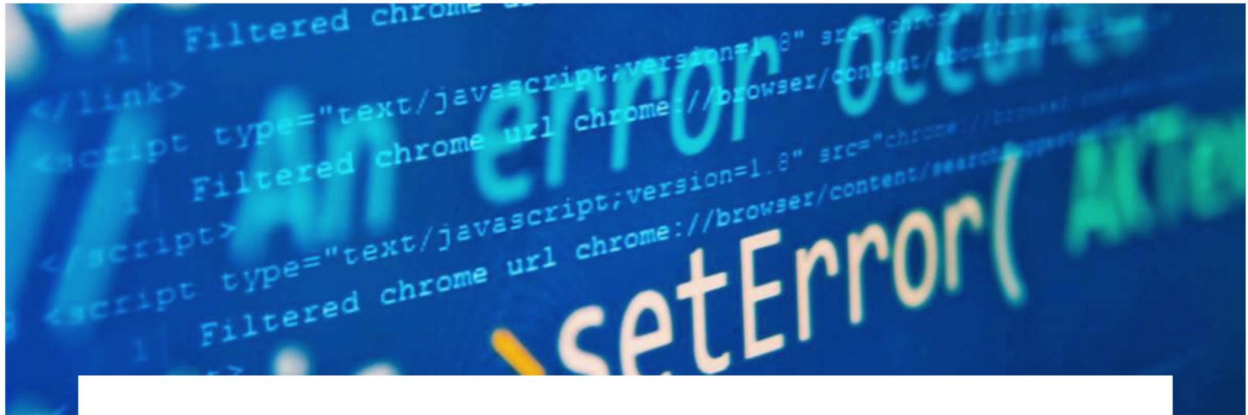


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NEWS

Federation requests government investigation into third Post Office branch system

Following public anger over the Horizon scandal and the subsequent unravelling of the controversial Capture system, subpostmaster federation wants third branch IT system to be reviewed

By **Karl Flinders**, Chief reporter and senior editor EMEA

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branch system known as Ecco+.

The system, used in Crown branches in the 1990s to automate accounting, was described by one former senior Post Office executive as “chronically unreliable”.

In the letter to Jonathan Reynolds MP, secretary of state for business and trade, NFSP CEO Calum Greenhow said some staff in Crown Post Office branches were dismissed or forced to resign, based on Ecco+ evidence of shortfalls, leading to “severe financial consequences”. These Crown branches were directly managed by the Post Office, although some were sold and run by subpostmasters.

Problems with the Post Office

Horizon system became national news in January, following an ITV dramatisation of its devastating impact on subpostmasters blamed for discrepancies.

Soon after, the [Post Office scandal](#) became widely known, and former subpostmasters who had problems with a pre-Horizon system, known as Capture, [came forward](#), forcing the government to review the system and its problems.

An independent forensic analysis, [commissioned by the government](#) in May, found [the system was likely to have caused shortfalls](#) for which subpostmasters were blamed, and in some cases prosecuted, years before the Horizon scandal.

In his letter, Greenhow asked the secretary of state to review Ecco+. “We have received evidence from postmasters who advise that Ecco+ were flawed and were used by Post Office to their detriment, and that this must be investigated consistent with your department’s approach to Capture,” he said.

The rapid unravelling of the Capture controversy

- Jan: [MP demands answers from government minister over second faulty Post Office IT system.](#)
- Feb: [More than 1,000 subpostmasters could have used second faulty Post Office system.](#)
- Mar: [Controversial Post Office Capture software was completely rewritten in 1994.](#)
- May: [Government appoints investigators to analyse Post Office Capture software used before Horizon.](#)
- Sept: [More parallels between Post Office Capture and Horizon scandal revealed.](#)

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- Sept: [Investigation finds 'reasonable likelihood' Post Office Capture software caused accounting losses.](#)

Greenhow said Subpostmasters have told the NFSP that, as the systems were used in Crown Offices, there were fewer prosecutions based on the systems reporting shortfalls, but instead some users “were either dismissed or forced to resign, leading to severe financial consequences.”

He added that there is also concern that Crown branches using Ecco+ were being sold off to staff, with those purchasing them facing serious financial losses because of the system failings.

“Given that Post Office and your department have agreed/acquiesced to investigations into the Horizon System and Capture, it is incumbent upon you to agree to a review of Ecco+,” wrote Greenhow.

A department of business and trade spokesperson said: “We can confirm we have received this letter and are considering its contents.”

The system was introduced in the 1990s, and used until the Horizon system was introduced in 2000. It was a counter-based electronic point of sale (EPOS) system that recorded data on floppy disk.

Concern raised

[Rupert Lloyd Thomas](#) spent 27 years at the Post Office in [senior roles, which included IT responsibility](#). He raised concern about Ecco+ in the 1990s.

“By 1996, Ecco+ was widely known to be chronically unreliable and the Post Office conducted an investigation into it after I raised issues,” he said.

“It was a cheap and nasty system, and I had a lot to do with work trying to get that system fixed.”

Lloyd Thomas, who was involved in [investigation problems with Capture](#) since January this year, added: “Ecco+ needs to be investigated like the Capture system.”

Howe & Co Solicitors, which is heavily involved in seeking justice for victims of the Horizon scandal, is working with the NFSP to identify the possible impacts that Ecco errors had on branch staff. David Enright, a partner at the law firm, said: “The Post Office and the government have announced that they are to publish reviews that will transform the relationship with some subpostmasters. However, there remain outstanding issues, including Ecco+, that must be bottomed out before we can move forward.”

Computer Weekly asked the Post Office for details on the Ecco+ systems, and it said: “We don’t have the information you’ve asked for about Ecco+ to hand, and so if you would like to pursue this, we would recommend you submit a freedom of information request given that the subject matter dates back some 30 years and that is the most appropriate route to conduct searches.”

The Post Office scandal was [first exposed by Computer Weekly in 2009](#), revealing the stories of seven subpostmasters and the problems they suffered due to Horizon accounting software, which led to the most widespread miscarriage of justice in British history (see below timeline of Computer Weekly articles about the scandal since 2009).

- Also read: [What you need to know about the Horizon scandal](#) •
- Also watch: [ITV’s documentary – Mr Bates vs The Post Office: The real story](#) •
- Also read: [Post Office and Fujitsu malevolence and incompetence means huge taxpayers’ bill](#) •

Timeline: Computer Weekly articles about the scandal since 2009

- May 2009: [Bankruptcy, prosecution and disrupted livelihoods – postmasters tell their story.](#)
- September 2009: [Post-masters form action group after accounts shortfall.](#)
- November 2009: [Post Office theft case deferred over IT questions.](#)
- May 2010: [A pilot of the new Horizon Online system at Royal Mail has been scaled back after connectivity problems and outages.](#)
- February 2011: [Post Office faces legal action over alleged accounting system failures.](#)