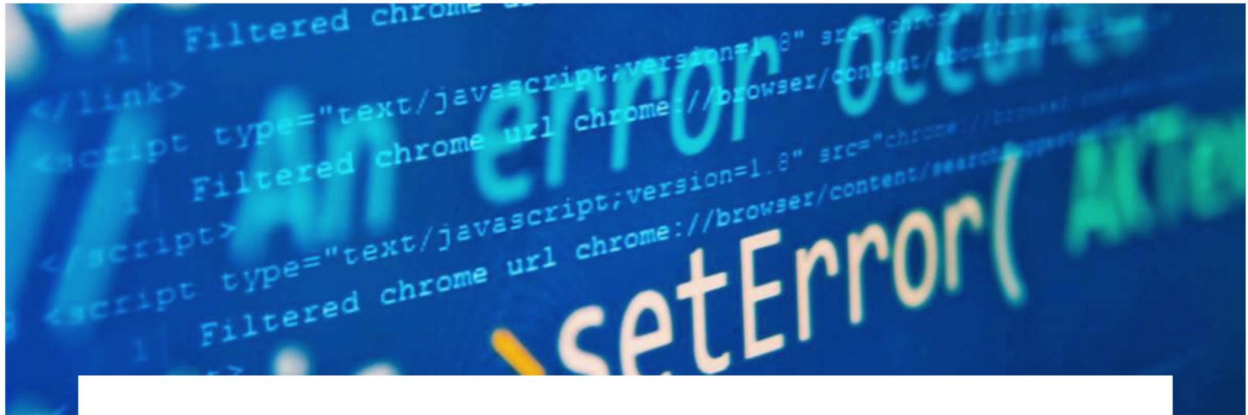


Home > IT for retail and logistics

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NEWS

## Government looking into third faulty Post Office IT system

The Department for Business and Trade will look into claims that a third Post Office branch system caused unexplained shortfalls that branch workers and subpostmasters were blamed for

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The government is looking into reported problems with a second Post Office IT system that was used before the controversial Horizon software, in the latest twist in the [Post Office Horizon scandal](#).

Civil servants met with subpostmaster representatives to gather information about the system believed to have been marketed to subpostmasters in the 1990s.

Ecco+ is the second pre-Horizon system to be looked at following [the emergence, in January, of the life-](#)

changing impact that errors in a system, known as Capture, had on subpostmasters in the 1990s.

Since then, independent forensic analysis, commissioned by the government in May, found Capture was likely to have caused shortfalls for which subpostmasters were blamed, and in some cases prosecuted. A High Court case in 2018/19 proved the Horizon system caused unexplained shortfalls that subpostmasters were blamed for, with hundreds wrongly convicted of criminal offences based on evidence from the flawed system.

As reported by Computer Weekly, last month, the National Federation of Subpostmasters (NFSP) wrote to the minister in charge of the Post Office requesting a review of problems experienced by users of Ecco+.

This week (21 November), NFSP CEO Calum Greenhow and legal representatives from Howe & Co solicitors met with civil servants involved in the Capture investigation to discuss Ecco+.

Greenhow said the government is taking it “very seriously”. “It has approached the Post Office for information about the Ecco+ system,” he said.

## **Department for Business and Trade**

A Department for Business and Trade spokesperson said: “The possible issues relating to Ecco+ have been brought to our attention following the independent investigation into Capture. The Department is looking into the issue.”

Ecco+ was mainly used in Crown Offices directly managed by the Post Office, and 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”.

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

The NFSP has found a document in its archives, seen by Computer Weekly, that suggests Ecco+ was marketed to subpostmasters. It states that Ecco+ is designed

to automate Post Office counters, with a monthly cost of £266 for a five-year contract for four counters.

Two former Post Office executives who worked closely with IT, [Rupert Lloyd Thomas](#) and Patrick Sedgwick, were instrumental in gathering information about the Capture system and helping investigators understand it. They are now turning their attentions to Ecco+.

“There was a crisis with Ecco+ in 1996 and an investigation into it was commissioned,” said Lloyd Thomas. “It was carried out by the Post Office IT department and a report was produced. The gist of that report was that the system was defective.”

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

Greenhow at the NFSP called on any former users of Ecco+ to come forward and report their experiences.

Subpostmasters' struggles with the Horizon system were [made public by Computer Weekly](#) as long ago as 2009, but it was not until ITV's dramatisation of problems experienced by subpostmasters, aired in January this year, that it reached the top of the national news agenda, where it has remained since.

Soon after the drama, Kevan Jones, then MP for North Durham and now a peer, revealed the [stories of former subpostmasters who had experienced problems](#) with the Capture system.

David Enright, partner at Howe & Co Solicitors, has represented hundreds of subpostmasters fighting for justice in the Post Office scandal. “This is the moment that the decks must be cleared,” he said. “The Post Office and the government are issuing statements of intent about the future, but all issues must be resolved first.”

Last month, 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.”

Computer Weekly [first exposed the scandal 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*).

#### **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](#).
- October 2011: [85 subpostmasters seek legal support in claims against Post Office computer system](#).
- June 2012: [Post Office launches external review of system at centre of legal disputes](#).
- January 2013: [Post Office admits Horizon system needs more investigation](#).
- January 2013: [Post Office announces amnesty for Horizon evidence](#).