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## Hansard

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# Post Office Horizon Scandal

## Volume 745: debated on Thursday 22 February 2024

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🕒 10.38am

**Mr Kevan Jones** >  
(North Durham) (Lab)

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*(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on financial redress for sub-postmasters and outstanding issues relating to the Post Office **Horizon scandal**.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade** >  
(Kevin Hollinrake)

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As a Back Bencher, I first spoke on the matter of compensation for victims in March 2020, which is obviously long after the right hon. Gentleman first campaigned for it. I pay tribute to his campaigning on this subject, which remains undiminished. My appetite for compensation for postmasters is equally undiminished, although I accept the need to increase the pace of delivery.

As of this month, £160 million has been paid in financial redress to more than 2,700 victims affected by the **Horizon scandal**. More than 78% of eligible full claims received have been settled as follows: 102 convictions have been overturned, and 42 full claims have been submitted, of which 32 have been settled; 2,793 applications to the **Horizon** shortfall scheme have been received, and 2,197 have been settled; 58 full claims have been submitted to the group litigation order scheme, and 41 have been settled.

Our top priority remains ensuring that victims can access swift and fair compensation. We have introduced optional fixed-sum awards of £600,000 for victims with overturned convictions and of £75,000 for group litigation order members as a swift means of settlement, and 100% of original applicants to the **Horizon** shortfall scheme have received offers of compensation. Today we are discussing what other measures can be taken to speed up compensation with the **Horizon** compensation advisory board, on which the right hon. Gentleman sits.

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have been working at pace to progress legislation for overturning convictions related to the Post Office's prosecutorial behaviour and Horizon evidence. I will provide a further update to the House very soon.

#### Mr Jones >

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Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question. I draw the attention of the House to my interest as a member of the Horizon compensation advisory board.

I like the Minister. He campaigned on this issue before he was a Minister, and he has been a very good Minister, but a lot of that good work was undone on Monday by the performance of the Secretary of State for Business and Trade. I am disappointed that he has not taken the opportunity today to talk about the overturned convictions. I understand that later today, at 12 o'clock, there will be a written ministerial statement on the subject. I do not think that is the way to do it, as the House needs an opportunity to discuss the overturned convictions.

I will ask the Minister a few questions. It is quite clear now that Nick Read, the Post Office chief executive, wrote to the Lord Chancellor basically opposing the overturning of all convictions, saying that up to 300 people were "guilty". It is not yet clear who instructed him to do that. On Monday, the Secretary of State said it was done off his own bat. I would like to hear what the Minister has to say on that.

If there are to be overturned convictions, they cannot just be about Horizon; they should also be about Capture. Evidence that I have put to the public inquiry and sent to the Minister yesterday clearly indicates that the scandal predates Horizon. Those affected need to be included in both the compensation scheme and among those with overturned convictions.

The board is meeting this afternoon, and we have made recommendations to the Minister on how to simplify and speed up the compensation scheme. Will he give an assurance to the House that once the recommendations are agreed, we can announce them quite quickly, primarily to restore to the sub-postmasters some faith, which was wrecked by the performance of the Secretary of State on Monday?

If the Minister's written ministerial statement at 12 o'clock is about overturning convictions, will he give a commitment to come back to the House on Monday to give an oral statement, so that the House can interrogate him and discuss that issue?

#### Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. The overturned convictions are a key priority for me and my Department. I am always keen to update the House whenever I can. There always has to be a sequence to ensure that we follow proper process. What we are doing potentially affects the devolved Administrations, so it is really important that we engage with them properly. That is one of the reasons why we need to make the written statement later today. I have never been unwilling to come before the House and report on what we are doing. I will, of course, continue to do that.

On the letter from the chief executive to the Justice Secretary, I am aware of the allegations by Mr Staunton. They are very serious allegations that should not be made lightly or be based on a vague recollection. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the letter from the former permanent secretary, it is clear that she believes the allegations are incorrect, and that there was never any conversation along the lines referred to by Mr Staunton. I think it is pretty clear that those allegations are false.

The right hon. Gentleman has regularly brought up Capture. We are keen to continue to engage with him on that to ensure that those affected are included in any compensation where detriment has occurred. I note his point about an oral statement. As I say, I am always keen to give such statements whenever possible, and to be interrogated on our plans. I do not think he will be disappointed by what we announce later today.

#### Paul Scully >

(Sutton and Cheam) (Con)

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slow down compensation, I hope we can spend time less time talking about someone who has lost his job and more time talking about postmasters who have lost everything. Will the Minister, who is doing great work in sorting this out, recommit to August as his target date for getting compensation—life-changing compensation —out of the door as soon as possible?

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this matter; as my predecessor, he did a tremendous job. The most concerning allegation we heard over the weekend was about the delay in the payment of compensation. In her letter, which is publicly available, the permanent secretary wrote:

“It is not true that I made any instruction, either explicitly or implicitly. In fact, no mention of delaying compensation appears in either note.”

So I agree with my hon. Friend that we should move on from that and focus on what really matters, which is getting what he rightly described as life-changing compensation to postmasters as quickly as possible. That is his, and will remain our, No. 1 priority.

**Mr Speaker >**

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I call the shadow Minister.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi >**

(Slough) (Lab)

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Let me first pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for securing the urgent question, and indeed for all the work he has done over many years, along with other Members, in trying to secure justice for sub-postmasters.

The Post Office **Horizon scandal** is one of the most insidious injustices in our country’s history. It has robbed innocent people of their livelihoods, their liberty and, all too sadly, their lives. At least 60 sub-postmasters have died without seeing justice or receiving compensation, and at least four have taken their own lives. More than 20 years on, the victims and their families are still suffering from the consequences and the trauma of all that they have been put through. They have been trapped in a nightmare for too long. We all want to see the exoneration of all who remain convicted, and the delivery of rightful compensation to all affected sub-postmasters, as quickly as possible. Labour wants to see a swift and comprehensive solution to this insidious injustice, and we are willing to work with the Government to ensure that happens.

Will the Minister please provide an update on the timeline to which he is working to amend the seismic damage that this **scandal** has caused, and will he please give an assurance that he is acting with the appropriate speed that is required for necessary legislation to go through? Victims have already waited too long for justice, and we must act now, with the speed and urgency that this awful **scandal** requires.

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he has approached this matter. There was nothing in his remarks that I disagree with. As I said earlier, 78% of claimants have received full and final compensation, but we fully share his wish, and that of his party, for a swift resolution and a swift end to this, and we have engaged significantly and extensively with his colleagues on the Front Bench. As for how we overturn convictions, the measures that we are taking are clearly unprecedented, but this is an unprecedented situation.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the timeline. We have always said that it is weeks, but it is fewer weeks now than it was. I do not think he will be disappointed— I said this to the right hon. Member for North Durham as well—by what we will say, hopefully, later today, but this has taken too long. We are working daily to resolve these issues, and the overturning of convictions, the legislation and the compensation cannot come too quickly.

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(Suffolk Coastal) (Con)

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My hon. Friend has done a great job, but I am conscious that there are still many people waiting to settle. Much of that is due to the fact that the Post Office is not releasing information that has been requested by my constituents or, indeed, their solicitors. I hope that my hon. Friend can put across to the chief executive of the Post Office how critical it is to regain trust by releasing that information, because I fear that other sub-postmasters, or people who might otherwise have been interested in dealing with the Post Office, will start either to move away or not to take up those business opportunities, which would also damage communities—and that is already happening in my constituency.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >[Share](#)

I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and for making that point; she is absolutely right. Disclosure both to the inquiry and on individual cases, which is required to be able to compile claims, has been too slow. If Post Office Ltd and its management team are going to rebuild trusts with claimants and the wider public, it is absolutely incumbent on them that this is done properly and that the governance around it is done properly. That is part of the reason why the Secretary of State acted as decisively as she did, but I absolutely concur with my right hon. Friend. Alongside her, I urge Post Office Ltd to deliver disclosure more quickly.

**Mr Speaker** >[Share](#)

I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Marion Fellows** >

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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Documents published this week by the BBC reveal that the Swift review, dated February 2016, noted that Post Office Ltd “had always known” about the balancing transaction capability that allowed transactions to be added remotely, which is what happened. The lawyers for Post Office Ltd did nothing about that, and many people still do not trust it. A letter has been circulated, and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) deserves all the praise we can give him today. I have a copy of his memo, which says that anyone can write to him on any issue and get advice on how to pursue claims.

The Minister has given us a list of percentages and so on, but it is still not fast enough. It is still not good enough, and one of the reasons is that Post Office Ltd is still not trusted; people want nothing to do with it. I cannot fix that, but I do not think that the spat between the Secretary of State and Henry Staunton this week did anything to increase sub-postmasters’ confidence, and we really need to get this sorted. Yes, the **Horizon** shortfall scheme has been well managed in some regards, and claims are going through and being paid, but how much is being paid? So many sub-postmasters are getting derisory offers—not just people in the GLO scheme, but normal, everyday sub-postmasters who have been putting in money for years. We need to get this sorted. I appeal to all sub-postmasters affected to put in a claim.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >[Share](#)

I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on that point and on a number of other points she raised, and I thank her again for the work she has done in this area for many years. I, too, am concerned about some of the information that came to light this week, and the public inquiry is there to examine any allegations relating to who knew what and when. It would be wrong of us to duplicate the inquiry’s efforts, because it is a public inquiry that has the powers to summon witnesses to give evidence and to carry out other forms of evidence gathering, which is the right way to do this. I agree with the hon. Lady that compensation cannot come fast enough and that Post Office Ltd has to rebuild trust not just with the wider public; key to this are the postmasters.

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litigation order scheme? Fifty-eight full claims have been received, 48 offers have been made and 41 have been accepted without going to the next level, which is the independent panel. That tends to indicate that those offers are fair, because people have recourse to the appeal process. I am aware of one or two high-profile cases where people say they have not been offered a fair amount. I cannot talk about individual cases, but we urge any of those individuals to go to the next stage of the process, which is the independent panel. The whole scheme is overseen by Sir Ross Cranston, who has a very good reputation both in this House and further afield. We absolutely believe that the process will offer fair compensation, but we urge people to return to the table and ensure that their claim is properly considered by all means available.

**Bob Blackman >**

(Harrow East) (Con)

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I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done on this issue—not only on the Front Bench, but on the Back Benches. No amount of compensation can compensate the victims of this complete **scandal**. However, it does help, and speeding up the process is obviously important. Will he, during the passage of the legislation that the Government have promised to introduce, ensure that innocent victims are not only compensated, but completely exonerated? In their communities, they have suffered the stigma attached to all this, and they need to have their names cleared and their reputations restored.

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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I thank my hon. Friend for his regular contributions on this subject, which he frequently raised prior to the ITV series. I appreciate his work.

My hon. Friend is right to say that no amount of compensation can make up for what happened to many people's lives. We want all the innocent people to be exonerated. We know there is nervousness, with some victims not trusting the process—they have simply had enough. We met Howe & Co., one of the solicitors, to talk about this issue yesterday, and its contention is that around 40% of the people who received a letter saying, "We will not oppose an appeal," still will not come forward. We need a process that does not require people to come forward if we are to have a mass exoneration of those affected by this horrendous **scandal**. We hope to announce that later today.

**Mr Speaker >**

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I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

**Liam Byrne >**

(Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)

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I associate myself with the words of praise for the Minister's speed and attention on this issue. I think a legally binding instruction for the Post Office and the Department to deliver at speed is a necessity in the new Bill. The Minister has told us today that about £160 million has been paid in compensation, but there is provision for about £1.2 billion, which means that only 13% of the money has been paid out. He updated the House on the number of claimants, and there were 555 people in the GLO group and 700 who were convicted. As the Minister told us, only 73 people have had their final compensation fully paid, which is only 6% of the two groups.

The confusion at the beginning of the week about who said what to whom shows there is confusion about the instruction to deliver at speed. When the Bill comes before us, will the Minister reflect on the necessity for a legally binding deadline under which the Post Office must make information available in 20 to 30 days and an offer must be made to settle within 20 to 30 days, with a legally binding deadline for final resolution? Otherwise, frankly, I worry that the ambiguity will still cause delays. He knows as well as I do that justice delayed is justice denied.

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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I thank the right hon. Gentleman for paying regular attention to this issue. I know that the Committee has a session next week and will be asking some of those questions.

We are keen to get compensation to victims as soon as possible. We are somewhat at the mercy of claims, and we cannot offer compensation if claims do not come in. Like others, I am very keen for people to come forward to submit a claim. One of the reasons why we put forward the fixed-sum awards of £600,000 for overturned convictions and £75,000 for members of the GLO scheme is to try to accelerate the payment of compensation, which contradicts the claim that people are trying to slow things down.

I am meeting the **Horizon** compensation advisory board this afternoon to look at its recommendations for accelerating compensation. We have taken nothing off the table, and I remind the right hon. Gentleman that the House recently voted to extend the compensation deadline from 4 August, on the recommendation of Sir Wyn Williams, because we do not want people to be timed out of compensation. The maximum budget for compensation has, thus far, been set at £1 billion.

One of the issues we are trying to resolve urgently is the fact that people are reluctant to come forward to have their convictions overturned by the Court of Appeal, which is one of the reasons why we have not compensated enough people with convictions. We cannot compensate them until we overturn their convictions, which is exactly why we have proposed the legislation. Once we have done that, the door will be opened for compensation to flow freely. That is exactly what the right hon. Gentleman and I want to see.

There has never been any confusion in our mind about the need to deliver this quickly. I have focused on that every single day, both since I have been in office and before. I have never been resisted by anyone in my Department or in other parts of Government. There may be confusion, but I promise that there has been no confusion in Government.

**Andy Carter** >

(Warrington South) (Con)

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I add my thanks to the Minister for his work in helping me to advise my constituents who have come forward asking many questions about the situation that they found themselves in. I am very pleased that the Government are working to compensate postmasters who were convicted in a court of law, but there are many individuals who worked for the Post Office and faced disciplinary proceedings who did not end up in court. However, their professional reputations were trashed, they had no ability to find jobs when they were dismissed, and they were significantly out of pocket. The Post Office must know whom it disciplined; it must have records through the disciplinary procedure. Will the Minister outline what steps the Post Office has taken to contact those individuals so that they can get the compensation that they rightly deserve?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for so ably representing his constituents who have fallen victim to this **scandal**. People do not need to have gone before a court of law to be compensated. A postmaster with a contract with the Post Office can access either the **Horizon** shortfall scheme or the GLO. A prosecution of any form is not required to be able to claim through those schemes. I think he raises a point about somebody who worked for a postmaster or for the Post Office. That is separate and I am very happy to talk to him about that point, which has been raised by a number of Members. The Post Office would not necessarily know whether a postmaster who is working independently and runs an independent business had disciplined their members of staff, so it might not be as straightforward as he sets out. Nevertheless, I am happy to engage with him on that.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** >

(Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

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The problem for many sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses is the quantification of what they are due to be repaid under the shortfall scheme, because payments were made out of their own pocket on several occasions over a long period. It is difficult in those circumstances for the claimants to know that they have been properly compensated, because the Post Office cannot tell them how

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homework and that the independent elements of scrutiny need to be strengthened? Somebody independent of Government and the Post Office must be put in charge of not just sorting this out, but doing so at speed.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I agree with the right hon. Member's points, and he is right that quantification is very difficult. These situations are complex. It is about not just financial loss, but the personal impact, including the impact on mental health, physical health, reputation—all those things. In those situations, we should give the claimant the benefit of the doubt where this cannot be evidenced. In many cases, the records are no longer available.

We have independent people in all parts of the process. Members of the **Horizon** shortfall scheme include eminent KCs, such as Lord Garnier from the other place. We have Sir Ross Cranston overseeing the GLO scheme, and in the overturned convictions scheme, we have Sir Gary Hickinbottom—they are eminent retired High Court judges. I have great faith in their holding our feet to the fire and getting the right quantum of compensation to the right people at the right time. Indeed, the **Horizon** compensation advisory board, with the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and Lord Arbuthnot, is also holding our feet to the fire, making sure that we do the right thing and deliver the right amounts of compensation. I will meet it again later today.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** >

(South Shields) (Lab)

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I know that the Minister means well and that he also understands that my affected constituents have had enough of being told that the Government are working hard to get them the justice they deserve and promises of swift compensation. One of my constituent's claims was submitted in October. She heard the Minister say in January that all claims would have offers within 40 days, but she still has not had an offer. She is right to conclude that the allegations of delaying payments to benefit the Treasury are true, is she not?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I am sorry that the hon. Member has taken that tone, but that is not true. As I set out, I think Henry Staunton has got this completely wrong. It is not the case, and there has never been any situation while I have been in this role—my predecessors have said the same—where we have tried to delay compensation. If the hon. Member wants to write to me, I am very happy to look at an individual case. Our commitment on the GLO scheme is that once we have received a full claim, we will respond to 90% of cases within 40 days. Some cases are more complex, but I am very happy to look at her specific case, as I have for other Members when people have contacted us directly. I am very keen to make sure that we get a resolution to her constituent's case as quickly as possible.

**Sir Christopher Chope** >

(Christchurch) (Con)

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I congratulate the Minister on his tenacity in relation to this issue. When does he expect the inquiry to be completed? It seems that Fujitsu is hiding behind that inquiry and is unwilling to commit itself to compensating the taxpayer for the compensation the taxpayer will be paying.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. The inquiry is due to conclude by the end of this year and to report some time—early, I hope—next year. At that point, we will know more about Fujitsu's exact role and the amount of the final compensation bill. I welcome the fact that at the Select Committee Fujitsu acknowledged its moral obligation to the victims and the taxpayer in contributing to the compensation bill, and we will hold it to its promises in that regard.

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The Minister is a perceptive man: he must see the problem of his reassuring the House from the Dispatch Box on a Thursday, after the Secretary of State's reassurances at the Dispatch Box on a Monday. The House and the country's patience is wearing thin. Many of the sub-postmasters, who are the victims in all this, including my constituents, have had their lives blighted and scarred for well over a decade. The delays to the compensation scheme are only exacerbating the pain and the problem. The public can see a pattern, whether it is the **Horizon** compensation scheme, the infected blood compensation scheme or the vaccine harm compensation, and it does not reflect well on the Government.

**Kevin Hollinrake >**[Share](#)

I will be the first to admit that we want to deliver compensation more quickly than has happened in the past. As I said, 74% of claimants have received full and final compensation. It is absolutely right that the remaining 26%— as well as any more who come forward, and I am pleased that more are coming forward—receive that compensation too. It has never been a case of our trying to delay compensation. I do not believe there is a pattern here. These issues are complex but we are doing much to accelerate the process.

We did much to accelerate compensation payments prior to the ITV series, which is critical. The £600,000 fixed-sum award, which has been very effective in delivering rapid compensation, was brought in last October. We were looking at a blanket overturn in convictions some months before that series. We are trying to deliver the scheme at pace. It is not always straightforward to do that, but the hon. Gentleman has my commitment that we will do everything we can to deliver that compensation as quickly as possible.

**Chi Onwurah >****(Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)**[Share](#)

The Post Office **Horizon scandal** is now commonly called one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British history—so many lives devastated, some lost. An inevitable consequence of that is to undermine public confidence in the Post Office, in technology, as misrepresented by the Post Office and Fujitsu, and in the Minister's Department, particularly following the performance—that is the right word for it—of the Secretary of State on Monday. What is he doing to restore public confidence in the Post Office, in technology and in his Department? Does he recognise that swift payment of compensation is an important part of that?

**Kevin Hollinrake >**[Share](#)

Yes, it is the most important part of that. It is right that the Secretary of State responded to the serious and false allegations in the newspapers over the weekend. I hasten to add that those allegations were not about the Secretary of State but about a senior civil servant, who has been very clear that the allegations are false. The No. 1 way we can give confidence to those who might be submitting a claim, or have done so, is the fact that the processes do work for the vast majority of claimants. Of course, we want to improve the processes but we also want to reassure claimants that there is independence running through every single part of them. The No. 1 message we can give from the House is that if people come forward, they will be treated fairly and receive compensation as quickly as possible.

**Allan Dorans >****(Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)**[Share](#)

How can the public have trust in the Government to stand up for whistleblowers when, by her own account, the Secretary of State attempted to cover up the departure of Henry Staunton?

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I do not think that is an accurate portrayal of events at all. I am very happy to talk to the hon. Member about that particular issue. It was decided that Henry Staunton was no longer the right person to lead the Post Office. He then decided to make some allegations about what happened during his tenure, which have proven, in my view, to be completely false. I do not believe that Mr Staunton is a whistleblower. He spoke out, but I think the allegations he made have been clearly demonstrated to be not accurate. What the hon. Gentleman has just said is not an accurate portrayal of events. The No. 1 thing we should all focus on now is ensuring that people are properly compensated, that the inquiry is allowed to do its work and identifies those responsible, and that those responsible—be they individuals or corporates—are held to account.

**Helen Morgan >**

(North Shropshire) (LD)

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I have a constituent who was part of the group litigation order. They were not convicted, because the process was paused in 2015, but they have pretty much lost everything, having borrowed substantial amounts of money to make up the shortfall over a long period of time. They have now been told that the £75,000 up-front payment would be net of any interim payment that they have received. They are not confident to go forward with the full assessment, because of some of the highly publicised very low—derisory—compensations that have been offered. Can the Minister offer my constituent any reassurance that it is worthwhile pursuing that extensive and independently assessed claim? My assessment is that they have lost significantly more than £75,000.

**Kevin Hollinrake >**[Share](#)

If that is the case, they should definitely submit a claim. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to talk about her particular constituent. I am aware that some individuals have come forward and said that they received derisory offers. We urge them to engage with the rest of the process, which has not yet happened. There is an independent panel for the GLO scheme. Again, I would direct her to the actual performance of the GLO compensation scheme so far: 58 full claims received; 48 offers made; and 41 offers accepted without reference to the independent panel, which would tend to indicate that the offers being made are fair. However, I do understand that the people affected by this will not be satisfied by my assurances until they have gone through the process. I urge her to tell her constituent to do exactly that.

**Jim Shannon >**

(Strangford) (DUP)

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May I also add my thanks to the Minister for his very dedicated response to all the questions that we have asked and for his energy in trying to make this scheme a success for those who have been victimised? On those who have had to take out loans to repay moneys that they never owed anyway, will calculations be carried out to allow repayment of not simply substantive amounts but moneys borrowed from family, friends or banking institutions, and the interest that they have had to pay them?

**Kevin Hollinrake >**[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Member for all the work that he has done in this area. I think he has spoken in every single debate that I have responded to in the House on this particular matter. *[Laughter.]* And every single debate across this House as well. That was also the case when we were working together, fighting for justice for banking victims. I pay tribute to all the work that he has done in this House in all these different areas.

On the hon. Member's question, the key principle is that somebody is returned to the position that they would have been in financially prior to the detriment taking place. That could take into account, for example, consequential losses, pecuniary losses—financial losses—as well as non-pecuniary losses, which are other impacts such as those on reputation or on health. The short answer to the hon. Member's question is, yes, absolutely.

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That completes the urgent question. We now move to the next one.

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