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Post Office Horizon

Volume 752: debated on Tuesday 30 July 2024

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🕒 12.42pm

Kevin Hollinrake >

(Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

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

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade >

(Justin Madders)

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As hon. Members will know, convictions across the UK have been quashed through recent legislation, and those affected are now able to apply for financial redress under the **Horizon** convictions redress scheme. The scheme will be wholly delivered by the Department, not the Post Office. All the forms of redress, including those pursued under the group litigation order, will be delivered by the existing schemes.

Since taking office, this Government have continued to work closely with the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to identify those who have had their convictions overturned. Letters have started to be issued to those eligible that will confirm that their conviction has been quashed and provide further information on how to access financial redress. But I would encourage those who believe that they are eligible not to wait for a letter. Please do come forward now and register for the **Horizon** conviction redress scheme.

We have put guidance on gov.uk to help people know where they stand: whether their conviction has been overturned and, if eligible, how to apply for redress through the registration and application process. Victims will be able to choose from two options: first, they can either accept a fixed settlement of £600,000; or, secondly, they can choose a full claim assessment if they believe their losses exceed £600,000 and wish to have their application fully examined by the Government.

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£200,000. We are making sure that they can access historical data from both the Post Office and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to support their decision and the application. We also recognise that, with the best will and support in the world, in a few cases, some information may not be retrievable, but I assure hon. Members that, even in those cases, we will do all we can to ensure that a fair offer is made to sub-postmasters who have suffered this terrible injustice. This House was united in the last Parliament in its wish to see justice for sub-postmasters. In this Parliament, we intend to deliver on that.

Mr Speaker >

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I call the shadow Minister.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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It is disappointing that I have again had to ask an urgent question to get the Government to come to the Dispatch Box. It is also disappointing that neither the Secretary of State nor the postal affairs Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas)—has responded to either of the urgent questions. This is clearly an important matter that deserves full scrutiny by this House. Despite earlier promises only 12 days ago to give the House a significant update, only a written statement was available.

One of the final acts of the last Government was to pass legislation that, for the first time in history, overturned hundreds of convictions and set in train a process to provide redress to the victims. We made a clear commitment that the victims would be able to apply for redress before the summer recess. That commitment has not been honoured, although claimants can now register for redress. To do so, they need a reference number that is available only to individuals written to by the Ministry of Justice, which has today confirmed that only 10 of the 700 postmasters have received such a letter.

I ask the Minister: when will the other 690 postmasters be written to? Assuming claimants apply for the most rapid form of redress—a fixed sum award—when will the first £600,000 payments be made? The Secretary of State will acknowledge that we had conversations regarding Court of Appeal convictions and those refused leave to appeal that were not quashed by the legislation. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that those cases are given assistance to overturn their convictions?

The last Government also announced that we would top up claimants in the Horizon shortfall scheme to a minimum payment of £75,000. How many of the thousands of claimants in this scheme have been written to to that effect? Finally, where is the Secretary of State, or where is the hon. Member for Harrow West, who has been appointed post office Minister?

Justin Madders >

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We promised to update Parliament before the summer recess, and we have done that by way of a written ministerial statement. I note that, when the shadow Minister was the Minister, he came and answered on most occasions for the Government. We certainly did not take that as an indication that the Government were taking this matter any less seriously than they should, and that is not the case now either. I understand the frustration that the shadow Secretary of State has about the number of letters that have gone out, but there have been difficulties in corroborating some of that data. I understand that, when he made that promise as a Minister, he did so in good faith, but it has turned out that additional physical checks have been required. We have had to access court documents—sometimes stretching back decades—which has meant that there have been delays. The Ministry of Justice has put more resource into that to ensure that work carries on at pace.

As the shadow Secretary of State has noted, the website is now up and running and applicants can register on it. I am pleased to report that, as of this morning, 89 people have already done so. We hope that, once verification checks have been completed, payments can be processed within 10 working days. We understand that the question on the Court of Appeal was discussed at length during the passage of the Post Office (Horizon System) Compensation Act 2024. The matter deserves further consideration, and I understand that the Minister for postal services has had conversations on what we can do in that respect.

[Back to top](#) [Previous](#) [Next](#)**(Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab)**[Share](#)

I welcome the answer provided by my hon. Friend. He will remember that, when the Select Committee reported just four or five months ago, we noted that 80% of the budget for redress had not been paid out. We suggested to the now shadow Secretary of State a number of measures to put into the Bill to speed up the process. Those amendments were rejected. Can the Minister now assure us that he has a grip on this and that we will now begin to see cheques in the post much faster?

Mr Speaker >[Share](#)

Order. May I just say that Members should speak through the Chair, not to the Minister? As an established Member of this House, I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman would not want to start on the wrong foot with me.

Justin Madders >[Share](#)

My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We want payments to be processed as quickly as possible. Data is updated monthly on the Government website. We can see that, in terms of the group litigation order, 210 offers have now been made. Under the Horizon shortfall scheme, of 2,730 claimants, altogether 2,417 offers have been accepted. Of the 110 convictions on the overturned convictions scheme, initial payments have now been made to 103 of those people.

Mr Speaker >[Share](#)

We come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney >**(Richmond Park) (LD)**[Share](#)

It has been said many times across this House, but it bears repeating: this was an appalling miscarriage of justice. The shocking dishonesty of Post Office officials found its match only in the bravery of the sub-postmasters who stood up to them. The Liberal Democrats welcomed the legislation in the previous Parliament to finally deliver justice by quashing their convictions, and we likewise welcome measures to ensure that those affected get the compensation they deserve. However, what we have seen with previous compensation and redress schemes for the victims of this scandal is a pattern of delay, complication and inefficiency. Neither the Post Office nor the Department for Business and Trade has earned the necessary trust from the sub-postmasters to administer the schemes. With that in mind, the Business and Trade Committee recommended in 2022 that an independent intermediary body be set up. Does the Minister agree that it is now time to appoint that independent body to ensure that these schemes get delivered fairly, effectively and without delay?

Justin Madders >[Share](#)

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for their contribution. We are concerned that matters are taking too long. We have been working with lawyers who have signed up to a framework for representing claimants, and we are looking at ways we can speed the process up. There are issues in terms of collating enough expert evidence to support the claims, but we are looking at how that can be accelerated. On the independent process, we are looking at an independent mediation step after the initial decisions and offers are made, and ultimately an independent appeal decision will be considered as well.

Ian Lavery >**(Blyth and Ashington) (Lab)**

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A whole number of individuals out there have been convicted and have paid huge amounts of money—£10,000, £20,000 or £30,000—back to the Post Office, but because they were directly employed not by the Post Office, but perhaps by their sub-postmaster, they cannot get any redress. They are victims of the **Horizon scandal** equally as much as anyone else. What advice can the Minister give to people in my constituency of Blyth and Ashington who find themselves in those circumstances?

Justin Madders >

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My hon. Friend refers to some specific circumstances that I would welcome further information on. If he can contact the Department, the relevant Minister will look through those circumstances to see whether there is anything we can do, because we do not want anyone to be out of pocket as a result of this **scandal**.

Sir Gavin Williamson >

(Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con)

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Communities across the country were impacted by the **Horizon scandal**, and one of those was Wheaton Aston. Not only did Wheaton Aston lose a much-loved postmaster, but it lost its post office. Will the Minister look at the specific case of Wheaton Aston not just in terms of that postmaster getting compensation, but to take up the issue with the Post Office to ensure that a post office is returned to the village?

Justin Madders >

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I will certainly relay that back to the Department, and we will look in some detail at that. It is important that communities have a post office that they can access. They are a vital part of our infrastructure in this country and a vital lifeline for many individuals, and we want to make sure that every community is served as much as possible.

Pamela Nash >

(Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke) (Lab)

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I take a moment to pay tribute to my predecessor, Marion Fellows, for the work she did on this issue throughout her time in this House. I was delighted to hear from the Minister that there have been conversations with the Scottish Government regarding this issue and looking for justice and redress for sub-postmasters. How confident is he that no further obstacles will be put in the way of justice and redress in Scotland by the Scottish Government following those conversations?

Justin Madders >

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I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to her predecessor, who was tenacious in her pursuit of this matter. We have had a number of conversations with the Scottish Government, and we do not want to see any difference between how this scheme is administered in any part of the country. We are confident that will be the case.

Dame Caroline Dinenage >

(Gosport) (Con)

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This is a national **scandal**, and it is almost impossible to quantify the loss of trust in the Government and the Post Office that has resulted. Can the Minister set out a little more on what the Government intend to do to ensure that the information and support to make the applications to the redress scheme will be there for every single postmaster who has been affected and every single one

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The hon. Member asks an important question. Disclosure packs are being prepared for every claimant, which will contain what we believe is all the information they need to assess whether they wish to accept the fixed sum, or to proceed to a more detailed assessment of the claim. The pack will include details of their contracts and remuneration with the Post Office, details of whether they were eligible for the Royal Mail share plan and any other information that the Department can obtain that is requested. We want to work at pace with individuals to ensure they have all the information they need to make an informed decision.

Kate Osborne >

(Jarrow and Gateshead East) (Lab)

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The Minister will be aware that I have long campaigned on this issue. He might not yet be aware of a letter I sent to his Department highlighting issues with the current compensation schemes, as well as calling attention to issues with the original 555 sub-postmasters, one of whom is my constituent Chris Head. Chris was one of the thousands of people impacted by the **Horizon scandal**, and he has still only been offered 17% of his verified claim. Will the Minister agree to meet me and Chris to discuss these issues?

Justin Madders >[Share](#)

I am indeed aware of my hon. Friend's letter and all the work she has done over a number of years in support of her constituents and the wider sub-postmaster community. I am sure that the relevant Minister will agree to meet her and her constituent, and I will make sure that request is passed on to him.

Llinos Medi >

(Ynys Môn) (PC)

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As the Member for Ynys Môn, I represent Lorraine Williams and the formidable Noel Thomas, who spent his 60th birthday in jail for a crime that never took place. It is clear that sub-postmasters continue to be treated appallingly by the UK Government in the wake of the **Horizon scandal** and made to feel guilty for the cost of compensation to the public purse. Can the Minister give confidence to Noel that the new Government will compensate for the real human cost of the suffering caused by this awful **scandal**?

Justin Madders >[Share](#)

We do not want sub-postmasters to feel guilty for claiming what is rightfully theirs. What this place has decided is their entitlement. We have taken measures to ensure that they will not have to foot any legal bills for taking advice in respect of their applications and we want to ensure that every potential head of loss is covered and adequately compensated for. We want to make the process as easy and swift as possible for those affected.

Rupert Lowe >

(Great Yarmouth) (Reform)

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I am pleased to hear from the Minister that the Government will expedite payments to those people who have been extremely badly treated by a state-owned entity in this national **scandal**. Will he do anything about those people who arguably knew that the Fujitsu software called **Horizon** was deficient and yet still brought legal cases against sub-postmasters, many of whom went to prison? There must be some redress and, going right the way back, those who were responsible for bringing cases against innocent people in the knowledge that the software was deficient must suffer some form of penalty.

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The hon. Member makes an important point, which has been raised on a number of previous occasions. We believe that the correct approach is for the inquiry to assess those individuals' particular culpability, and then we will take forward its recommendations. It is important that we see individuals take some responsibility and accountability for their actions.

Robbie Moore >
(Keighley and Ilkley) (Con)

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The Horizon IT scandal is without doubt one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our history. While we cannot change what has happened, we must establish what went wrong. Will the Minister assure the House that he will carefully consider the findings of the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry? Does he agree with the shadow Secretary of State that there should be prosecutions of those deemed responsible?

Justin Madders >

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We are taking a close interest, as the hon. Member would expect, in the evidence coming forward in the inquiry. Much of it is shocking. The amount of obfuscation and, shall we say, misinformation put out by a number of individuals is concerning. We think it is right to wait and see what the chair of the inquiry recommends in terms of future action, but we are committed to looking at that closely and ensuring that individuals take responsibility for their actions.

Christine Jardine >
(Edinburgh West) (LD)

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One of my constituents was about to end more than 20 years of service with the Post Office with a comfortable package, but she was persuaded to take on a post office for two months. She did so and then got caught up in the Horizon scandal. She had months of trauma, trying to prove her innocence and arguing with the Post Office, and then she was sacked. She lost the package and incurred a lot of expense. I spoke to the previous Minister about that.

My constituent has applied for compensation, but she has been told that she is not entitled because she did not have a contract, which she says she did. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can protect such people and ensure that they get the compensation they are entitled to, and that we do not have this continual excuse-finding for not paying people who deserve compensation?

Justin Madders >

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I am grateful to the hon. Member for that question. Where there are evidential difficulties, we are looking at other ways of ensuring that those who should be eligible are entitled to claim. I am happy to have further conversations with her in that respect.

Jim Shannon >
(Strangford) (DUP)

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I thank the Minister very much for his answers to the questions posed. I make representations for the 26 postmasters from Northern Ireland who have been fighting for years to clear their names. While it is fantastic that movement has been made to undo the wrongs of this scandal—I thank the Minister and the Government very much for that—what steps have been taken to ensure that compensation is issued to all postmasters across the UK in a timely manner to avoid more delays and miscarriages of justice, including for those 26 from Northern Ireland?

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We are working closely with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that all the information required is verified and corroborated so that those individuals in Northern Ireland who have been caught up in this **scandal** receive that letter as soon as possible.

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