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for Culture
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Andrew Bridgen MP
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Department
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Baroness Neville-Rolfe DBE CMG
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
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2 July 2015

Dear

Mr Bridgen,

POST OFFICE HORIZON SYSTEM

I am writing as the Minister responsible for the Post Office, further to your adjournment debate in the House of Commons on Monday this week regarding the Post Office Horizon system. I would like to follow up on the offer my Ministerial colleague George Freeman made during the debate, which was echoed by the Prime Minister, by inviting you to attend a meeting at the Department to discuss this matter.

The Post Office mediation scheme, set up in connection with the Horizon system and the small number of complaints made against it, is independent of Government and the details of individual cases are confidential. It is important that confidentiality is maintained.

Furthermore, the Criminal Cases Review Commission has received applications from individuals in the mediation scheme, which I understand they are looking in to. The Government is very clear that the work of the CCRC must not be undermined by any party, particularly while investigations are ongoing.

The Government acknowledges the concerns that Members of Parliament raised during the adjournment debate. I am aware that MPs have met with Post Office on this in the past, and furthermore, that Post Office have offered to meet with any MP individually and in confidence to discuss individual cases.

The Government wants to ensure that MPs take the opportunity to raise their concerns directly with Post Office. At the same time, the Government would like to allow the Post Office a further opportunity to address the very serious accusations that have been made against it. This meeting will provide an opportunity for both MPs and Post Office to understand each other's views better, while maintaining the confidentiality of individual cases and respecting the work of the CCRC. I hope that all parties involved will approach the meeting on that basis.

This will be a private meeting and I will be writing in similar terms to the Post Office to invite them to attend. Following this meeting we will consider whether any additional further action or meetings are required. I hope you will be able to accept this invitation, and I invite you to suggest one or two other colleagues who should also attend. My office will be in touch to agree a mutually convenient date.

Finally, I am attaching a copy of the letter mentioned during the debate from Paula Vennells, CEO of Post Office Limited. A copy of this letter has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

I am copying this letter to George Freeman.

Kind regards

GRO

BARONESS NEVILLE-ROLFE DBE CMG



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George Freeman MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary for Life Sciences
Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
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26 June 2015

Dear Minister,

Adjournment debate: Postmasters and the Horizon system

I wanted to write to you ahead of Monday's debate.

I hope you are reassured, following the briefing from my team, about all the Post Office has done to address the concerns raised by a small number of (mainly former) postmasters several years ago. We have gone to great lengths to do so because I was determined that, if there were problems with the Horizon system, these had to be identified and resolved. This was essential as the Horizon system underpins our network – it is relied upon by 78,000 users in 11,500 Post Office branches serving communities across the UK.

The investigations over the past three years have underlined the confidence we have always had in Horizon -it has been found to work as it should - and I firmly believe that we have provided the small number of people who came forward with complaints, with a proper and reasonable avenue to have those fully investigated. They have all been rigorously investigated by the Post Office, independently reviewed by forensic accountants Second Sight and, where it is appropriate, people have been provided with the opportunity for independent mediation.

You will know that, more recently, the Post Office's conduct on legal matters, such as prosecutions, has been questioned and that there have been some extremely serious, untrue assertions made about this. We continue to refute these robustly, but without discussing the individual criminal cases involved because we are naturally respecting the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC), following applications they have received for a review of some of the cases. We also assured people who came forward to the Complaint Review and Mediation Scheme that they could do so in absolute confidence and we have honoured that throughout.



This issue has been difficult for us. It involves a very small number of people, from the nearly 500,000 people who have worked in our network since Horizon was introduced in 2001. While some of the cases are very sad, it cannot follow that the Post Office is responsible for these individual circumstances. I do of course have sympathy in such cases.

It is also, I think, worth saying that we are continuing to mediate and resolve cases. In some there are genuine grievances about the support the Post Office provided, such as training, and where there is evidence that we might have done more we are acknowledging this and discussing it with the people involved to see if we can reach a mutually agreeable solution.

It is, frankly, difficult to see what more the Post Office could be expected to do to ensure the rightful outcome of these cases, based on the evidence. We very much hope that those remaining in the scheme who are being offered mediation will engage with it. Mediation is being offered for all cases that are not subject to a previous court ruling (which mediation cannot overturn).

Through our own work, and that of Second Sight, we have found nothing to suggest that, in criminal cases, any conviction is unsafe. We take great care regarding our continuing duty of disclosure on all legal matters including full co-operation with the CCRC.

I regret that this is the first Post Office issue on which you are having to engage as a Minister and I am grateful for the time you are giving to it.

Please do not hesitate to let me know if there is any more information you would like on this, or on any other matter.

Yours sincerely,

Paula Vennells
Chief Executive