

Diary note

National Federation of SubPostmasters Annual Conference, Eastbourne 16th May 2000

Alan Johnston, MP, Minister for Competitiveness

Overall impression - Well received by the audience, standing ovation at the end.

Tribute to NFSP and the work they do - focal point especially in rural / urban areas. Made special tribute to Northern Island, due to all the bombing's, hold-up's, etc that happen there - did you know that 16 Postmasters have been murdered!

Only one announcement made - it would seem that MSPO's have not been able to be part of the NFSP!! As of June, this will now change.

Spoke about his history with the Post Office - Postman for 16 years, etc.

Postal Services Bill - Spoke briefly about how it is going through parliament and the history behind it.

ACT Campaign - Congratulated on how well the campaign went and that others could learn not only from the way they ran the campaign but also how they presented. It would seem that Stephen Byers received 1,225 birthday cards from Postmasters!

Benefit Payment Card / PFI - Spoke about how the PFI failed due to costs running well over, running three years behind schedule and felt that the original project was 'blighted' from outset. The Payment Card was a staging route to ACT for BA and a route to smartcards for PO.

New Contract - Lots of praise not only for Horizon but also on how the PO and NFSP had worked with the Government to agreeing the way forward.

PIU Report - Report is near completion and *should* be made public within the next couple of months. Please note that there were two guys there from PIU - Mike Granville was escorting them around.

Governments Vision - That Horizon is a very modern network. The partnership of government, PO and NFSP must work together with the private sector. The main categories to work forward with:

1. Financial Services
2. E-Commerce
3. Government Services

1. Financial Services

New contract set up with Barclays. The PO need to work with the rest of the banking world "while the opportunity is there"

Government fully supports a "Universal Bank" for basic banking services for those with no bank accounts (urban and rural areas).

2. E-Commerce

Major growth area and the PO need to think where they fit in. E.g. order goods over the Internet at the PO and then collect the goods from the PO.

3. Government Services

Again the PO need to think about this as a balance required. The government can not (and will not) give all its services to the PO.

Additional comments

Alan has received 1,620 personal letters regarding the saving of the PO network.

Government has and will continue to help invest in Horizon.

PO needs to work with the NFSP to help develop rural / urban areas.

PO must build on new business

The Prime Minister wishes to discuss with General Secretary feedback from today's speech within the next couple of weeks.

Q&A

1. How will the government make sure that there is "no gap" between themselves and PO during 2003 & 2005? - Jean Kendall
Working closely together to find solutions
2. 5th in line to attend Conference and say the same speech. How will "YOU" make it work? - Colin Baker
Believes in Shared Vision, PIU report and Horizon Working Group (finds Basil Larkin a breath of fresh air)
3. Will the Government promise to put as much of its work across PO counters?
No - balance required
4. At present Postmasters get paid 17p per BA transaction. Will this continue with a Universal Bank?
Government should not get involved. Discussion is between PO and NSFP (answer not liked at all by the audience)
5. Post Office based solution needs to be considered very carefully. Should keep in 'nominated PO for benefit encashment'
Agreed, but pointed out that all different kinds of solutions are available - e.g. smartcards.
6. Don't want to be left with just 'social banking' - Postmasters are looking at losing 40% of their business. They need a proper bank that would not only save the 40% but also build on it.
Agrees a solution is needed, but ACT is happening.
7. PO's are closing every day. Will the subsidiary that is spoken about be available to stop this happening now?
Some closures are not preventable. PIU is looking into those that are preventable.

Don Grey, Post Office

Presentation on Horizon (Journey on Horizon)

Close relationship needed to make it work.

Moving forward fast - can not and must not look back.

Horizon is a modern system

Smartcard functionality available in autumn.

Horizon is the capability to grow the business.

Progress

Over 300 PO's automated a week. That works out that 1 counter is made live every 5 minutes, which equals 1 outlet goes live every 12 minutes.

ICL Pathway achieved last payment milestone 7 days early.

6,426 offices live as of last night.

Last week saw the highest number of outlets automated in 1 week = 331.
95% of surveys have been completed.
9,000 offices are ready for installation.

Training

Reported that Postmasters wish to extend 'managers course' to 2 days, however PO believe this is not the case. For Don; having spoken to Postmasters personally during site visits and even the night before, no one could state why they needed the extra time!

Big issue with late notification of invites and venues still a problem. Two reasons:

1. Software change / upgrade to database next week - KnowledgePool.
2. Over 30% of Postmasters do not respond to training request.

Helpdesks

Calls have dropped re cash accounting. Have found that most problems have been down to confidence. Centres are taking on new staff to cater for additional outlets brought into programme. Mentioned a problem on 3rd May (?) - down to two reasons:

1. Outlets did not read instructions
2. Maybe (just maybe) there was a software problem

Either way it was being looked into.

Screen freezes

New releases of software (CSR+) due out in September will help.

CSR+

Testing on track.

Installed mid September / October.

Smartcard functionality available.

System messaging service available.

Additional Comments / Overall

Positive relationship with ICL Pathway.

Postmasters are finding it hard to adjust - especially in the early weeks before installation.

Postmasters are hungry.

Horizon is a success story.

Horizon will only get better if there is a better understanding between each other.

Horizon is just a "core system" at present.

Horizon is not perfect.

It is the springboard for success and key to the future.

Q&A

1. When Leeds & Wakefield went live (44 outlets), they were all promised Support Officers. 17 did not show, which caused major problems for the first week of balancing. Why offer / promise something and then not delivery.
Not enough Field Support Officers to go around, and is being looked into.
2. Mid Glamorgan is due to go live in June. Two points for reference:
 - Phone call regarding training received before letter
 - Had to write four letters before receiving confirmation about installation date.
 Fault is bad communication.
KnowledgePool is not up to standard, but changes are being made.
3. Two points
 - Helpdesk don't know the answer to questions WHEN the phone is answered - which is not very often, usually just rings and rings.
 - Management of training is appalling. Trainers know nothing about running a PO.

No one seems to know what additions are required as no one reports these issues. Dialogue is needed.

4. Month end is extremely busy of PO's - please can automation stop during this period?
This is a big and complex programme. We have already stopped Monday mornings and Tuesday's after a bank holiday. There are already many constraints on ICL Pathway and should not have additional ones.
5. Elderly Postmasters are quitting due to Horizon, which in some case means the PO closes. PO should be looking after their staff better.
This is not always the case - during a site visit, came across an 86 year old, who loves the system. PO will always get people who don't like or want Horizon, but we must be professional.
6. Laser printers - are older offices going to get the new printer?
No, but it is on my (Don's) agenda.
7. Support - Tuesday migrations should get additional support the following week for balancing. Facility is there - please ask for it.
8. Two points:
 - Training - trainer didn't know how to balance. Had to go through the book together - Not good enough.
 - Helpdesk - PO was robbed. Helpdesk did not inform relevant people as it said it would, which caused a lot of problems for Postmaster.
PO needs to know these problems happen. Please log ALL problems, so something can be done.
9. Manager Course used to be two people attending from each outlet, now reduced to one - WHY?
Capability for KnowledgePool
10. Scales - are they supplied as part of Horizon or not?
Not part of implementation cycle, however D104 is the correct scale for connection to Horizon and can be released from the PO for use.