

Notes of the Meeting with James Arbuthnot, Alice Perkins and Alwen Lyons
March 13th 2012-03-14

1. JA started the meeting by explaining why he was concerned about the Horizon system and the support that sub-postmasters receive from the Business when they are faced with a discrepancy in their accounts. He told us about a recent meeting at which he and another 8 MPs had met some of the affected sub-postmaster and Shoosmiths their legal representatives.
2. AL explained the training and support given to sub-postmasters both in the class room before the start and in their offices, as well as follow up balance support and helpline advice.
AP agreed to look at the support we give to sub-postmasters especially around balancing to see if it could be more effective. Action Point
3. AP invited JA to visit the model office to see how Horizon works.
4. JA made a counter proposal offering to come to Old Street but accompanied by a computer expert possibly someone from Computer Weekly. He puts credence on Computer Weekly's opinion because of their involvement in the chinook helicopter crash enquiry, which successfully challenged the initial assumption of pilot error. He knows that Computer Weekly have also been 'sceptical about Horizon'.
5. AP explained that the system had been independently reviewed by several people including RM Internal audit and Deloitte (who had no relationship with the Business or Fujitsu). JA was not convinced that this had been done by IT experts.
6. AP offered to consider a further review of the system by an IT expert specifically looking at the integrity of the data and discrepancy errors thrown up in sub-postmaster's balances. Action Point
7. JA came back to the training which he did not think was adequate and introduced the issue that the sub-postmasters' contract was over 100 pages long, and was written in 1994 when the Horizon system was not in place and did not explain the process for making good errors clearly enough. He also suggested that the sub-postmasters did not get a copy of their contract until they had taken up their appointment by which time it was too late to understand the full commitment they were making.
Need to check if this is accurate. Action Point
8. AP asked if the issues being discussed were wider than Horizon. JA returned to the moment when a sub-postmaster has to make the decision on a misbalance, when they have to declare a shortage and make good, or settle centrally. In his mind this is the issue as the sub-postmaster has to choose to continue trading the following day.
9. AP promised to reflect on the meeting and invited JA to another meeting, possibly at Old Street. Action Point

10. In closing JA informed AP that there had been discussion about an adjournment debate on the topic.

A meeting is in the diary for 28th March but before then we need to:

- a) Put together a brief covering the facts about the issues JA raised eg contract and training.
Kevin Gilliland
- b) Be ready to present our view on Computer Weekly and what are these views based on.
Lesley Sewell
- c) Find out the views of the IT industry and the Govt on Computer Weekly (possibly ask Ian Watmore's new CIO)
Lesley Sewell
- d) Consider who we might suggest as an independent IT consultant who could carry out a review, 2 or 3 possibilities so there is a choice.
Lesley Sewell
- e) Is there something else we would suggest to counter this proposal
All
- f) Find out if we invited JA in to the model office what could we show him about balancing and how a sub-postmaster can check their accounts during balancing.
Kevin Gilliland

Summary of Issues affecting Sub-Postmasters

- Sub-post offices make up the vast majority of the Post Office Network. A sub-postmaster or sub-postmistress ("SPM") is a self employed manager of a sub-post office. They contract with Post Office Limited ("POL") to provide this service.
- Although SPM's are self-employed, many are under the mistaken impression that they are employed by the POL such is the control exercised by POL as to how they carry out their duties.
- Access Legal from Shoosmiths, a national law firm, have been contacted by almost 100 SPM's who have suffered losses they cannot explain, and have been subjected to disciplinary measures by POL. All are adamant that they or their staff have not stolen any money. They claim that the Horizon system, an electronic point-of-sale and accounting system that the POL require them to use, has caused the errors, or not enabled them to work out why the errors have appeared in the first place. They claim there has been no real investigation by POL as to the cause of the losses that have appeared – and SPMs are expected to pay it back regardless of how it was caused.
- POL is adamant that the Horizon system has no faults.

Horizon & the balancing of accounts

- All transactions in a sub-post office are processed through Horizon. At the end of a trading period (a 4 or 5 week period) an SPM must balance his accounts and send a declaration, plus any related receipts, checks, and cash to POL. The Horizon system will produce figures based on the transactions that have taken place as to what the cash and stock total at the sub-post office should be. The SPM will then have to count the stock and cash held to check it matches up.
- When an SPM has completed a cash and stock check and discovers that there is less cash or stock than Horizon believes there should be, the SPM must make good this loss if it was caused by his/her error or that of an employee. It is also the case that if the SPM has more cash than the Horizon system believes there should be, the SPM is entitled to take the surplus money from the system. At the Crown offices (the larger post offices run by POL) the managers do not have to repay these losses as they are written off by POL. — *Is this true? What is the chance?*
- If the SPM is ever faced with a loss when balancing, the SPM is presented with two options on the Horizon system: "Settle Centrally" or "Make Good Loss". Settle centrally means that, according to POL, the loss can be investigated. However the description of this from SPMs is that it just means the loss will be taken from the SPM's remuneration either as a lump payment or in stages. If "make good loss" is selected, the SPM must make good the loss there and then out of his or her own pocket. One of these options must be selected, otherwise an SPM will not be able to trade the following day.
- Some of the SPMs have told Horizon that they have made good the losses when in fact they haven't. The reasons they do this vary, but are typically related to an inability to pay (often due to have made various repayments previously) and a desire to keep the post office open for their community.
- When doing the above, an SPM is committing false accounting, albeit not to enrich themselves, or deny POL what is rightfully theirs.
- When discrepancies are found at audit, a SPM will be suspended and all the accounts papers at the post office will be taken away for investigation. The SPM will not be allowed to go behind the post office counters in their shop. The losses at this stage have been between £6,000.00 and £150,000.00.

- The SPM then has a supposed chance to explain the losses, but without access to the papers or the post office system, the SPM's ability to do this is extremely limited. Typically the SPM's contract will be terminated and POL will request that any losses are repaid under the Contract.
- POL will ask an SPM to repay all losses that occur and as such there appears no distinction between losses that may be the fault of the SPM and those which may have been caused by something else. SPMs have no opportunity to investigate the reason for the loss, nor do POL seem inclined to do so either. It is far from clear whether when there is a loss in a sub post office, that POL has actually lost any money.
- If the loss is not repaid, POL will prosecute the SPM for false accounting. SPMs are typically advised by their legal advisors to plead guilty to false accounting, as in the above circumstances they will have committed it. Many will be charged with theft or fraud but these charges are typically dropped in these circumstances. SPMs have been imprisoned as a result of convictions for false accounting.

Other relevant issues

Interview – At interview for the position of SPM, most are not questioned about their accounting or computer-literacy skills. Very few of the SPMs had any experience or qualifications in accounting before taking on the role of SPM, although even those with accounting qualifications have struggled with Horizon. The SPMs are then expected to take over the full accounting and balancing procedures upon their appointment as SPM without even basic knowledge of the same.

Contract – The contract with POL is a standard form 100 page contract that was drawn up in 1994 when a paper-based accounting system, with a full paper audit trail, was used. SPMs are routinely not provided with this contract until they have purchased the sub-post office and completed the interview and training process. The SPMs are typically not made aware of the onerous sections of the contract, specifically those sections relating to repayment of losses, termination of the contract and lack of compensation for loss of office.

Training - POL provide training for SPMs on how to use the Horizon system which is undertaken prior to an SPM commencing their contract. This tends to vary between 2 days and two weeks. The training typically focuses on sales technique with very little focus on accounting skills. When an SPM starts they are typically accompanied by a trainer for their first week who shows them how to use the system, in their own post office. The majority of SPMs believe that their training was not adequate, in particular in relation to the accounting and balancing procedures and what to do if a loss occurs. Requests for further training are denied and there is no possibility for a SPM to obtain further training on the Horizon system without it being provided by POL. The support provided by the Helpline POL operate to assist SPMs is reported to be inadequate.

Faults with Horizon – It appears that there are numerous ways in which these losses could have occurred, whether it is as a result of system errors, human errors when entering data, faults with cross system communication or electrical faults. The technical reasons why the errors are occurring is not the main issue that needs to be addressed, instead it is that the Horizon system does not allow SPMs to find where an error has occurred and rectify before having to repay losses.

National Federation of Sub-Postmasters – The NFSP are the trade association for SPM's. They negotiate with POL on behalf of SPMs and provide representation at disciplinary meetings. They state publicly that there are no issues with Horizon. Many SPMs report that they receive no useful assistance from the NFSP when they have accounting difficulties. The Communications Workers Union, the relevant union for POL employees, has recently set up a branch to assist and represent SPM's. This has been set up by former executive members of the NFSP. Many SPMs are now seeking assistance from the CWU as opposed to the NFSP.

Reputation key
Much cash around
There is a helpline available