

DRAFT STATEMENT FOR PANORAMA

1. The Post Office rejects the various extremely serious though completely unsubstantiated allegations made on Panorama this evening. These, in essence, simply repeat allegations previously made by a small number of largely former postmasters, many of whom are now seeking substantial sums of money from the Post Office. In this, they are being led by an organisation which is not remotely representative of the thousands of postmasters working hard in their communities today and whose businesses are quite unfairly, and almost casually, being damaged in the process.

2. As Panorama is well aware from our lengthy discussions, the Post Office is constrained in what it is able to say about the individual cases featured in tonight's broadcast. This is because, in some cases, applications have been made to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, the independent public body set up by Parliament to investigate possible miscarriages of justice in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

3. It is also because we gave a commitment of confidentiality to all those with a grievance. We have been meticulous in honouring this, even where this is to our detriment in the face of incomplete and, therefore, wholly inaccurate and thoroughly misleading coverage, including tonight's.

4. What we can say is that we have firm evidence which contradicts the claims which have been made and the theories which have been advanced. After a comprehensive re-investigation of all the cases we are now dealing with, and a review of each by independent investigators, there is no evidence that our computer system or a third party is responsible for the losses incurred in the relevant post offices. What we should all be concerned with, including the BBC, is what actually happened in each case and not about theories that are, quite simply, at odds with the facts.

5. We have never said that our computer system is perfect. However, over the course of our investigations, we have demonstrated that it works well and is robust and effective in dealing with the six millions transactions that some 78,000 users put through the system every day for people up and down the country. The independent investigators acknowledge this fact.

6. The Post Office does not prosecute people for making innocent mistakes and never has. However, where missing cash has been dishonestly and systematically covered up, or indeed simply stolen, we may take action as our customers would expect of an organisation entrusted with public money. These are not innocent mistakes, they are criminal offences, and represent a deliberate choice made by individuals at the time. It is understandable that people might now wish to turn back the clock and choose differently.

7. While no appeal was ever made against any conviction in the cases you have featured (or indeed in any of the cases we are looking at), a number of people have recently decided to ask the Criminal Cases Review Commission to review their case. This is the right of any person convicted of an offence. The CCRC which, unlike Panorama, will have access to all the evidence and other material in these cases is clearly the right place for these matters to be considered and we are naturally co-operating fully with it as it goes about its work.

8. Over the last 3 years, we have done everything and more than we committed to do in investigating the concerns put forward about our computer system. We set up an independent

enquiry and, when that failed to find anything wrong with the system, established a scheme to understand individual complaints and provided financial support for people to obtain independent professional advice. We continue to offer independent mediation in the majority of cases to try to resolve individual complaints but criminal convictions can only be overturned by the courts.

9. Ultimately, only all the evidence in each complaint, assessed by properly informed experts in their field, can decide its rightful outcome, not speculation through the media. The Post Office will continue to be guided by that evidence as it works through this issue. Your viewers, our customers, and our colleagues would expect nothing less from the Post Office, just as they might expect rather more from the BBC.