

**Post Office Horizon scandal****Post office operators will not all get payouts by March deadline, says minister**

Gareth Thomas admits compensation date for those caught up in Horizon IT scandal difficult to achieve

**Mark Sweeney**

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Post office operators affected by the **Horizon IT scandal** will not all receive payouts by the March 2025 deadline called for by the campaigner Sir Alan Bates, the postal minister has admitted.

Gareth Thomas said it would be difficult to achieve the deadline but promised that there would be “substantial progress” toward clearing the compensation claim backlog by next summer.

Last week, Bates said he might once again take legal action if the compensation process was not resolved more quickly.

“If we need to fundraise for a court case, we will,” said Bates, who leads the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, last week.

Last month, Bates sent a letter to hundreds of former branch owner-operators calling for a March 2025 deadline for financial redress for those affected by the Horizon scandal, in which hundreds of post office operators were wrongly pursued through the courts over account shortfalls that were later linked to a faulty IT system.

“I wish I could commit to Sir Alan’s timeframe,” said Thomas, speaking to BBC Breakfast on Wednesday. “I think we will have made substantial progress by next summer.”

The inquiry into the scandal **heard testimony on Tuesday** that claimed the compensation strategy had previously been focused on saving taxpayers money, as opposed to the supposed goal of “full and fair” compensation for those affected.

The former **Post Office** chair Henry Staunton told the hearing that during his time in the role he formed a view that the state-owned body had a bureaucratic, unsympathetic and adversarial approach. “With respect to remediation, the government and Post Office were dragging their heels,” he said.

Bates said last week that financial redress schemes “can’t be allowed to drag on for years again”, adding: “There’s no reason it’s just the bureaucracy driving them into the ground again. There are potential legal avenues we can take but it’s going to then be another year, 18 months, for the group.

“If we can’t get these things resolved shortly, if we can’t get an affirmation from them of a March 2025 deadline, then we may as well follow other routes.”

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Last month, Bates said the Department for Business and Trade appeared to be trying to get away with paying out as little as possible to victims while maximising the income for the legal firms involved.

Between 1999 and 2015, more than 900 post office operators were wrongly prosecuted after the faulty Horizon IT accounting system made it look like money was missing from branch accounts.

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