

CONFIDENTIAL AND LEGALLY PRIVILEGED

Project Sparrow - Note for Tim Parker

For the last three years the Post Office has been investigating claims made by a small number of largely former postmasters (136) that faults in the Horizon computer system were the cause of losses in their branch. Of these 136 people, 43 have criminal convictions related to these losses.

However, thorough investigation has not produced any evidence to support the claims: indeed it has underlined that the system is efficient and robust. In the cases involving criminal convictions, nothing has emerged to suggest that any are unsafe.

The Horizon system deals with six million transactions every day and has been used by almost 500,000 people since it was introduced. It is currently used by 78,000 people working in Post Office branches, is independently audited and meets or exceeds standard industry accreditations.

The Post Office has nonetheless taken its responsibilities to its people very seriously. We are genuinely sorry that this small group of people feel they have been treated unfairly and this is demonstrated by the enormous lengths we have gone to re-investigate their cases and offer opportunities for those involved to have their say.

We commissioned a review by independent forensic accountants, set up a scheme which, where appropriate, offered mediation and reinvestigated every complaint in huge detail. We also provided funding for individuals to help support people obtain independent professional advice on preparing their case.

External criminal lawyers have continued to review material in the cases involving criminal convictions, including of course material produced through the mediation scheme, to ensure that the Post Office complies with its duty of disclosure, which it takes extremely seriously.

Throughout all this no evidence has emerged to support the very serious allegations being made, which in some cases have stretched to claims that the Post Office has abused the prosecution process.

We do take forward prosecutions where it is right to do so. Post Offices are dealing with public money. We would be heavily - and rightly criticised if we did not deal with the very small number of cases where, for example, false accounting and/or theft takes place.

But we can only prosecute where there is clear evidence of wrongdoing and we can meet the bar set for bringing prosecutions: the evidential and public interest tests. We do not prosecute people for making innocent mistakes and we never have.

Twenty cases involving prosecution, 17 of which were accepted into the mediation scheme, recently applied to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, as is their right. We are, naturally, co-operating fully with this process and providing all information required. We are not destroying any information that we, and external lawyers, hold on these cases, as has been alleged.

We have said we are prepared to mediate in every non-criminal case. Unfortunately many applicants are refusing to engage in the process.

We have offered to meet them with their MPs to talk through their case. Some have agreed to this but a number of others have declined.

Some individuals are being advised in this by the Justice for SubPostmasters Alliance (JFSA). The JFSA has been in existence since 2009 and is led by Alan Bates, who himself is one of the applicants.

Through the Scheme, significant compensation claims - totalling more than £65m - have been made without the evidence to support them. This figure can be compared to the total losses of public money in the 136 cases involved, which is just over £1m.

The JFSA's campaign has secured the support of some MPs - with whom the Post Office has engaged at length - which has in turn led to parliamentary and media activity.

We have been robust in rejecting the serious allegations made in Parliament and media, particularly in recent months. Whilst the investigations have determined that it was not, as originally claimed, faults with Horizon that caused money to go missing in a small number of Post Office branches, the campaign's allegations have grown to include suggestions of wrongdoing by senior management, bullying, deliberate cover-up and abuse of prosecutor powers.

A BBC Panorama programme, which we expect to repeat many of the allegations being made by the campaign, is due to be aired on 17 August. We have challenged the programme at length, over a period of 3 months, but expect it will go ahead. We have provided detail on every allegation put to us save where this would require us to discuss matters private to individual postmasters. We are not appearing on the programme for interview because the programme is focussing on individual cases that have been referred to the CCRC.

We cannot provide detail on individual cases because:

- we agreed to confidentiality with all applicants because of the very personal nature of some of the facts involved: while they have talked publicly and partially about their cases it would be wrong for us to breach the undertakings we made
- we would be accused of seeking to undermine or predetermine the CCRC's deliberations in relation to criminal cases
- we would be accused of trying to further damage individuals' reputations if we were to reveal some of the details of the cases which are known to us but not to the wider public

I hope this note is helpful. We can of course expand on any part of it.