

No. 104/2020

4th March 2020

Dear Colleagues

POST OFFICE: HORIZON SCANDAL – BEIS SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY & WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATES

Further to LTB 095/20 dated 27th February 2020.

BEIS Select Committee Inquiry into Horizon Scandal & Effect on Postmasters

Branches will be aware that last week the Prime Minister confirmed in response to a question raised during PMQs there will be a public inquiry into the Horizon scandal. The Union welcomes this inquiry, which is something we have been calling for, due to the appalling way in which these Postmasters have been treated, with many of them losing their homes, life savings and reputation, with some even being convicted and imprisoned.

Rachel Reeves Labour MP, Chair of the BEIS Select Committee, has today announced there will be a BEIS Select Committee Inquiry held over two sessions on Tuesday 10th March and Tuesday 24th March in relation to "*...issues emerging from the Horizon IT Court cases, looking at the impact on sub-postmasters and its effect on the future viability of the Post Office, and examining the lessons the Government and Post Office Ltd have learned from a scandal which saw hundreds of sub-postmasters accused of fraud.*"

Rachel Reeves announced the inquiry on the BBC Breakfast news this morning and attached to this LTB is an associated press release.

The Union will be giving evidence at the first session next Tuesday along with two former Postmasters and the NFSP. At the later session on 24th March, the Committee is expected to question the current Post Office CEO, Nick Read, the former CEO, Paula Vennells, Fujitsu, a BEIS Minister and a representative from UKGI (UK Government Investments). We will also be making a formal written submission to the inquiry.

Westminster Hall Debate – Criminal Cases Review Commission

There is also a Westminster Hall debate scheduled for 1.30pm tomorrow, 5th March, sponsored by Lucy Allan MP (Jacob Rees-Mogg's PPS) regarding the Criminal Cases Review Commission's process for review of convictions relating to the Post Office and the Horizon system.

The CCRC is currently considering the cases of more than 50 Postmasters who have been prosecuted or imprisoned due to accounting irregularities relating to Horizon. CCRC commissioners can refer cases to the Court of Appeal if they believe there is a real possibility that the convictions in question could be quashed. There is an expectation that the outcome of the CCRC's deliberations will be communicated at some point this month.

Westminster Hall Debate – Post Office Network and APPG Meeting

Marion Fellows MP (SNP) has secured a Westminster Hall debate on the Post Office Network and coincidentally this will also take place on Tuesday 10th March. Marion Fellows has been particularly active in asking questions in parliament relating to the Post Office's franchising plans and other topical issues such as access to ATMs from Post Offices. Marion is also the Vice Chair of the APPG for Post Offices. The next APPG meeting is due to take place on 16th March and as reported in Computer Weekly, the APPG will be reviewing the Horizon Scandal as follows:

"March's APPG will hear from subpostmasters affected that want the government to pay the court costs and for a judge-led public inquiry to be called.

Gill Furniss, Labour MP for Sheffield Brightside & Hillsborough and shadow minister for steel, post and consumer protection, said: "I and the rest of the APPG will shortly be meeting with key stakeholders, including Alan Bates, to discuss the best way to redress the grievances suffered by Subpostmasters. We hope that this insight will aide us in drawing more widespread attention to the issue, both in Parliament and across the country."

She added that support within Parliament for a public inquiry into the scandal is growing, with an increasing number of MPs raising concerns on the matter. "It also crosses party lines, MPs and peers from nearly all the parties in Parliament work together through the APPG on Post Offices to get justice for the subpostmasters affected by this scandal," she said.

"This surge in support is welcomed and we are exploring a range of ways to pressure the government into launching a full public inquiry. As a precursor to this, it is also our hope that the BEIS Committee and the National Audit Office will be investigating this matter. I have written to both of these bodies to this effect."

Bates said the APPG might be able to dig deeper now that the court case is concluded. "They should now be able to ask a lot of questions they could not last time due to the court case," he said.

He said his main goal is to recover the costs of the action. "We think this should be paid by BEIS because they did not do their duty," he added.

The subpostmasters then want a public inquiry into the scandal. "We want a full public inquiry, preferably judge-led, to find out who knew what, when and why they made the decisions they did," said Bates.

House of Lords – Question from Lord Arbuthnot

Additionally, on Thursday in the House of Lords, Lord Arbuthnot (former Conservative MP) who has been championing the Horizon cause against the PO has asked the following oral question of Government:

"Level of compensation received by sub-postmasters as a result of the Horizon accounting system litigation, as compared to the losses those sub-postmasters incurred due to Post Office Ltd's policies" - Lord Arbuthnot of Edrom

The narrative for the various parliamentary activities described above demonstrates there is cross-party support for Postmasters affected by the Horizon scandal. Hopefully a consensus will build up and this will lead to a fair solution that recognises the trauma experienced by Postmasters at the hands of the Post Office.

Clearly momentum is gathering around this scandal and no doubt we will be reporting on further developments as and when they occur.

Yours sincerely

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