

Business and Trade Committee

Oral evidence: Post Office Horizon scandal: fast and fair redress, HC 341

Tuesday 5 November 2024

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Members present: Liam Byrne (Chair); Antonia Bance; John Cooper; Sarah Edwards; Alison Griffiths; Sonia Kumar; Charlie Maynard; Gregor Poynton; Mr Joshua Reynolds; Matt Western; Rosie Wrighting.

Questions 1 - 44

Witnesses

I: Sir Alan Bates, GLO Claimant and Founder, Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance; Jill Donnison, Claimant, Horizon Shortfall Scheme; Dewi Lewis, Claimant, Horizon Convictions Redress Scheme.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Alan Bates, Jill Donnison and Dewi Lewis.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the first public session of the Business and Trade Committee in this Parliament. We are returning to what is unfinished business for this Committee, which is justice for the sub-postmasters who were wronged by the Horizon scandal. Thank you very much indeed for joining us as witnesses.

Let me thank those sub-postmasters and former sub-postmasters who are joining us in the Public Gallery today. I hope that the message that you take from this Committee hearing today is that we will follow this tenaciously and relentlessly until justice is done in what is the biggest miscarriage of justice in British history.

To our witnesses, thank you very much indeed for joining us. You were all wronged by the Horizon scandal in different ways and you have all therefore sought remedies and redress through different schemes. Sir Alan, you are applying through the GLO scheme; Jill, you are applying through the HSS; Dewi, you are applying through the HCRS, which deals with overturned convictions.

Sir Alan, perhaps I can start with you. First, congratulations both on your recent nuptials and on your knighthood. We are now 2,785 days on from when you first commenced your action against the Post Office. Have you now received your settlement for redress?

Sir Alan Bates: No.

Chair: What on earth is going on?

Sir Alan Bates: I wish I knew. The bureaucracy of the whole thing is definitely a big problem. I have jotted a few notes down. My initial claim went in on 12 October 2023, so it has been over 13 months now since my original claim went in for the scheme. I have received my 80% of the offer, as most people have, which is all very well and good, but we do not seem to be getting very far forward.

I keep contesting what DBT keeps saying about my claim, but one thing I have noticed recently is that ever since these schemes began, behind the scenes they have been shifting the goalposts. In other words, the wording on the paperwork on the terms and conditions of things like the GLO compensation scheme guidance and principles has changed on a number of occasions since the scheme began, and certainly since my application went in.

Chair: What do you think is going on here?

Sir Alan Bates: I don't know. I really don't know, and this is something that we are quite pleased that you and the Committee are looking at. They get bogged down. You will hear from the lawyers later about some of the problems they have had along the way. Speaking for my own case,



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I do not know whether it is something personal about my case or whatever. I know that I am towards the front of a lot of the claims, but you are told that the scheme is one thing and then you find out it is something different.

A perfect example of that is that when we started off this scheme, it was never meant to be purely about the legal considerations and legal technicalities in anything, but they seem to be applying this the whole time. Legal tests seem to be key and the whole point. To give you an example of what I have just been saying about them changing or shifting the goalposts, in the original GLO scheme guidance and principles—I am only going to give you the front page and one of the paragraphs as an example—point 1.1.2 says, “In awarding compensation to postmasters, the Scheme will be guided by considerations of fairness, in addition to applying established legal principles”.

Q2 **Chair:** Was your offer fair?

Sir Alan Bates: In whose eyes? This is the big thing. Where does the fairness test come in? I will get to that in a moment. The more recent version, from 29 November 2023, has changed that. It actually says, “The central goal, and the key overarching principle, of the Scheme is to deliver compensation to eligible postmasters that is full and fair, restoring them to the position they would have been in had it not been for the Horizon-related actions of the Post Office. Decisions will be taken in the light of established legal principles”, purely. They have lost “fairness” from that phrasing there, even though they do repeat “full and fair”.

The other point on that test is where we are not clear about where “fair” comes in. Two sentences down, it says, “The Scheme will take into account all relevant facts and matters presented in the claim in order to produce a fair result for the postmaster.” Is it in the eyes of the postmaster that it is fair, or is it in the eyes of DBT that it is fair? There is no clarification on the fairness test in all of this, and that causes a bit of a problem.

Q3 **Chair:** We have a missing fairness test, you would say.

Sir Alan Bates: The initial paperwork promises a fairness test, in addition to applying established legal principles, whereas the later version only mentions established legal principles. It has dropped the fairness.

Q4 **Chair:** The stage of the process where this is going wrong is in the negotiation. There was an initial offer put on the table and it is now being negotiated endlessly, by the sound of it.

Sir Alan Bates: In my case, I was not involved with the figures for my claim. That was left to my solicitors and to the accountants they were using to assess everything. They put my claim together; they submitted it. I agreed it; I submitted it. All I did was provide information and answer questions that they wanted in that case. It was rejected, so it came back. I looked at it at that point and actually reduced what my



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claim was, because I felt that was fair. That was me applying the fairness rule, but it was still rejected by DBT when it went back. Then they just processed it through the different stages.

Q5 **Chair:** Did they tell you why it was rejected when they rejected it?

Sir Alan Bates: They just don't agree with it.

Q6 **Chair:** I am trying to understand what you think is the motivation here. Is it lawyers just trying to keep the bill down? Are they trying to time people out so that people die before they get their redress? What do you think is the motivation here in those that you are negotiating with?

Sir Alan Bates: There were a lot of loose ends when the scheme was set up, and these should have been nailed down to start with. We, the JFSA, or even the lawyers, were not involved in the finer details or the briefing of the Government's lawyers who were assessing these claims and how they were going to be instructed to deal with them. That would have been very useful at an early stage, for everyone to know how things were going right from the outset.

It seems that although we agreed a basic scheme at the outset and some of the early documentation to do with the scheme, and then our lawyers took over on our behalf, the DBT went off and instructed their own lawyers, who then instructed their own accountants. We do not know what they were instructed to do.

Q7 **Chair:** Do you know when this is going to draw to a close?

Sir Alan Bates: I wrote to the Prime Minister about a month ago.

Chair: You did. You have written to him twice.

Sir Alan Bates: I wrote to him initially about a month ago and I said that it needs to be finished by the end of March 2025. A deadline should be set, and we asked for his help in setting this deadline. I never received a response. I wrote to him a few days ago to remind him that I had never received a response. Now we are five months from the end of March 2025.

Q8 **Chair:** On 5 January, on LBC, the Prime Minister, who was then the Leader of the Opposition, said that the Government should now "get on with it. Do at least that bit right". You have not yet had replies to your letters to the Prime Minister about setting a deadline.

Sir Alan Bates: That is quite right. Deadlines need to be set. You cannot have an endless piece of string on this. People have been waiting far too long, for over 20-odd years. Over 70 have died along the way in the GLO group. There are people well into their 80s who are still suffering and still having to put up with this. They should not be. They really should not be.

Q9 **Chair:** What happens if this drags on forever and a day? Would you ever go back to court with a crowdfunding campaign for justice?



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Sir Alan Bates: I would never say never. It is a consideration. I will not say that I haven't spoken to people about this. I know that if we decide to go down that route, we are going to halt the current scheme and it is going to be at least another six, 12 or even 24 months before it moves forward in that direction. That might be a choice people are prepared to take. We have a group meeting coming up in a few weeks' time, and that is one of the options that we are going to discuss. There are a few other options as well. We have to move this forward. I hope that after today, you will be able to bring a bit of pressure to bear on them as well. It is the deadlines that need to be set in this. They are terrified of having deadlines set at the Department.

- Q10 **Sarah Edwards:** Thank you very much for joining us, Sir Alan. It is wonderful to meet you. I want to just pull up a little bit more on what Liam was just saying. You previously spoke about how you do not think that the financial redress was either fast or fair. You have been more than fair in your response to Liam, but I wonder if you could paint a bigger picture as to what you think is fair, rather than allowing someone else to set that standard of fairness. What would you say if you were to write that standard?

Sir Alan Bates: I know that there are people who are working their way through the scheme and who are achieving and settling their claims. I believe—I get letters and emails from them—that they have felt that they have had or accepted a fair offer. When you are being offered a third of the amount in the first instance, and all the rest of it, when your claim has been put together by professionals, with the support of legal and accounting professionals, and then you have to argue your way from the ground all the way up in it, it does not seem very fair, if you are starting from there. It is a tough battle and we should not need to do that.

- Q11 **Sarah Edwards:** You have partly answered what I was going to ask, which was how you feel other members of the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance feel about that fairness. Some clearly think that they have a fairness, but what you are describing is that there are very different experiences. Do you have any stories that you wish to share from members of the organisation?

Sir Alan Bates: The lawyers would be able to give you the numbers involved, in terms of who are through, and all of that. The impression I get is certainly that those who took the £75,000 offer in the first instance have moved on. They have felt that it was a fair result for themselves and they can get on with their lives, because their claims were relatively small. There has then been a proportion of people who also have claims that are above the £75,000 but are lower-end claims. They are working their way through, and those have probably been resolved. I know that some of the more complex cases have as well.

The bulk of those that are left—the few hundred that are still outstanding—are probably the more complex cases. They are the ones



that are going to take a lot longer to resolve. There are going to be far more challenges along the way.

- Q12 **Charlie Maynard:** Thank you for being here today. Splitting the four schemes into two, there are two with a C—"conviction"—in them, OC and HCRS, and then there are GLO and HSS. Focusing on GLO and HSS, where people were not actually convicted, if I am correct, in both of them we are looking at £75,000 as the headline sum. You have answered quite a lot of the question I was going to ask, which is that given the misery that people went through, that frankly does not seem very much money for the years and years of pain. That is why presumably a lot of people are like, "Hang on, this is worth arguing about, because £75,000 just doesn't cut it." I am not sure whether the DBT is on the same page on that. What is your view?

Sir Alan Bates: I think the £75,000 was a band brought in, because there were a lot of smaller claims in there. That was a good option. It was a few thousand or something of that nature, £10,000 or £20,000. As I say, the lawyers will probably be able to answer those questions better than me. The banding worked well there, and possibly banding should be looked at for levels above that as well, even if it only clears out a proportion of them relatively quickly. It is an option that could be explored quite quickly, I think, by quite a few individuals.

- Q13 **Rosie Wrighting:** Thank you for coming in today. Jill, I understand that you are here on behalf of your mother Janet. I was wondering whether you could tell us a bit more about her story.

Jill Donnison: I have written a little bit down. Am I okay reading that out?

Rosie Wrighting: Yes, of course.

Jill Donnison: My mother was a postmistress for almost 16 years. Like a lot of other postmasters, she was highly regarded in the community. With our first office, she won best post office and represented the north-east in the finals in London. Our next post office that she bought had the Horizon system fitted more or less after taking over, and the problems started immediately. The helpline was just giving her the same answers all the time. It was just, "No one else is having this problem. You need to make good the shortage."

Finally, after several requests, we got a gentleman to come out, have a look, do an audit and see where the problems lay. He could not solve the shortage problem. Again, he told my mam to make good the shortfall. More than 20 years later, Alan has opened this and we have received some paperwork from the Post Office. In that paperwork, the gentleman reports—he actually says these words—"I think Mrs Moorhead is hiding something. I have told her she must put the money in." He made this allegation without any proof whatsoever. This was the type of person who was being sent round to help postmasters.



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My mam was quite fortunate, because she was able to put the shortages in, but she did worry. She lived under the stress and anxiety of a shortage occurring that she would not be able to afford. As well as being a postmistress, she was a former school governor and a magistrate, so as you can imagine, she was very conscious that if anything was to come out, the media would have a whale of a time with her, and obviously she would not be looked upon leniently in a court.

Sadly, she sold the post office, just totally disillusioned, at a ridiculous price. We lost her two years later. I am here for my dad, my three brothers and my mam. It definitely affected my mam's health. The stress, the anxiety and how she lived definitely did.

As far as our offer goes, like Alan has said, we have had 80%. We got above the £75,000, so we were maybe the next category up. When I initially made the inquiries, I was told that the scheme was closed and that they were no longer taking anybody else on. I then contacted our solicitor. He said, "We need to try to get it reopened. You need to push." We are trying to get as many people as possible to get back on to the scheme.

Eventually, I got a pack through. It was not easy to fill in. No legal team would take it on, because the scheme was not open, so I filled it in myself. It was October 2022 when I got the form returned to them, and it was August 2023 when we got our offer, so it was 10 months later that they gave us an offer. I then contacted Neil Hudgell's solicitors and was advised not to accept the offer; they would get an interim payment for us. Since having the solicitors deal with us, our offer has turned out to be just over a quarter of what has actually been found in the forensic evidence of what we lost.

Q14 Rosie Wrighting: You spoke about the worry and stress that your mum lived with. Can you tell me how this has impacted the wider family?

Jill Donnison: Now we are reliving it, because we are going through all this, and we really do not need it. They are asking for probate certificates stamped by courts, but you can go online and check if probate has been granted. It is just stumbling blocks all the time, so that is affecting us now. As a family, when we were younger, Mam was always preoccupied. She was always very anxious—she was agitated, she was stressed, she did not want to go to work. She went from winning the best post office in the north-east and loving her job to just being totally disillusioned.

Q15 Matt Western: Jill, thanks very much, and thank you all for being here. Can you talk through a little more about the experience that you have felt going through the HSS?

Jill Donnison: It is not very user-friendly. It is very legal. The letters that we have received are not nice letters—they are not letters where you think they are trying to help you or you are going to get through this.



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It is more about the time. I am doing this now for my dad. My dad is 74. It was 10 years yesterday since we lost my mam, and he has had 10 years of not having Mam and then the previous years before that, 11 in the post office, of just constant battling with shortages.

Q16 Matt Western: When the Post Office first made you an offer, did you consider it to be fair?

Jill Donnison: We did, if I am perfectly honest. We did consider it to be fair, because we were not aware of what we had actually lost. We contacted the Post Office and they sent us all the documents they had, redacted letters, accounts and what-have-you, but there were five years of data missing. Then there were points of the claim that the solicitors have pointed out that we were not made aware of, such as cost of the property. Mam sold it at a loss to get out, but we did not think about the fact that that would have increased by the time she sold it in years to come if this had not happened with the Post Office. The solicitors helped us with points like that. That has increased our case. The offer that we have received, as I say, is just over a quarter of what we have actually lost.

Q17 Matt Western: You mentioned that you submitted back in October 2022 but did not get a response until August 2023, 10 months later. Why do you think it took so long?

Jill Donnison: I really don't know. I put it down to maybe the scheme being closed and them just putting them to one side to see whether they were going to reopen it. I don't know. I cannot answer that.

Q18 Matt Western: I am so sorry about the loss of your mother 10 years ago yesterday. I am sure, or I can imagine, that the anxiety played a big part in her illness. Your lawyer told us that the Post Office had said that stress really did not play a part and that you could not demonstrate or prove that that had an effect. What was your reaction to that?

Jill Donnison: It is absolutely disgraceful, because I really genuinely believe that the stress shortened my mam's life. It has been proven that stress brings on all sorts. It is absolutely disgraceful. You cannot put a price on that. How do they know? They did not live in the shoes. They do not know.

Q19 Matt Western: The other thing that your lawyers have said is that in disclosure provided by the Post Office, it laid blame on your mother for the shortfall losses. Can you tell us a little more about that?

Jill Donnison: We only found that out when we received the paperwork from the Post Office after I had filled in the form, so more than 20 years later. There was a redacted letter and it literally said, "I think Mrs Moorhead is hiding something and I have told her to put the money in." Everybody read that report. When he went back to the office, because he could not find any problems, he came up with this allegation to cover his own inadequacies, because he could not find the shortage or the



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problem, so there has been 20 years of people reading those reports, thinking that Mam is a thief.

Q20 **Chair:** When your mother was originally asked to repay the money, how long was she given?

Jill Donnison: She had to put it in on balance day.

Chair: So it was straight away.

Jill Donnison: It was straight away, yes. Our largest shortage was £5,000 and that came to light. It was something the Horizon system was doing where it was doubling first class stamps, so you were looking like you had twice as many. Stamps were cash in the post office. It was literally that you had done your balance on a Wednesday and, if there was a shortage, you had to start that following week on the Thursday morning on an even keel, so that money had to be put in.

Q21 **Chair:** Where on earth did you get £5,000 from by the close of business?

Jill Donnison: I don't know. I think she must have had it hidden somewhere. I don't know—I really don't know. That was left to Mam to deal with. We had other businesses that we ran as a family, so I think we did pull from one to the other to compensate.

Q22 **Matt Western:** Just to come back on that, it was really only because she had other businesses in the family that she was able to offset some of those moneys. In retrospect, how long was she able to sustain the business because of that? If she had not had those other businesses, she would have lost the business a lot sooner.

Jill Donnison: Yes, absolutely. She definitely would have. She was living with that anxiety all the time, because it was just, "What is Wednesday going to bring? What shortage are we going to have? Am I going to have the money to put that in to start Thursday again?" You phone the helpline, and everybody on the helpline was just saying, "Nobody else is having this problem." I had that at first hand. I rang the helpline myself on numerous occasions and it was, "Nobody else is having these problems. You need to make good the shortage." That was all we got.

Q23 **Matt Western:** Finally, in terms of the duress and the anxiety, when was the first shortfall discovered and how many years later was the final one?

Jill Donnison: The first shortage was within a week of Horizon being installed. That was put down as teething problems. If I remember rightly, I think it was installed in the September and she was still having shortages by the December. She was running the old paper system alongside this. This system was working out, but the Horizon system was not, so she knew it was something the system was doing but did not know what it was doing.

Q24 **Chair:** You have been waiting for 20 years for redress, and yet your mother was expected to make good the gaps in a balance sheet within



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minutes.

Jill Donnison: Within 12 hours, yes.

Q25 **Chair:** That is extraordinary. I just wanted to check your experience about applying for the redress scheme. A lot of people have said to us that you get hit by a barrage of questions that are really quite difficult to answer. You said that you answered those questions yourself. Can you tell us a little bit about the experience of trying to answer all those questions?

Jill Donnison: It was really long-winded and really in depth. They were asking questions like what the shortages actually were and how many times they occurred. How would we know that? I was doing this on behalf of my mother, who had passed away, and it was just impossible to answer. I was trying to be fair, so we did a range. We knew that the largest shortfall was £5,000, and they ranged from £5 and £50 throughout. Like I say, I could not put a figure on that, so that was left to the Post Office. They then came back and made an offer of what they thought. The offer that we were given has turned out to be just over a quarter of what we have actually lost.

Chair: You were expected to be psychic.

Jill Donnison: Yes, absolutely.

Chair: Are you psychic?

Jill Donnison: No, not at all.

Q26 **Chair:** How did you feel when you were being asked to put these numbers down? That does not feel very fair to me.

Jill Donnison: It was just a case of "What do they expect? What do they want me to do here? I haven't a clue. I am filling this in as best I can," yet they are ready to jump on us: "This needs to be sorted. We need the probate certificate, we need this, we need that." They were expecting me to know the figures from 20 years ago.

Q27 **Chair:** Would it have made more sense if you had been given a bit of legal or other advice and support up front when you were filling that form in?

Jill Donnison: Yes, definitely. It just goes to show that they are asking me for figures that do not even have themselves. When I got the data that we requested, there were five years missing that they did not have, yet they expected us to know what we had lost.

Q28 **Mr Reynolds:** Jill, your scheme is being administered by the Post Office. Was the expectation just fully on you to deal with all of this, fill these forms out and have everything? Were you given any support by the Post Office with trying to get that?

Jill Donnison: No, nothing at all.



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Q29 **Mr Reynolds:** Even though they knew the numbers, obviously with the five-year gap in the middle, they were expecting you to provide them. Why?

Jill Donnison: I have no idea. When they sent the documents that they had, they were practically illegible. You could not read them. You had to have magnifying glasses on them and they were so tiny. It was disgraceful. It was not helpful at all.

Q30 **Mr Reynolds:** The expectation was for you and other sub-postmasters to be able to do all this, fill everything in and have all that expertise around you, when the Post Office itself had no idea, in reality. Because you could not decipher it, there was no way they could.

Jill Donnison: Yes, exactly. They expected us to have figures that they did not even have.

Q31 **Charlie Maynard:** Jill, thank you. Playing that bit back, your mum was putting in money repeatedly and then, finally, the Post Office or the auditors to the Post Office worked out that actually there was a four-times differential. They ultimately were able to figure out what she had put in. If they could work it out for your mum, why are they not working it out for every single one like that?

Jill Donnison: For myself, what they have worked out is that there are things that I didn't know I would be able to claim for. I filled the form in as best I could and sent that off. We got the offer. It has then gone to the solicitors. For instance, there was distress and inconvenience. You cannot put a figure on that, so they just gave us nothing. We just got nothing. There were three headings that fell under "unquantified", it was said, and that was because we did not put a figure on it, because we did not know and we could not, so they just decided, "They won't get anything for that." There was distress and personal injury. I think personal injury was the £8,000, if I remember rightly.

Q32 **Chair:** Do you think that what the Post Office asked of you was fair?

Jill Donnison: Absolutely not, no. Even if Mam had been alive and they had asked Mam those questions, she would have known more than I did. They knew that I was making the claim on her behalf and that I was not the postmaster. They knew that I just worked in the office, so absolutely not, no. It was not fair.

Q33 **Chair:** Did the amount of detail that they asked for slow down your claim?

Jill Donnison: Yes. It must have taken us two months to fill the form in.

Q34 **Sonia Kumar:** Thank you so much for coming today. Your mum was running a paper copy of what was happening and the Horizon. When did she present the case to the Post Office to say, "There are discrepancies," and when did they actually start taking note?



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Jill Donnison: We made lots of phone calls about little shortages. They would just tell us to put it in. On the programme that was done with Alan, when Jo Hamilton was on the floor with the dockets, that totally resonated with me because I have done that with my mam. Sorry, can you repeat your question?

Sonia Kumar: As you were running the paper copy and the Horizon, when did you first alert the Post Office, saying, "There are discrepancies between what the paper is running and what the Horizon system is running"?

Jill Donnison: That was the December, when the gentleman came out to the office and we showed him what we had been doing.

Q35 **Sonia Kumar:** How many times did you have to speak to them to say, "There is actually something wrong now with the system"? When did you identify that there was definitely a system problem?

Jill Donnison: I would say the December, yes.

Q36 **Sarah Edwards:** To follow up on that question, was the person who was sent out to look at the books an accountant?

Jill Donnison: I don't know who they were. It was just a gentleman who worked for the Post Office. He came out and did an audit.

Sarah Edwards: You do not know whether they were qualified to assess a set of financial books in front of them.

Jill Donnison: No, I do not know.

Chair: You are shaking your head, Alan.

Sir Alan Bates: I did a freedom-of-information request about the qualifications of the so-called auditors that Post Office sent out. There weren't any. They weren't qualified auditors. Also, they refused to allow people to bring in their own accountant to check the books. That was another refusal they always used to do.

Q37 **Chair:** This whole process has been riddled with unfairness and it does not feel as if we have got rid of that unfairness. I have one last question before I hand over to Gregor Poynton. As you were going through the application for redress, did you ever feel that you were given the benefit of the doubt?

Jill Donnison: There was a little bit of the form that I was filling in. Mam and Dad sold the post office for about £31,500 less than what they had paid for it 11 years earlier, so Mam could get out. I remember putting that figure down. They asked for Land Registry and all sorts of paperwork to prove what we had sold the business for. We had to get figures from our solicitor to show the goodwill, the fixtures and fittings and then obviously the property prices. We had to get all that to prove that. They offered us the £31,500 to meet that, but, if I am perfectly honest, no, I don't think there was any benefit of the doubt given.



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Chair: Despite everything that the Post Office had put you through and all of the time, there is still no benefit of the doubt along the way.

Jill Donnison: Yes.

Q38 **Gregor Poynton:** Mr Lewis, we are going to look at the administration and structure of the redress schemes, but it is important to hear the human story before we start, so I would be keen to hear your story and the impact that that has had on you.

Dewi Lewis: A lot of what I have heard resonates very closely. It is six years tomorrow that I lost Mum; she used to work for me before her retirement, with me in the post office. I ran the post office in Penrhyndeudraeth. I ran the shop from 1979 until March this year. I ran the post office from 1985 to 15 March 2011—"beware the ides of March"; I should have listened more to my English literature master at school—when everything went belly-up. We had worked with Horizon okay until the previous August or September when they did the upgrade, and that is when we started getting massive shortfalls.

I was a senior county councillor; my MP, who is here today, sat on the same cabinet with me on Gwynedd Council. Public duties were my life. That all came to an end on the 15th. The auditors and Mr Bradshaw arrived on 15 March. I resigned everything on 15 July because I was advised very strongly to plead guilty and to make up the £53,000 they claimed. My parents had to take equity release on their retirement house. They had both retired after a long career. Mum was a schoolmistress before working for me in the post office. My father was an insurance broker and another county councillor before me, so we are well known in the community.

They said, "If you pay it back initially we will not charge", and then they said, "Oh no, we have found out that you are a county councillor. You will be front page news. We are charging," and that was that. I was pleading guilty to try to reduce the sentence. I served four months in Her Majesty's Prison Altcourse and it was dreadful seeing Mum and Dad having to come in and see that. I felt more for them than for myself. I knew what I was going through, but they could only imagine.

Having said that, I was lucky. There were postmasters who had to go through far worse prisons than Altcourse. Another postmaster from north Wales, Noel Thomas, had to suffer Walton, one of the old-type prisons. I am not sure whether I would have survived that.

I came out from Altcourse. The chairman of the magistrates came to pick me up from Altcourse on the day of my release. He saw a few of his old clients on that day.

Then I just carried on running the shop. The Post Office rented the counter from me for a number of years, and then I kept on running the shop, which the Post Office said was failing, for another 14 years until I retired on 31 March this year.



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In the meantime, I have lost both my parents, had a divorce and become dependent on medication to get me through. I was very fortunate that my community, friends and family stood by me. I did not have any of the nasties that some of the other postmasters had, so I count myself as being very lucky on that. My community all knew me and nobody thought I was guilty.

I ran the shop, became somewhat of a recluse, did not do anything publicly and could not do anything publicly until I received the letter of exoneration. I received it on 22 August this year, two days after I got married to my latest wife, who stood by me. She used to fly in from Dublin. She was a bank manager in Dublin, and used to fly in from Dublin airport to John Lennon every fortnight to see me in Altcourse; she was on first-name terms with people in John Lennon airport. That was the sort of support that got me through everything.

Community, friends, family and faith kept me going. The support of those family, friends and community has been invaluable. I count myself very fortunate compared with a lot of other sub-postmasters and their families, who have had it even worse than myself, and all those postmasters who did not see the day when justice was seen to be done for the first time.

Thank you for the opportunity to come here today and the work that you are doing as a Select Committee. We are very grateful.

Q39 Gregor Poynton: Mr Lewis, you mentioned that the problems seemed to start when the upgrade came in. I would be interested to hear what you were seeing in that period and whether you had any communication with the Post Office about the problems you were seeing.

Dewi Lewis: My retail support manager was very good and was trying to get to the bottom of things but could not understand. The line was, "We are aware of everything. Leave it with me. We will see what we can do." That carried on until the March, when the auditors came through and then the heavy mob and Mr Bradshaw, the investigator, came through and started making the threats and saying, "Come up with a good story."

Q40 Gregor Poynton: You could tell there was something going wrong, but they were not really helping. They were not trying to get to the bottom of it on a good-faith basis, and then suddenly there was an investigator banging on your door, asking for the money back. At that point, you had mentioned that you were looking to find a solution. You mentioned that your family were having to take money out of their homes and so on. Is that where you were looking to get to with that?

Dewi Lewis: Before that, because I was so concerned about it, I approached my MP and my bank to see whether there was anything we could put this in to see that we could go through it, and there was nothing we could do. This was three years after the crash. The only



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people that did not support me through the whole of it were the banks. Banks and the Post Office did not want to know.

Q41 Mr Reynolds: You have used the words “fortunate” and “lucky”. I don’t want to speak for other members of the Committee, but when I hear you saying those words it is heartbreaking to me, because you were and are an upstanding member of your community. The fact that you feel lucky and fortunate because it is not as bad as others have experienced is truly awful. I want to talk a little bit about your experiences going through the Horizon convictions redress scheme. How has that process been so far?

Dewi Lewis: Having listened to Alan and Jill, I should say that a letter of quashing arrived on 22 August. We were told that the redress scheme was in place and that we had a choice of taking the £600,000 or fighting for more, but that an initial payment of £200,000 would be made in two to three weeks. That was the understanding that we had and that my solicitors at Hudgell had. That was the first letter from the Ministry of Justice.

Two weeks later, we had another letter from the Ministry of Justice. It had mixed up the reference numbers, my case numbers. The case numbers on both letters were the same, so we are not quite sure what the situation in the Ministry of Justice was. When the Department for Business and Trade finally agreed that it had the right reference number, which was the same one, it said that it would be processing the claim. That was 5 September, and we were told, “Yes, you are registered under the scheme.”

Nothing was happening. Tracy and Neil Hudgell were brilliant in supporting me. I am sure they must have thought that I was a pain, because I was asking them every week, “Anything happening?” “No.” They were having weekly meetings with the Department for Business and Trade. Because I had been through an IVA after coming out of prison, even though we furnished them with a certificate of completion, which went back to 2019, I think, they said, “Oh no, that is not good enough. We have to check. We have to have a legal opinion on that.” The legal opinion seemed to be slowing the whole process down again.

Then we were told, “You can have the £200,000, or do you accept you could go for the £600,000 and draw a line completely?” Given what we have heard from other colleagues today, I said, “Yes, we will take the £600,000, because there is no fight left in me to go for forensic accountants and valuers.” How do you quantify what the value of the post office was, if it and the property where I lived went for sale in 2011, and what it would be today? How long is a piece of string? We decided that rather than fight, we would go for the £600,000.

Until last week, we had no inkling when we would even get the initial payment. Lo and behold, it was announced, I think, after speaking with your staff here, that I was going to be in front of you. I think that was announced on the Tuesday. Surprise, surprise, on Friday morning, I



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checked the bank account and the £200,000 had arrived. I try not to be cynical, but I am finding it very difficult.

Chair: The miracle of a Select Committee.

Dewi Lewis: Yes. You have much more power than I thought. We were told that there would be a deed of agreement coming out with that. Hudgell are still awaiting that deed of agreement, or settlement deed, so that we could progress and get the rest of the settlement. That is where we are as of today.

Q42 **Mr Reynolds:** You have said that you have taken the deal with that £600,000 because you have no fight left. Do you believe that that £600,000 takes into account all of that financial and emotional loss that you have experienced, or is it a means to an end?

Dewi Lewis: I am not sure. I doubt it, because the £600,000 includes the £53,000 that we put in, plus the interest of what that would be by now during a period of quite high interest rates over the last few years, during a period of austerity when interest rates went up. It includes what we would have got from a colleague share plan, which the Post Office had at that time. Looking at the heads of what would have possibly been, I am not sure.

As I said, after the experience of Sir Alan and Jill, going through with the Post Office and with the DBT, I want to get on with my life and do other things, rather than carry on fighting. There has been a difference in my health since I had the letter of exoneration. I never knew how much it had taken out of me. Before that, I would not get on the train to London, never mind go out and do public interviews, which I have done in the last few weeks. In the meantime, I have come off most of my anxiety and stress medication, which had been going up. I was on the top end of things. Since August, I have been able to come off those, but the longer the fight goes on, I am not sure. It is very difficult to quantify.

Chair: The clock is slightly against us, so I am going to move us on to some of the final things we need to check with you.

Q43 **Alison Griffiths:** Thank you so much. It has been incredibly moving hearing your testimony. I am going to slightly change the question I wanted to ask, in the light of what you have been saying.

I am going to ask two questions. First, do you have faith that the schemes are designed with the best interests of the sub-postmasters in mind? The question I am going to actually ask is whether you think they were intended to be designed to be in the best interests of the sub-postmasters. I suppose that I am inserting human fallibility in there as well. I would love to hear thoughts from all of you on that.

Sir Alan Bates: As far as intended, I would agree. Initially, I think there were thoughts that it was going to be a benefit to the sub-postmasters, which is why we engaged with the process right at the start. How it has



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turned out is that it does not seem to be for the benefit of them. It seems to be for the benefit of the Department more than anything else, to run it through at its speed and on its say-so.

Can I divert slightly from that question to something I was asked earlier, about whether we would go to court with this matter? I said it might take six, 12 or another 24 months. What I should have added at that point was that there are more complex cases now that are going to go through. If they run the full gauntlet of what is available or part and parcel of these schemes, which is to go back and challenge them a few times, then take it to a panel and all the rest of it—if 100 or 150 cases decided to do that, it could take years in its own right to get that far. It might be quicker for us to go back to court and get a 12-month finish line that we know we can achieve. That is one of the reasons why we feel that a deadline must be set for these schemes. Sorry, I took it slightly differently.

Jill Donnison: The intent was there, yes, on paper, but when it has come down to actually dealing with it, there is just too much red tape. They are wanting proof of everything, so no, I do not think it has got the best interests at heart for that reason.

Dewi Lewis: I have my doubts. There are three things that still concern me. One is that nobody has an idea where the £600,000 figure came from. Was it just a figure plucked from the air?

In the recent Budget, the Chancellor announced £1.8 billion for the whole package. The previous figure we understood was £1.2 billion. We do not know whether that £1.8 billion is extra to the £1.2 billion, or the total, or whether it includes all the claims. Does it include the legal costs? We do not know.

The final thing is this timetable business. I noticed yesterday that the head of the four redress schemes at the Post Office told the public inquiry that £302 million, out of £1.2 billion or £1.8 billion, has already been paid out, but by March 2026 he expects it to be up to £1.5 billion. Thinking of the age of postmasters and what we have been through, I believe that a realistic timetable would be March 2025, not 2026, for the whole settlement.

That is the final message I would give. If you think that these are for fairness, for the postmasters, that is what I would take from today and emphasise. Where did the £600,000 come from? Where did the £1.8 billion come from? Where is the timetable to a finish line for everybody who is going through all this additional pain now?

Chair: That is very useful. Thank you.

Q44 **Antonia Bance:** This is redress for what everybody accepts has been a massive miscarriage of justice. It seems completely inappropriate for the processes to be so slow and very legalistic, and for the proof needed to



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be so high. I wonder whether there is a way of doing this that could have a lighter touch, in terms of the burden of proof needed and the weight that that places on people to prove their claim down to the minute detail. I wonder whether you want to comment on that.

Jill Donnison: For me, as far as that goes, the Post Office knows who were postmasters and postmistresses and for how long. It knows when the Horizon system was fitted and when the postmaster left. Within that time, it knows, because of what has come out about the system, that the postmasters and postmistresses have been cheated, and it needs to deal with it.

Sir Alan Bates: I think that you are probably going to hear a lot of the comments that I might make from the lawyers and solicitors. It is probably more important to hear it coming from them. You will believe it more from them than from me.

Chair: That concludes this panel. I want to thank you for the courage that all of you have shown in coming forward and speaking today. Coming and giving evidence to a Committee like this is not an easy thing. I want to thank you for your tenacity in pursuing this.

What you have told us today is that even though you may have had minutes or hours to make good shortfalls, after years and years you have still not had the redress to which you are entitled. You have told us that there is not enough help up front in putting the claims in. You have told us that fairness is getting lost when offers are put on the table. You have told us that it is a mystery, frankly, how some of these numbers are conjured up. You have told us that there is a clear need for deadlines around this process. There is a real risk that if we do not have those deadlines, sub-postmasters who have already suffered so much may be forced to go back to court.

Thank you very much indeed for your evidence today. It has been invaluable.