

SCSC Statement on the Post Office Horizon

The Post Office Horizon IT case has been subject to an inquiry, due to conclude this year, which is examining the Post Office's prosecution of over 700 sub-postmasters for theft, false accounting and related charges because of technical faults in the Horizon IT system. These accusations persisted for 16 years – from 1999 to 2015 and has been described as one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British history. Given the scale of the issues, the role of IT and the clear safety implications that have arisen, the SCSC Steering Group would like to make the following statement:

- The Post Office Horizon system would not normally be regarded as a safety system, yet it is a computer-based system that has indirectly led to widespread harm.
- The ongoing public inquiry has raised important legal, ethical and technical concerns. Problems highlighted include: sub-postmasters could not see what was going on (for example, figures changed remotely without sub-postmaster knowledge), poor quality coding and lack of both audit and fault logging.
- The SCSC fully supports the public inquiry and other investigations, and we agree with professional computer bodies (e.g. the British Computer Society) that there should be a review of how computer-based system evidence is treated by the courts.
- We will look to adopt relevant recommendations and encourage our members to do the same once the inquiry and investigations conclude.
- We propose that organisations relying on computer-based system evidence in court should, where challenged, be required to justify that the system, including aspects such as hardware, software, data and service delivery, is reliable. Furthermore the evidence should be shown to be trustworthy. The justification should also show appropriate confidence in use, including in the way that reported problems are managed. Courts should not accept evidence relating to the computer-based system without this justification.
- Where there are disputes involving computer-based systems there must be fair treatment; i.e. where relevant, there must be access for both sides to technical experts who in turn must be given access to appropriate software and data.
- Post Office Horizon is an example of how systems, organisations, agreements, people and processes came together within a delivered service to result in indirect but severe harm. We suggest that the SCSC Service Assurance Guidance could be useful in such situations to reduce risks.
- We will extend the remit of the SCSC to cover any computer-based systems and services which could cause harm. This will include harm in the wider context of the system including all stakeholders, the environment and consequential harms, not just harm caused directly by the system or service itself.

Note: Here "computer-based system" includes aspects such as hardware, software, data and service delivery.