

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Männystrie O tha Laa

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Ms Joanne Bunting MLA
Chair
Committee for Justice
NI Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
BT4 3XX

24 April 24

Dear Joanne,

**THE POST OFFICE (HORIZON SYSTEM) OFFENCES) BILL – LEGISLATIVE
CONSENT MOTION**

On Monday 29 April 2024, the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill ('the Bill') will reach Committee Stage in the House of Commons, and the House will consider amendments tabled by the UK Government to include Northern Ireland within its scope.

The Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 13 March 2024. The Bill as introduced provided for the quashing of convictions, in England and Wales only, for certain offences while the Horizon system was in use by the Post Office. The Bill also made provision about the deletion of cautions given in England and Wales for such offences.

Should the amendments be accepted by the House, and the territorial extent of the Bill extended to include Northern Ireland, a Legislative Consent Motion will be required. Therefore, I am enclosing with this letter a briefing paper which seeks to provide the Committee with the necessary information to enable it to reach a view on the laying of a legislative consent memorandum in the Assembly.

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While the ability to make these provisions is within the legislative competence of the Assembly, I consider it more appropriate that amendments are carried within the Westminster Bill. The Bill has already been introduced and it would not be possible to keep pace via an Assembly Bill. Any delay in legislating to overturn these convictions would delay access to financial redress for sub-postmasters in Northern Ireland, and lead to differential treatment.

Therefore, I consider it is preferable to legislate in one Bill so that sub-postmasters in Northern Ireland are treated on the same basis as their counterparts in England and Wales.

I would like to place on record my thanks to the Minister of State in the Department for Business and Trade, Kevin Hollinrake MP, and his officials for their understanding in this matter. The decision to include Northern Ireland within scope recognises the significant and unique challenges to delivering the necessary legislation at an expedited pace following the Executive's recent restoration after two years.

I am also grateful to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for working collaboratively with me to secure Northern Ireland's inclusion in the Bill.

If the Bill is amended as proposed by the UK Government, I would be very grateful for the Committee's cooperation to enable a Legislative Consent Memorandum to be laid before the Assembly by 14 May 2024. I would hope that the written brief attached to my letter will suffice to allow the Committee to reach a view without the need for a subsequent oral brief, in light of the timescales involved.

My officials can, of course, assist with any further queries the Committee may have.

Best Regards,



NAOMI LONG MLA
Minister of Justice