

REQUEST FOR HELP WITH A COMPLAINT TO THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND ABOUT PAULA VENNELLS

15 February 2020

Dear All,

I campaign on NHS whistleblowing and accountability. I have referred Paula Vennells to the health regulator the Care Quality Commission under NHS and social care Fit and Proper Person rules:

<https://minhalexander.com/2019/12/26/referral-of-paula-vennells-cbe-chair-of-imperial-healthcare-nhs-trust-former-post-office-ltd-ceo-under-cqc-regulation-5-fit-and-proper-persons-fppr-but-what-was-the-governments-role-in-the-pos/>

I am also making a Safeguarding (abuse) complaint to her Bishop, in the diocese where she is a priest.

The referrals to the church and the NHS are interlinked, and if either one succeeds, that supports the other.

All institutions in public life should have so called 'Safeguarding' arrangements for protecting vulnerable people from abuse. Abuse is quite widely defined and includes neglect and acts of omission, and organisational abuse in terms of very poor standards of care. The Church of England has a [Safeguarding policy](#) which reflects this.

I have drafted a Safeguarding referral which sets out how Post Office Limited was abusive to subpostmasters and their families, to make the argument that because Paula Vennells oversaw this institutional behaviour, this makes her an unsuitable person to be a priest with access to vulnerable people.

Tom Hedges has very kindly supported this referral with a succinct and powerful impact statement about how an unsafe prosecution affected him and his loved ones.

I would be very grateful to hear from anyone who would be kind enough to add their own statement, whether they are subpostmaster or close family member who has been harmed.

A list of bullet points or a short account of no more than one page would be fine, as would be any off the shelf witness statements that have already been prepared, to save on time and the unpleasantness of re-visiting past events. I am grateful for any help possible, but please do not put yourself to trouble if the task would cause too much distress.

A copy of my draft Safeguarding referral follows below. Obviously, I may amend it if any additional contributions raise new points that should be added. I have already linked to some of the testimony and articles about personal experiences.

I will aim to send it off by the start of the week beginning 24 February 2020.

My email address is MinhAlexander@aol.com Tel 07738 570747

All my very best and thanks again,

Minh

Dr Minh Alexander

DRAFT SAFEGUARDING REFERRAL LETTER TO BISHOP OF ST ALBANS

Dear Bishop Alan,

Safeguarding concern about Paula Vennells

I write to make raise a Safeguarding concern about Paula Vennell's continuing ministry at Bromham Benefice, in your diocese.

Paula Vennells was centrally involved in highly abusive institutional actions against subpostmasters and their families when she was Post Office Ltd CEO in the period 2012 to 2019.

Post Office Ltd terrorised subpostmasters and their families with accusations based on unsafe evidence from its flawed Horizon IT system, despite holding knowledge that this system was flawed. This persecution started before Paula Vennells' tenure but continued after she became Post Office Ltd CEO.

Post Office Ltd unsafely prosecuted many hundreds of subpostmasters, and sent some to jail knowing that its evidence was in doubt.

It lied to many subpostmasters, telling them they were the only person who had reported any problems with the Horizon IT system, when in reality it was in possession of many years' evidence of glitches across its system.

When subpostmasters found they were not alone, organised and challenged Post Office Ltd's false narrative, the Post Office still maintained ludicrous denial for many years, with a High Court finding in December 2019 that its denial was akin to a claim that the Earth was flat.

These are all the judgments and relevant key documents from the Post Office trial, collated on the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance website: [Documentation](#)

It appears that amongst a number of likely reasons for Post Office Ltd's entrenched and prolonged denial was the fact that government and the Paula Vennells pinned the organisation's business plan on [digitalisation](#) and an increased range of business activities

which required digitalisation. Admitting that the Post Office's core digital accounting system was unreliable would have been highly prejudicial to these ambitions.

But Post Office Ltd's abusive scapegoating of subpostmasters, blaming them for phantom financial shortfalls caused by glitches in the Horizon system and 'recompense' with menaces, was monstrously callous and subjected many hundreds of families to profound, life changing and far reaching harms:

- People lived with unbearable stress for years
- They experienced traumatic, humiliating events such as having their homes searched and being handcuffed, which for law abiding people was completely alien and very frightening
- Mental health and physical health suffered very seriously in some cases
- Some died by suicide
- There was serious financial loss, to the extent of bankruptcy and long term economic insecurity and homelessness
- The financial abuse by Post Office Ltd in coercing payments from subpostmasters, for phantom shortfalls, using a wholly oppressive contract and threats of prosecution has still not been rectified in that the monies have not been repaid
- Many have been left without adequate pensions or equivalent security for their old age, in an increasingly uncertain world
- Family life was disrupted, marriages came under pressure and fell apart in some cases
- Some subpostmasters experienced the unimaginable agony of being disbelieved by loved ones
- Many experienced terrible stigma and were shunned by their communities, with the stigma extending to their families, including their children
- Years were lost with complex and very stressful litigation
- Litigation costs, vexatiously drawn out by Post Office Ltd's various aggressive and dishonourable tactics, described by a Court of Appeal judge as "["attritional"](#)", added to substantially to the financial loss
- Employment prospects were very seriously damaged because of the unsafe convictions, feeding into the downward spiral of stigma, social isolation and poverty

- For those who faced the prospect of jail or were actually sent to jail, this was amongst some of the greatest cruelty by Post Office Ltd.

As a former consultant psychiatrist who has cared for patients in our prison system, I am only too aware of how harsh and frightening an environment prison is, especially for those serving their first sentence.

Suicide risk is elevated for people on remand and any new arrivals, especially people in jail for the first time.

Self harm is common across the prison estate.

UK government safer custody statistics on numbers of prison self harm incidents 2012-2018:

Table 2.1: Annual self-harm^{1,2,3} summary statistics, England and Wales, 2004-2018

| | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 (r) | 2018 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------------|--------|
| MALE AND FEMALE ESTABLISHMENTS | | | | | | | |
| Self-harm incidents | 23,158 | 23,230 | 25,843 | 32,313 | 40,160 | 44,651 | 55,598 |
| Self-harm incidents per 1,000 prisoners ^a | 267 | 276 | 303 | 377 | 471 | 521 | 667 |
| Self-harm individuals ^{b,c} | 6,754 | 6,942 | 7,794 | 9,457 | 11,000 | 11,633 | 12,570 |
| Self-harm individuals per 1,000 prisoners ^f | 78 | 82 | 91 | 110 | 129 | 136 | 151 |
| Self-harm incidents per individual | 3.4 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.4 | 3.7 | 3.8 | 4.4 |
| Hospital Attendances | 1,547 | 1,603 | 1,757 | 2,261 | 2,740 | 3,067 | 3,214 |
| Proportion of incidents requiring hospital attendance | 6.7% | 6.9% | 6.8% | 7.0% | 6.8% | 6.9% | 5.8% |

Suicide risk is elevated in prisons compared to the general population.

The children of people who are jailed suffer significantly:

[Prison Reform Trust: What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)



credit: Action for Children Family Help Centre and Help Hub, Hmp Grampian

Post Office Ltd wilfully and seriously harmed the children of subpostmasters when it sent their parents to prison knowing that they could be innocent.

Janet Skinner's son was 14 when she went to jail:

["Her son, Matt, was 14 at the time and taking his GCSEs; he learnt about her conviction from the local paper. "We didn't get to say goodbye. We came home expecting to see her and she was gone," he says."](#)

Seema Misra was jailed whilst pregnant, on her [son's tenth birthday](#):

"Trusting the legal system would deliver justice, she refused to plead guilty. She was two months pregnant with her second son when she was sentenced to 15 months in jail. It was her first son's 10th birthday. She doesn't remember what happened in court: she woke up in hospital. Her tears fall as she remembers how she begged a police officer not to handcuff her, begged him to let her leave the hospital by a back door and, when he refused, begged for his jacket to cover her wrists. "It was my local hospital," she says, "I didn't want people to see me going out with handcuffs on."

Post Office similarly harmed all the children of parents whom it made ill with severe stress, blighting family life and seriously affecting the environment in which children were growing up, as well as their families' material circumstances.

Post Office Ltd harmed the children of parents whom it wrongfully prosecuted through the serious stigma and ostracisation that this caused them. For example:

["Mr Castleton described how he and his family were abused, including an incident where his daughter was spat at, because "local people presumed I was a thief".](#)

Post Office Ltd is supposed to be a business with a social purpose, but it showed no conscience whatsoever in its institutionally sociopathic victimisation of the subpostmasters and their families.

Not only did it harm people who became vulnerable due to mental ill health and massive duress such as prosecution and financial ruin, but it actively worked to create that vulnerability with its tactics of intimidation, isolation and threatening litigation strategy. The fact that Post Office Ltd continued its abusive denial and resistance years after serious harm was obvious, and many subpostmasters had been rendered vulnerable by mental ill health and chronic serious stress from intolerable circumstances, showed grave institutional irresponsibility and recklessness if not malice.

Paula Vennells was at the helm of Post Office Ltd for seven years in which denial and unsafe prosecutions continued, and further abuse took place in the form of Post Office Ltd's abusive handling of the Post Office mediation scheme and cover up of unfavourable findings by its own appointed investigator, Second Sight, which it [gagged](#).

Paula Vennells misled [parliament in 2015](#) by maintaining Post Office Ltd denials about flaws in the Horizon IT system and the possibility of unsafe prosecutions.

"It is important to put to bed any implication that we are not accounting properly."

"We are a business that genuinely cares about the people who work for us. If there had been any miscarriages of justice, it would have been really important to me and the Post Office that we surfaced those. As the investigations have gone through, so far we have no evidence of that."

Her comments to parliament in oral evidence had the effect of minimisation and subtle victim blaming, claiming that there were only a small number of unhappy and vocal subpostmasters:

"...the vast majority of people have no issue with the system, and they are actually quite satisfied with the training and support around it. We are dealing with a very small number of people who have had some really difficult things happen to them"

"Inevitably, because of their distress, the people who have gone through this are very vocal and very challenging about what they have been through—quite rightly so."

Post Office Ltd previously maintained to me under FOIA that no internal whistleblowing disclosures were raised between 2012 to 2019. This lacked credibility as the Post Office whistleblowing policy requires annual reports on numbers of incidents, and there were dedicated reporting systems in place including an online service, suggesting that a certain volume of reports was expected.

A BBC File on Four broadcast on 11 February 2020 revealed that there were at some point, [Post Office whistleblowers who raised concerns about the Horizon system](#). They too received an intimidating system response, which included suggestions that their jobs and careers were at risk if they did not "move on and let it go". This adds to the evidence of poor, unsafe Post Office Ltd culture.

Please see below the Fit and Proper Person referral to the Care Quality Commission which I sent you previously, which gives some more detailed facts.

Please note that Paula Vennells accepted in the oral evidence to parliament in 2015 that she was responsible for how Post Office Ltd conducted itself:

"Q100 Nadhim Zahawi: You are the chief executive, so the buck stops with you.

Paula Vennells: It does stop with me. Also, therefore, as chief executive, I am responsible for the reputation of and what happens for the Post Office."

I am concerned from the above pattern of events that Paula Vennells has a capacity for abusing power, which makes her unsuitable for any position of trust and exposure to people at vulnerable points in their lives, and to any ordinarily vulnerable adult and to children. I do not feel her past behaviour can be consistent with the position of trust that comes with her role as Church of England priest, bringing her into contact with vulnerable people and people in crisis or at critical points of their lives, such as bereavement and other loss.

I am very concerned in particular that she may cover up any matters which affect reputation. For example, I am very troubled as to how she might approach any reports of abuse that she receives from or relating to vulnerable people, if such reports happen to stand between her and her goals and ambitions. I see she is tipped to be a Bishop and I am very concerned if she is again given power over others.

I attach witness statements and impact statements from subpostmasters and members of their close family of the abuse they experienced and how it affected them.

These are links to some of the accounts of the harmed subpostmasters' experiences:

[A former Subpostmaster writes: "This was systematic abuse... I lost my business and lost my family"](#)

Times 9 February 2020: [Victims of the Post Office's sub-postmaster scandal on their decade of hell Hundreds of sub-postmasters had their lives ruined when a faulty IT system led to them being accused of fraud. Katie Glass hears their stories of torment, prison — and the unfinished battle to clear their names](#)

[Alan Bates: The 'details man' the Post Office paid the price for ignoring](#)

[Former West Boldon postmaster who lost £100,000 in Horizon Post Office debacle calls for judicial enquiry](#)

[The Post Office computer problem that destroyed the lives of pillars of the community](#)

[Criminal Cases Review Commission investigation of miscarriages of justice](#)

["The horror of that whole Post Office fiasco was a major factor in her death."](#)

[A former village postmistress sentenced to 18 months in jail is one of 34 people whose convictions are being reviewed](#)

[Rubbina Shaheen was jailed for 12 months at Shrewsbury Crown Court in 2010 after she was accused of stealing £43,269.](#)

[Noel Thomas: "But his life was turned upside down when he was jailed for nine months in 2006 after being accused of taking £48,000."](#)

[Post Office IT fiasco: 'Decade of hell' for accused](#)

[Decent lives destroyed by the Post Office: The monstrous injustice of scores of sub-postmasters driven to ruin or suicide when computers were really to blame](#)

[My uncle took his own life after the Post Office went after him – this High Court ruling is too little, too late](#)

[Jo Hamilton 'Victory against Post Office one of the best days of my life'](#)

[Oxford Post Office manager speaks out after £57m pay-out](#)

["I hate everything about it. I will not go into a post office."](#)

["...I was told by Post Office that their system was infallible.... At the time the PO assured me I was the only person, claiming it was a computer error"](#)

[Tragic Redditch postmaster died before being exonerated of false accounting](#)

[Post Office vs Mental Health: "It's been a living hell."](#)

[Peter Murray part 3](#)

[Pete Murray Part 4: "You'd better get yourself a lawyer"](#)

[Pete Murray part 2 "What kind of games are you playing with human beings' lives?"](#)

[Pete Murray 1 "The Post Office claim I owe them £35,000, despite never showing or telling me what I have done wrong."](#)

[A former Subpostmaster writes: "I hate them."](#)

[A claimant writes: "I felt a fool for trusting them"](#)

[A former Subpostmaster writes: "She was simply regurgitating a lie"](#)

[Tuesday, April 23, 2019 "I balanced and it showed a loss of £32,000"](#)

['Post Office false theft claim left me bankrupt'](#)

[Depression, bankruptcy and jail: Why we sued the Post Office](#)

You may also wish to listen to:

1. This Private Eye podcast - Going Postal

<https://www.private-eye.co.uk/eyeplayer/play-367>

2. This File on Four broadcast - Second Class Citizens: The Post Office IT Scandal

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000f5hb>

Yours sincerely,

Dr Minh Alexander

NHS whistleblower and former consultant psychiatrist

Cc Justin Welby Archbishop of Canterbury
John Sentamu Archbishop of York