



Annual Review

NFSP officials addressed delegates on the key issues affecting subpostmasters

NFSP General Secretary George Thomson opened the presentation of the Annual Review at this year's Conference, highlighting the vital role which subpostmasters play and calling on Post Office Ltd (POL) and the government to play their full part in delivering a sustainable future for the post office network.

George contrasted the network's position now with this time last year, and highlighted the "two massive wins" which the NFSP had secured during that period – successfully campaigning for the Post Office card account (POCA) contract, and the establishment of the Business and Enterprise Committee inquiry to look at new work for post offices.

He went on: "We know that the post office network has been neglected for 20 years by governments of all parties. The network has been taken for



George Thomson on the NFSP's vision for the future

granted on the assumption that it will always be there, even if you remove work from it. It won't.

"Faced with a government which didn't seem to understand the importance of the post office network, we have produced our *Six Steps to a Sustainable Post Office Network* report, distributed

to MPs, Peers, devolved administrations and councils across the country. We have a vision, which we want to deliver in conjunction with POL and the government, of a sustainable network, achieved through the six steps we've identified. We have made clear to this government that we need answers on new work for post offices within the next few months.

"Our members have £2bn invested in this network. Yet it can sometimes feel that we are taken for granted by POL – how can it be right that Crown offices get £40m to renovate and sub post offices get nothing?"

George went on to emphasise post offices' role at the heart of communities and local retailing: "We want more protection for local shops and local retailing. The government must understand that if it does nothing, local shops won't be there.

"However, subpostmasters are

so much more than just retailers – our members have a different, very specific set of skills in running a post office and we should never forget that."

George insisted that the network should not fall below 12,000 outlets: "We do not want another post office closure programme. The only way this can be achieved is by delivering new work to subpostmasters."

He also warned that POL's new Post Office Essentials model (if trials are successful) "may have a role to play, but numbers must be tightly controlled and monitored".

George then repeated the NFSP's call for a Postbank at the Post Office, backed by the government, to put trusted local banking back into communities.

"This Federation strongly disagrees with the notion that it doesn't really matter how you become a Postbank – that's absolute rubbish," and he called for NS&I to be brought back into

the Post Office and given a banking licence.

During his address, George also warned that the dangers of separating POL from Royal Mail under the new Postal Services Bill were "massive". He said: "We need clarity for the future as the business faces up to some of the biggest changes in its history."

George finished his address by reminding delegates of the importance of the NFSP to subpostmasters, and promised: "We will make sure that everything we do has one question at its heart – does this help subpostmasters have a sustainable business? Does this help ensure that someone wants to buy the business when the subpostmaster wants to retire or sell?" He ended by telling delegates that he was proud to be the leader of such wonderful people. "We will not let you down," he said.

PAY DEAL

Negotiating Committee (NC) Chair Mervyn Jones provided Conference with an update on pay and ongoing discussions on operational procedures and processes.

He described the "intensive" negotiations with POL on this year's pay round, set against a backdrop of recession: "I won't tell you that this year's agreement comes close to your or my aspirations. I do however genuinely believe that this was the best we could achieve under the present climate.

"Many subpostmasters are struggling financially and supplementing their Post Office income with money from their retail side or from their pension," he went on. "There is a perception that subpostmasters' pay has increased, but the costs of delivery have increased significantly too.

"It was clear during pay negotiations that POL planned to move to fully variabilised pay for the commercial network. If we are to make this change, there has to be sufficient new money to achieve this. Your NC resisted POL's aspiration to fully variabilised pay due to the



Mervyn Jones reported on pay

ongoing recession and falling transaction volumes."

Addressing mailwork pay, Mervyn told delegates: "It was also clear this year that POL wished to buy out the mailwork residuum.

"The NFSP flatly and absolutely rejected this after looking at the impact in certain offices. POL refused to budge, placing the entire pay deal in jeopardy. We therefore agreed to remove mailwork sub post offices' pay from the deal to be addressed at a later date, and any changes in this area will go before the NFSP's Mailwork Advisory Group before any agreement with POL."

Mervyn stressed: "The difficulties surrounding our network won't be solved by 1% or 2% increases in pay. We need new, profitable work for POL, for subpostmasters and for the network."

Moving onto operational issues, Mervyn highlighted the



Kym Ledger reported on membership

positive feedback received so far from NFSP members who attended the Step training programme, but pointed out that subpostmasters attended at their own expense and queried whether the costs would translate into equivalent levels of sales.

Mervyn also addressed problems with cash supplies, stating that many offices had insufficient cash when winter fuel payments were due leading to subpostmasters taking abuse from dissatisfied customers.

He also acknowledged that not all subpostmasters properly managed their cash requirements, with POL incurring £26 million in interest payments last year.

On a positive note Mervyn stressed the constructive dialogue with the Product and Branch Accounting team, which had undertaken to clarify the process around transaction correction disputes.

MEMBERSHIP

Publicity and Development Committee Chair Kym Ledger began her Conference address by looking at membership, and stated that although the NFSP's profile had been raised through the well publicised campaign victory on POCA, membership density had not increased.

While NFSP percentages had remained unchanged following Network Change, Kym pointed out that this meant that "we have the same share of a much smaller pie" and went on to stress the importance of membership retention and recruitment.

She set out the various recruitment initiatives currently in operation, including Super Recruiters, the ongoing importance of Regional Membership Officers and how, for the first time, the NFSP had won the right to meet with newly-appointed subpostmasters during their training by POL.

Kym told Conference that the newly revised Branch Secretaries Guide "was a vital work aid" which "had been welcomed throughout the Federation". She told Branch Secretaries: "Your Executive Officer will provide training for you on a one-to-one basis, all you need to do is ask."

Kym highlighted the changes in the NFSP Helpline, with members now phoning through to NFSP Headquarters; and the success of the NFSP forum. "We hope that as the forum community grows, word of mouth will mean that the numbers registered will increase further," she said.

NFSP structure

Publicity and Development Committee Chair Kym Ledger presented the Executive Council's proposals for restructuring the NFSP. She explained that the aim of the review had been to identify a way forward to ensure members receive a service that best fits their needs going into the future, and ensures that the NFSP continues to be a highly respected and influential organisation on behalf of its members.

The proposals included allowing branches to merge to ensure all members have access to an active branch, and centralising region and branch financing at regional level to give each region the flexibility to ensure that members' subscription income is utilised and meets the needs of all members.

Following debate, the motion was carried. Further information will be issued in the coming months.