

WITNESS: GILLIAN HOWARD

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0157\_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 13, 2022

**POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY**

**FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF GILLIAN HOWARD**

THIS STATEMENT IS PROVIDED IN RESPONSE TO THE RULE 9 REQUEST OF THE PUBLIC INQUIRY DATED 29/10/2021 TO ADDRESS THE HUMAN IMPACT OF THE FAILINGS OF THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM

I, MRS GILLIAN HOWARD, Date of Birth [GRO], of [GRO], [GRO] will say as follows:-

**PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

1. I am 62 years old. I am married to my Husband, [GRO]. We have been together since I was 13 years old and [GRO] was 15 years. We got married at Christmas in 1978 when I was 19 years old.
2. We have two children together, a son and a daughter. Our son [GRO] is 28 years old, he will be 29 in [GRO]. Our daughter [GRO] is 32 years old, having been born in 1989. We were told we couldn't have children so it was very special when we found out we were expecting.

3. **GRO** still lives at home with me and **GRO**, and **GRO**, who is married, lives next door with her husband, **GRO** and their two children, **GRO**, who is 10 years old and **GRO** who is 5 years old.
4. **GRO** and I have continued to own the paper shop at the Post Office Branch and I do some work for the business from home. This normally involves buying stock, pricing and preparing vouchers. I also care for my husband as he has never fully recovered from a stroke he suffered in 2008.
5. In early 2021, I was diagnosed as suffering from Phobic Anxiety Disorder.

## **POST OFFICE HISTORY**

6. We bought the New Mill Post Office in 2002 for £69,950.00. It was mine and **GRO** dream to run a Post Office so I was happy to support his decision to make an offer on the local branch. We knew it would involve a lot of hard work, but we wanted to invest in the business and set ourselves up financially for retirement. We used all our savings and re-mortgaged our house to make up the purchase price.
7. I was employed by the Post Office as a Registered Assistant at the New Mill Post Office. I would work in the evenings and weekends and would help **GRO** to close the shop, do cash collections and carry out small administrative tasks.
8. On the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2008, I took over in the role of Sub-Postmistress at the New Mill Post Office in Huddersfield. My husband **GRO** had been the Sub-Postmaster at this branch since we purchased it in 2002; however, he suffered a stroke in 2008 which is why I took over. At the time I was also working as an

insurance claims manager. In this role I was responsible for, amongst other things banking, time sheets and petty cash.

9. I was never officially appointed as the Sub-Postmistress. I had contacted our Business Development Officer as I was struggling after [GRO] Stroke. I recall her coming round and I thought she was going to help me, but instead she just gave me a box of chocolates and manager's access on the computer. She said as we didn't have a manager I needed to have access. She told me a charter was going to be written on what to do if there were errors, but this never materialised.
10. Following an audit on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2010, I was suspended from the position of Sub-postmistress.

#### **CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION**

11. When [GRO] was Sub-Postmaster, he experienced several shortfalls. These were normally small amounts so we simply made them up out of our own money. I would withdraw the cash from our personal accounts through the ATM at our shop. I would estimate that between 2002 and 2008, there was around £1,000.00 in shortfalls.
12. We would try and look into the shortfalls, but it would take hours and the helpline never really helped us resolve the issue. It was extremely stressful.
13. When I took over the branch. I experienced yet more shortfalls, which were getting larger over time. It was all very confusing. To make matters worse, at the time I took over, two local Post Offices were closed so their business was redirected to us. I was absolutely run off my feet.

14. By 2008 I was going to the paper shop at 5.30 in the morning to sort the papers, I would then open the Post Office for 9.00am and work all day. I would close between 5.00 – 5.30pm so that I could drive an hour to see **GRO** in hospital. I always had to ring to make sure I was okay to close the branch. Once I came home from the hospital I would do my work for my claims manager role. I did this for 19 weeks. I was exhausted.
15. I tried calling the helpline numerous times about the shortfalls, but they were not helpful. I was not told other people were experiencing the same issues so I felt totally alone.
16. On balance nights, my employee and I were often there for hours trying to balance the system. She would be on the phone to the helpline, but we never got any help. Eventually, they made it so that the line closed at 5.00pm which wasn't helpful as we did not balance up until after this time. We then had to call the next day, but the line could ring for half an hour and then get cut off. We would have to wait 24 hours for someone to ring us back and then sometimes it would need to go to the second or third line and it could be days before you heard from them and by this time more problems had developed.
17. By March 2010, the shortfalls were amounting to £22,000.00. I was sinking under the pressure of running the branch, holding down my job and caring for my husband, but I felt as if I had no option but to carry on as I didn't want to lose the branch and our pensions.
18. On the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2010, the Post Office came in to take an audit due to concerns about the amount of cash I was holding overnight. The local bus company would deposit coins on a night. There was too much for me to count on an evening as I went to see **GRO**, so I would do it the next day.

19. I had mixed feelings at the time of the audit; I knew I had been making minor mistakes, but I just could not understand why the shortfalls were so significant. I used to spend hours trying to work out where I had gone wrong, but eventually I just gave up as I had so much going on. I knew if I declared the balance as wrong I wouldn't be able to open the next day so I would just declare the figure it said.
20. I remember feeling relieved when the auditors came as I couldn't cope with the amount of stress the shortfalls were causing me and I felt that someone was finally going to help. However, I was also so worried about what all my family would think about me. I felt I would be humiliated because I thought it was me making all the mistakes.
21. When the auditors arrived, I panicked and told them I had to go to the doctors, because I didn't want to be there, I was so scared. I recall driving to Denby Dale. I didn't take a phone with me and I thought about ending my life. It was only because I knew that GRO needed me that I didn't go through with it.
22. I realised that I had to face up to the matter and with the help of my daughter, returned to the branch later that afternoon and confessed that I had been making some minor mistakes. I advised the auditors that I was not taking the money and that I would declare the balance even though I knew it wasn't right because otherwise I could not open the next day and there was no one to help me on the helpline.
23. The auditors did not appear to be aware that the Sub-Postmaster had suffered a stroke.
24. The final audit showed a shortfall of £48,850.05. The shortfall had doubled in the space of two months.

25. I felt so guilty. I thought it was my fault that the mistakes were happening and that I wasn't capable of doing the job. I never considered that it was the computer system that was at fault.
26. The day after the audit, on 28 May 2010, Helen Dickenson, a fraud investigator came to visit me and [GRO] at home. I remember her arriving and telling us that she was the "Post Office Police". I had not told [GRO] anything about the shortfalls, he was advised he could resign or face a disciplinary hearing.
27. He would not have coped with a hearing, at the time he couldn't even read or write. He therefore had no option but to resign.
28. A week later, I was interviewed by Helen Dickinson and Paul Whittaker from the Post Office. Once the tapes had stopped, Helen advised me it could be one of three options; my employee had taken the money; we had made lots of mistakes or the Post Office had let us down. She said she would do everything she could to dissuade the Post Office from pressing charges against me.
29. On the morning of my daughter's wedding, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010, I received a letter from the Post Office informing me that I was being charged with False Accounting. I was advised by my solicitor to plead guilty and I did so on the basis that it was made clear that I made no financial gain from the shortfalls.
30. On the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2011, I was sentenced to a 6 month probation order with 6 months of supervision.

## **THE HUMAN IMPACT**

31. The human impact which the failings of the Horizon IT System have had and continue to have upon me and my family are set out in the remainder of this

statement. The section headings follow the particular questions posed by the Inquiry.

**WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING REQUIRED TO MAKE GOOD APPARENT SHORTFALLS SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?**

32. We were told that we needed to pay back the shortfall that had been found. We had no option but to look to sell the branch as I could not risk losing our family home as this had been adapted for **GRO** needs following his stroke.
33. We had paid cash for the Post Office. We had worked hard all our life for this money and it was our retirement fund.
34. We have purchased the business for just over £69,000.00. When it was valued we were told it was worth £90,000.00 so we put it on the market for this price the same week. We had an offer; however, when the buyer applied to the Post Office, he was told it was going to become a Post Office Local and this meant that the salary was reduced.
35. **GRO** had been paid a salary of £34,000.00 per annum; however, this was to be reduced to £13,500.00 per annum. The business had to be revalued and decreased to £60,000.00. The buyer decreased his offer to around £30,000.00; however, we were unable to accept this as this didn't even discharge our debt to the Post Office.
36. We put the business back on the market and received a further offer, but for reasons I cannot recall he backed out.
37. We then had an offer from a cash buyer in the village for just under the value and to me he seemed the perfect buyer. He had previously worked for the Post Office as an auditor and knew our situation. He had all his bank accounts set

up, he had completed his business plan and paid his deposit, but when he applied to the Post Office they turned him down. It felt as if they did not want us to find a buyer.

38. We spent two years trying to find a buyer. In the end someone approached us to sublet a third of the building as a pharmacy. We spoke to the landlord and this was agreed and all the correct contracts were arranged. We didn't make any profit from this.

39. The lease has recently been renewed on the building and due to a term in the landlord's insurance, the pharmacy has now been given its own lease rather than subletting for us. This means we now only have a third of the building as the post office was taken off us. It is therefore extremely difficult for us to sell the one-third share and I think the only person we can sell to is the pharmacy.

40. There is also a clause in the lease that says that if the pharmacy decides to revoke their license then we have to take the lease back. There is no option, this will be enforced upon us.

41. Despite being unable to sell the business, the post office continued to chase me for payment. They would hound me and I would receive threatening letters from their solicitors. My daughter tried writing back to them to explain that I did not have the money and to leave me alone as I was doing my best.

42. I remember at the point that I was really getting hounded. I saw something about this happening to other people. I found a number for Alan Bates and I called him. I remember coming off the phone knowing this was not just me and this just grew and grew. I was put onto a firm of solicitors who had drafted a template letter to send to the Post Office Solicitors to try and stop them from chasing the payment.



43. I recall the letter saying that we were aware that the horizon system was under investigation and that until this was complete they should not attempt to get money out of me. We sent the letter to them and received a response saying that they would put the matter on hold.
44. It was such a stressful time dealing with all of this, and as **GRO** was poorly I did not have any support from him as he was not able to give me it. I was also caring for him.
45. **GRO** was not able to go back to work, because of his stroke and the Post Office was taken off us immediately and new agency staff were put in there the following day.
46. Because we were unable to sell the business, I had to keep the paper shop going; however, the majority of the time I would hide in the back in the stockroom. People used to think it was because of **GRO** stroke and I would let them. I never told anyone what happened to me.
47. Money was tight and I ended up selling things including my mother's jewellery and father's war medals. My brother doesn't know this and I feel so guilty. I worry he will ask me for them and I will have to tell him.
48. My brother, who was in his mid 60's at the time, went back to work at a funeral parlour in order to help us out. He opened a bank account and gave me the card and all of his wages went into this account. He retired again when my conviction was overturned aged 73.
49. **GRO** parents who were in their late 80's would also help us out. They would go without things so that they could help us.
50. Because we only had 1/3 of the business and I was struggling to work we had to employ more staff and this meant we were paying out more in wages.

**WHAT WERE THE COSTS OF MAKING GOOD ALLEGED SHORTFALLS SHOWN BY HORIZON?**

51. I paid back the smaller shortfalls with money from our own business account as mentioned above.
52. As detailed above, I would estimate that between 2002 and 2008, there was around £1,000.00 in shortfalls.

**HOW WERE YOU AFFECTED WHEN ALLEGED TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SHORTFALLS OR DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?**

53. I was out of my mind with worry over the investigation. At the time  could barely do anything for himself; I had to dress him and feed him and help him to the toilet.
54. I felt that I had let everyone down. I have strong values and I felt that I hadn't kept to these. There were times where I felt that I couldn't go home, but I knew I had to because  needed me.
55. I felt so guilty because I thought it was me making the mistakes. I have always worked in a financial role. I have worked for a building society and then as a claims manager, but these roles were all on paper. I thought it was me making a mistake with the computer system.
56. I also felt very let down by the Post Office. I had received no support from them; however, the previous year when we had suffered a break in and some cigarettes were stolen they had provided us with support even though the break in was to the shop and not the post office.

**WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?**

57. I don't remember initially ever being accused of anything. We were just told that there was a shortfall and we would need to pay this back and [GRO] would need to resign or he would be suspended with immediate effect with a disciplinary hearing to take place. We also lost the Post Office with immediate effect.

58. Luckily we had previously taken out income protection and mortgage protection and this had all come into effect when [GRO] suffered his stroke. This meant there was no mortgage on our family home and we have continued to receive half of [GRO] income. We will be paid this until [GRO] is 65, the payment will then stop but his pension will not start until he is 67.

**WHAT WERE YOUR FINANCIAL LOSSES CAUSED BY ACTION TAKEN AGAINST YOU IN RELIANCE UPON HORIZON DATA?**

59. As explained above, we tried to sell the business but in the end we couldn't, so we had to keep the paper shop open.

60. I lost my Post Office wage and [GRO] was not able to return to work as a result of his stroke.

61. As detailed above, my brother went back to work and gave all of his wages to us so we could get by.

62. During my prosecution, I couldn't get funding support for a solicitor as I had to provide details of my income for the previous years and this had been good. My brother therefore lent me the money for a solicitor. I think it cost him about £5,000.00.

**WHAT EFFECT DID IT HAVE TO BE ACCUSED OF COMMITTING CRIMINAL OFFENCES AS A RESULT OF SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?**

63. When I received the letter informing me I had been charged with False Accounting, I was utterly devastated. I felt like my whole life had been turned upside down and that I had ruined my daughter's wedding day. I considered taking my own life. Without a doubt, this was the worst day of my life.

64. We were just about to leave for the wedding when the postman knocked on the door with a recorded delivery letter. I put it to one side, but my daughter encouraged me to open it as I needed to face what was happening.

65. My daughter wanted to cancel the wedding, but they had spent two years arranging it around [GRO] birthday. We had been told that whatever improvement [GRO] had made within two years of his stroke would be how he would stay. It was also too late in the day to call the wedding off.

66. I remember not wanting to be there and I did not enjoy the day at all. I took my glasses off because I thought that if I couldn't see anyone then they couldn't see me.

67. I barely spoke to anyone and I wasn't in any of the photographs. We live in a small cul-de-sac and because of the support I received after [GRO] stroke, all of our neighbours were invited to the wedding. I have recently found out that they all thought that I didn't approve of the wedding and this is why I didn't speak to anyone. This really upset me as it was not the case, I thought he was a lovely lad.

68. I couldn't even bring myself to look at the wedding photographs as they just reminded me so much about what had happened. I wouldn't even have a picture up in the house. It wasn't until three months ago that this changed and I managed to put two photographs up.

69. When all this is over, the plan is for [GRO] and [GRO] to do a vow renewal so that I am able to enjoy the day.

70. I was also very concerned about what [GRO] family would think of me. I didn't want them to think I was a criminal.

71. In the valley that I live in, everyone knows everyone. I have never discussed what we have been through with anyone. I feel embarrassed about it and did not want people gossiping or feeling sorry for me.

**WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING CONVICTED OF A CRIMINAL OFFENCE AS A RESULT OF SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?**

72. I can still remember going to court which was an awful experience. [GRO] and my brother came and they sat in the gallery in their suits. Helen Dickinson was also there and told me that I shouldn't have been brought to court. I just did not know what was going to happen to me and I was so worried about what would happen to [GRO] as I was still having to help him dress and wash and go to the toilet. My daughter had also just found out that she was expecting a baby.

73. I remember standing there with the man next to me ready to take me down the steps and I just thought, I might be going down there.

74. My solicitor advised me that I should plead guilty to false accounting to try and avoid a prison sentence. I agreed to do so on the basis that it was stated that I had not received any financial or material gain.
75. I hadn't taken a penny and would have done anything to have proved my innocence. I even asked if I could undergo a lie detector.
76. The Judge asked the Post Office representatives how much was missing and not one of them knew. He said it was a sad situation as because I had pleaded guilty he had no option but to sentence me even though he didn't believe I had done anything wrong. He therefore gave me the minimum sentence he could.
77. I felt so humiliated going to the probation meetings. The first time I went, GRO came with me to support me but he was told that he was not allowed in. There were people in there with tins of cider and I was just on my own. I felt so frightened. I went through to another room with a lady and she said the only thing I was guilty of was not shouting louder. I feel guilty of this to this day, but I did try to shout and no one was listening.
78. The probation office was on the ring road on the corner that went round to the retail park. I parked up and sat and watched the traffic lights so I could work out the sequence so I could get in without people seeing me. I worked out I had about 30 seconds to ring the bell and get in.
79. In the end the probation officers allowed me to park in the back car park and enter and leave by the back door.
80. I had never even had a speeding or parking ticket before this conviction.
81. Following my conviction I stopped working in the shop and started to hide away. I was so worried about what would be in the papers and kept thinking I would be in the shop selling a paper with my photograph on the front of it.

82. I didn't look for other employment because I felt that no one would employ me with a criminal record.

**WHAT EFFECT DID THESE ISSUES HAVE UPON YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES AND LOCAL COMMUNITY?**

83. I stopped going out. I couldn't go to any of the local shops and I wouldn't even put the bins out unless it was dark for fear of people seeing me. I would either do it late at night or I would get up at 4/5am to put them out. I didn't want to bump into people as I didn't know what had been said or what to say to them.

84. After my conviction was overturned, it was reported in the Yorkshire Post and even then I feared that people would believe that I was guilty. My family have been amazing at supporting me and have never once thought I had done anything wrong. I have also found the support of my legal team has really helped me.

85. Before my conviction was overturned I did feel that I had no support and it was just me and **GRO** because I was not able to let anyone else in and tell them what had happened because I was so embarrassed. I also wanted to protect my family so it was easier to let people believe it was all because of **GRO** stroke. I didn't want my children hearing people talking about their mum.

86. We would go to GP appointments for **GRO** and sometimes the doctor would ask me how I was. Sometimes I would say I was okay and other days I would cry because it was all getting to me, but I could never tell them what went on. They just thought it was because of **GRO** I felt as though I was living a double life. I couldn't tell people the truth so I was forced into lying. I brought

my children up to always be honest and it felt as though I was breaking my own rule in not telling people what had really happened.

87. We lost almost all of our friends. We did tell one friend about what happened, **GRO** who lives just down the road from us because I have always felt you need just one person and I could be truthful with her. At one point I was so low that I melted down **GRO** tablets into a cup for me to take. I just felt as though I couldn't cope, there were bills coming through the door which we were struggling to pay, I was being chased for money and it was all over the media that the horizon system was robust. Our friend happened to come by and saw what I was doing. She saved me that day.
88. I previously used to do a lot of work for charity, in the community **GRO** and I would use our cars to run the elderly to and from church if there was a funeral on; however, I stopped doing this after my conviction.
89. I have always been very generous, buying gifts every Christmas for the local hospital and I used to be the trustee of a local social club before **GRO** was born. Whilst doing this I helped organise sponsoring guide dogs. I have always dealt with money. I just can't believe that the Post Office has done this to me.
90. Since the conviction was overturned I have made progress in going out. I started to try and go back to the shop. Initially when I tried to approach it, I would start to feel sick and would shake so I would turn around and come back home. Gradually I managed to get to the stage where I could park in the car park. I then made it to the front door and in the last couple of weeks I have managed to go behind the counter and serve some customers.
91. I am still unable to go in any of the local shops. To help me get out more, my daughter and son-in-law re-mortgaged their house and purchased a caravan in



Skipsea which we go to every weekend as a family. It has really helped me and I really enjoy going here; no one knows who I am so I feel that I am able to go out and go in all the shops. We are also able to go out for tea there which I don't feel I can do at home. We have even been out to see GRO which is something I never thought I would do. We have been going here since May/June 2021 and I feel like a different person. It's like everything lifts from me and I feel amazing. We don't talk about what has happened whilst we are there.

92. My Daughter and Son-in-Law have recently told my neighbours, on the other side of my house of the house to them, about what has happened to me and they have been fine about it.

93. I have also recently spoken to GRO the person who runs the Post Office in my shop about what happened to me. He advised that he used to be an auditor for the Post Office and said that it was dreadful what had happened. He said they could see what was happening, but were told to keep their mouths shut or they would lose their jobs. This wasn't nice to hear.

**PLEASE DESCRIBE THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECT WHICH THESE ISSUES HAD UPON THE MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY?**

94. My daughter has been impacted by what has happened. She became a very angry person and her mood would change at the flick of a switch for no reason. We wouldn't know what we had done wrong. She hid from me how bad things were because she knew we had enough to cope with, but she would suffer from paranoia and panic attacks and she wasn't sleeping.

95. One day she was driving home from work when she was getting palpitations and thought she was having a heart attack so took herself to hospital. She was having a panic attack.
96. She attended a psychiatrist for this and has got better, but it has still impacted on her life. She worked at the local GP and this was another reason why I could not tell them about my conviction as I did not want to hinder her. She was initially a receptionist before becoming a secretary, and eventually assistant practice manager. They eventually asked her to become the Practice Manager, but due to supporting me and **GRO** she felt unable to take on the job and therefore in the best interests of the GP she resigned and returned to her previous employers where she remains today.
97. My son was still in school when **GRO** suffered a stroke; however, he felt as though he needed to become the man of the house and saved up his pocket money to buy himself a tool kit to help around the house. He would come with me to open and lock up the shop and help with any carrying or lifting. When he finished school he took over running the shop and continues to do this.
98. He is also involved in volunteering for a charity called "you can shine" which helps school children with their confidence and he is a football coach. He wanted to do something like this professionally, but it meant that he would need to go to college and he did not feel he could do this and so had to give up on this dream.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

99. I am sometimes angry about what has happened and sometimes I am disappointed. I couldn't be in London when the conviction was overturned due to **GRO** and I just felt so alone. How do you put right what has gone wrong?

100. I haven't celebrated the conviction being overturned as I don't feel as though the matter is finished yet. My friend has bought me a bottle of Champagne to open, but I don't think the day for this has come, although I know it will.

101. I think what has happened will always be with me, I am reminded every time I see that Post Office sign. I just want the people who did this to understand what they have done to me. I am a strong person and they have weakened me, but I will get it back.

**Statement Of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed:

**GRO**  
Gillian 2 11:47 GMT

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 13, 2022

Name: GILLIAN HOWARD

FILE REFERENCE: **GRO**

