

Witness Name: Mr Scott Darlington

Statement No: WITN0237_01

Exhibits: None

Dated: 8/1/2022

IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR SCOTT DARLINGTON

I, MR SCOTT DARLINGTON WILL SAY as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. I am grateful to the Chair to be invited to provide a "human impact" statement, concerning the physical, psychological, emotional, reputational and financial consequences to me and my family of being held responsible for shortfalls shown by the Horizon IT system and Post Office Limited's actions toward me and my family. The initial paragraphs below provide a brief summary of my background, and provide context to the detail of the human impact of the Horizon scandal on me and my family. This statement does not reflect a full account of my experiences or those of my family and if necessary or required I will provide further witness statement evidence.

BACKGROUND

2. I am now 59 years old. My criminal conviction by Post Office Ltd (which was quashed by the Court of Appeal in April 2021) and the poverty I was put in by Post Office played a very significant part in the breakdown of my relationship, as I am no longer with my daughter's mother. However, I play an active part in my daughter's life and have a good relationship with my ex-partner, who I was with for over 20 years.

3. I went to Music College and obtained a HND in sound engineering and from school obtained an apprenticeship at ICI pharmaceutical. I worked there until I was 23. I then went to Israel for a year and lived on a Kibbutz.
4. When I returned, I started working with a popular music label and was involved in merchandise and working at different gigs. I was around 26-28 when I did this.
5. I then went to work at an engineering supply company as an Account Manager. This was around 1988, and I worked there for five years.
6. Following this job I ran a record shop for two years.
7. After that, when my mum became ill with cancer, I helped run her business which was part of a shop, a cigarette shop. I worked there from 1997 until 2005. She died whilst I was working there. I subsequently came to sell my mother's half of the business and I used the proceeds and part of my savings to buy the post office, based in Alderley Edge.
8. I paid £154,000 for the post office and there is approximately £65,000 still outstanding on the mortgage. This was a post office in a comfortable and wealthy village. I got to know everyone in the village and I really enjoyed the work.
9. I was a Subpostmaster of Alderley Edge Post Office, 45 London Road, Alderley Edge, Cheshire SK9 7JT from 12 March 2005 to 9 April 2009, following suspension by the Post Office in February 2009. I operated a retail business from the same premises comprising of greeting cards, stationery and gifts. I employed two part time assistants.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

10. I received initial training from the Post Office regarding Horizon when I took up the position of subpostmaster.
11. Prior to taking up the position I received 10 days' training in Liverpool, at Post Office's Lyme Street offices, starting approximately 28 February 2005 and ending 11 March 2005. It seemed useful at the time, but I quickly learnt that it had covered only about 25% of the type of transactions which I would go on to undertake. We undertook one training balance, but only around 5 transactions had taken place so it was not a realistic trial run.
12. A trainer then attended the branch for my first week. When balancing on the Wednesday, I was down by £6. The trainer said that this was a good thing as, given the hundreds of transactions that took place each day, it was highly unlikely that I would balance to the penny. He encouraged me to accept the discrepancy, instead of investigating it as he said that it may not be possible to get to the root of the issue even after reviewing all the paperwork. The trainer also said that the loss may resolve itself the following month in any event.
13. I received no further training.

HELPLINE

14. I contacted the Helpline to seek advice regarding Horizon and/or alleged shortfalls 2-3 times a month.
15. For example, I rang the helpline to ask them how I was meant to vouch for the accuracy of the transaction stream going forward in the absence of retained documentation. This issue arose as there was a change in methodology for Giro Cheques. The new Giro cheques had a barcode, which meant that you did not retain

any evidence of the Giro having been cashed or paid in. Previously there had been a paper slip, which I submitted to Post Office every day. This new system had no way of checking what had been paid or received. If the system went down, once it rebooted it asked "*are there any giro transactions that need recovering?*".

16. Of course I could not know the answer to this question, as I wasn't sure what the system had stored or lost, and I could only access this information once I had answered the question. The Helpline advisor did not know the answer and escalated the question to a technical manager, who told me that he did not know how transaction corrections could be generated once the barcoded giro paying-in slips were introduced. This meant that I had no independent way of verifying what had been paid in or cashed, and the sums involved were very large.
17. The helpline was only open until 8pm on balancing days (Wednesdays), and often it would take longer to balance than this, and so I had little option but to pay the smaller shortfalls that regularly arose in order to open up the next day.
18. I emphasise that because of the way the Horizon system worked, it was almost impossible to conduct any kind of audit trail to identify where discrepancies might have arisen.
19. Prior to the large discrepancy in September 2008, which ultimately led to my suspension, termination, and prosecution, I had a smaller discrepancy of £1,700 in around May 2008 (see below). The Horizon system showed that I apparently had £1,700 more of stamp holdings than I actually had in the branch.
20. When I contacted the helpline, the advisor said that unless I could prove that the stamp holdings were wrong, I had to pay with either cash or a cheque. The advisor simply said that a mistake had been made and that was the end of the matter. We settled for a deduction from my salary of £850 over 2 months.

21. I asked Post Office how I could query the system regarding stamp shortfalls, and whether Post Office accessing the system remotely could be a possible cause of the shortfalls. Post Office told me that it was not possible to access branch data remotely. They said that the only way that they could affect transactions, was to issue a Transaction Correction and only when the branch accepted the Transaction Correction was the data amended.

22. I later found out, during the Group Litigation, that this was untrue. The Post Office could access terminals remotely.

SHORTFALLS

23. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon IT System, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, in order to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.

24. My work started relatively well at the post office. The first odd thing that arose was when I received a transaction correction notice which had arisen from the prior subpostmaster. It came through on the Horizon screen and I telephoned the helpline. The Post Office said I had to pay it and chase the previous postmaster. I never got that money back. This is an example of how the Post Office held me and other SMPs responsible for making good so called shortfalls or discrepancies, no matter what the cause.

25. For the first few weeks there weren't any real problems, there was often a slight discrepancy but usually it would be just a few pounds. There would be a stock take every week.

26. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) in excess of £2,200. There were a number of minor shortfalls during the

period of my appointment, which totalled approximately £500-£700. I was not made aware of any obligation to repay shortfalls, when I went to my original interviews with the Post Office. No one told me about any potential problems, including the SPM that I bought the branch from, who had been in position for 20 years.

27. Two weeks into the role I received a transaction correction for £450 relating to the previous SPM and I was told to pay it, even though it had absolutely nothing to do with me.
28. This was a transaction correction that I received about 2 weeks into my appointment, which related to the period prior to my appointment and the previous SPM. I was told by Post Office that I had to pay for this regardless, which I did so that I did not have problems from the start of my appointment.
29. On 3 May 2008 I experienced a shortfall of £1,700. This shortfall was deducted from my remuneration. This was shown as a loss in the accounts.
30. I recall that in February/March 2008 we were £1,700 down on stamps. The system effectively said I had £1,700 worth of stamps more than I had actually had. I rang the helpline and they basically said I had to pay the money unless I could prove there was something wrong. They took it automatically out of my remuneration. I was earning £35,000 per annum.
31. I was astonished and angry. The fact was that this discrepancy was clearly not my fault. I told the Helpline that the system was saying that I had more stamps in the office than I had had the previous week, but I had had no deliveries of stamps. So it was impossible that the £1,700 to be correct. However, the Helpline gave me no option but to pay. There was no offer at all of any investigation. As such, I had to agree to 'repay' this sum in two monthly instalments from my salary at £850 per month.
32. This demonstrates how unequal the relationship was with Post Office, if they said that the account was short, you had to pay, no matter what.

33. In September 2008 I experienced a shortfall of £9,000. I did not repay the Post Office this shortfall. I spent hours trying to investigate the apparent shortfall. I didn't know what to do, so I signed off the accounts as correct, even though technically the Post Office would say that they were not.
34. I only did this because I did not think that I could rely on the Post Office to help me, after the previous incident with the shortfalls described above, and hoped that a transaction correction would correct the situation before long.
35. In September 2008 I recall that there was another large discrepancy of £4,000. I and my colleague, Arthur, who worked for me, stayed up until 11pm to try and work out what was going on. I decided not to tell the post office straight away because they would simply take the money back without any investigation. Consequently I added in £4,000 in order to make the figures balance otherwise the software would not have worked.
36. However the problem kept repeating itself, and I kept doing the same thing and eventually it had increased to £40,000.
37. I had no idea where these shortfalls were arising. Arthur had worked in post offices for some thirty years, could not understand how the shortfall was arising. There were errors in a number of areas, such as foreign currency, cash, stamp holdings etc. We knew that there was no way that we could have been making so many large errors in so many areas. We were very sure that Horizon was wrong.
38. In February 2009 I experienced a shortfall of £44,508.46. This sum had risen incrementally over the months following the £9,000 shortfall. This final figure was determined at an audit. I was suspended on the day of the audit and therefore did not carry out the accounts.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

39. The Post Office conducted an audit of the branch on 12 February 2009 prior to my termination.
40. Although I knew I was in trouble and that I may lose my job, there was an element of relief that this was going to be sorted out.
41. This audit came after the Post Office asked me to remit £50,000 of cash to them as they stated that there was too much cash in the branch, which I was not in a position to do as a result of the alleged shortfalls that I had been experiencing.
42. The auditor arrived shortly thereafter, which I was grateful for as I wanted to get to the bottom of the problems. I immediately explained that the figures had been inflated by about £40,000 and the auditor checked the stock against Horizon (which I did not consider to be a thorough audit) and there was an apparent shortfall of around £44,000.
43. Even after the auditors had done a full audit, the imbalance increased by another £4,000 from £40,000 to £44,000 and they could not establish what had happened.
44. The 'Fraud Investigation Team' arrived the same day, and said that I was suspected of a criminal offence, before the audit had even been concluded. The contracts manager then called me to say that I was suspended.
45. In my certain view there was no adequate investigation.
46. On the day of the audit I was taken to the Crown Post Office in Macclesfield for an interview. I was told that I could either have a Royal Mail employee or National Federation Representative with me. I was not advised to seek independent legal advice, and I did not believe that I needed it. The notes from the interview do not adequately reflect the conduct of the interview, as the Post Office staff were

intimidating and kept leaning over me demanding to know if I had stolen the money, which I had not.

47. I was interviewed under caution by Post Office Limited Fraud officers and found them to be quite threatening. They had access to my bank accounts.
48. The Post Office then said that they needed to search my house, which I invited them to do immediately, as I had nothing to hide. The investigators also said that they had the right to access my personal and business bank accounts, which I showed them. They found nothing other than a £4k entry which they queried and I explained that I had sold some musical equipment, including a very expensive microphone and pre amplifier.
49. My employment was terminated and I was subsequently charged, prosecuted and received three months custody suspended for two years in February 2010. I first appeared in court I believe in relation to this matter in January 2009.
50. After my termination, Post Office Ltd returned some documents to me that I had provided them with, the double banding that I used to seal them had been untouched, so it was clear that the Post Office had not reviewed the documentation I had provided at all.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

51. I was formally suspended on 12 February 2009 by letter. I recall that this letter stated that it was due to falsification of accounts.
52. The branch was closed on 12 February 2009.
53. A temporary SPM contacted me, who was given my details by Post Office Ltd. He offered me 10% of the remuneration in return for him running it. I couldn't afford this,

so I found a locum SPM who agreed to pay me £2,250 per month. However, this quickly reduced to £600, as the locum SPM said he could not afford it. This did not cover the rent and the business started to lose money very quickly.

54. My contract was terminated by Post Office for reasons relating to alleged shortfalls. Post Office stated that I was in breach of section 12 of my contract as a result of falsifying accounts.
55. The Post Office did not prevent or impede the sale or transfer of my business directly. I attempted to sell the branch, and had a buyer lined up, but the process for the buyer to apply to be the SPM took so long that the buyer pulled out a few days before the lease was due to be signed. Eventually, my Landlord could not wait any longer and my lease was terminated.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

56. After my criminal conviction (which I detail later in this Statement) the Post Office pursued civil proceedings against me for the recovery of the alleged shortfalls. A Proceeds of Crime Act application was made to recover £44,000 and an application for a restraining order over the branch, my property and my car.
57. A restraining order was granted preventing the disposal of the lease on the branch, or the property and my car. The Proceeds of Crime Act application was withdrawn on the day of the court hearing by Post Office Ltd, on the basis, I was advised, that it could not succeed.

LOSSES

58. I lost significant sums in shortfalls. Some £2,200 in large shortfalls, and a significant number of smaller shortfalls.

59. I lost the value of my business. I purchased the branch for £154,000 (using a £110k loan and £30k inheritance, plus £17k loan from my brother to purchase stock. I also spent £6.5k refurbishing the branch.
60. After I was suspended as the subpostmaster, the shop began to lose money. However I still had to pay the full rent on it. Post Office had put another subpostmaster in to run the post office within my shop, although they didn't pay me the full rent. I tried to sell the lease but eventually the landlord foreclosed.
61. I was suspended for 2 months without pay equating to approximately £9,166 in lost salary.
62. I should have been given notice and paid for this period. As such, I was due £55,000 for twelve months' notice, or £27,500 for 6 months' notice or £13,750 for 3 months' notice.
63. The reasons I invested in a post office was because I was looking for a steady income to support my family, including securing my young daughter's future. I would have continued to run the post office for a further 20 years until retiring at 67. My anticipated earnings in this period would have been £1,100,000 from the branch and £670,000 from the retail business.
64. After the closure of the business I was unemployed for 4 years. I could not find other employment because of my criminal conviction.
65. I was forced to alter my loan used to purchase the business to an interest only loan and £65,000 remains outstanding. I believe I have paid approximately £30,000 in interest on this loan to date.

66. I had to sign my house over to my ex-partner, as I was unable to pay for the mortgage or outstanding loan against it, so I have lost any future increase in the value of that property. My father paid £1,200 for the last council tax bill of the post office before the landlord foreclosed the premises.
67. I could not repay a loan taken out through Northern Rock to attempt to improve the branch, and the remaining £9,000 was charged against my property. My ex partner had to pay £6,000 in a deal to remove the charge, so she was able to negotiate a new mortgage in her name.
68. I have County Court Judgments against my name.
69. I had to pay £5k to exit the lease. I had to sell everything I had, including my musical instruments to find the money to pay my landlords to exit the lease and avoid bankruptcy. I describe the impact of this further below.

HUMAN IMPACT

70. As I have said, I suffered serious and repeated shortfalls in the Horizon system at my post office, which I simply could not understand.
71. Running a post office is like any other business in that a lot of money comes in and a lot goes out. Whatever is left is your living. It's quite a tight margin at times. Small discrepancies appeared at every office balance, a few pounds here and there so this wasn't a problem to absorb. However when I experienced a shortfall of £1,700 and it became clear that I was to pay it back no matter what, this had quite an impact on my ability to pay staff wages and other costs. I was only able to absorb this loss because I had built up some savings by then.

72. My trust in the Horizon system was lost and from then, and any pleasure derived from running the branch was replaced with a constant worry.
73. The way the transaction correction system operated, meant that any known transactional mistakes had to be made good immediately, whilst waiting sometimes weeks for the correction to be sent to the terminal in my branch. Again this disrupted cash flow. I was very nervous that another sizeable discrepancy would cause massive problems. I was proved right.
74. On the day the Post Office auditors arrived, and the shortfall became known, I was treated like a suspect criminal. There was no assistance to help get to the bottom of what had happened to create the shortfalls.
75. The investigators read the "you are suspected of committing a criminal offence and anything you say may be used as evidence etc" statement to me.
76. I was not allowed out of my little office while another balance was performed. I was then given a total shortfall receipt and driven to Macclesfield Crown Office to be interviewed in a room fitted with tape recording facilities. This was quite a surprise. I felt absolutely terrible.
77. I felt ill wondering how I am ever going to get this put right. I was distraught thinking how my family and friends are going to react to this. How am I going to pay the ongoing bills, my mortgage etc. it was such a devastating feeling to be faced with this.
78. I allowed the Post Office investigators to search my house as requested. It was humiliating and grim to watch these strangers look through my home hoping to find something.

79. One said to me privately "I feel sorry for you mate, have you got the money to pay this back?" I said "of course not, I haven't taken it" to which he said "well they will want it back somehow, I'm telling you".
80. I had such a sinking feeling knowing they are going to prosecute me rather than help me find out what had gone wrong. I felt powerless to do anything to get them to look into it properly. I was beside myself with worry for myself and family. But I still believed that something would come to light. I was very wrong. The Post Office did not even consider looking into what happened.
81. The Post Office's first and only instinct was that you were a criminal. They had no interest whatsoever in listening to you and looking into the problems you described first; before reaching a conclusion that you had taken the money.
82. I was suspended and not allowed behind the counter in my branch and received no more remuneration for transactions conducted at the branch by the locum SPM.
83. Despite this I had to continue to pay all the continuing costs associated with operating the branch. Looking back I wish I had just kicked the Post Office out of my branch. I was in a state of constant anxiety and felt that if I did this it would make things even worse. I wish I had just locked them out of my branch and refused them entry no matter what.
84. It didn't take all that long to be in trouble with the landlords of the branch premises. The landlord understood my predicament, but warned me that I was to be foreclosed and that they were entitled to the remainder of the lease which amounted to £90,000.
85. Things were getting so bad, so out of control. I was waking up in pools of sweat from anxiety. This became the norm during this period.

86. My home was now at risk, and because my brother's name also appeared on the lease, his house was under potential threat also. I did not know how I was going to tell my 8 year old daughter that she would lose her home.
87. It was only pure luck that stopped my landlords from forcing me into bankruptcy and claiming the outstanding lease from my house. They gave me 7 days to find £5,000 and I could walk away from the lease. This was to enable the restaurant next door to expand into my premises.
88. To raise this money I sold anything of value that I had. I am a musician and I had to sell all my equipment and home studio and borrow from family and friends to raise the money.
89. I spent many years building up my music equipment and my studio. It was very dear to me, as music was and it my passion. To have to sell of this, was like having to sell your dreams.
90. I can honestly say that the night I finished clearing out the retail side of things and handed the keys to the landlords was the first time I cried.
91. Everything had gone, but I was still to pay an outstanding £80k loan. I did not know how on earth I was going to do that.
92. I was receiving county court judgements against me from my suppliers whom I could not pay. It felt like an ever expanding nightmare.
93. I was now at my lowest ebb, but was still going to be prosecuted for false accounting and theft.
94. I could not afford to pay for legal representation. I had to have basic legal aid and it really was the most basic representation. I have often thought I should have represented myself, but the anxious condition I was in left me with no choice.

95. It was a horrible feeling waiting to be tried in Court. I tried to explain the problems with the Horizon System to my solicitor and barrister, but they just could not understand it. As far as they were concerned, the Post Office's computer records could not be questioned and the Court would not accept that I had not taken the money, so they urged me to plead guilty to avoid a custodial sentence.
96. I felt like a pariah. I had never been in trouble with the law in my life. I was in a general daze trying to cope with the paperwork. Only my family and close friends knew I was going to be prosecuted. I was depressed. I Lost weight, I was having trouble sleeping and I'm sure I was no fun to be around.
97. I kept looking at my daughter thinking, "my god what is going to happen to us all". It's not as if I was 25 and had years to rebuild something. My whole life was hanging by a thread. That is how it felt. Despite knowing I had not taken a penny, or made the mistakes causing this situation, I felt I was being treated as guilty without any way of proving my innocence. It really was truly horrible.
98. On the day of my trial at Chester Crown Court, the Post Office did not turn up. The judge that day was not happy. I was not happy. I had been waiting for weeks and weeks for this day in a state of severe anxiety. I could function, but only just. My case was adjourned and re arranged. I had to go through it all again.
99. At Chester Crown Court for the 2nd time, my barrister had sight of a Post Office document that stated that there was no evidence of theft. My barrister showed me the document on the morning of the hearing. It was a Post Office investigation report that had looked into all of my bank accounts and personal finances. The Post Office report concluded that there was no evidence of theft by me.
100. Despite this the Post Office were intending to prosecute me for theft until my barrister went to see Post Office legal team with this document. The Post Office then dropped the theft charge. I thought "*what sort of a game is this?*"

101. I was led into the dock in handcuffs. I remember the final time I went to court at Chester Crown Court, I was put in handcuffs and put in a bullet proof glass box which I found horrendous. I was sure that I was going to be sent to prison. My heart fell in my chest, and I was overwhelmed with thoughts of how I had let my family down. I felt hopeless.
102. The Post Office lied in court. The Judge asked the Post Office if they could vouch for my accounts. The Post Office said "they believed so". The judge accepted this. I knew the Post Office could not vouch for the accuracy of the accounts, and Post Office knew they couldn't either.
103. The theft charges were dropped, because the Post Office's own report demonstrated that I had stolen nothing. However, the Post Office proceeded with the false accounting charges. On the advice of my solicitor and barrister I pleaded guilty to false accounting.
104. I was told I should plead guilty, as there was no way of backing up a plea of not guilty in the face of computer evidence. I could not risk going to prison; I was not going to do that to my 8 year old daughter. I very nearly went to prison anyway.
105. The judge said he didn't know if any criminality had taken place and adjourned to consider the matter. He decided there had been and sentenced me to 2 months in prison suspended for 2 years and 120 hours community service.
106. I was front page news in the Macclesfield Express and the Manchester Evening News under the headline "*Postmaster who cooked the books is spared jail*".
107. Given these headlines in the local press, I naturally felt that everyone where I lived in Alderley Edge believed I was a thief. I had abusive comments posted on the on-line version of these newspapers. I hid away from the community who knew me so well, due to shame.

108. I had to face other parents waiting outside my daughter's school with me, they clearly didn't know what to say, so they ignored me. I saw the online abuse about me being untrustworthy and "He got what he deserved" etc.
109. I didn't venture into the village where my branch was (Alderley Edge) again. As I believed that the local people would know that I had pleaded guilty, as was therefore a criminal.
110. I did my best to keep my daughter out of it, but I knew some of her friends parents were saying that her dad was in the newspapers.
111. My community service could only be served on Fridays, so this took months before I could even look for some kind of employment.
112. The effect of what happened went on and on and impacted my whole family and circle of friends.
113. My brother Steve (who has helped me all the way through this from the beginning) complained to the press complaints commission regarding this article about me, and the complaint was upheld. But the damage was already done.
114. A few days after my conviction, the Post Office demanded my car and house which my daughter lived in. They took a Proceeds of Crime Act action against me. I really felt that the Post Office were punching me when I was down.
115. They wanted everything, and this caused me huge panic and stress. I suffered extreme stress for a great number of years. I was very close to not being able to cope on many occasions.
116. I lost a lot of weight from the stress and I collapsed unconscious with no prior warning, and was taken by ambulance to hospital and diagnosed with a Vaso-Vagal incident probably due to the stress. I have never had any health problems like this before.

117. This period was extremely bleak. I could not afford to pay for anything for my daughter, school uniforms or shoes or anything. I felt like I had failed her, a rubbish dad who couldn't take her to the cinema or even buy her an ice cream.
118. The outstanding mortgage on the branch that didn't even exist anymore had to be re arranged so that my ex-partner (mother of my child) could just about afford it on her own. I had to sign over to her my share of the family house for that to happen.
119. I have not been able to pay any maintenance to help my ex-partner for my daughters care for some years. She was marvellous about this but I owe her. I owe her a lot. She deserves to receive the maintenance that I was unable to pay due to poverty.
120. Once you have a conviction, everything becomes more expensive. Car insurance, home insurance and many other things go up in price for a convict.
121. I could no longer travel to the USA, even if I could have afforded it. This was something I had enjoyed doing many times before this conviction. I used to travel for music and to play in a band in America, I could no longer do this after my conviction as I was not permitted to enter the USA. The problems go on and on. The consequences are far reaching.
122. The whole process for me was beyond stressful, I lost weight and was riddled with anxiety. I was only receiving £52.20 in Working Tax Credit for three and a half years. My ex-partner had to pay the mortgage interest on the property which we had previously jointly owned, and where my daughter lived.
123. My life was devastated. My relationship broke down, I struggled to raise my daughter, I lost my home, and I suffered serious health issues caused by stress. In fact, I have had to have counselling quite recently.

124. However, the problems caused by the conviction just would not stop.
125. I applied for a job at Astra Zeneca. I passed my assessment and interview only to be told by email that I had shown up on a CRB check and was being refused a position on that basis.
126. I spent the next 3 and 1/2 years out of work unable to find a job. I am certain that my age, and having a criminal conviction had a massive bearing on my ability to find work.
127. I suffered ongoing weight loss and stress. I didn't go to the doctor because I thought that if I was being treated for stress or depression that would further impact on my ability to get a job.
128. On one occasion when I was renting a house with my brother Steve I collapsed unconscious and he had to call an ambulance, I was taken to hospital and given an ECG. They stated there wasn't enough blood going to the brain, but because I had a clean bill of health, they put this down to stress.
129. Eventually I got work for in an Aerospace company in engineering production, but was later made redundant. I am in a new relationship and life is better and although the wages from Aerospace were low, it kept me afloat; but as I say I was made redundant.
130. I still suffer from ongoing stress which I trace back to the Post Office situation.
131. The relationship with my brother, who I dearly love, was stretched on many occasions.

132. He had invested £17,000 when I purchased the business. He never pressed me about this, but it's always hung over me.
133. He has had to help me through this and without him I could not have got here. I can't imagine what things would have been like without him. But he was worried about his home also, despite having no input in the running of the branch, he was at risk.
134. My brother spent hundreds of hours on my behalf and other postmasters' behalf as he tried to help the doomed Post Office mediation in 2013. He did all this work for no benefit to himself. He has a busy job in London and had dedicated so much of his life to this entire debacle. I can never thank him enough.
135. This tested our relationship as I'm sure can be imagined.
136. My friends have always been supportive, and I'm sure they didn't think I was a criminal; I but how they spoke among themselves I will never know.
137. My daughter has had to live with my predicament from the age of 8 when it started to her current age 22. Her whole childhood has been blighted by this. She has been fantastic but I know it's been damaging and it's still not over.
138. My father is 84 and he has had to see the effect on my life. I am so pleased he is still here to see me exonerated of the criminal conviction and see the trouble Post Office are now in.
139. My ex-partner whom I was together with for 23 years has had to put up with the threat of losing her house for a long time. She has had to pay for almost everything for my daughter, and had to pay the outstanding debts caused too. She has been very supportive, but it's had an enormous effect on her for years and years.
140. My current partner of the last 13 years has had to live with this situation too. My lack of funds, my living situation, my mental health. Having to help me financially

when she could. She has been fantastic but it's been very hard for her too. It still is, for everyone.

CONCLUSION

141. The Post Office action against me devastated my life. I have lost the best part of 15 years of my life, the time of my life when I should have been earning a good living, raising my daughter well, living life and having time to play music in my spare time.

142. I have tried to give a flavour of the consequences of the Post Office action against me in this statement, but it is impossible to give a full account of the nights and days when you can see no way ahead.

143. I was criminalised and convicted. That conviction hung over my head for years. It destroyed my business, ruined my finances, almost lost me my home, it stopped me working, it blighted my reputation.

144. I was a claimant in the Group Litigation against Post Office Ltd. That case demonstrated that the Horizon System was deeply flawed, and that the Post Office knew it. Also, that case indicated that the Post Office may have relied on perjured evidence in criminal and civil cases. I know that there is now a Metropolitan Police investigation into the use of perjured evidence by Post Office Ltd.

145. I received a small amount of damages from that claim, most of the monies awarded to the claimants was swallowed up in legal and legal funding costs. I think that it is very wrong that ordinary people like myself have to pay the cost of uncovering such a massive scandal and nationwide miscarriage of justice.

146. That claim also led to the Criminal Cases Review Board referring my case to the Court of Appeal. This was a long process, and waiting for the hearing was worrying and stressful.

147. In April 2021 my conviction was quashed along with the convictions of many other subpostmasters. Although I was very pleased to have had my name cleared, I never should have been put in the position of having to go to the Court of Appeal.

148. The quashing of my conviction gave me back my good name, but it gave me back nothing else. Not my business, my lost income, the years of poverty I endured or the inability to be a proper father to my daughter as she grew up. The cost to me has been huge across so many areas of my life.

149. For example, I have relayed how my landlord gave me 7 days to find £5,000 or face bankruptcy, and how I had to sell everything I had. I also had to sell my musical instruments and equipment. To someone who is not a musician, or does not have a passion for music, this might seem like a small thing.

150. However, music has been a hugely important part of my life since childhood. My instruments and equipment were not just possessions, they were filled with experiences; they were reminders of so many days and nights of joy and happiness. Selling them, was like selling my memories.

151. I know that I cannot get back the years I lost. I cannot get back the birthdays and Christmases when I could not buy my daughter a proper present, or the many days when I felt unable to look her in the eye, as I felt I had failed her.

152. I cannot get back the years when my sense of self-worth was lost. When I saw myself as a failure in the eyes of my family, my father and my friends.

153. However, as a result of the Group Litigation, which I was a party to, and the Court of Appeal action in which my conviction (and so many others) were overturned, and this Inquiry, the truth is coming out.

154. I want the full truth to come out. I want the world to know that I, and ordinary hard working, decent people like me, had their lives ruined by Post Office Ltd.

155. I want it to be publicly shown that Post Office knew its computer system (Horizon) was completely flawed and unreliable, and that despite this Post Office pursued subpostmasters and ruined their lives for money that never existed.

156. I am entitled to be properly compensated for the losses I have suffered as a result of Post Office Ltd, and I want this done now and not at some dim and distant time in the future.

157. The Post Office and the Department of Business who own it, have known for years that Horizon was a broken system. I believe that they knew, or should have known, when they were destroying my life and the lives of others that their Horizon System was unreliable. This is wrong on so many levels, and it cannot simply be allowed to be brushed under the carpet.

158. There must be compensation for not just the financial losses, but also to take account of the loss of the life I had and should have had.

159. However, there must also be accountability. Those at the Post Office and Department of Business who allowed this to happen, must be held to account fully and publicly. They must feel something of the shame and pain that I and others went through.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe that the facts stated in this Witness Statement are true.

Signed... **GRO**Dated... 8-1-2022.....
Scott Darlington