

Witness Name: Gary Blackburn
Statement No.: WITN04650100
Exhibits: None

Dated: 19th December 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF GARY DAVID BLACKBURN

I, *Gary David Blackburn*, will say as follows:

1. I have prepared this witness statement in response to the request made by the Horizon IT Inquiry pursuant to Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules, dated 21st November 2022. In this witness statement I address each of the questions set out in the Annex to the 21st of November Rule 9 request.

Professional Background

2. My full name is Gary David Blackburn I worked for Post Office Ltd between October 1985 and March 2014 at which point in time I TUPE transferred out to a company named Atos where I continued to provide support to the Post Office albeit then in a supplier capacity. I left Atos and therefore my involvement with Post Office Ltd in 2017.

3. I spent the first nine years of my Post Office career working in Crown Office counters in and around Huddersfield, in 1994 I moved into what was called the Northeast Regional Office, which was based in Leeds. During my time in Leeds, I worked on a relatively new helpdesk that was created to support both the NE region Post Office field support services, led by Retail Network Managers (RNM), and the branches themselves. There were 6 other geographic regions at that time, each had their version of this 'regional helpline'. The purpose of this desk was to provide advice and guidance on all Post Office transactional services. This initial desk, predated automation of the Post Office branch network. During a later business transformation which reduced the 7 regions to 3 the Helpline service was consolidated into 1 with the Northeast taking on responsibility for the provision of this helpdesk service. This is how I transferred onto what became the Network Business Support Centre (NBSC).

4. During the specific period in question, I fulfilled many operational roles. These roles included a Team Leader on the NBSC, Problem Manager within the Business Service Management (BSM) function and I managed a team of people in the Live service desk function and finally was also Post Office Business Continuity Manager.

5. I don't remember much about my time working as a Problem Manager within the Post Office it was my first role within the business service management function and was 20 years ago. It was, I also think, a short stay in that particular team. But what I do remember is that the role was largely reactive in nature not particularly predictive or preventative and therefore a lot

of the work that I would have undertaken alongside my colleagues came from analysis of the calls that had been received by the NBSC or thematic Incidents. The objective being to identify trends that led to improvement opportunity. This naturally included, on occasions such as following the Major Incident in March 2005, engaging with IT service providers to the Post Office, at that time the primary one being Fujitsu services. As a Problem Manager you would be allocated to work alongside a Fujitsu counterpart to oversee completion of agreed remediation actions. Post incident findings such as March 2005 were not shared with the branch network to my knowledge, I think that my line management hierarchy during this time was Bethany Newton, and her boss was Richard Ashcroft. Engagement of Fujitsu was via their Problem Management team representatives and the Post Office Supplier Manager, Scott Somerside. As the Supplier Manager it was Scott's role to oversee Fujitsu's delivery against their contracted service delivery obligations.

6. I left the problem management role to run a new team which was named the Live Service Desk. The Live Service team was set up to provide a direct and single point of contact for Post Office IT suppliers, the purpose of the desk was to coordinate and facilitate service restoration of any thematic IT related incidents such as a loss of service. The role involved internal communication to groups of stakeholders as appropriate and provision of a major incident management function (I or my team would set up bridge calls with appropriate stakeholders as we worked towards restoration of the service). On service restoration the root cause and improvement opportunities would be passed back into the Problem Management team. As the Live Service Desk matured, we took on responsibility for coordinating IT related

responses to High Profile Flag cases, I had approval authority for the documented process for this element only, standard complaints were those logged into the NBSC and not my responsibility. I'm unsure how the NBSC defined complaints and thus differentiated from a general call for assistance. High Profile complaints were received from branches or MPs by the Post Office senior management or Retail Network Managers (RNM). These complaints would most often be about availability of service be that to consumers or a specific sub-Post Office but occasionally did include complaints about branch specific accounting discrepancies. These HPC complaints always required investigation by the appropriate IT supplier on occasion involving onsite or field investigations. A combination of the Post Office RNM and Fujitsu's Branch Issues Managers (BIM, Nick Crow, or Denise Miller) would be engaged to conduct these investigations and report back with findings. The Live service desk would facilitate flow of information and communication. Once the investigation was complete, I would create a draft response and send to the Post Office Flag case team to obtain senior management sign off and incorporating into the final business response. The same process of engaging Fujitsu's BIM applied to internal enquires (non-complaint) commonly raised by the RNM or on occasion the Post Office Product & Branch accounting team based in Chesterfield, the P&BA. The BIM was also responsible for proactively investigating trends and therefore would occasionally contact myself or my team to request facilitation of branch visits. We would do this via the RNM. This is how I remember the process for resolution of disputes that came through the Live Service Desk function. The process felt effective at the time but in hindsight perhaps lacked consistent 'second opinion' review or challenge. When an IT supplier provided their

findings to myself or my team, we had limited options for further review. The Post Office IT function did have a team of Business Relationship Managers run by Chris Taylor that were technical. In addition, there were experts in both Ian Trundle and Bob Booth. Whilst always supportive these individuals/teams were primarily strategically focused and not designed to be regularly engaged in the operational day to day running. However, my team and I would seek support from them alongside P&BA expertise when the investigation outcome was inconclusive or not aligned with our understanding of how the system should work.

7. Around Autumn 2007 the then Business Continuity Manager (Tim Vause) left the business, and a decision was taken to combine that role into my management of the Live Service Desk.

8. During my time as Business Continuity Manager, I recollect the primary objective being linked to continuity of service for the Post Office Card Account (Consumer replacement option for Benefit Books). I had responsibility for overseeing the planning associated with continuity of service. This included an annual, cyclical set of IT and Operational process exercises that were both 'desktop' and 'live' in nature. The live exercises including my chaperoning of government officials, who had to witness. I also conducted other planning activities linked to Post Office operations to ensure that the Post Office could maintain primary services under any number of differing circumstances such as denial of staff which included pandemic planning, swine flu specifically during that period and industrial action. There were also plans for inclement

weather which posed a risk to delivery of both cash and stock provisions to the Post Office network.

Advice and Assistance

9. As I have mentioned the NBSC was formed out of an amalgamation of what were previously 7 regional help lines. What exactly drove the Post Office to do that strategically I don't know, I was a low-level managerial grade and not a decision maker. But it did coincide with Business wide organisational restructure and the automation of the branch network under the Horizon programme.

10. The purpose of the NBSC was to support the branch network through answering 'how do I' related transactional questions alongside the Fujitsu Horizon Service Desk (HSH) which was there to support the branch network with technical questions and queries in relation to the technology (Hardware, Software and Network) that had been provided. That ranged from pin pads, printers, routers etc. and provision of advice and guidance on how to operate each service from a technical point of view, that included balancing and rollover. But accounting was often a query that could and would come into either the NBSC or the HSH. Leading to calls being triaged between the 2 desks on a regular basis.

11. Regarding the NBSC management structure, in my days working in that team it was led by Jill Camplejohn (later married name 'Kennedy') and for a short period Howard Steet. I was a team leader, one of four or five. I'm afraid I

don't remember how many helpdesk agents, but each Team leader had a small group of helpdesk agents that we looked after from a people management perspective and provided them with guidance in the answering of queries received from the Post Office network. There was also an admin function that was largely performance focused but included people who created and maintained the knowledge articles that were used by the agents to answer the branch queries. NBSC Helpdesk agents were not, in theory at least, allowed to 'guess' or use their knowledge or experience alone. The answer they provided had to be associated with a knowledge article. The call logging tool that the agents used to log incidents and create the unique reference numbers at the time was 'Remedy'.

12. Fujitsu provided the HSH/HSD service to support the Horizon system technology and that for me was primarily for 'Tech that was not working, broken, offline or not working as expected'. I don't recollect how many NBSC or HSH staff there was but when the service first moved into the new office at Dearne house in South Yorkshire the NBSC was quite substantial, my guess is that it was 6 or 7 agents per Team leader so there was potentially upwards of 30 to 40 plus staff working in the NBSC wider team at the time.

13. The type of people that were recruited to the NBSC during my time were experienced, counter trained staff that understood the accounting process. They would also need good communication skills, knowledge of the wider business operating model including the branch network and the roles and responsibilities of field support services. Training was provided, there was an onboarding programme for all agents this included the option of Post Office

standard training that anyone joining the business would have access to but specifically all personnel that were going to work in branches received, except for SPMR staff. The SPMR was trained automatically but not the people they chose to employ. The NBSC training included use of the Horizon system and tools for the job, remedy call logging system and the telephony system. The NBSC agents were supported by knowledge articles. Remedy had a series of Categorisations selected via dropdown menus that would pinpoint the area of the question within the remedy system that then linked to a knowledge article. The knowledge article then used to provide the answer to the caller. In addition to that there was the horizon manuals, weekly news updates (Counter News) and bulletins. Finally, I remember there being access to 2 horizon terminals to help with visualisation of queries. In the early days this equipment was offline, later they were switched to be online (live counters).

14. Notification of problems or changes to service came into the NBSC from many different parts of the business, bulletin boards were updated with messages or temporary work arounds, new Knowledge articles would be created, or existing ones updated.

15. The most common advice requests that I remember coming into the NBSC was generally transactional in nature to help postmasters with the sale. The second most common would-be accounting procedures which at the beginning of the period in question would be a weekly accounting activity and rolling over into the following trading period.

16. Almost all the queries would be answered by the NBSC agent using the knowledge articles apart from 'system faults' 'failures' or the 'system not performing as expected' which would be redirected to the HSH. The NBSC agent would try and assist in identification of root cause of branch discrepancies, but this may often have required a combination of Field support via the Retail Network Manager, P&BA, or system interrogation via Fujitsu. The request for further investigation most commonly coming from the RNM. Staff training requests would also come from the RNM.

17. Whilst both the NBSC and the HSH both had continuity plans to cater for unplanned events it was entirely possible that on occasion the desk would not be accessible by the branches. This could be down to telephony technical fault, unexpected staff shortages or sometimes large spikes or peaks in call arrival patterns meant that some branches may not have been able to get through in a timely manner or at all. It is also worth noting that the service desks were not 24/7. Having said this in my opinion the NBSC, certainly in the early days was sufficiently resourced. Post my time in the NBSC there were operating model changes. The strategy was to migrate to a single point of contact for all support inquiries with an IVR hanging off the back of that single number, providing access to various other departments including the HSH. I also think that the service moved out of internal Post Office limited ownership. It was outsourced albeit to another member of the Royal Mail group (RMG) in Royal Mail themselves, who were the owners of Dearne House the location of the NBSC and already providing a host of service desk related services across the RMG.

18. During my personal time at the NBSC I feel that it met its purpose in terms of providing a good level of support, freeing the RNM's to focus on Branch development and sales specifically. But that's not to say that there wasn't the opportunity for miscommunication between the caller and the agent that could have led to incorrect advice or guidance being given or human error in branch with guidance not followed as advised. I'm not a technical person but I did get to visit the HSH on a couple of occasions when they were based in Stevenage. In my opinion they seemed perfectly proficient in the resolution of technical issues with Branch network connectivity being possibly one of the biggest and most regular challenges.

19. During my time working in the live service desk, I was also engaged and involved in several Post Office programmes. The purpose being to ensure that those programmes didn't materially change the support operating model and ultimately that we updated knowledge and processes accordingly and were ready to continue providing support. The example that's been provided for me to look at is an example from the Network Transformation (NT) Programme. It is evidence of identifying a gap in NBSC readiness/capability through receipt of negative feedback linked to the new 'Local' branch operating model. The action I took was to facilitate linking up the responsible and accountable people. In this instance that was Sarah Lambert (NT training lead) and Kendra Dickinson (Royal Mail NBSC lead) to close the knowledge gap.

Resolution of Disputes

20. In response to the specific examples of dispute investigations at South Warnborough, Hogsthorpe and Barkham I've laid out above that my role was primarily facilitation between the field support services such as the RNM community and the IT suppliers with the aim of restoring service and resolving issues. At South Warnborough I can see that I'd been approached inappropriately but I linked into the person responsible for providing the answers to the specific questions which in this instance was a member of the Royal Mail NBSC management named Ian Speck.

21. At Hogsworth I can see from the email evidence provided the Sub postmaster believed that a specific mails related transaction was creating accounting discrepancies. When Karen Arnold first contacted me, my initial response comes from my pre-empting the most likely root cause of the problem being within branch which was purely based upon the fact that at the time I had no understanding or even belief, that the Horizon application could or did generate erroneous discrepancies linked to this transaction type. This was purely expression of my opinion and was not an attempt to foreshorten the process by not pursuing the investigation further. My belief was driven by my perception of the relatively low frequency of this type of problem when compared with successful transactions of the same type conducted without discrepancy. I went on to offer advice, which was to obtain evidence prior to requesting that Fujitsu attend site. Fujitsu had, at the time, a basic maintenance policy which was to replace hardware if they couldn't find an obvious onsite fix or explanation (This Policy was also likely driven by the need to fix and close calls as quickly as possible, driven by Service Level Targets) in this instance that would have led to a loss of the information

contained on that processor that potentially supported the postmaster at Hogsworth. Hence my reference to *'this policy could work against us'* that this course of action could lead to an end of investigative options and establishing root cause. I'm afraid I don't have any recollection of how ultimately this matter was or if it was resolved, the email from John Breeden on 3rd July 2009 suggests that my initial advice of obtaining evidence was taken.

22. I have no recollection of the issues reported by the SPMR at Barkham Post Office or how this investigation concluded but from the evidence provided what I can say is that it was common practice to request Horizon transaction logs to aid accounting related investigations, I or my team could facilitate obtaining them and forwarding to the subject matter expert allocated to complete the investigation. This could include any or all: P&BA (Andy Winn), Fujitsu BIM, Fujitsu Incident Management Team (IMT), other Post Office technical or operational resources whose names I have mentioned earlier in my statement.

Remote Access

23. At the time my understanding of how Fujitsu interrogated the Horizon systems was limited to the procedures they documented, and we jointly followed. These processes were an agreed part of the end-to-end service that Fujitsu were asked to provide, for example OCP. I knew that Fujitsu could correct system errors through this procedure. I also knew that they could see what had happened in branch down to the detailed sequence of individual keystrokes. So, my relationship with Fujitsu, and based upon my lack of

technical knowledge was one of having to trust the supplier and following Post Office Ltd contractually agreed procedure, I did not challenge as I didn't feel that it was my place to do so but nor did it occur to me that it was necessary, it was BAU. I have no recollection of this capability being communicated to Branch staff or how this capability was controlled or audited beyond documentation of the corrections being made. OCP 17510 is an example of how such corrections were recorded for audit purposes, but I don't recall having seen this specific document before. I can't recall me or my team's role specifically but communication of the correction details to the Branch was not part of our responsibilities. Communication with branch would fall to P&BA on occasions but normally the appropriate RNM. I have considered Peak Incident Management log [POL00001313] this is another example of the BAU process in operation but I'm afraid that I have no recollection of the detail or whether the branch was informed.

Bugs, error and defects

24. Whilst Fujitsu services were both accountable and responsible for both proactive and reactive identification and correction of bugs, errors and defects my awareness of them would have been via the Incident, Problem or Major Incident Management procedures. Whilst I can't remember specifics Post Office Ltd had technical resources working alongside Fujitsu in the remediation activities which included coordination of the release containing fixes.

25. Callendar Square Post Office had suffered from one such 'bug'. My involvement in this process was to assist my colleague, Shaun Turner, obtain answers from Fujitsu I don't know how the issue originally came about, what advice the branch was given beyond ensuring occurrences were logged with the HSH, why there was a communication breakdown between P&BA and Fujitsu regarding the 'BIMS' process, I don't recall a 'presentation' by Fujitsu or what follow up was undertaken, with other impacted branches or post the S90 fix. I don't even recall whether the fix was successful but reading through the email chain today it does not look like root cause of the original error was established or if it was, I was not made aware of it.

Horizon Online

26. As someone that worked in operational roles my involvement in requirement gathering, contract negotiation, design, build or implementation of Horizon or Horizon Online was limited to a need to understand and support the service once live.

27. I believed that the support processes were sufficiently robust be that within the NBSC, Problem or MIM. My responsibility was to focus on service restoration and protection. But I also recognised that service came with risk because the service was consumed and supported by people, Training, knowledge, understanding, and effective communication were all key. With the benefit of hindsight and particularly following the subsequent public revelations of Post Office Ltd response and treatment of some SPMR's I have no doubt that open communication linked to the risk of failures could have

been handled differently. I have chosen to remain within the IT service industry and if I have learned one thing during that time it is that IT can and does fail that people are fallible and make mistakes. It is how you respond to those circumstances that matter. Openness and Honesty is and always will be the best policy. Clearly there were occasions when the benefit of doubt could and should have been given. I'm sickened by what I have read post my time at the Post Office and have experienced a wave of emotions from sadness, shame, and anger. I had no direct involvement or visibility of the human response and action taken against SPMR's. If I, had I hope that I would have found the courage to challenge, sound a note of caution and promote the communication of outcomes more vigorously and robustly than I perhaps did.

28. This has been a difficult exercise to complete. With the passing of time recollection of process, people, context, and chronology is hazy at best. The artifacts provided some help and reminded me of my purpose and how I recall acting with what I believed I was required to do. I hope that in some small way this statement is of value.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed: A rectangular box with a dashed border containing the text "GRO" in a bold, sans-serif font. A horizontal line extends from the right side of the box.

Dated: 19th December 2022

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