

WITNESS: PAULINE THOMSON

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0258_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 12, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF PAULINE THOMSON

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 PAULINE THOMSON, Date of Birth **GRO** of **GRO**
GRO will say as follows:-

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I am 72 years old and live in Brenchley. I have two grown up children and I am not currently in employment. I married my husband **GRO** in 1973. Sadly, **GRO** passed away following illness on 29th October 2021.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

2. I became the Sub-Postmistress of the Matfield branch of the Post Office in September 2004. Prior to this, I had worked for the Post Office for about 25 years. I worked within local branches, but not as a Sub-Postmistress, as I

moved around the country and abroad with my husband's work. My last position before I became the Sub-Postmistress at Matfield was at the Spencers Wood branch in Berkshire.

3. I started working at the Spencers Wood branch part-time and then became the Manager of the branch in 2002, when the Sub-Postmistress and her husband retired. My husband and I moved into the Post Office and our rent was paid in lieu of our salary. We also sold cards and stationery at the Post Office.
4. Whilst at Spencers Wood, my husband and I decided to look for another Post Office where I could be the Sub-Postmistress.
5. We found a Post Office in an idyllic village of Matfield in Kent. The business was a Tea Room with a Post Office inside. The outgoing Sub-Postmistress who owned the business intended to continue to run the Tea Room and I was going to be the Sub-Postmistress of the Post Office. We rented the residential property from a Doctor, which was a bungalow in the village. There was a little shop with the Post Office too which I ran.
6. I became Sub-postmaster of the Matfield Post Office branch in September 2004 until the termination of my contract in October 2008.
7. When I started at the Post Office I received half a day's training on the Horizon system. I didn't receive any further training as Horizon developed and nothing further when I took over the branch.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

8. Following an audit at my Post Office branch on 12 September 2008, a shortfall in the sum of £34,331.41 was found.

9. The Post Office initially prosecuted me for Theft as a result of this shortfall.
10. In March 2010, following a plea bargain agreement the theft charge was dropped and I was convicted of False Accounting and sentenced to 120 hours of Community Service after pleading guilty to this charge following legal advice.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

11. 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?

12. From 2004 to 2007, we ran the Post Office with very little difficulties. We did suffer from some shortfalls, but they were low and below £100, which I paid. We did contact the Helpline which seemed only to be able to help with basic queries, they could not explain the shortfalls or offer any solution other than paying the shortfall amounts.
13. From 2007, the shortfalls seemed to increase. I started to notice that the cash in hand on Horizon was creeping up and up. I never held that amount of cash in the branch. I just couldn't understand it. In 2007 and into 2008, the shortfalls continued. They were starting to be in the thousands of pounds and I could not afford to pay them. The Helpline could not help and I could not ask anyone else. The support I received from the Post Office in general was minimal.

14. I don't remember the name of my area manager, I never even met them.
15. In June 2008, I attended my daughter's wedding. The previous Sub-Postmistress covered the Post Office whilst I was away.
16. When I returned to the Post Office, Horizon was showing a discrepancy in the sum of £6,319.22. I made contact with the Helpline who provided me with advice on how to remedy the discrepancy. Following this advice, the discrepancy doubled to over £12,000.00.
17. By September 2008, the situation with the shortfalls was ridiculous. I did not have the money to pay them. It had reached around £34,000, which was the shortfall amount found at the audit.

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

18. As mentioned above, initially I paid back £100 here or there to try and rectify the shortfalls. This money came from business profits. In total I probably paid in the region of £600 or £700.
19. I couldn't afford to continue paying the shortfalls, especially as they increased significantly as discussed above.
20. I didn't pay any further money to try and repay the shortfalls.

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

21. On 12 September 2008, I had taken our dog out for a walk. When I came back, I saw two men waiting outside the Post Office. I knew that they were the auditors, and I was relieved as I thought that they would sort out the problems

with the shortfalls. I recall one of the auditors' names being Merwyn Antony. I told them they would find a shortfall.

22. The auditors carried out their audit. Whilst they were doing this, I telephoned my husband and told him that the auditors had arrived. This was the first time that I told my husband about the shortfalls. I wanted to protect him from the problems with the Post Office. I would try and leave the problems at the Post Office when I returned home.

23. At that time, I can remember feeling dreadful stressed and quite helpless. One of the men tried to make jokes with me. For example, the owner of the building drove an Aston Martin which was parked outside. The other man said to me "is that what you spent your money on?".

24. By this time two further men who were investigators, had arrived.

25. The investigators' names were Jason Collins and Adrian Morris.

26. At about 5pm the Investigators left. About 10 minutes later the Investigators returned with two Police Officers.

27. One of the Investigators said to the Police "Charge her with Theft" The Police Officers arrested me, took me outside and put me in a marked Police Car. There were a lot of people around from the Village and people were going in and out of the local pub who all saw me being put into the Police car. I was terrified. The whole situation was a nightmare.

28. Until I received a letter from Alan Bates in 2010, I had no idea other people were going through the same thing as me. The Post Office never made me aware.

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

29. At the Police station I was put into a Cell for two hours whilst the Investigators and the Police Officers searched my property. The Investigators took copies of documents relating to debts which we had. They also took a brochure about a villa we had rented a few years ago. At the interview, they joked that I had taken the money to buy a property abroad.
30. I could not believe what was going on. My husband did not know where I had gone. The investigators kept going on and on about my debts and kept asking me "Have you taken any money from the Post Office?" I felt oppressed at this interview.
31. The investigators had told me that I was suspended on the same day and took the keys for the safe and the Post Office. The Post Office never opened again. I was devastated, I loved my job.
32. I received a phone call the following day confirming my suspension.
33. I can't remember exactly when, but it wasn't long after my suspension that I received a letter confirming my contract had been terminated. At this point I was told my salary would also stop with immediate effect. I received a cheque for £500 which was my salary for the time up until my suspension.
34. About a month after the audit, the Post Office took all the records and the Horizon system from the Post Office.
35. On 17 October 2008, I attended an interview at the Maidstone Mail Centre with the Post Office. The interview was to discuss the termination of my contract and the shortfalls. I told the Post Office that I had not taken the money and I could not say where it had gone.

36. On the day when we returned from my husband's brother's funeral, a summons charging me with Theft was waiting for me. The Summons said I should attend Sevenoaks Magistrates Court on 23rd April 2009.
37. I attended 2 or 3 hearings at Sevenoaks Magistrates Court. As I was pleading not guilty to Theft, my case was sent to Maidstone Crown Court. At this stage, there wasn't a false accounting charge.
38. From recollection I believe I attended Maidstone Crown Court around 5 times in total. I recall receiving a summons dated 14th July 2009 to appear for trial which was to take place on 28th August 2009. I remember at the first attendance I went through everything with my barrister. After that my barrister was replaced with another barrister called John Fitzgerald, although I cannot remember which chambers he was from. I was represented up until my trial by Berry and Berry Solicitors in Tonbridge.

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

39. As mentioned I was evicted from my home after it had to be sold. I lost my income.
40. My husband had been made redundant previous to this. As a result of my conviction, we lost the deposit on the bungalow we were evicted from which was a couple of months rent from what I can recall.
41. When we moved, my cousin paid a new deposit and three months rent for us.
42. After my conviction, I did receive several letters from the Post Office advising me I should pay back the £34,331.41 shortfall. The last letter I

received from the Post Office asking me to pay the money back was in December 2010. On the advice of my lawyers I ignored them.

43. Following my conviction I was not ordered to pay any court costs and I did receive legal aid for my own legal costs.

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?

44. I felt that I had let the Community down when the Post Office closed.

45. The day after the first interview at the Police station, I opened up the shop. Of course, my friends from the village came to see that I was alright. A lot of my customers were very good but some "cut me dead".

46. I learnt a few months later that one of the police officers who had arrested me drank in the local pub and had told all of the locals about my arrest.

47. I had to attend my brother-in-law's funeral shortly after I was arrested and pretend everything was normal. Coming back home to reality was very hard. I kept the shop side open but I was locked out of the Post Office. I had to sell newspapers with my picture on the front page. I wasn't eating or sleeping properly. My husband slept with the front door keys under the pillow as he was afraid I would disappear into the night.

48. One of my friends encouraged me to go to see my doctor. I was diagnosed with stress and depression and I was put on antidepressants.

49. The day I was in court for sentencing, my daughter gave birth to her first baby. I couldn't enjoy the whole of her pregnancy for fear of being imprisoned. I

found all the hearings and lawyer meetings totally alien. I had never had any experience of this. I was not eating or sleeping.

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

50. Once my case had reached Maidstone Crown Court, my barrister advised me that the Post Office was looking for a plea bargain for me to plead guilty to false accounting. As I was very scared of going to prison, I pleaded guilty to three counts of false accounting.
51. Before my sentencing hearing, a good number of the community wrote letters of support for me.
52. When I went to the sentencing hearing, I was accompanied by my friends and my husband. I took a packed bag, as advised by my lawyers, as I was still not sure whether the Judge would send me to prison.
53. On 18th March 2010 I attended my sentencing hearing and was sentenced to 120 hours of Community Service. The Judge stated that I was in a very dark place.
54. My local newspaper, The Courier, and the local television, Meridian, reported about my case. They were sympathetic to me.
55. I attended a meeting with my Probation Officer and was then given a voluntary role in a charity shop in another village. At the charity shop, due to my conviction I could not initially serve at the shop counter and till. Therefore, initially I spent 3 days a week sorting out the clothes. Eventually, I was able to

- serve in the shop. After I had completed my community service, I stayed on at the charity shop. The Manager was a nice lady and understood my situation.
56. Initially, we were able to stay in the property and work in the Shop. As we were unable to pay our rent, the owner of the property, allowed us to stay in the property if we decorated it, which we did.
57. Eventually we were evicted from our home after the owner sold the business. We moved to a house in a nearby village which we have continued to rent.
58. After I left the Shop, an ex-customer told me that she was returning to work and asked me if I would be interested in dog walking. I gladly accepted this offer of work. My friend, who was the Sub-Postmistress of a nearby Post Office, also asked me to work in her shop, which I did. It was a godsend to have these two incomes.
59. I continued to work in the Shop, and I did the dog walking up until the restrictions from the coronavirus pandemic.
60. My mental health has suffered significantly from the situation with the Post Office. I experienced suicidal thoughts over this time. I developed a depressive illness and I was commenced on antidepressant medication, which I still take. I have been informed that I may never fully recover in respect of my mental health however I have made some progress.
61. I have got better, but for a long time I found it very upsetting to discuss all that I had been through.

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

62. I didn't tell my sister or my children. I lost my reputation within the community.

Whilst the majority of my customers supported me, some of my customers did not return and some would "cut me dead". Some people would blank me. It was a very difficult time. In the eyes of the public and the local community I was a thief.

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

63. The mental health toll my conviction had on my late husband was also huge and I believe it impacted his own health. He supported me and had go through this whole situation as well as me. He suffered with serious medical conditions prior to him passing away and the contribution of my ordeal with the Post Office certainly did not help this.

64. Prior to his passing my husband was in and out of hospital. He was a shadow of the man he was. He lost his confidence. He worried all the time. I felt I became stronger as I had to be in charge, and I had to be strong for him.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

65. The situation with the Post Office has changed me as a person. I am now a completely different person to the person I was when I worked in the branch. I am now stronger but more hardened and untrusting. I am still taking prescribed medication for Depression. Nothing can undo what I have been

through as a result of the Post Office's actions. It will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Statement Of Truth

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

Signed:

GRO

Pauline thomson (Jan 12, 2022 14:32 GMT)

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 12, 2022

Name: PAULINE THOMSON

FILE REFERENCE:

GRO

