

WITNESS: SIOBHAN SAYER

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0183_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 13, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF SIOBHAN SAYER

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 SIOBHAN SAYER, Date of Birth **GRO** of ADDRESS **GRO**
GRO will say as follows:-

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I'm a 56-year-old semi-retired teacher. I live with my husband, **GRO** and one of our 4 children.
2. I recently decided to resign from my position as a teaching assistant at the local high school due to the stress of the ongoing matters with the Post Office and to focus on my wellbeing through counselling.
3. I'm currently on my 3rd session of 22 counselling sessions and I'm hoping that this will help me come to terms with what I have gone through over the past 14 years with the Post Office.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

4. Originally, my husband, **GRO** and I owned a car restoration company. We bought the petrol station as it had land that we could move the restoration company to, in the same building.
5. We had to wait for planning permission to be agreed to move the restoration site, so **GRO** continued to work there whilst I ran the petrol station.
6. A part of the business was a Post Office branch which we took on in addition to the petrol station, as it would generate more trade. I became Sub-Postmistress of the Erpingham branch of the Post Office on 6 January 2000.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

7. Following an audit of our Post Office in January 2008, a shortfall of £18,551.80 was alleged and I was interviewed by Post Office investigators. I had no legal representation and I remember it was a very stressful experience.
8. In March 2008 I received a letter suspending me from my position. My contract was later terminated in April 2008.
9. The Post Office sought to prosecute me for Theft and False Accounting, and I pleaded guilty to False Accounting, on the advice of my barrister, in February 2010.
10. I was sentenced to a 40-week custodial sentence, suspended for 18 months, and 200 hours of community service.

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. I was informed by the Post Office that it was my responsibility to repay the alleged shortfall. There were various consequences associated with this in terms of costs.

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

13. The Post Office went through the Proceeds of Crime Act to seize £4,800 from me.

14. This was funded through the selling of assets including: a car; other personal assets, and the borrowing of cash from family members.

15. The Post Office put a Charge on our home.

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

16. After I was first accused, I went straight to my GP as I fell to pieces. I was inconsolable and felt tremendous guilt about what the Post Office had told me I had done.

17. At the time of the investigation, I was already suffering from postnatal depression and was on medication. My mind was already all over the place and I had a newly born baby to care for. The investigators came to interview me at my home. I was in shock, but I agreed to the interview as I believed there must be a rational explanation for the shortfall and it would all get sorted out.
18. I remember when the investigators approached me demanding to search my home. I didn't have anything to hide so I thought this would go some way to proving my innocence. The investigators were hostile and accused me of fraud. I remember them searching through rooms and throwing my underwear around in the search for money. My daughter, GRO was just a baby at the time and she was crying throughout. I often relive these moments in my head.
19. Private papers, unrelated to this matter, were taken from my home. I was constantly asked by the investigators where I had hidden the money. I kept telling them that I hadn't hidden any money. This was very upsetting for me having three strangers searching my home and launching these accusations against me. I felt that this was disgusting behaviour, not least because I was a mother with a young baby present. I am still appalled by how I was treated.
20. I had no legal representation; I did not believe I needed this as I had done nothing wrong. I became stressed and anxious during the interview, so it had to be stopped. Shortly afterwards, I went to my GP and he signed me off and said I was unfit to be interviewed.
21. One investigator kept turning up at the house. I remember opening the door and him being stood there, this still haunts me to this day. I now realise this was an intimidation and bullying tactics from the Post Office.

22. It took 8 months for the Post Office investigators to re-interview me. Between my first and second interview was such a worrying time, as I had no idea how long this would go on for and I had the constant worry of the investigators turning up at my door again.

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

23. I pleaded guilty to False Accounting in the Crown Court at Norwich on 15th February 2010. This was after receiving advice from my barrister, who told me that she had spoken with the Post Office Prosecution Team; they were saying that the evidence against me was overwhelming and that I was the only person who had this issue with the Horizon System and the shortfalls. They said that they were very confident of securing a conviction. This frightened me and put me into a state of panic.

24. I had done nothing dishonest. Now it seemed the Post Office Prosecution Team were goading me and saying that they had so much evidence of me doing this criminal act. My barrister told me the jury were likely to believe the computer evidence from the Post Office over me, and that I should plead guilty to avoid a custodial sentence.

25. Before I knew it, I was stood in Court with a security man beside me and I confirmed my name and address to the Judge. It was a complete blur and there was a lot of language being used between the legal teams that I did not understand; I felt like I was not involved. I was too anxious to say anything as they scared the life out of me.

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

26. The Post Office pursued a civil claim against me for the remaining balance, which they calculated to be around £18,000.
27. At some point after my conviction, I was granted a stay on the civil action pending further enquiries. This stay lasted until my conviction was quashed in April 2021. At this point, the Court discharged the civil claim. I did not pay the £18,000.
28. As a result of the issues caused by the Horizon system, we were forced to sell the business at a significant loss.
29. Following the trauma I experienced as a result of the Horizon System, I did not work for almost three years.

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?

30. When I found out that I was being accused of Theft and Fraud I couldn't believe it, it broke me. I didn't have the strength or ability to get out of bed anymore and was just existing for a time. I developed further depression on top of the post-natal depression I was already suffering with.
31. I couldn't leave the house as I thought everyone would be talking about me. This carried on for two years, such was my embarrassment. I would avoid going to Tesco out of fear of seeing someone I knew and having to make awkward small talk, or them blanking me completely. I couldn't face the thought of everyone talking about me behind my back.

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

32. My children were 19, 16, 12 and 2 at the time. My husband, [GRO] and I had made the decision not to tell them as we did not want them to know anything. They went to school on the day of my court hearing and [GRO] my 2-year-old, went to my Mother's [GRO] went to work; it was a normal day and that is how we treated it but I had been told to pack an overnight bag as there was a possibility I would not be coming home that night. If that had been the case [GRO] would have had to explain things to our children.

33. When I left the Courthouse, I was relieved not to be going to prison, and I rang [GRO] straight away. I was pleased I was going home to my family.

34. I did my community service at the Cancer Research shop in Norwich; I did 2 full days a week. I worked on the till; this surprised me as they knew why I was there, which was embarrassing.

35. Following the termination of my employment by the Post Office, I did not work for nearly three years. This was due to a combination of things including the anxiety caused by the termination, the fact that the story hit the local papers, post-natal depression, and the limited local job opportunities due to my conviction. As a result, I decided to be a stay-at-home mum for a while, before returning to work as a part time teacher's assistant, 3 days a week.

36. Due to the stress of the ongoing accounting issues caused by the Horizon system, we were forced to give up on our plans and sell the business at a

significant loss. We went into survival mode - that is the only way I can explain it.

37. I am still a teaching assistant but at a high school. I have been lucky to get this work as each position required a DBS check, which brought up the conviction. I then had to go to human resources and explain what had happened.

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

38. I felt very uncomfortable leaving the house and carrying on with normal life within such a small community. It is upsetting that I had to leave my social life behind; I enjoyed myself before the issues at the Post Office. Afterwards, I completely withdrew from the local community.

39. I am lucky that all my close friends and family believed me from the outset. However, I noticed that some people I knew less well became distant. I was told by the Post Office that I was the only one affected by this, because of this, I started to believe that I was guilty. I couldn't show my face at the local shops.

40. I was dismayed to see the article in the newspapers about me. It was so embarrassing; I just wanted the ground to open up and swallow me and felt so angry that I had a role to play in distributing these awful papers. We felt it right to inform our neighbours about what had happened, before they read about it. It was the right thing to do but it was humiliating.

41. I still worry about things. Following the quashing of my conviction, a lot of journalists came to my house; this was very distressing. I didn't want to be constantly reminded of what had happened to me, I just wanted to move on. I

would just sit in my house and cry. I now find it difficult to open my front door as it provokes those feelings again.

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

42. GRO and I were going through the process of being registered as foster carers at the time of my conviction. We were very lucky that the agency had faith in me and decided to allow us to progress despite the conviction, but it could have easily gone the other way.

43. We have since fostered more than 20 young people. A parent of one of the children, found out about my conviction through a newspaper article and asked for their child to be removed from our care due to my criminal record. However, the foster parenting agency was so supportive throughout and kept me updated. The foster child remained in our care after full support from social workers that it was in the child's best interests to remain with us.

44. My older children were at local schools at the time of my conviction. As my court case was well published in the local press, the local community knew about my situation. The kids at high school would bully my children. They would say things like, 'your mum's a thief'. Thankfully this hasn't had any great lasting effect on any of them, but it was very difficult for them at the time and was distressing for me to see them go through this. It was a horrendous experience for us all.

45. My husband, GRO was unable to get close to the people he worked with and he sensed my conviction was stopping his colleagues from talking to him. It was quite an awkward time for GRO

CONCLUDING REMARKS

46. I am still struggling to come to terms with what I have been through over the last 14 years. I still have flashbacks to when the investigators came to my house and searched my property and my underwear drawer. I would like to know why these people, who found it amusing at the time, are not being held accountable for their actions. Why are the investigators, who were so rude to me, not being held accountable? They came into my home and lied to me. How could they tell me I was the only one when they had undoubtedly told other postmasters the same thing before and would go on to tell others the same lies afterwards?

47. I would like an apology from the investigators and people who came to my home. I also want an explanation why they did this.

48. The JSFA fought to bring this scandal to light and paid a huge cost to do the job the Government should have done. The settlement was forced on them due to the money burning efforts of the post office

Statement Of Truth

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

Signed:

GRO

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 13, 2022

Name: SIOBHAN SAYER

FILE REFERENCE: **GRO**

