

Witness Name: Carol Armitage

Statement No: WITN07490100

Dated: 1 February 2023

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF Carol Susan Armitage

I, Carol Armitage will say as follows...

I have been asked to make a witness statement under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 under a request dated 3 January 2023 regarding training.

INTRODUCTION

1. First of all, I should explain that I am now 71 years of age and I retired from the Post Office in July 2016 so it is difficult to remember specific events.

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

2. I first joined Post Office Ltd in February 1970. After an extensive training course I worked as a Post Office Counter Clerk at Huddersfield. This involved serving customers with a large number of transactions and balancing my stock unit at the end of the week. I also traveled to other branch offices in the area when they need staff due to holiday times.

3. From there I progressed through various departments to eventually end up as the cashier in charge of the main cash remittance unit at Huddersfield. This at the time dealt with the supply of cash to the smaller sub post offices and the accounting of spare cash and cheques submitted by them to us for banking. I have asked when I became the cashier at the main remittance unit in Huddersfield. Unfortunately due to the passage of time I am unable to provide the year in question

4. After the first Post Office reorganisation I was moved to the District Office in Leeds as Manager for Customer Services. There I helped to distribute the weekly newsletter to offices and aided with complaints from members of the public. I have asked when I moved to the District Office in Leeds Unfortunately I am unable to provide the year in question

5. Then I became Audit Manager for offices part of the Bradford Area. This involved supervising audits both financial and procedural at both Crown Branches and Sub Post Offices. Eventually they cut the teams. I have been

asked when I became Audit Manager in Bradford. Unfortunately I cannot remember the year.

6. Post Office Counters then reorganised again in 1993 and I was given the chance of voluntary redundancy which I took in July of that year.
7. I must point out that the last two posts may have been the other way round I moved around so much under organisation it is difficult now to remember the order.
8. After that time I decided to set myself up as a holiday relief for sub postmasters, running their offices when they were on holiday. I worked in various branches using different methods of accounting. Manual - Recording everything down on paper. Computerised - Using either the Post Office Capture System or a program developed by a former sub postmaster Richard Jackson. Both of the systems were basic accounting systems and reduced manual calculation.
9. After a period of time I realised that monetary commitments meant I needed to find full time work again, it was then I saw a job advertised for the newly formed Post Office Network Business Support Centre.

NBSC BACKGROUND

10. I joined the NBSC in February 2000 after passing the Post Office aptitude test. I was told that although I had passed it in 1970 it was a long time ago. I have been asked to describe the Post Office aptitude test and what skills and knowledge were involved. I cannot remember what was required

11. I then went through another intensive period of training both of products and services and the operation of the newly implemented Horizon System. After the training we were gradually introduced into the live helpline. Not many branches had been rolled out as such and then it was not so busy. We started off by listening into calls with help of a trainer and eventually graduated to taking these calls ourselves. The calls were from sub postmasters who need help on accounting for various transactions on the system and dealing with the accounting of error notices. I have asked to give my recollections of the training received on the Horizon IT system, As far as I can recollect it dealt with recording different transactions on the system, how to pull off reports and balancing the system. I considered that this was accurate to assist others when both entering transactions and navigating the system.

12. As Horizon rolled out nationally the staff increased and as new sub postmasters were appointed the calls increased. The nature of the calls also changed. As well as guiding the sub postmaster through the transactions we also got calls from offices who found it difficult to balance the office, I have been asked to give further details of the difficulties SPMs reported when balancing. Problems were offices reporting large discrepancies in cash and not knowing where to look, also in the case of newer SPMs lack of knowledge

on how to correctly produce the stock unit balance and roll the stock unit and office over into the next accounting period. Whether it was inadequate training or simply because they only need to do this once a week at first and then only monthly I am unable to say. Also, in the case of offices operating more than one stock unit problems arose with putting through transactions in the incorrect stock unit

13. NBSC had a computerised system which required us to log each call under the branch name, name of sub postmaster and a brief description of the query whether it was balancing or transactional. At quiet times all these calls were dealt with straight away but at busier times priority was given to those with a customer waiting. No checks on balances were done at this time.

14. To help guide us through those calls the system we used provided a link into the Post Office Transactional Instructions and also checks for us to make as to how the office should look for any discrepancy. We were asked to make notes on the system as to what we had informed them.

15. I must point out that although we asked leading questions it was sometimes difficult to understand what exactly was the problem. I, myself always tended to see a manual balance in front of me as well as the computerised Horizon one.

16. If an office had failed to balance we asked them to run off several reports from the system as to what had been booked into the branch and out from the

remittance unit and stock centre. They were then asked to check these reports against the manual advices received.

17. When offices rang regarding a shortage, they were also asked if they were looking at what we called a balance snapshot or an actual trial balance. If I might explain, a balance snapshot is what the Horizon system thinks you have based on what has been recorded, but, as offices could have selected the incorrect stamp or settled the transaction to cash instead of cheque then this was not always accurate. They were asked to recheck their cash and stock and then make adjustments accordingly. In the majority of these cases the stock unit balanced. I have been asked to describe the checks that were carried out then if the office failed to balance after rechecking their cash and stock. I asked the office to run various reports which are listed below to try and identify major gains or shortages.

Suspense Account

- Shows uncharged receipts and unclaimed payments brought to account or redeemed. Checked this against instructions from Chesterfield sent to offices when error notice received. This check was to ensure office dealt with correctly

Stock Unit Report

- View how many stock unit make up the office balance

Users

- How many people allowed access to system

Transaction Log

(searched by either User, stock unit, time span, amount. Receipts or payment

Rems in

- When stock or cash scanned in and booked into system. Cash was automatically remmed in when pouch was received but stock pouch had to scanned in first then individual stock items manually booked into system

Rems Out

- When stock or cash scanned in and booked out of system. Also that cheque remittance out agreed with individual daily cheque listings

Transfers

- When cash and stock transferred into or out of a stock unit

Reversals – New and Existing

- Anything that was barcoded was classed as Existing

Event Log

- Tells when user logged in also when cash declaration made

Reversal slips

- If office had stated that had reversed transaction but still there checked reversal slip to see if transaction showing or just settlement element. Not possible to reverse existing transaction twice.

Adjust stock.

- Shows whether stock adjusted positive or negative.

Cash, stamp and stock declarations.

- In the majority of cases office only need to make one cash and stamp declaration and assign it a number, However in some cases someone had already made one previously and instead of over writing it with the new figures the SMR made a new one. This would create a subsequent large surplus in the branch as both declarations added together. In the case of the stock declaration office were not advised to use it but to use stock adjust instead. If the branch inadvertently went into this icon assigned it a number then came out without entering anything the Horizon system took it to mean that there was no stock thus creating a loss.

18. NBSC advisors were split into teams under a team leader who was there to give further help when requested and also sometimes listen into calls to evaluate the performance of individual advisors. As it got busier we were given what was called a call handling target. I cannot remember now what the time was, as I never met it. I was more concerned with making sure that the sub postmaster was fully aware of the instructions and comfortable with my reply before terminating the call. I have been asked what the call target was and by how much on average did I miss it. I cannot recollect the target or even if a penalty was occurred for failure but am certain I probably only met it once or twice in my career with NBSC and to my knowledge did not receive any penalty. We were constantly reminded at individual performance briefings of the need to meet targets but I do not consider any undue pressure was put upon me.

19. As far as I am aware all advisors were courteous and helpful.

20. As regards the Horizon system I can only recollect one problem that was noted. It was a receipts and payments mismatch. All calls that mentioned this were referred to the Horizon Technical Helpdesk. No further information as to the problem was provided. I myself cannot recollect ever receiving such a call. I have been asked what year the receipts and payments mismatch case appeared on the knowledge base, unfortunately I am unable to recall the specific year only that the information was there.

21. I must also point out that NBSC dealt only with transactional and balancing enquiries, all calls that involved the inability to access Horizon such as the caller being locked out, power outages and screen freezes were transferred to the Technical Helpdesk.

22. I finally left NBSC in July 2016 after yet another reorganisation in which NBSC was transferred from Wath Upon Dearne to Chesterfield

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed:

GRO

1 February 2023

Dated: _____