

Witness Name: Christine Smyth

Statement No.: WITN06340100

Dated: 31/01/2023

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST STATEMENT OF CHRISTINE SMYTH

I, Christine Smyth, will say as follows...

INTRODUCTION

1. I started working as a counter clerk for the Post Office in March 1981, at Lockerbie Post Office in Scotland. I transferred to Dumfries Post Office in 1983, again as a counter clerk, where I assisted the TV enquiry team as needed. I transferred to Portsmouth Branch Office (BO) in 1985, then to Southsea BO in 1986, but helped out occasionally at other local branches as needed. I then worked for two years, 1988-90, as part of the training team based in Brighton, training new Postmasters on site, also assisting the audit team if needed.

2. In 1990 I became Branch Manager at Western Road, Hove, for a short time, before transferring to be Assistant Branch Manager at Fareham BO. I returned to Portsmouth BO in 1991 as a counter clerk, where I remained until 2009 (?)

when I then went to Waterlooville BO, quickly followed by Leigh Park BO. The new Horizon was launched whilst I was at this office). I, once again transferred back to Portsmouth BO as a counter clerk, and then joined the Training and Audit team as a Field Support Advisor in 2012. I remained part of this team for 7 years, before taking voluntary redundancy in 2019.

BACKGROUND

3. Both Southsea BO and Portsmouth BO had counter training schools attached to them, and trainees would often be brought to the counter for practical experience. I often had trainees to supervise whilst at these offices, and never had any issues either personally, or balancing.

4. Whilst at Leigh Park BO the New Horizon IT system was brought in. I was given a folder of "screen shots" and basic transaction scenarios. The system went live the following day, and I found it very intuitive to use.

5. On joining the Field Support team in 2010, I met my Team Leader, Jane Rattue, and other members of her team. I was allocated an existing, experienced, person to shadow (Natalie Liff). I then attended a week- long course in Maidstone to introduce the requirements of the role.

6. I shadowed Natalie for Audits, classroom training and on-site training for approximately 4 months, gradually becoming more "hands on" and Natalie stepping back. During this time I had regular contact with Jane, I sent in weekly

reports on work covered, any issues, and areas I felt needed to be developed. Jane regularly observed me "in action" and gave constructive feedback. I had very limited experience of back office, multi stock unit balancing so Jane ensured I had a good working knowledge of back office procedures and reports, both for the running of an office and for audit purposes.

7. Training on the Horizon system was either classroom based (usually for the Postmaster, but occasionally for other members of their team) or practical, in branch.

8. Classroom training was delivered over 2 or 3 days, depending on job role (Postmaster would get an extra day to cover back office balancing, sales and troubleshooting).

9. All participants were given a folder with step-by-step instructions for using Horizon to use whilst in the classroom. When leading a classroom course, it was my job to make sure all the training material was up to date, the Horizon system was working at all the terminals (usually eight), that all the practical materials were available and that handouts covering balancing, remittances, helpful phone numbers and other important issues were printed – ready to give to the delegates.

10. Delegates were given multiple opportunities whilst in the classroom, to use the Horizon equipment – I would initially explain the layout of the "Home Screen" to them, the how they could look for information, we would ask questions that required using the "Help" button. They would "take over" their stock unit (check the cash and stock against the reports generated by Horizon), I would

ask them to carry out several transactions to familiarize themselves with the system, and they would then follow worksheet scenarios acting in turn as a customer or a clerk. I would explain the difference of "Front Office" and "Back Office", and I would get them to do regular cash declarations, and they would also balance their stock unit at least twice whilst they were with me, once following me, the second time using the balancing sheet provided (a copy of which I would give them to take away with them to use once in branch). Postmasters were reminded to declare the cash as it actually was – not what they thought it was, or thought it should be – that way discrepancies would be spotted and rectified much sooner. All delegates were given multiple opportunities to ask questions as these generally helped everyone else. Delegates were given their own handouts, as previously mentioned, and I always reminded them that the Helpline was there if they ever had a problem that they couldn't resolve themselves. Each delegate was given feedback on how they had done on the course, and this was also given to my line manager and uploaded onto the All Branch Database, so that if anyone was visiting a branch they could see how the branch was performing. Delegates were also given feedback forms on myself and the training they had had (the most common remarks were that I was great, and they had enjoyed the course and had found it useful).

11. Once on-site I would usually work on a 1-2-1 basis with any staff requiring training. Every person using the Horizon equipment had to have compliance training, so this was one of the first things covered with new staff members.

12. Security was strictly enforced both for the staff member, and the Postmaster the safety of their business, the Post Office, Royal Mail and Parcelforce and

themselves depended on it. They were reminded not to share passwords, to keep cash holdings to a minimum and make sure they logged off the system before someone else served out of the stock unit. I would explain to staff the layout of the Horizon screens, how to find less common transaction buttons, the difference between "Front Office" and "Back Office", how to do a cash declaration, how to look for discrepancies, what to do if there was an issue. I often found that the handouts I had given the postmaster in the classroom went missing, so I made a folder, specific to that office, full of helpful information – the front of the folder had day to day useful info (phone numbers, how to carry out infrequent transactions, how to reverse transactions etc., the back of the folder would have mainly manager transactions (balancing, remittances into and out of the office, stock ordering information, cash declaration sheets etc.) this was left near the Post Office position and all staff were able to access the information, should they need to.

13. I would also stress to all staff the fact that the Helpline was available for them to call, should there be ANY issue – and to phone sooner rather than later. All staff to be trained were given as much time as the Postmaster could allocate to them, and in shops that had part-time workers starting earlier or later than our normal 9 – 5.30 core hours I would often alter my working day to accommodate these staff members, to ensure they had the same consistent training as everyone else. Any quiet periods I would often become "the customer" and give the trainee practice, to build their confidence. I would work in branch with the Postmaster and his staff for a period of around 10 days, stepping back gradually as everyone gained experience. This time period would cover two balances, the first following the helpsheet and with guidance, the second balance I would encourage the postmaster to carry out the balance as

much as possible on their own, again using the handout as a guide. After a few days on their own, I would attend the following Wednesday for their "follow-up" balance, where the staff were encouraged to complete the balance on their own, following the process on the handout.

14. Every office I visited was given feedback on the training provided, and they also were left feedback forms for them to complete on me, and the training given (I usually had lovely comments). I also completed on-line reports for my manager and reports were uploaded onto the national database, so that if another team member/manager/investigator wanted any information regarding the office, everything was in one place.

15. In all the years I used the Horizon system I never had any issues with the system, nor was I aware of any issues whilst I was training. I have never heard of any office I had contact with experiencing any issues with the Horizon system.

16. I was confident that any branch would have no issues so long as staff followed procedures, didn't guess how to carry out transactions or correct errors and contacted the Helpline if in any doubt.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed _____

GRO

Dated: 31/01/2023