

Witness Name: Christopher Bowman

Statement No.: WITN07770100

Dated: 23 March 2023

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER BOWMAN

I, Christopher Bowman, will say as follows...

INTRODUCTION

1. This statement responds to a request for a written witness statement made to myself under the inquiry rules 2006 to rule 9 (request number 1) regarding training.
2. The inquiry believes that I hold information relevant to the issues which will be investigated by the inquiry. However, as it relates to events that occurred up to twenty-four years ago, there may be areas that I cannot recall and in such cases I have stated.
3. This statement has been drafted by myself and in my own words.

BACKGROUND

4. Leaving school in 1986 with various GCSE and CSE qualifications I was offered a position on the post office YT scheme, initially starting out under the guidance of sub postmaster Peter Covey.

5. In 1988 I was successful in an interview for a vacant postal officer position based at Guisborough Crown Office until its closure in 1990. During this time, I carried out general post officer duties which included the general serving of customers, dealing with benefit payments, postal services and other government department transactions. All of which would culminate in producing a weekly balance and office cash account collating each individuals' weekly summaries using a manual process.
6. On closure I was transferred to Thornaby Crown Office, initially under the management of Jean Stockley before her retirement shortly afterwards and then under the guidance of William Wood. My time at Thornaby would often see me substituting covering the roles of the deputy manager and often covering the relief of other branch staff shortages.
7. In August 1998 I was offered the opportunity of joining the 'Testing Programme' which included, robust testing of the 'Benefits Encaptured System' based at Borough High Street in London and subsequently ICL Pathway in Feltham. This was my first experience of using the Horizon System, still in its very early form. During this secondment we would follow scripts to process transactions and BES card payments. We would help find and resolve issues prior to the intended national roll out. I believe the BES payment card scheme was scrapped in early 1999 and was never national rolled out.
8. In September 1999 I was asked to join the Horizon Project in the position of a Horizon Field Support Officer (HFSO) and remained in that role until project completion in 2002.

9. I completed my post office service after nearly twenty years in 2008 whilst based at Billingham branch office when taking EVR.

10. In September 1999 I joined the Horizon Project as a HFSO. Initial training was an intensive six-week course held in the Midland Hotel, Bradford. Myself and several other HFSO were trained on all aspects of the Horizon system in a classroom environment, once again working from scripts to produce weekly balances, using all help material to guide us to reach and resolve any issues that arose from its operation. We also learned all about migration and how to achieve the smooth transition between the manual and automated systems. I remember the last week of training been quite intense, covering several examinations of our capabilities in qualifying as a HFSO, being prepared to assist post masters and staff in the roll out of Horizon.

11. My responsibilities as a HFSO were to aid staff in both sub and crown offices and help in the transition between manual and automated systems, spending time with each and every employee to enable an understanding in the operating of the Horizon System. The role would entail contacting offices the week before migration and install. Updating the postmaster on what would be required to aid the smooth transition of migration between systems. All staff at this point had received off site training and attended seminars on procedures. Arriving in branch on migration day would invariably be after install. We would escalate and resolve any issues around installation if required, before aiding the sub postmaster and staff with balance requirements before migration could take place. Some post masters could initially be hostile to our presence, more in apprehension regarding the process. I would always try and ease

their fears using my personality to form a rapport with all staff making transition and training less stressful.

12.All issues I found around migration seemed to come from the migration of what were deemed to be call suspense accounts; i.e. unclaimed payments and uncharged receipt sections of the old post office cash sheet. In these sections were all receipts taken after final despatch and any error notices issued and currently outstanding. If I recall these accounts were migrated at two different levels during the process and could take some configuring at which level the figures should be entered. From experience this seemed the biggest cause of mis migrations and did cause initial concern from post masters. Personally, I cannot remember having any serious issues surrounding the suspense account migration, but was aware of issues encountered by fellow HFSO's. These mis migrations I believe were escalated and initially dealt with by ICL who would process a patch to resolve outstanding errors. I would always spend the three days on site been as thorough as possible, and aim to cover any transactions staff maybe struggling with, I would often stay after hours to help staff understand certain processes, always encouraging the use of manuals and helplines when possible. I would always try build up friendships to increase confidence on the use of the Horizon System.

13.Some sub post masters could be very negative, which could obstruct what was being taught, but these scenarios were very rare. All staff during our time on site were made aware of all helplines and encouraged to use help available and although not advised I would always leave my mobile number, to aid with issues after my attendance. I would also make follow up phone

calls to make sure all was ok. We would continue to support staff through the first balance and cash account, this would take place in either a revisit or during our time on site. Times during the initial transition were tough for some and extra training would always be flagged by myself where I thought necessary. Post masters and staff were always left the Horizon manuals and all telephone numbers for helplines available, as well as been shown how to access training mode. As regards to the system operation I never personally experienced any serious malfunction whilst in attendance, that couldn't be resolved through relevant help and support desks or by myself on site.

14. HFSO's were managed in small regional teams by an immediate line manager, mine been Brian Corderey. This person was the first point of contact if raising issues surrounding install or migration. We also had an out of hours admin team when working late to inform of our whereabouts on completion of migration.
15. In reality looking back our three days on site was never enough to cover all aspects of system operation, hence although strictly against post office policy I would leave my contact details as mentioned in a previous paragraph. I personally always tried to ease people's apprehensions and fears around the systems use. To some this was a massive undertaking, in the transition from manual to an automated system. I appreciate how daunting this must have been to post masters who had no previous experience of automation.
16. I would always endeavour to find resolve in any issues surrounding Horizons usage, often working with the experiences of other HFSO's if necessary, to obtain the relevant information required. I would always encourage the use of

best practice, using my experience I had gained in my role, often staying after hours to find answers to the post masters concerns.

17. As previously stated, I cannot remember being aware of any errors, bugs or defects in the systems operation that wasn't human error. These mistakes were usually rectified on site by the use of Horizons reversal system, I would endeavour to correct any pending mistakes whilst present on site, using this process as part of my training programme. I was aware of concerns surrounding the migration of the suspense accounts, and issues this may have caused if incorrectly translated. This was an issue usually corrected by ICL in the form of a correction patch.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed:

GRO

Dated:

23-03-2023