

WITNESS: WENDY BUFFREY

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0189\_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 14, 2022

**POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY**

**FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF WENDY BUFFREY**

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 WENDY BUFFREY, Date of Birth  of ADDRESS

will say as follows:-

**PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

1. I'm a 62 year old retired health and safety consultant and live in Cheltenham with my husband,  I have retired due to my illness, fibromyalgia, which I believe is directly connected to my experience with the Post Office.

**POST OFFICE HISTORY**

2. Before I started working as a Sub-postmistress at Up Hatherley Post Office, I was working for 10 years as a representative for Johnson's cleaning products in the South Quarter.

3. I was looking at taking over a Post Office that my friend owned at the time. I asked to spend some time in the Post Office on a Saturday Morning.
4. I liked working in the Post Office with the customers. I am a people person, and this role came naturally to me.
5. The Post Office also had a retail shop which sold stationary, cards, gifts and confectionery. I employed 3 assistants that worked in the shop and Post Office. There were 4 part time staff employed to cover the shop.
6. On 24 March 1999, I signed an acknowledgement of appointment form for the position of sub-postmistress. I was, and remain, unclear as to the precise contract terms involved. I commenced my role as sub-postmistress at Up Hatherley Post Office on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1999.
7. It was not until 2011 when another sub-postmaster contacted me that I realised that I was not alone in the issues I had faced with the Post Office.

#### **CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION**

8. I was suspended from my role with the Post Office following an audit on 11th December 2008. My contract was then terminated a few weeks later.
9. I was prosecuted by the Post Office and charged with Fraud. I pleaded guilty and received 150 hours community service and was ordered to pay £1,500 of Post Office costs.
10. My conviction was quashed in April 2021.

**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. An audit of my Post Office was conducted in 2004. A shortfall of £2,872.70 was alleged. In 2008, a shortfall of £26,000 was alleged.

13. This had significant cost implications for me including being forced to sell my business and take out a loan, as detailed below.

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

14. When the shortfall of £2,872.70 was alleged, the Post Office advised that they would deduct the shortfall money from my remuneration monthly for 1 year, until I had paid off the shortage.

15. In 2008 the Post Office alleged a shortfall of around £26,000 after conducting an audit. I had already taken out a loan to pay off £10,000 prior to the audit.

16. I had to sell my property, including the business, as there was a Proceeds of Crime Act application against me which meant I had no choice.

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

17. When I was first informed that I was to be held responsible for the shortfalls, I was in total shock. I was adamant that I had not stolen anything and felt insulted that I was being accused of such a thing. It is against my moral principles to steal anything from anyone.
18. It was also deeply concerning that I was to be held responsible for such a big shortfall. I didn't have a clue where I would find the money to cover this. It was a deeply worrying and stressful experience.

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

19. I was suspended after my last audit at the Post Office on 11 December 2008.
20. I was interviewed by the Post Office on 21 January 2009 and was not allowed to take a solicitor with me to the interview, so I took the Head of the Federation with me.
21. I never received an outcome to the investigation; the Post Office sent me a letter regarding alleged proceeds of crime. I was told that my contract was terminated by the Post Office, on 2 January 2009, for inflating cash figures and failing to make good the losses without delay. The Post Office informed me that this was a breach of my contract.
22. Shortly after my contract with the Post Office was terminated, I was employed by St John's Ambulance Service and a private ambulance service working for the NHS as an Emergency Medical Technician.
23. I repeatedly told the auditors that I did not remove any money from the Post Office. I was told in return that Horizon does not make mistakes and no other

postmasters have experienced issues like this, therefore I must have taken the money.

24. I was summoned to the Magistrates Court on a charge of theft, where I pleaded not guilty. My family attended the Crown Court with me for support and some of my customers attended the hearing in Gloucester. Some of my customers had sent handwritten letters which had been given to the judge upon the hearing.

25. My case was transferred to the Crown Court, where my barrister informed me that if I did not win the case, I could expect to face a prison sentence of between 3 – 5 years. I agreed to plead guilty to Fraud, but I would not agree to plead guilty to Theft as I never took the money.

26. I knew that there were cells at Gloucester Crown Court, and I believed that I was not going to be going to prison as I had been told my case would be heard at Cirencester which had no cells. I waited there along with others. Only to find my case had been moved to Gloucester so I had to drive there or be charged with contempt. I don't know how I made that drive.

**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?**

27. I was brought up to tell the truth, not to steal and not to spit. I am an honest person and therefore found the accusations of criminality particularly distressing, as it completely undermines my basic values.



28. In January 2009, shortly after my suspension, I went to see my GP and reported that I was under investigation at work for falsifying accounts. My GP informed me that I was suffering from depression.
29. I contacted the Federation of Sub-postmasters, who were useless. They told me that, as I had been suspended, I was no longer entitled to Union support. This made me feel abandoned and alone.

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

30. I was convicted of Fraud but not Theft. I was sentenced to 150 hours community service and ordered to pay £1,500 in costs to the Post Office.
31. Around 3-4 months after I received my conviction, I got a letter from Gloucester Crown Court saying that they wanted the money that I owed. I had to contact my solicitors to write a letter to the court stating that this money had already been paid back to the Post Office.
32. For my community service I volunteered at the Monk's Resident Gardens, a women's refuge and I also spent time working on the canal, litter picking.
33. Even though I had legal aid, I did have to pay the Post Office's costs when I was convicted which were £1,500.
34. Since I had a criminal record, it meant I couldn't continue working for the ambulance service. I was required to cease my involvement with the St John's Ambulance Service and told not to contact the other members. This was such an emotional blow for me as my work for St John's was a great social outlet, particularly so, as my husband was quite ill.

35. I felt very low and sometimes wished that I was not here. I received a lot of abuse whilst doing community service. I was spat at in the street by one of my ex-customers and I was also spat at whilst doing my community service. The whole matter was very degrading for me as I used to think of myself as an honest and decent member of the community.
36. In August 2011, I was feeling tired and low all the time. This seemed to be getting worse. I was working as a cleaner but didn't see how I could progress and get more responsibility at work. I suffered a lot of stress during this time. My GP prescribed me sertraline to combat the depression I was suffering with.
37. I contemplated suicide in August 2011 but then got a call from another postmaster who was in a similar situation to me, and I realised that I wasn't alone. I met up with other postmasters and this was very comforting for me. Although the situation improved towards the end of 2011, I still felt numb and as if there was something missing. I no longer felt suicidal, but I didn't feel like the person I used to be.
38. I then suffered a major tragedy in April 2014; my son was working in Norway at a ski resort, whilst he was waiting for his electrician qualifications to be translated into Norwegian. He was running a bar out there and tragically died when he came off his bicycle whilst riding home from an end of season staff party.
39. The Post Office continued to investigate the situation and in 2014 I hoped that the investigation would be published. A report by Second Sight suggested that there had been irregularities, but the Post Office rejected that report and relied on their own report; this ended the mediation process. My colleagues and I, again, gave up hope of getting the matter sorted. This led to me having trouble

sleeping and made me want to go back on antidepressants. It all made me become depressed again – partly because of **GRO** and partly because of the situation with the Post Office. I was shocked to be accused of dishonesty, and this was something I thought about every day.

40. My main problem was that I was not sleeping. I would lay in bed ruminating over my difficulties with the Post Office going over it again and again. I kept thinking about whether I had done something wrong. I would get up at night, looking in drawers trying to look for some possible hidden money in case I had put it there by mistake. I just could not understand what had happened to the missing money.
41. There was a further court case in early January 2019 and I remember being depressed and struggling over the stress of the case. It brought up all the old issues and I was getting quite down. My husband's illness was also a problem. I couldn't concentrate and just felt demotivated. I tried to get some more sertraline to help with my symptoms.
42. I managed to find employment as a cleaner in 2010 and then, after getting more qualifications, I got a job as a Health and Safety consultant at ACT Consultants Ltd. However, I was furloughed from my job when the Covid lockdown started. I returned to this role again in Autumn 2020, in between the first and second nationwide lockdowns.
43. Towards the end of 2019 I developed intermittent pains around my joints. I saw a rheumatologist in August 2020 who diagnosed me with probable fibromyalgia and a sleep disturbance. I firmly believe that the stress and difficulties with the Post Office has contributed to the development of my fibromyalgia.



44. In the early part of 2021, I experienced recurring dreams of being dragged off by the Police and put in prison. This was just before the hearing in April 2021 where my conviction was quashed.

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

45. Despite receiving legal aid to support me through the court process, I was ordered to pay £1,500 of the Post Office's legal costs.

46. After my suspension, and termination, we had to move into the buy-to-let property I was in the process of renovating with my son. We lost out on another revenue stream we had hoped to receive from this.

47. I also lost my position at St John's Ambulance due to the stigma associated with the conviction.

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

48. My conviction had a huge impact on both my life and my family's lives. Details of my conviction were published in the local newspaper as well as being shown on television. This was deeply embarrassing for me.

49. My son, GRO was vilified at his workplace by his colleagues because of my conviction. His colleagues would talk about it in such a way that he felt he had to defend me. In the end, the bullying got too much for GRO and he had a nervous breakdown. He left his job and has only recently started at a new firm.

50. Even when out in the local community, I noticed people whispering behind their hands. Initially I felt anxious about going outside into public places out of fear of being recognised from the newspaper or television.

51. Whilst I was a volunteer and a paid member of staff at St John's Ambulance Service, I received a recorded letter saying to please not come back to St John's again and to not contact any of my colleagues as they didn't want to be tarred with the same brush. I have not heard from any of my colleagues since. To have worked with people who I considered to be friends for 6 or 7 years, to then turn their backs on me and completely disown me, was absolutely horrible.

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

52. My father died of cancer two years ago. It is very upsetting for me that both my father and GRO my son, died without knowing that my conviction was quashed.

53

**GRO**

54. After the GLO, when we lost so much to costs, it brought back all the terrible feelings from before. So many people have been left without fair compensation, and worse still is the fact that no one is being held responsible for what they did to me, my family, and my colleagues.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

55. I don't feel like I'm the person I used to be before the situation with the Post Office. I used to be a happy person and sing along to music; I still have trouble concentrating and feel down generally. I found it difficult just carrying out my duties at work. I believe a part of me has died and I don't think I will ever get it back.

**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 14, 2022

Name: WENDY BUFFREY

FILE REFERENCE:

**GRO**

