

WITNESS: AMANDA BARBER

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0147_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 11, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF AMANDA BARBER

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 Amanda Barber, Date of Birth: , of

will say as follows: -

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I live with my husband Norman in a caravan at the above address.
2. I am 51 years old.
3. I am employed as a Customer Service Advisor at IKEA, where I've been working since June 2021. Prior to that, and since my issues with the Post Office, I have had small jobs such as cleaning.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

4. I became sub-postmaster of the Thelwall branch in 2009 when I bought the business using a Post Office loan via Barclays Bank. I worked there with my husband Norman.
5. Prior to that, my husband and I purchased a previous Post Office from my father in Lancaster. My father ran that one before us. We had this for approximately 3 years.
6. In addition to this, my husband and I would frequently work for the National Register.
7. Norman and I first became aware of others having similar issues with the Horizon system after watching the Panorama TV programme in 2019.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

7. I had reported issues with Horizon, the financial software, to the Post Office on a number of occasions. I initially thought that other staff members had been stealing money, but there was no evidence of this. The Post Office wouldn't listen, and said that I had to make good any shortfalls. I had been doing this for some time, and I ended up having to take out loans and credit cards to clear the balance.
8. An official audit was done on my Post Office on 21 June 2011. I was present at the time. Before they had even checked the balance, they had suspended me and claimed to have found a shortfall.
9. The auditors found a deficit total of £5,631.84 at the store. My husband and I knew about a shortfall, but he was selling his car the following day to make up for this.

10. On the same day, the auditors had managed to arrange for an agency worker to come in. He turned up in a sports car and laughed as he came in claiming he was making a fortune from taking over Post Offices, and that we would never see the Post Office again.
11. I was asked to attend an interview with Post-Office Officials at the Warrington Sorting Office. I told them the truth, but they still charged me with Fraud. I took a neighbour with me as a witness. I was told that I would likely avoid a custodial sentence if I pleaded guilty.
12. They later interviewed my husband Norman at the police station, and he was also charged.
13. The Post Office searched my car, and also wanted to search my home, but I managed to resist them doing so.
14. At Warrington Magistrates Court I was persuaded to plead guilty to the charges of fraud that were against me to lessen my sentence, given the issues with evidence. This was on the advice of my legal team. On 6 June 2012, I was sentenced to a 12-month Community Order and a requirement to complete 100 hours of unpaid community service, and have since been trying to pay back the Post Office.
15. My conviction was quashed by the Court of Appeal on 18 November 2021.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

16. 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?

17. I first noticed shortfalls and was starting to pay £200-£300 at a time to try and cover this. I initially felt that it was staff stealing. However, it reached a stage where the shortfalls were too much for me to be able to pay back.

18. I took out credit cards and loans, and my husband used his inheritance money. My husband had also planned to sell his car to make up these shortfalls, but the auditors turned up the day before, and weren't interested.

19. I'm still paying back the money to the Post Office now.

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

20. Throughout mine and my husband's time working at the Post Office, we borrowed £30,000 from my family, used £50,000 of our inheritance, and sold the family car. This was just to cover the costs of the shortfalls on a weekly basis.

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

21. It was very degrading to be told that I was suspended from the Post Office, as was having my car searched, and being interviewed by the Post Office officials.

22. Almost immediately everybody stopped talking to us. Our immediate family even isolated us. Only our daughter stuck by us. It was a horrendous experience to go through.

23. We were told that there was a chance we could go to prison. It was a very frightening time for me and my husband.

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

24. As a direct result of my and my husband's experience with the Post Office, we sold our shop and the sale of the business was at a loss.

25. After my role was terminated by the Post Office, we effectively lost the entire family income as we were unable to carry on working in the shop. We had both been earning approximately £20,000 a year, and our daughter was working full time at the business too.

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

26. My contract with the Post Office was terminated, meaning that I no longer had any livelihood, and I lost my business as a result.

27. We were also prevented from working for the National register, which was another source of income for us both. We were never able to work for the Post Office again.

28. At one point we had £30 to our name to pay for either food, fuel or to go towards our mortgage. We had to lend inheritance money that my daughter received to help us get by. This was humiliating.

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

29. As a result of the criminal conviction, I was ordered to repay £5,631.84 back to the Post Office. I initially started to do this at an agreed amount of £40 per month from June 2014.

30. I also had to pay back the Court fees of £700.

31. Prior to the conviction, I was earning approximately £40,000 per year. Due to the conviction of fraud against me, I now earn £16,000, so there is a significant loss of livelihood.

32. Previously I would also make up income with my role on the National Register. My husband and I would go all over the country, and I was on a rate of £100 per day. It was worth doing frequently, and we were able to do so whilst leaving the Post Office being managed back at home.

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?

33. I was a well-known member of our local community. We ran the newsagents as well as the Post Office, and everyone in the community would use the shop. We were considered a pillar in the community.

34. Being accused of being a criminal changed everything overnight. It was all over the local news, and people started ignoring us in the street and we were segregated from the community.

35. Along with the emotional impact, I was very angry that it was being taken so far. Our reputation was ruined.

36. I became depressed and anxious, and at times felt suicidal. I went to my GP to ask for help as I didn't want to be here anymore. I was placed on antidepressants, and I still take these now.

37. I had to do my community service with men, and although I was told that it would not be in my local community, it was. It was humiliating having to work in local parks where I could come across people that I knew. I just kept my head down hoping that people may not recognise me.

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

38. Following my suspension, we had no income coming in, and we therefore put our house on the market. We couldn't keep up with the mortgages. It took 3 years for the house to sell, and we could barely get by during this time.

39. We now live in a caravan due to the lesser expense and have done for many years.

40. We are still paying money back to the Post Office and we have been left in a huge amount of debt.

41. Because I had a criminal conviction against me, I struggled finding work. I wanted to go for management positions, but this was not possible due to the conviction.

42. I ended up in low paid roles just to make ends meet.

43. Along with my husband's role in the airport, where he works at their car parks, and our dual roles in the Post Office and on the National Register, we were trying to put away money for a happy and luxurious retirement. This would involve a lifestyle of holidays and enjoyment. The conviction meant that this was no longer a future we could plan for.

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

44. Following the conviction, our family stopped talking to us. I pleaded guilty to avoid a custodial sentence. As such, people saw us as guilty.

45. They also convicted my husband, even though I was the Sub-Postmistress and he just helped out.

46. Nobody would speak to us anymore. It was very traumatic having everything changed in our life.

47. Prior to the incident my husband and I were very outgoing. We talked to everyone and had lots of friends. However, since the conviction, we have become socially withdrawn, and people simply ignore us.

48. My husband and I had a big role in the wider community, not only with the Post Office and newsagents, but we also helped the introduction of Post Offices within WHSmith shops.

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

49. My daughter worked with us in the newsagent section of the business. She was deeply affected by everything that had happened, and we had to support her too.
50. She no longer works and feels just as isolated as we do.
51. My husband and I struggled within our relationship too. He had to work 7 days a week to try and make ends meet. However, when I did see him, we spent a lot of time either arguing or not communicating at all. It was never like this before the incident.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

52. The squashing of the conviction against me is a relief; however, this experience will always be with us. The past 12 years have been hell.
53. Family and friends haven't spoken to us for the whole of this time, and therefore relationships have just gone. We will never get that time back.
54. Going through the process of overturning the wrongful conviction has brought back all those feelings. The humiliation has come back, and it is difficult to hear strangers talking about our experiences.

Statement Of Truth

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

Signed:

GRO
Amanda Jane Barber (Jan 11, 2022 20:09 GMT)

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 11, 2022

Name: AMANDA BARBER

FILE REFERENCE: **GRO**

