

WITNESS: CARINA PRICE

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0150_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 13, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF CARINA PRICE

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, MS CARINA PRICE, Date of Birth , of
 will say as follows: -

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I am currently 60 years of age.
2. Prior to my appointment as Sub Postmistress, I was an administrative manager and a retail manager.
3. At the time, I was married with two young children.
4. Since finishing the Post Office in 2005, I have had various part time jobs over the years. I became a director at my new partner's business before needing to resign due to illness. I am now on incapacity benefits.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

5. I was appointed as Sub-postmistress of the Sopley Post Office branch, in Dorset, in 1999.
6. I bought the business because it fitted well for my needs. My husband and I wanted to start afresh and leave the past behind because we had marriage difficulties.
7. We have two sons, the youngest of which was diagnosed with GRO I decided I wanted to spend more time with my family to meet his needs.
8. The Post Office was in a rural area. We lived in a four bedroom house next door which had a garden for the boys to play in.
9. It had an adjoining general store which I also owned.
10. I employed two people to work alongside me at the Post Office - Mr Farmer and Mrs Coles. Eventually they ran the Post Office for me. However, I still oversaw the balancing in the Post Office.
11. I also had a part time job at a cigarette vending machine company.
12. I was suspended from my position in the Post Office following an unannounced audit in 2005.
13. The name of my area manager was Mr Harvey.
14. I only became aware of other sub-postmasters experiencing the same issues with Horizon as me after I became aware of the JFSA, but this was quite a few years after they terminated my contract.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

15. I recall receiving error notices on the system from 2002 to 2003. From then on, I noticed that the figures were regularly wrong and just wouldn't balance. I would pull my hair out not being able to understand why.
16. At first, I thought it was me making the mistakes and I repaid the initial shortfalls.
17. I phoned the helpdesk about the discrepancies in the beginning. Their attitude was always "it will bounce back", which I found very frustrating and unhelpful.
18. An auditor visited and I recall them saying that I can't leave £2,000 in the suspense account; they told me to take the money and keep it myself. I said to him I couldn't do that - it was the Post office's money, and it was a reputable place to work.
19. I had various other audits before the main one in 2005, and as mentioned above I repaid any shortfall found at audit with my own money. I cannot recall the amount of the discrepancies at this stage as it was all such a long time ago.
20. I thought **GRO** and **GRO** had something to do with it because they were running the post office. I was doing the weekly balance based on their figures, and I couldn't understand why it wasn't balancing.
21. I would spend until the early hours trying to figure it out, and in the end had to just accept the figures and sign it off.
22. An unannounced audit was carried out by the Post Office in 2005 and a shortfall of £13,000 was found. This was when the allegations against me arose.
23. In 2006, I was charged with numerous counts of suppressing a valuable security and three counts of theft. I pleaded not guilty.
24. I was convicted by a jury at Bournemouth Crown Court on 30th November 2005 to 28 counts of suppressing valuable security.

25. I was cleared of the charges of theft and of 12 of the charges of suppressing a valuable security.

26. I was sentenced on 19th January 2006 to a 9-month prison sentence which was suspended for 2 years.

27. My conviction was subsequently quashed on appeal on 19th July 2021.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

28. 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?

29. As mentioned above, the shortfalls were small at first and I regularly had to use my own money to cover these.

30. The shortfalls were getting bigger and I could not afford to keep repaying them.

31. I had to take an evening job doing bar work as well as my day job at the cigarette vending machine company. I was exhausted from working so many hours.

32. I also used my own takings from the shop to rectify the shortfalls.

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

33. I would estimate that out of my own pocket I put in around £13,000 in total to cover the initial ad-hoc shortfall amounts.

34. Following the audit in 2005, I was told that I would have to pay a further shortfall of £13,000 back. I had to take a loan out of £37,784 to cover the shortfall, my living expenses and mortgage, believing I would be able to work and repay it.
35. It took so long to get to court I had to use the loan money to pay the mortgage and my family's living expenses.
36. As the case proceeded to court, my barrister informed me that the shortfalls were in excess of £17,000. He advised me to pay it before court, but I realised the loan I took out didn't cover the shortfalls in addition to my living expenses and mortgage. Instead I had to take out a further loan of £20,000 to pay the shortfall.

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

37. As mentioned above, two auditors visited the office and they implied that I had taken the £13,000 which made me feel awful and very upset.
38. The whole situation caused me a huge amount of stress.
39. I had so much on my plate, with the shop and my children; I thought the shortfalls were due to my mistakes.
40. The whole experience was shocking. I couldn't believe what was happening and I just thought it was a big misunderstanding.

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

41. I was invited to attend an interview. I can't remember exactly what happened, they just bombarded me with "this is wrong, and that is wrong". They said

- money was going missing. I said I haven't taken any money and I didn't know why it was going wrong.
42. After the interview I was suspended without pay. As mentioned above, I had to use the loan money to live on.
43. At the time, my husband was an artist and he was not often able to contribute financially. We had taken the children out of school and he was home schooling them.
44. I had always been the breadwinner of the family and after my suspension we had less income. I had to hand in my notice at the cigarette vending machine company when I knew I was going to court.
45. I did not look for alternative employment because I didn't think anyone would employ me whilst I was under investigation.
46. My physical health deteriorated at this stage and I really struggled to cope.
47. Criminal prosecutions were taken against me by the Post Office.

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

48. As detailed above, due to the financial pressure I was in from the identified shortfalls and loss of income I had to take out an initial loan of £37,784 which was a high interest unsecured loan. Subsequently I had to take out a further loan of £20,000.00. I also had to use various credit cards as a result of the Post Office's actions.
49. I hated being in debt, but I had no choice. It was not a comfortable feeling at all. I worried about how I would pay the mortgage.

50. At first, I missed a lot of repayments and the interest kept getting higher and higher. I had many sleepless nights because I thought we were going to lose the house.
51. In 2006, I set up a payment plan with a debt collection company. I have since been able to make the monthly payments, but it is a big chunk of my monthly income gone and I am left with just enough to get by.
52. I have done everything in my power to make the repayments and ensure my sons do not lose their home.
53. My new partner **GRO** has recently helped with the payments. My debt should not be his responsibility which makes me feel dreadful.
54. I am still paying the loans back today. I feel like I have spent my whole life living with a huge debt hanging over my head.
55. I did not have to pay costs for legal representation as I received legal aid.

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?

56. I was horrified at the charges.
57. At the time, I was in a bad marriage and I struggled to cope. My husband just couldn't take the stress. I had no family support and worried all the time.
58. I asked **GRO** and **GRO** to investigate the issues, but it seems they were telling everyone that I was taking from the Post office to save my house. They gave me grief, didn't care and offered no help.

59. The local newspaper published an article that said I stole from vulnerable people. It was a very horrible article. This led to everyone in the community finding out what was happening.

60. I once had a good relationship with people in the village. They read the articles and just sided with the papers, they never believed me.

61. I went to the parish counsellors to talk it through, but they didn't believe me either.

62. I felt like I was being judged every time I left my house.

63. The Post Office told my barrister that if I pleaded guilty I probably wouldn't get a custodial sentence. However, I was not prepared to plead guilty to something that I didn't do.

64. I left Sopley a few months before the trial. I separated from my husband and I left my sons behind.

65. I attended hearings at both the Magistrates Court and the Crown Court.

66. I was put on trial for something I didn't do. The defence had a huge mountain of paperwork which they said proved I was guilty, however, I still had hope throughout the whole trial that the jury would find me not guilty. I cannot even explain how this made me feel.

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

67. In November 2005, I was found guilty by a jury at trial.

68. I was completely devastated and broke down in tears.

69. My whole world had fallen apart. I never returned to Sopley because I thought my family would be better off without me
70. I felt depressed and had suicidal thoughts. I lost my home and my shop, and as a result of this, I split up with my husband. I felt like I wanted to jump under a lorry.
71. I started taking anti-depressants.
72. I went to a GP appointment and the doctor knew about my conviction and treated me awfully. It put me off going back.
73. I never felt that I could talk about the events. I have buried my thoughts for so long and I am still not coping. I have never been able to move on because of the debt.
74. **GRO** and **GRO** who worked for me stayed and set up a lease for the premises and at the time I didn't get it checked over because I felt under a lot of stress with what was going on. I just signed it which caused me many problems.
75. In 2006, I went to the job centre. They could tell I was not stable, they told me to see a doctor and I was put on incapacity benefits and job seekers allowance.
76. I knew I wouldn't be able to get another job because of my conviction. I just fell apart and became more depressed.
77. In 2007, I gradually eased myself back into working. I was able to do part time casual work.
78. I couldn't face potential employers asking me about previous convictions so I only applied for jobs where I knew they wouldn't ask.
79. I could not return to retail because of my conviction.

80. I eventually ended up helping my new partner. He owned a motorcycle company [GRO] [GRO] [GRO] but the business is coming to an end now as it is not making any profit.
81. I tried some cleaning work, but my health wasn't up to it.
82. I have not been in a financial position to own another property.
83. I moved into my current partner's caravan and we lived there for 8 years. I was looking after my mother at the same time. For the last 8 years we have rented a property.
84. Had it not been for the Post Office's actions, I would have still been working in the Post Office. I intended to stay living in the property, and working in the Post Office, beyond retirement.
85. This situation has affected me both mentally and physically in the most horrendous way.
86. I am still not coping, I become tearful when I think about what happened.

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

87. My conviction had a massive effect on my relationships the community and my family.
88. I was not physically or mentally capable of dealing with these issues and that is why I had to leave.
89. My husband at the time was a pensioner and my son is [GRO] I knew my children couldn't cope so I tried to protect them and take the debt with me. I felt so upset.

90. My husband and children continued to live in the house.
91. I haven't seen my eldest son for quite a while. He doesn't speak to me because I walked away.
92. When I left, my eldest son had to deal with his father's issues and his younger brother. He blamed me for this and he still doesn't understand that I tried to protect them and take the debt with me.
93. My eldest son had GRO I wanted to be there for him and wish him well. I went to the hospital where he had the operation and my husband told me it wasn't the time because I would make the situation worse.
94. I just don't know how to put it right with them and I blame myself.
95. I have two grandchildren who I have never seen. I have tried reaching out, but they don't want anything to do with me.
96. My husband and I still don't get on.
97. I keep in touch with my younger son, we play games once a week.
98. My mother was dealing with my father's illness. GRO
Everyone came to me for support, but I couldn't give it to them anymore. I felt like such a failure.

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

99. I thought that by leaving my family it would take the pressure off them. Although they got the house, my children went through their teenage years without a mother in the family home.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

100.I have had to live with the stigma and consequences of the conviction which has blighted my life and the lives of my immediate family. Not a day goes by where I don't think about it. It is a huge thing hanging over my head.

Statement Of Truth

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

Signed:

GRO
carina price (Jan 13, 2022 09:30 GMT)

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 13, 2022

Name: CARINA PRICE

FILE REFERENCE: **GRO**

