

WITNESS: DELLA ROBINSON

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0155\_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 11, 2022

**POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY**

**FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MISS DELLA ROBINSON**

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, MISS DELLA ROBINSON, Date of Birth , of   
, will say as follows:-

**PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

1. I am currently 54 years of age.
2. Prior to working for the Post Office I had worked in a number of different jobs until such time as both my two sons had grown up. After having my first son I worked in a factory doing nights and then also had a job wrapping wall papers. After having my second son I worked at a local school during dinner times.

3. I was diagnosed with blood clots on the brain in 1992 and developed epilepsy in 1993. So, I had to stop working at that point as I was having radiotherapy and stayed at home with the kids.
4. I have not worked since my job with the Post Office.
5. I have since been registered disabled due to suffering with an exacerbation of my epilepsy.

### **POST OFFICE HISTORY**

6. I began work as a Sub-Post Mistress at the Dukinfield Post Office on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2006 and occupied this position until 27<sup>th</sup> February 2012 when my contract was terminated.
7. My partner, GRO, is a joiner. In 2006 we saw a property in Dukinfield which we thought would be a good investment/project for him. We have previously bought a property in Ashton which we rented out, so we were looking for the next project. We viewed the property believing that it was being sold to be made into flats. We then learned that there was a running Post Office for sale within the property.
8. It was our intention to turn the two flats into an investment and for me to run the Post Office alongside these. The long-term goal was to renovate the flats and rent these out as well as the property in Ashton before GRO moved on to the next property, whilst I continued to run the Post Office.
9. We had lived in Dukinfield all our lives and we liked the thought of doing something for the community and working for ourselves. I thought it would be a lovely job in a town that was so friendly.

10. After purchasing the property for £240,000, we decided to keep on the two previous employees we knew the previous owner well.

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

11. I had never been behind a Post Office counter before and it was all new to me. I was given some very basic training which I felt was mostly either inadequate or irrelevant.

12. The computer software used by the Post Office when I began my job as Sub-Postmistress was called Horizon. However, none of my training had been in relation to how Horizon worked which left me feeling anxious about how I would cope using it when I was on my own.

13. I had to teach myself a lot of things and although I had kept on the two members of staff, they only had experience in running the counters nothing to do with balancing off and maintaining the books.

14. No audits were done between 2006 and 2010 and the Post Office was very happy with how I was increasing the business and making money for them. I felt as though I had a newfound sense of confidence in my life again which pleased me; I loved my job.

15. At first, I noticed some mistakes occurring, for small amounts of money, usually £10 or £20. As I became more confident, I started to challenge these transactions and was able to prove that they were wrong. I would ring the Horizon Helpline about twice a week for the first three years of running the Post Office and found their assistance to be pleasant but not effective. Most of the time I just found it easier to work out the problem myself.

16. I can recall one time that I returned from holiday to find that there was a shortfall of £36,000. After investigating it fully, it transpired that the shortfall was only £500.
17. Following that period things started to get complicated and sometimes it was just easier to accept the transaction correction notices from the Post Office as it was getting too complicated and time consuming.
18. In 2010 we had a further shortfall of about £1,500 which I couldn't sort out and I came to the agreement with the Post Office that I would pay this back £500 per month out of my wage, even though it was not my fault. I found this very frustrating and it made me quite angry.
19. Horizon needed to be balanced monthly, but as I was experiencing problem after problem, I continued to balance weekly and, physically on paper so I could see where the problems were coming from and work from them as Horizon would not do this, so you would be none the wiser relying on the system.
20. The shortfalls snowballed and it came to the point where I could not put any more money in as there were differences of about £1,000, which we simply didn't have.
21. My cries for help to the Helpline were completely ignored. The Helpline hours had changed and on one occasion my difference had trebled by the time I had finished listening to what the Helpline told me to do. I simply could not rely on the system working.
22. My area manager during my employment was a lady called Tina. I cannot recall her surname.

23. On 24th January 2012 I was visited by an auditor, her name was Belinda Truman, and there was also someone called Andrew Wise. I was sick at the time and so I was not working. I received a call to go to the shop and to my amazement it was closed. It was complete chaos. The auditor from the Post Office informed me that they had been counting cash and had calculated a shortfall of £15,500.
24. This made me panic and I felt so anxious. We re-counted it all and the shortfall had risen to £17,000. I was suspended straight away and was not allowed back into the Post Office from that point onwards.
25. I was interviewed on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2012 by Stephen Bradshaw, who I remember was head of security, and someone else but I cannot recall the other name. and my car and home were searched.
26. I received a letter from the Post Office dated 27<sup>th</sup> February 2012 confirming that they were terminating my contract.
27. Throughout this ordeal, the Post Office always made out that I was the only person who had suffered financial issues.
28. Our house and possessions were searched by the Post Office security team, and I was charged with false accounting and theft of a sum in the region of £17,000.00. I was initially sent to Ashton Magistrates Court after receiving a summons. At court, the Crown Prosecution Service told me that if I pleaded guilty to false accounting then they would drop the theft charges.
29. I then went to a plea hearing again at Ashton Magistrates Court when I was advised by my barrister to fight the case at the Crown Court.



30. I was so scared. I was told by the Post Office that if I pleaded guilty to false accounting, they would not pursue me for the money and would drop the theft charge. I then chose to do this.
31. On 12<sup>th</sup> December 2012 I pleaded guilty to false accounting and on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2013 I attended Manchester Crown Court again for sentencing. I had no idea what was going to happen and was terrified.
32. The solicitors and barristers all spoke between themselves and then I was sentenced to 180 hours of community service. I also had to pay £5,000 in legal costs.
33. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2021, my conviction was overturned by the Court of Appeal.

#### **THE HUMAN IMPACT**

34. 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?**

35. There were a number of occasions over the years that I noticed shortfalls. If the shortfall was only a fairly small amount of money then I would just pay it myself out of my own pocket.
36. As time went by I began to notice that we were regularly losing £100 to £200 a month and the Helpline did not offer any assistance; no one seemed to accept that there was a problem. The shortfalls snowballed and it came to the

- point where I could not put any more money in as there were differences of about £1,000, which we simply didn't have.
37. Before the audit and subsequent criminal conviction took place, I estimate that I had repaid in excess of £3,000 to the Post Office to try and reduce some of the shortfalls, of which £1,500 was deducted from my wages. I also paid further sums during the investigation, and court process.
38. Following my conviction and all that happened, we had our Ashton property repossessed, this had been a regular income for us as we rented it out at £480 per month. The value of the property was £95,000.
39. We now have a mortgage on our Dukinfield property, which we did not have before we bought the Post Office. We are now in arrears as we are unable to pay the mortgage and live week by week.

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

40. As mentioned above, I paid in excess of £3,000 to the Post Office. This included the £1,500 referred to above which was deducted from my wages. I believe I paid £500 per month for three months. I paid further sums during the investigation and court process.
41. Eventually, I no longer had the money to repay the shortfalls.
42. The Post Office agreed that in the event I pleaded guilty, I would not have to repay the shortfall found at the audit. I did however receive a letter after my conviction advising me I would have to pay the amount back. We knew we didn't need to however, as I had pleaded guilty and the Post Office had agreed not to pursue me for the money.

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

43. When I was dealing with the shortfalls I would often have sleepless nights and used to stay late at work until 11pm or 12am trying to find the money that was missing.
44. In January 2011, the losses were about £11,000 and this made me feel very uneasy despite knowing that I had done nothing wrong.
45. During the time that the audit was done I felt so anxious. I could not possibly explain away the £17,000 as I had no idea where it had come from.
46. From the time that I was suspended until the time of my conviction I was a wreck. I had no idea how the legal system worked and the fear of having to spend time in prison petrified me.

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

47. I was suspended straight away. I was not allowed to talk to any of my staff or go back into the Post Office or the shop which was inside the same building. They took the keys from me.
48. It felt as though my world had just been turned upside down. The whole experience was awful.



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

49. As discussed below, we could not afford to repay the mortgage on our home, so it was repossessed. We lost out on an arrangement to sell the property as a result of my conviction.

50. I lost my Post Office wage and have not been able to secure further employment.

51. My husband  lost income. He was employed as a joiner. I suffer with epilepsy and  had to take time off work to look after me.  still works as a joiner on a self-employed basis.

52.  mum lent us £4,500 to pay off the arrears on our mortgage. We had three properties at the time and we did manage to keep our own but the other properties were repossessed. We are still in arrears with our home in Duckenfield. We didn't previously have a mortgage on the property, which we now do. We also borrowed around £3,500 from our son, .

53. We have been paying back the money we owed in dribs and drabs.

54. As mentioned above, I paid around £5,000 in legal costs as a result of my conviction.

**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?**

55. It was horrible, I felt as if I was guilty even though I knew I had not taken the money that was missing.

56. In court, initially I was told to plead guilty, but then my barrister told me to fight my case. I was confused, and so scared.

57. They had press there after the hearing, it was awful. I was told by the Post Office that if I pleaded guilty to false accounting, they would not pursue me for the money and would drop the theft charge. I chose to do this.

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

58. As a result of my criminal conviction and the worsening of my epilepsy, I have not been able to secure further employment since my conviction.

59. Had my contract not been terminated by the Post Office, I had the opportunity to sell the business to an interested buyer who had discussed offering me £120,000. As a result of my conviction, the arrangement fell through.

60. At the sentencing hearing, I did not know what to expect, I felt so out of my depth. The Judge gave me 180 hours of community service.

61. I was ordered to pay £5,000 in legal costs. The probation officer took me to Age UK where I carried out my community service. It took me a few months to complete it all. I felt a sense of shame because the people in the shop knew why I was there; people used the shop and Post Office in Dukinfield, so it was common knowledge.

62. I had to carry around a lot of the stigma from my conviction when I went out into my local town; I felt heartbroken. My husband GRO had worked so hard and we were building our lives back up. We were building for our futures

- again. We had a buyer for the Post Office, but the Post Office said no and this fell through.
63. As a result of my conviction, we couldn't afford to pay the mortgage, so our properties were repossessed. I felt devastated. We are still in arrears now with the mortgage company. It affected me a lot; I shut down and was really struggling. We had to live week-to-week and struggled financially.
64. For about 10 years prior to the conviction, we had owned a rental property in Bolton. The rent paid the mortgage but, around four years ago, the mortgage came up for renewal. Due to my poor credit based on my conviction, the mortgage company were not prepared to renew the mortgage and the property was repossessed and taken away from us.
65. My husband [GRO] had to work 7 days a week so we could make ends meet the best they could. We had to borrow money from [GRO] family monthly, so that we could survive.
66. The stress of the whole experience exacerbated my epilepsy which I am now registered disabled for; this has resulted in my losing my driving licence.
67. I would suffer with nightmares where I relived the experience.
68. I put on large amounts of weight.
69. I lost my confidence, independence and I have developed depression. I was able to manage my epilepsy before this. To go from the Post Office giving me my confidence back and a new lease of life to then have it all taken away from me was heart breaking. I feel I cannot move forward.
70. I have suffered from financial hardship as a result of the Post Office's actions and also from a health perspective. I have been diagnosed with Prolonged

Duress Stress Disorder. I have been recommended to have twenty sessions of psychological therapy, which I am currently undergoing.

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

71. I loved my job and life at the Post Office. I consider it to be the best time of my life.

72. My confidence increased and I was very proud to be the Postmistress. I was the centre of community life, it was a new lease of life. I loved the people who came in, it wasn't really a job it was a pleasure. I felt guilty about the effect my conviction had on my children.

73. My community service was done at an Age UK shop and the customers who visited were often the same as those who came into my Post Office. I felt ashamed that they knew what I had been convicted of and thought they would judge me for it.

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

74. I feel that it hasn't just been me affected by my conviction.

75. My son became more introverted. He was worried what people thought.

76. I felt more for what my husband GRO had lost; he had put his whole life into us; it was his baby as he had done everything towards achieving this. It devastated me to see that all his efforts had been for nothing.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

77. It upsets me so much so see the impact of the Post Office's error on my life. I went from being so happy to so desperately sad.

78. The whole experience has taken so much out of me mentally and I do not believe that I will ever fully recover from the stresses and strain that I have been put through.

**Statement Of Truth**

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

Signed:	Position Or
	Office Held:
Print Full	Date of signature: Jan 11, 2022
Name: DELLA ROBINSON	

FILE REFERENCE 



