

WITNESS: ALLISON HENDERSON

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0146\_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 12, 2022

**POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY**

**FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF MRS ALLISON HENDERSON**

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 ALLISON HENDERSON, Date of Birth , of ADDRESS   
 will say as follows:-

**PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

1. I am currently 62 years of age.
2. The job with the Post Office was the first proper job that I have ever had.
3. I had been a homemaker helping to raise our two children prior to starting employment with the Post Office.
4. Since finishing with the Post Office in 2010 I have attempted to start a new business called "Clean & Care 4U" however the business did not work out and I have not worked since this time.

## POST OFFICE HISTORY

5. I began work as a Sub-Post Master at the Worstead Post Office in 1997 and occupied this position until 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2010 which is the time that I resigned.
6. I had not done any form of work prior to 1997.
7. My husband was the main breadwinner and has worked for GRO for a lot of years. He still works for them now and his continued employment has been the reason that we have managed to stay afloat.
8. After raising my two children I was keen to find a business to occupy my time as they were at the stage of moving out of home. My husband and I both liked the idea of moving to the countryside and running a small community post office.
9. Whilst visiting our static caravan in Cromer, we kept on the lookout for a suitable Post Office and found one in Worstead which we were happy with.
10. Our decision to purchase a Post Office was with the intention of changing our lifestyle, rather than it being solely a business decision.
11. As the Post Office was attached to a house, we purchased both for the sum of £97,000 which included £10,000 for the good-will of the Post Office. We sold our house in Hertfordshire and moved in.
12. My salary at the time of purchasing the Worstead Post Office would have been in the region of £10,500 gross per year.
13. There was a shop that we also ran which was attached to the Post Office, but we chose to close this in 2000 due to it failing to make a profit.

**CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION**

14. In the early 2000s the Horizon software was introduced to my Post Office. I cannot recall the exact date due to the time that has now elapsed and also the fact the Post Office took away all my documentation at the time that they terminated my contract.
15. For several years I had difficulty in using the Horizon system and I often struggled to balance the accounts that it showed. On several occasions I would work into the night to try and balance them. I spoke to the Helpline and to the Area Manager on numerous occasions to seek help and guidance on what to do.
16. From 2006 onwards I noticed that the balances were regularly wrong and would not balance. I often felt anxious and worried about this but the Helpline offered me no real support and just gave me the impression that 'no-one else was having problems with the Horizon system' which made me feel embarrassed.
17. The first time that I ever saw an error notice on the Horizon system was in 2006. The system generated a shortfall of £1,500 and the Post Office required me to pay the shortfall. However, a while later, the system generated a loss of £2,000.
18. The shortfalls kept coming and I could not afford to cover the amounts.
19. On 10<sup>th</sup> February 2010 two auditors attended my Post Office. I was hopeful that they would be able to sort out my balancing difficulties.
20. I was shocked when they advised me that there was a shortfall of £18,000. They then returned to me a couple of hours later to say that the amount had been reduced to £11,957.78.

21. They implied that I had taken the money which made me feel awful and very upset.
22. I was told that I could not re-open the Post Office and that I would be suspended. They wanted to take away my keys and some of the paperwork and that was the end of the matter. I had to argue with them to keep the door key as one of our daughters used the bedroom above the post office area. They eventually agreed and just took the safe keys.
23. I then received a phone call from the Post Office the same day to inform me that I was suspended without pay.
24. My Post Office was closed for two days and a relief Sub-Post Master was appointed to look after things whilst the Post Office investigated things further. I reluctantly agreed to allow the relief in to keep the post office operating for the older folks of the village. Honestly, I thought that the issues would be sorted quickly and I would be up and running again.
25. On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2010 I received a letter from the Post Office stating that they were considering terminating my contract.
26. I spoke to my local representative at the National Federation of Subpostmasters and on his advice, decided that I had no other option other than to resign which I duly did on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2010. This is a decision I have since regretted.
27. I was summoned to a meeting with the Post Office. I was allowed to bring my Federation Rep, but he was not permitted to speak during the "interview". The two men conducting the interview were total bullies. I was under the impression the purpose of the meeting was to discover where I or the system had gone wrong, but all they did was to accuse me of theft. They even marched me to the car park to take a look at my cheap Proton car to see if it was worthy of being

- a “recovery asset”. I was subsequently charged with Theft and False Accounting.
28. Criminal proceedings were brought against me, and my claim was transferred from the Magistrates Court to Norwich Crown Court. I had never felt so scared and alone in my life.
29. My solicitor and barrister provided me with legal advice and advised me to take a plea bargain of false accounting with the Post Office dropping the theft charge.
30. I felt pressurised into accepting this. I could not face going to prison for something that I had not done and was desperate to avoid spending any time in prison whatsoever. I therefore, very reluctantly, accepted the plea bargain. With the prospect of a custodial sentence hanging over me I felt I had no choice.
31. The Judge adjourned the hearing and ordered me to pay the alleged shortfall before the case returned to court for sentencing.
32. I then returned for sentencing on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2010 and was given 200 hours of community service and ordered to pay court costs of £1,400. I also had to pay my own lawyer’s fees which totalled £7,000.

### **THE HUMAN IMPACT**

33. 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?**

34. As stated above, there were a number of occasions that I noticed shortfalls starting in around 2006.
35. If the shortfall was only a fairly small amount of money, then I would just pay it myself out of my own pocket.
36. However, as time went by, the amount became substantially bigger, and I could not afford to cover it with my own savings.
37. At one point in 2006 I noticed a shortfall of £1,500. I spoke to the Post Office about this and came to an agreement that they would deduct £100 per month from my salary for a total of 15 months until the money was repaid in full.
38. However, a while later there was a £2,000 shortfall and I needed to take out a personal loan to pay for this.
39. As the shortfalls kept coming, I knew that I had no money of my own left to cover them. I felt trapped.
40. I was concerned that, if the Post Office closed, then there would have been repercussions for the whole village, especially the older residents who did not have transport of their own and relied heavily on my Post Office.
41. After accepting the plea bargain at court, the Judge ordered me to pay the shortfall that was owed in the time before I was sentenced. I could not afford to do this and so my husband took out a personal loan to pay it in full.

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

42. When the first allegations were made about the shortfalls and that I must have taken the money I felt awful. But I knew that I had done nothing wrong and so was sure that this would become obvious once they investigated things fully. However, this was not the case.

43. When I was suspended, that was when it first really hit home. I was very upset and shocked that the Post Office had accused me of stealing and I was 100% certain that I had done nothing wrong.

44. I immediately became very concerned about my reputation within the community. I knew that everyone would find out the reason why the Post Office had suddenly closed and I had been suspended. I worried about people gossiping about me. I still had to drop my grandchildren off at school and did not want people whispering behind my back as I knew that I had done nothing wrong.

45. I did not seek medical support as my GP lives in the same village as me. I just dealt with it all by myself as best I could. With hindsight this was not the right think to do, but this was how I wanted to handle it at the time.

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

46. Due to the error made by the Horizon system, I was given a criminal conviction and ordered to do 200 hours of community service.

47. As part of my community service, I carried out volunteer work every Wednesday and Saturday in a local shop in a small market town.

48. When I carried out my community service I hated the fact that the shop owner, staff and local people all knew why I was there.

49. I was desperate to let the world know that I had done nothing wrong, but I had been put in an impossible position of having to admit something that I had not done purely to avoid the risk of going to prison. I felt that the best course of action was to shut myself away so that I did not have to discuss the matter with anybody.

**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?**

50. Being accused of something that you have not done is always a horrible feeling. But for it to result in a criminal conviction, the loss of my job and livelihood is something that I think I will never be able to get over.

51. I have felt so ashamed and embarrassed about the past events when I have always known that I have done nothing wrong.

52. The mental anguish has taken its toll on me, and still does.

53. I did not attend my General Practitioner about how I was feeling at the time that it was all being investigated as she lived in the village too. I just tried to keep it to myself and not talk about it. I should have obtained some professional help and I still need some professional assistance with the feelings which I have had from when the problems with Horizon started and which still continue. The whole affair has had a detrimental effect on my health and on my family. I have felt very low in mood, I break down in tears and I still lack confidence.



54. I completed a course of CBT treatment which I found was helpful, but I feel that this is something that will NEVER fully leave 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?**

55. Following my suspension and resignation from the Post Office and then criminal conviction, we had no option but to close the Worstead Post Office. As it was integrated into our home, it was totally impractical to have a relief Sub-Post Master running the Post Office out of our home.

56. We decided to convert the Post Office into another room in our house.

57. I loved the Post Office and the village. If this whole affair with the Post Office had not happened, I would have kept the Post Office open for the community. My grandchildren also went to school in the next village, and I would have wanted to stay in the community whilst they were there.

58. Before this whole affair, I was regarded as a pillar of society and got heavily involved in the community. I was involved in the local festivals and I organised local parties, pensioner lunches and events in the local pub.

59. This all stopped from 2010. From then, my husband and I decided to keep ourselves to ourselves. I was traumatised by all of the events and I did not want to talk about it.

60. My husband had to give up his position as Chairman of the Parish Council. This was to protect the integrity of the Council.

61. In 2016 we moved away from Worstead selling our house for £275,000 and moved to Cromer, which is where we live today.

62. I did start a company called "Clean & Care 4U" in 2011 in an effort to rebuild my working life.
63. Unfortunately, the business did not work out as one of my first customers understandably wanted references and background checks. I was of course ashamed and embarrassed that my conviction would come out, so I ceased the business. The business was eventually dissolved. I have not worked since.
64. I was made to feel that I was the only Sub-Post Master who was experiencing problems with Horizon. I reluctantly accepted the charge of False Accounting. As part of the plea bargain I was told not to mention to the Court anything about the Horizon system. When I queried this with my Barrister and complained that it was unfair, he flippantly said to me "that's the way it works". I have since learnt that many other Sub-Post Masters had suffered the same.
65. The whole affair has been deeply traumatic to me. I was made to pay money to the Post Office which I never took.
66. In addition to the suspension, resignation and criminal conviction, I have also suffered a large amount of financial loss.
67. I have had to repay total shortfalls of around £15,000, I have lost earnings, paid interest on loans, paid legal costs, undergone private medical treatment etc etc.

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

68. I loved the Post Office and the village in general.
69. If this whole affair had not happened, I would loved to have kept the Post Office open for the community to benefit from.
70. Prior to this affair, I was a pillar in the community.

71. We moved out of the area in 2016 which has resulted in losing contact with a lot of friends who we had grown close to from living in the same village for a long period of time. However, this was a move that we felt we simply had to make. Our friends and neighbours in Cromer knew nothing of the post office saga until after my conviction was quashed at the Court of Appeal. It was a saga in my life that I wanted to shut away from people.

72. I have buried feelings about the Post Office and my husband has helped me to deal with all the paperwork. I have felt shame about the past events despite my innocence.

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

73. There has been a clear impact on our family as a result of the whole Post Office issue.

74. My grandchildren went to the school in the village and I would have wanted to stay in the community whilst they were there.

75. My husband and I kept everything from our grandchildren until my conviction was quashed. We were doing this to protect them and to avoid any stigma from being passed onto them. Speaking about what happened to my still upsets me and reduces me to tears, as it does to the grand children when we speak of the events.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

76. I am thankful that I can now, at least try, to put the whole affair behind me, but I know for a fact that this is something that I will have to live with for the rest of my life. I feel that I will never completely recover from what happened to me.

77. I still have so much anger and ill-feeling towards the Post Office and the way that I have been treated, not least for the fact that this whole affair has caused me so much misery for over 15 years of my life. I feel that I am making mental progress. until the subject of the post office arises on the TV news, the newspapers, or radio. I still get distressed by the events that happened to me. Having to compose this impact statement has reduced me to tears.

**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 12, 2022

Name: MRS ALLISON HENDERSON

FILE REFERENCE

**GRO**

