

WITNESS: ROBERT AMBROSE

STATEMENT NUMBNER: WITN0181_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 12, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF ROBERT AMBROSE

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, MR ROBERT AMBROSE, Date of Birth: of
 will say as follows:-

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I am employed as a Sales and Marketing Officer for a social housing provider.
2. I am 51 years old.
3. I live at home with my wife.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

4. I acquired the High Wych Post Office on 5 May 2010. Prior to this, my business partner and I owned a financial advice company giving mortgage and property advice. We were both regulated by the Financial Conduct

- Authority. We were approached by somebody who was looking to sell their Post Office, and we both bought this and moved our financial advice company to the same premises.
5. The Post Office was within a retail store. We purchased the leasehold for the retail store on an equal basis also.
 6. My business partner was the Sub-Postmaster, but I managed the Post Office and did all the paperwork.
 7. I received standard and basic training prior to the commencement of my role at the Post Office, but no further training was provided to me after I became Sub-Postmaster.
 8. I was not aware of any other individuals who were affected by the Horizon scandal as I was always told by the helpline that I was the only person they had come across to have experienced difficulties with Horizon. It took me years to learn how widespread the issue is.
 9. My conviction was overturned by the Court of Appeal on 19 July 2021.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

10. I immediately knew of issues with Horizon as the number of shortfalls were high as were the amounts. I expected that there would be some minor shortfalls, in terms of short-change, but the amounts were sometimes huge and unexplained.
11. I was continually on the helpline for Horizon, but they denied any issues with the system, and I spent hours and hours trying to work out the issues with the shortfalls. I have a good accounting and financing background, but even I couldn't fathom it. I was paying back these shortages, which I thought would be

- on a short-term basis. However, I couldn't afford to keep putting my own money through the system.
12. I made contact via the helpline number I was given and from memory, took incoming calls when I asked and pleaded for more senior involvement. I do not remember or have a record of timings or names but the response was consistent from anyone I spoke to: it was my fault and responsibility, and the back office input to Horizon was not possible and no other Post Masters were experiencing the same issue.
 13. The way in which the Post Office worked was that it was black, or it was white. They denied that there were issues in the system and said that I was responsible for any shortfalls. However, it was impossible that these shortfalls were happening.
 14. An auditor came to the Post Office on 9 February 2012. The auditor managed to find discrepancies, and they suspended me and closed the Post Office straight away.
 15. They had asked me to go down to the police station on a set day and time, but before that date came, I received a knock on the door to find two police officers and two Post-Office officials. I was taken down to the police station for an interview whilst the Post Office officials searched my property.
 16. My business partner was questioned, but as it was my role to deal with the paperwork of the Post Office, it was agreed that I would be the one held responsible.
 17. At the police station, I was charged with Theft and False Accounting.

18. On 24 September 2012 I appeared at St Alban's Crown Court to answer the charges. I was given the opportunity to plead guilty to avoid a custodial sentence. I took it, as I desperately wanted to avoid going to prison.

19. On 28 October 2012, again at St Alban's Crown Court, I was sentenced to an 18-month prison sentence, suspended for two years, and 250 unpaid hours of community service.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

20. 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?

21. Whenever there were shortfalls in the system, despite not knowing how these occurred, I paid back the money. However, it got to a point where I couldn't afford to pay this anymore.

22. I knew that there were going to be continual shortfalls in the system after that, but there was nothing I could do. I was hoping that the Horizon system would correct itself at some point, but it never did.

23. Of all of the individuals who I borrowed money from, only one still speaks to me following my conviction.

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

24. I used my savings and income (including that of my business) to make good supposed shortfalls from when they started to appear until I was suspended. I effectively paid in what I could as I was so worried about being held responsible and the consequences. Because the shortfalls fluctuated so widely and on occasion reduced, I thought if I could just keep putting in money long enough the system would 'right itself'. It took all I had as the shortfalls increased.
25. I borrowed from my parents, partner and friends to cover the supposed shortfalls once I had no more money. This was in the thousands of pounds.

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

26. Due to the number of losses and shortfalls in the system, I was already half expecting an audit to occur. This was considerably frustrating because I had been on the helpline over and over again trying to resolve these issues. I had even discussed these with management, and they denied any issues within the Horizon system.
27. I would constantly live in fear waiting for the auditors or the police to come, as despite my pleas, the Post Office refused to accept that there were issues within the system.
28. When I was arrested, I was terrified. I thought I was going to go to prison, and desperately wanted to avoid this.

29. I became completely withdrawn, and despite people reaching out to me, I couldn't deal with things in the same way.

30. My relationship broke down and I moved out of my partner's home. I just wasn't the same person anymore.

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

31. The Post Office closed, meaning my business partner and I no longer had this as a business opportunity. In addition, due to the allegations against me, I was unable to operate as a financial advisor.

32. My business partner blamed me for the closure of the Post Office, and so the lease we had purchased for the shop was renegotiated with someone else, and the shop continued without a Post Office. However, I wasn't able to have any of the sale of the leasehold.

33. I had no money left by this point as any money I did have, was put into the Horizon system to cover the shortfalls prior to the audit. I was left without money, a business, or a career as a financial advisor.

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

34. At the time of my arrest I was a director of a regulated financial services company and financial adviser. This was taken away along with any possibility of working as a qualified financial adviser again. I therefore lost the ability to earn an income through this means.

35. My income was immediately affected after the termination of my role in that I was signed off as unfit for work for 2 years.

36. I then (and still) work in employed roles below my experience, knowledge, skills and capability. I had to leave one of these jobs after a colleague found an internet article regarding my conviction which led to again being signed off as unfit for work for 6 months due to recurring anxiety and depression. It has severely affected my income as I was a qualified and experienced financial adviser.

37. My first job following my conviction was in a call centre for a not for profit organisation. I have been too fearful to work in the private sector since my experience with the Post Office.

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?

38. Following on from the accusation of Fraud and False Accounting, I became depressed and anxious and had to start medication for this.

39. I began drinking excessively and wasn't looking after myself. I was in a very bad place mentally. I was no longer working as due to my mental health issues, was declared unfit to work.

40. Because of the way the Post Office ran, and their reluctance to accept issues within the Horizon system, I felt that there would be no way out of this, despite my innocence.

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

41. Because of the shortfalls showing in the Horizon system, I ended up with a criminal conviction against me for Fraud and False Accounting. I ended up losing my whole livelihood. I was no longer able to work as a financial advisor, something that I had trained for and had done for many years, even before I worked for the Post Office.
42. Financially, not only did I lose funds in buying into the Post Office and lease for the shop, but I lost money in making up the shortfalls prior to that. I had nothing left.
43. The conviction would follow me everywhere. I was once sacked from a job because another colleague had Googled my name and found out about my conviction.

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

44. People in the community regarded me as a criminal. People lost all respect for me; I went from being a trusted financial advisor to a fraudster. I knew I was innocent, but it didn't matter.
45. Not only did people feel they couldn't trust me, but equally I felt I couldn't trust anyone else. Apart from my immediate close friends and family, no one else seemed to believe me. I grew tired of repeating the same story over and over again of what had happened. The impression was that people thought I was

- guilty. I don't think this helped as I had pleaded guilty to avoid the custodial sentence.
46. My family and I have had no previous experience of criminal proceedings, and it was a very worrying time. People had previously come to me for financial advice, and it appeared as if I had disappointed them. I went from someone with a good professional reputation to someone who was dishonest in their eyes.
47. Several local papers had reported on the story, which had said that the Post Office had to be closed due to me stealing from them. I had to move away from the area as I couldn't face anybody.
48. I even got several abusive text messages from two individuals because their local Post Office had been closed because of me.

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

49. My immediate family knew that I was innocent, and they tried to help me where they could. However, I was a changed person after the charges were made against me. The anxiety and depression took over, and I was difficult to be around. I know that they would have found me difficult to deal with.
50. In addition, after the audit and the impending arrest, my relationship broke down with my partner who I lived with, and I moved out almost immediately, meaning that I had also lost my home. I knew that I was going to be questioned on the shortfalls prior to the audit, and so the anxiety and fear had been impacting that relationship for a while in any event. As such, it all came to a head after the audit and the relationship just didn't survive.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

51. It has taken a long time for me to try and rebuild my life following the conviction. I literally lost everything overnight. Money and property and business is one thing, but losing your reputation and dignity is another. Having to question the way you feel about yourself and being constantly in a state of self-doubt is something that I hope to never experience again.
52. I have had to pick myself up from having nothing to trying to focus on bettering myself. I had worked hard to become a financial advisor, and to build a good reputation upon it. This was ruined by this wrongful conviction.
53. I was unable to work for approximately two years whilst my mental health was so severely affected. I then had to retrain, getting my first job in a call centre, and moving around until I found my current role.
54. I am glad that the conviction has now been quashed, and I am hoping that I can move on with my life again. I feel that I can finally lift my head up high, particularly in the same village where I used to run the Post Office.
55. The overturning of the conviction is a positive step, but it is difficult to move on after the last 10 years.

Statement Of Truth

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

Signed:

GRO

Robert Ambrose (Jan 12, 2022 17:30 GMT)

Position Or Post Office Manager

Office Held: High Wych Branch

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 12, 2022

Name: Robert Ambrose

FILE REFERENCE

GRO

