

WITNESS: GAIL LESLEY WARD

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0156_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 11, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF MRS GAIL LESLEY WARD

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 GAIL LESLEY WARD, Date of Birth: of ,

will say as follows: -

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I am 61 years old.
2. I live at the above address with my husband and our dogs.
3. We have three children between us who have all moved out now. At the time of the Post Office conviction my youngest son was 13 and still at school.
4. I am employed as an assistant manager in an independent pound store where I have worked for seven years.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

5. I started working for the Post Office when I was 35 at the branch in Swanage and became a branch manager there in 1999.
6. I became a Sub-Postmistress at the Priory Road Post Office branch in Wells, Somerset in June 2002 when I saw the premises for sale online. I had been looking for a suitable Post Office that was in a nice area, had nice schools for my son and a property to live in included.
7. This Post Office also had a shop side, which would sell stationary, greeting cards and toys. All of this was included within the purchase, and I paid a lease monthly for the Post Office, shop and the property attached that we lived in.
8. I was already trained on the Horizon system by the Post Office when I took over my branch. My husband worked with me for the first 2 years. He received on-site training when we opened.
9. Alongside my husband and I, we had two employees working with us in the Post Office branch who were Rachel Sherfield and Paula Wilkinson. My Post Office branch area manager was Colin Burston.
10. I continually performed very well during my time there and won several awards for beating targets set for me.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

11. At first, I hadn't noticed any issues with the Horizon system. The first audit I had there was only a few pence out. However, significant problems began towards the end of 2005. I continued to report this to the Post-Office but was simply told to make good any shortfalls within the system.

12. I was continually on their telephone helpline trying to manage the errors in the system, and on some occasions was left in tears.
13. In January 2007, two auditors arrived, unfortunately I do not recall their names. I was very nervous as I knew that there were shortfalls, but I was also relieved that they could now be fixed. This was not the case, however.
14. Part way through the audit I was told to go upstairs until they finished. I didn't know what was going on.
15. Instead of helping me make the system right, I was essentially blamed for the shortfalls. I was told that following their audit, they had found a shortfall of £12,030.70.
16. I was told to sign something, but I was so upset and was crying that I had no idea what I was signing. I was told that I was suspended right there and then, and they took the keys from me for the Post Office. They later arranged for somebody else to take over as relief sub-postmistress— this was a lady called Lynn Duddy who I believe worked for a company called Interim Services Ltd who I believe ran lots of Post Offices in similar situations.
17. The investigations included two interviews. The first interview was on 12th January 2007 but I do not recall the date of the second interview but remember it was in Exeter. I also do not recall the names of the interviewers. I told them that I couldn't explain the shortfalls that they alleged. I did seek some support from the Federation prior to the interviews, but they refused to help me. They simply told me to let them know how I got on. It was as if they didn't believe me either. The Federation was supposed to be our union to back our corner, but they failed me also.

18. I was told that paying back the alleged shortfall amount would help my case, and therefore friends and family managed to fork out over £12,000 within a week of my suspension.
19. At the last interview, I was hoping that they would reinstate my position at the Post Office. This was not the case.
20. I received a letter dated 22 March 2007 from the Post Office terminating my position, and despite appealing it, the position remained the same. They wouldn't listen to me, despite me stating that there were still financial shortfalls at the same Post Office, even after I had stopped working there.
21. I continued to work in the shop side, but then received a Court Summons in May of 2007. I instructed a barrister and solicitor to help me and represent me at the initial Magistrates Court hearings at Wells and Frome Magistrates Courts, However, due to the value of the shortfall, this hearing was to simply confirm my name and date of birth, and it was then transferred to Bristol Crown Court.
22. The Court hearing was listed for 7 September 2007 but was adjourned as the Post Office didn't turn up. It was re-listed for 15 October 2007, again at Bristol Crown Court.
23. In Court, the Post Office told me that they would drop the theft charge and I wouldn't go to prison if I pleaded guilty to false accounting. I had no choice but to accept this and therefore I pleaded guilty to four counts of false accounting. Following my conviction for false accounting, I was given an order to pay £500 in prosecution costs and do 150 hours of unpaid community service.
24. I received a letter through my solicitor in the spring of 2008 asking if I could be contacted as I was not the only one that this had happened to.

25. My conviction was quashed on 23/04/2021 at a hearing at the Royal Courts of Justice in London.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

26. 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?

27. No deductions were made to my salary to cover the shortfalls however, I was continually paying money back into the Post Office to cover the shortfalls. This was hundreds of pounds every week.

28. Unfortunately I have no paper accounts from my time at the Post Office. Once I was suspended, I was not allowed back in to my office and when the Post Office closed the branch, they removed all of the paperwork.

29. Any profits that we made in the shop were put back into the system. I kept believing that the system would correct itself, but it never did. I even maxed out a credit card to try and make the figures right.

30. We were also loaned £12,000.00 from family and friends to pay over to the Post Office to cover the alleged shortfall shown by the Horizon system. As stated above, the shortfall identified following the audit was £12,030.70. By repaying this alleged shortfall in full, the Post Office auditor assured me that

no further action would be taken. During this time, we also sold various personal items to help pay for food and household bills.

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

31. The alleged shortfall we repaid of £12,030.70 following the audit was in addition to the earlier smaller shortfalls the system had showed and which we had paid back in amounting to often several hundred pounds a week.
32. As detailed above, we had to borrow £12,000 from family and friends to repay this sum.
33. The personal items we sold included computer equipment such as old monitors and keyboards as well as books, CD's and DVD's, ornaments, clothes and camping equipment.

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

34. When I was told by the auditors that an investigation had opened, I was initially relieved. I thought that they were coming to help me out after all the issues I was reporting with the Horizon system.
35. However, I was then blamed for this, and I couldn't stop crying. The auditor told me that if he was a gambling man, putting the money right would prevent this from going further. I therefore borrowed money from friends and family.
36. Asking for money from people was mortifying.
37. I had to go through interviews which were degrading, and I felt that nobody believed me.

38. I knew that I hadn't done anything wrong. I was good at my job but was criminalised. I was told that it was my issue and nobody else's, and that I had to try and fix it. I thought that paying the amount the auditors said was outstanding would be sufficient, but they then took it further than that.
39. During this time all that I felt was panic ; I felt sick throughout it. I had to be strong for my children, but this was extremely difficult.

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

40. As advised, following the investigation, I was dismissed as a Sub-Postmistress and somebody else took over the Post Office instead.
41. Despite paying back a huge amount of money to the Post Office, they still summonsed me to criminal hearings. In the final hearing, I ended up being persuaded to accept the charges of False Accounting and was ordered to pay prosecution costs and serve a community order of 150 hours of unpaid work.
42. The relief sub-postmistress Lynn Duddy who came to take over the Post Office after it was taken off us was able to take all of the profits whilst we were still required to pay the full bills.
43. The community service was done at Tramway train station cleaning all the trains. This is a busy train station, and I was embarrassed in case anybody I knew saw me.

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

40. I tried to sell the shop to pay for the debts. This included both the shop and the Post Office; the buyer had been approved by the Post Office to take over. However, the Post Office then closed the branch, and the buyer pulled out. I lost all of my salary from the Post Office and as we had no money to stock the shop, we lost that too.
41. We had mounting debts and no way to pay for these, including the ongoing business loan, the lease on the shop and credit cards to pay. People were coming to the shop less and less. As stated above, I tried to sell my personal items at car boot sales just to have enough money to buy food.
42. We had to pay interest payments on the credit cards that we maxed out whilst trying to stay afloat, however I am unsure of the amounts involved. In the end, we filed for bankruptcy. They took our shop off us, and we lost everything. We had to move into rented accommodation.
43. The bankruptcy was declared on 17/04/2008.
44. My legal costs were covered by legal aid. I did however have to pay £500.00 court costs when I was convicted.
45. As far as I recall, I have not been affected by increased insurance premiums as a direct result of the conviction. I do not know if my bankruptcy has impacted any premiums.
46. Following my conviction my earnings have been substantially lower than what they were in my Post Office role.

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?

47. I felt completely traumatised throughout the criminal proceedings. I was terrified, especially when I was told that I could receive a custodial sentence.
48. I felt completely victimised and alone. None of the officials would listen to me, and they all believed I was guilty.
49. The Post Office made out that I was the only one going through this and as detailed above, it was not until I received a letter through my solicitor in the spring of 2008 asking if I could be contacted that I realised that I was not the only one that this had happened to.
50. On the day before the final hearing, my solicitor told me to pack a bag, and I had to say goodbye to my 13-year-old son in case I was unable to come back home following the hearing. It was heart-breaking, and I had no idea what would happen.
51. I recall collapsing in the dock once I received the sentence from the Court and had to be helped out by my husband who had come to the Court with me for support. It was relief that I could go home to my children, but I still had a criminal conviction to deal with, along with the financial difficulties that I had to face.
52. I knew that the conviction was wrong. I was innocent and had tried everything I could to make things right, even at my own financial expense. It was hard to come to terms with everything that had happened.

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

53. As detailed above, the financial consequences resulted in bankruptcy for us.

54. I managed to find jobs in local shops before finding work in a local pound store. I have managed to progress into management in this job, but my income is affected.

55. I was planning on working in the Post-Office until retirement, and my husband and I had big plans for our retirement together. This is no longer going to be the case.

56. Prior to the conviction, I had no financial worries at all. Following going bankrupt, I had a poor credit history that has taken years to try and get right again.

57. I also started developing chest pain, which my GP put down to anxiety. I was incredibly depressed and anxious throughout and leaned hard on my family and friends.

58. I used to be such a positive person, but now I only see things in a negative light. I always think of the worst rather than the best.

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

59. Overall my family and friends were so supportive with me. They managed to pay the initial costs that the Post Office stated were a shortfall, and they were with me throughout the ordeal.

60. Most people were sympathetic, and I was always honest when people asked me why I no longer worked in the Post Office.

61. However, a friend and former colleague at the Post Office stopped when she saw me in the street, told me she had nothing to say to me and then walked away; it was awful. She still hasn't spoken to me since.

62. There was a lot of finger-pointing in the community. People would be gossiping saying 'there's no smoke without fire'. I always felt that people were talking behind my back and I struggled making any eye contact with anyone.

63. Following the conviction, I have become more socially withdrawn. I avoided going to places in the community and when I did, wouldn't go alone. Even now, following the overturning of the conviction, I am not the same as I was.

64. I struggle with trusting people, particularly new people, and I have no confidence socially.

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

65. As advised, my family was so supportive. However, I put a lot of stress and financial concerns onto them, and I feel incredibly guilty about it. There was so much that I couldn't give back to them. I had a good salary before all of this, but even school trip money would be out of my reach.

66. In addition, my husband and I had plans for a lovely retirement, and due to the difficulties with finances, this is no longer the case. I have been so fortunate that my husband was amazingly supportive and stood by me throughout all of this.

67. My husband and I had always said that once I had paid my business loan, we would purchase a property to rent out, and then move into this once retired. The conviction ruined all of these plans, and so my husband has been affected deeply too.
68. I also had to tell my children that I may have had to go to prison, and that was heart breaking for me to have to do; I can only imagine the anxiety that they would have felt also. I was constantly crying in front of my son, and this must have had an impact upon him.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

69. That feeling from when the conviction was overturned on 23rd April 2021 was immense relief for me. I had been fighting to clear my name since the beginning.
70. I wasn't aware until after my conviction that there were other Sub-Postmasters and Sub-Postmistresses that were also criminalised in the same way, and I started fighting for justice with them.
71. The fact that the Post Office was aware of the issues with Horizon, yet still criminalised their staff is something that will always make me very angry and distressed.
72. I feel that I can now start looking people in the eye again. I am no longer a criminal. However, I am always taken back emotionally to that point when the auditors came in, suspended me, and took my keys away. Those memories will always stay with me.
73. The prosecution and conviction ruined everything I had worked so hard for my future plans. I was 42 when I purchased the Post Office and had planned on a

happy and financially stable retirement. I am now 61 with nothing to show for anything and I am living in a rented house.

74. I am trying to move forward with my life following the wrongful conviction, but I think the experience will stay with me forever.

Statement Of Truth

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

Signed:

GRO
Gail Ward (Jan 11, 2022 17:50 GMT)

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 11, 2022

Name: GAIL LESLEY WARD

FILE REFERENCE: **GRO**

