

Witness Name: Mr John Bowman

Statement No.: WITN0307_01

Exhibits: None

Dated: 07-02-2022

IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR JOHN BOWMAN

I, MR JOHN BOWMAN will say as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. I am grateful to the Chair to be invited to provide a "human impact" statement, concerning the physical, psychological, emotional, reputational and financial consequences to me and my family of being held responsible for shortfalls shown by the Horizon IT system and Post Office Limited's actions toward me and my family. The initial paragraphs below provide a brief summary of my background, and provide context to the detail of the human impact of the Horizon scandal on me and my family. This statement does not reflect a full account of my experiences or those of my family and if necessary or required I will provide further witness statement evidence.
2. I live in Brynna, Pontyclun, South Wales with my wife **GRO** We have 3 children who are all adults now and married.

BACKGROUND PRIOR TO APPOINTMENT AS SPM

3. Prior to becoming a subpostmaster I was a senior production manager for Sony UK from in or around 1978 to 1990. This was quite a high pressure job with 3000 people

- responsible to me as I was part of the management team. As part of the job we used computers for quality control, production statistics, HR and for the monthly and annual stock checks. Computers were part and parcel; of my life for a long time.
4. I worked at Public House as a licensee for the next 8 years, looking after the financial aspects of my own business and accounts. I enjoyed working at Public House but the working hours were long.
 5. I was the chair of Llanharan Community Council, Trustee of of Llanharan Community Development Project, Chair of Brynna FC.
 6. I enjoyed working with the public and that drew me to the Post Office. I liked that the Post Office was a big part of community.
 7. My previous employment was with a large company which was highly pressurised. As I was getting older I wanted to own my own business. I thought it would be enjoyable to be my own boss.
 8. My parents had been in the licenced trade and we had both worked with them.
 9. I was in my early 50s and I was looking for a 9 – 5 job. I thoroughly enjoyed my previous job but it was long hours, 10am to 12pm. In the licenced trade we worked weekends and holidays, including Christmas day, Boxing Day and New Year's day, it would be very busy. We were now having grandchildren and I wanted to spend more time and be able to spend weekends with my family.
 10. We came across the Post Office at 31 William Street, Brynna, Pontyclun, South Wales, which my wife and I knew as a nice area. I had played football in and around the area for a long time and knew the area well.

11. My wife and I were looking to retire at 60 and we wanted to leave the Post Office to our youngest daughter, GRO. We wanted the Post Office to be able to leave something for our children.
12. I became the Subpostmaster of Brynna Post Office, 31 William Street, Brynna, Pontyclun, CF72 9QJ, from 6 May 1998 until in or around December 2004.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

13. On the introduction of the Horizon system at my branch in late 2001, my wife and I attended off site training at the office of the Post Office on Tremains Road, Bridgend. This lasted about a week.
14. The training was more theoretical than hands on learning and there were only a couple of terminals available for us to use, and these had to be shared between the whole group which consisted of approximately 15-20 people. When we had the opportunity to use the terminal we had to share it between 3-4 people.
15. The training focused on very basic transactions such as processing stamps, parcels and pensions. The training did not cover foreign currency and banking.
16. The trainers did talk us through how to conduct a balance and we only had the opportunity to physically do a test balance once. However, the data had been input by the trainers and so it was an ideal test balance with no problems. The training did not cover what to do if you experienced a discrepancies.
17. After the off-site training the Post Office arranged for someone to come to my branch and supervise us as it was the first time we were doing live transaction. This person was supposed to stay for a week, however he was there for 2 full days and then on the Wednesday he watched me do a balance and said I was competent and that there was no point in him standing around.

18. Approximately 1 month after the Horizon system was installed at my branch I contacted the Helpline as I was having balancing problems and demanded that Post Office send someone to my branch to help me.
19. Approximately 2 months after making this demand an Area Manager came to visit me. He told me that there was nothing wrong with the Horizon system and that it must be my error. He told me that he would arrange for a trainer to come to my branch and deliver some onsite training. He reemphasised to me that it was my responsibility under my contract to make good any shortfalls, and subtly suggested there would be consequences if this was not carried out immediately. He seemed to be inferring that he understood that it was a new system and that there were bound to be problems. He told me that no one else was having problems.
20. In early to mid-2002, a trainer did visit my branch. By this point, I had continued to experience problems for over 6 months with no help, despite me asking for it. The trainer was scheduled to be with me for 3 days. At 4pm on the trainers first day he received a phone call and told me that he had to leave to attend another branch which had "*more pressing needs*" than me. Although he said that he would return to complete the training, no further training was given and he never came back again.
21. I requested further training as I had not received the help I needed. Several months later a different Area Manager came to my branch and told me that Horizon was working fine and that no one else was having problems. I pointed out that I had no problems with the manual system before the introduction of Horizon.
22. The Area Manager was very offensive and said that maybe the "*modern*" Post Office and system was not for me and that I should "*consider my options*".
23. The Area Manager said that I may not be sufficiently competent with IT, and that possibly the modern Post Office may not be the best fit for me. He suggested I take advantage of the Rural Post Office Closure Scheme.

24. The Area Manager told me that I was "*not up to date*" and that I needed to "*get a grip*" as I told him that I couldn't continue to make up the shortages. I told the Area Manager that my previous job position at Sony involved computer systems and I was familiar with computer systems prior to using Horizon. He responded that no one else was having problems and simply stated that I had to repay the shortfalls under my contract or face formal action. He provided no other explanation, training or support. He made clear that if I didn't cover the shortfalls the Post Office would have no other option but to seek legal action against me to cover the money.

HELPLINE

25. In the first month of Horizon being installed at my branch I contacted the Helpline every week when balancing. Before I contacted the Helpline I double checked my cash and stock.
26. When I called the Helpline I told them that despite my checks, the balance was showing a discrepancy which I could not understand. The Helpline reiterated that it was a new system that I had to get to grips with, that it was the early stages for me and that the system would correct itself.
27. They told me that I should make a note of the losses as it would correct itself and I could recover the losses at a later date. At that stage the helpline were very helpful.
28. However, the advice that I received from the Helpline varied. Sometimes they went through the balancing procedure again with me. This would always result in a different balance and a different discrepancy despite no transactions having been taken. More often than not performing a repeat balance would make the alleged shortfall worse. These experiences put me off from performing a second balance.
29. On other occasions, I was informed by the Helpline that checks had been undertaken on the Horizon system and that there was nothing wrong with it. I was also told that the system would simply "*sort itself out*" and I was advised to just continue making

good the losses by putting cash in. I was not comfortable doing this as I could not understand the alleged shortfalls.

30. The Helpline repeatedly told me that there was nothing wrong with the system and it must be my accounting. My branch was only a very small post office and so it did not make sense that such discrepancies were so common.

31. On one occasion when I called the Helpline during the balancing process and the Helpline advisor told me that they were experiencing a high volume of calls and that a lot of offices seemed to be having problems. The advisor commented that the Helpline staff were "*learning on the job themselves*". I was surprised that the support staff were still learning as I knew that the Horizon system had been introduced in larger Post Offices since 1999/2000. I was on the line for quite a long time with the Helpline advisor and we went through the balance from scratch, however, I ended up even more out of balance.

32. Generally, it sounded as though the Helpline staff were reading from a script. They would use stock phrases such as "*there is nothing wrong with the Horizon system*" and "*the shortfalls are your responsibility*".

33. As it went on the Helpline staff became more abrupt and were becoming more frustrated.

SHORTFALLS

34. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon system, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, in order to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows

35. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch I paid the Post Office up to £20,000.

36. In my first year of using the Horizon system I paid approximately £4,500 in relation to alleged shortfalls. This figure sticks out in my memory as it was my first year of experiencing losses and I was making notes of the losses. These losses covered less than a full calendar year.
37. However, as time went on the shortfalls continued but time and my depression made it more difficult for me to keep track of the discrepancies. I was diagnosed with depression late 2004, my GP notes state that I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety due to the post office and that I was not sleeping and had anxious palpitations.
38. The weekly shortfalls ranged from £100 to £500, occasionally more. I always made the alleged shortfalls good on monthly balancing by putting cash in to balance by using takings from my retail business. I felt that I had no choice but to do this in order to continue trading as the system would not work unless it was balanced.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

39. An Area Manager (the second area manager) visited my branch approximately 18 months after Horizon was installed at my branch. A couple of weeks after this visit, Auditors arrived at my branch, without notice, to conduct an audit. They asked me to step to one side and did not allow me to stay with them during the audit and therefore I was not able to verify their findings. I found them to be very secretive. It was like the police had arrived and asked me to please step out. I asked if I could be in the office and they said no.
40. On conclusion of the audit, the auditors said that there was a small discrepancy of less £100. The auditors simply told me that I had to make this good and did not make any attempt to help find the cause of the shortfall. I put the cash into the branch immediately on the same day as the audit.

41. I did not have any other audits at my branch. I did not expect the auditors to discover any major discrepancies, as I have stated I religiously made good shortfalls as they occurred.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

42. I was not suspended or have my appointment terminated by the Post Office.

43. I sold my post office, retail business and my home because we were not earning enough from the post office and retail business to make a living. We had to constantly use the takings from the retail business to balance the alleged shortfalls in the branch.

44. In April 2004 I was diagnosed with **GRO** and I had to have invasive surgery **GRO** I was meant to have 6 weeks off work for recovery. I had to have a substitute subpostmaster, however we couldn't afford this due to the continuing losses so my wife had to take time off her work as a chef and I came back too early to help whilst I was meant to be recovering from my operation.

45. As a result I developed **GRO** requiring further surgery. Due to my ill health and continued depression my wife at this time terminated her employment to take on the running of the office. As the cost of employing a substitute postmaster was more than my wife was earning. We were now wholly dependent upon the income from the post office and retail business. This we decided was simply not sufficient to make a reasonable living, and accelerated our decision to sell the business as I required further surgery. The result of the failed second surgery has resulted in a permanent non operable **GRO**

46. I continued to suffer with depression and I became a hermit. I didn't leave my house for 12 months. I still suffer with depression and I still get low and feel down.

LOSSES

47. When you take into account my loss of earning throughout the final 10 years of my working life (possibly longer) my losses are incalculable.
48. I was led to believe I had no option but to make good the alleged shortfalls and I estimate that I paid the Post Office approximately £20,000.
49. The Post Office significantly damaged my mental health and wellbeing.

HUMAN IMPACT

50. Being required to make good the shortfalls resulted in a drop in our living standards and an increase in our workload due to the need to release our part time assistant.
51. I was diagnosed with depression which resulted in me having to regularly employ a substitute subpostmaster. My continuing depression required my wife to resign her position in order to manage the office, resulting in a further drop in our living standards and our eventual decision to seek a quick sale of our post office.
52. Unfortunately, we made the decision to sell our post office at a time when the Government were closing rural post offices which offered no security to potential buyers. This severely depleted the sale price of our post office which was part of our retirement plan.
53. I found myself unemployed at age 55 with no real prospects of gaining a responsible position as I would have to explain my leaving Post Office Limited at a time when there was great publicity around subpostmasters being prosecuted.
54. Positions that I would have been applying for would have had financial responsibility and it didn't feel right applying for these jobs when I would have to explain my period out of employment.

55. Being accused of being responsible for the shortfalls made me doubt my own business acumen and dented my confidence in my own ability. It was a stressful period in my life which impacted on all aspects of my life including my ability to sleep at night.
56. When the Post Office managers who came to my branch forcefully expressed their opinion that I was not sufficiently computer literate enough to handle the Horizon system and that the modern post office was not for me and maybe I should accept the Post Office Limited's severance package, I felt they were pointing out my age and saying that this was too much for me. Throughout this period I had the impression that Post Office wished to move my small post office into a local large convenience store as part of the Rural Post Office Closure Scheme, which they did months after my leaving.
57. I did not think that the severance package was a good package as I would have had to sell my post office and then I would only be left with the retail shop, this did not make sense to me as I would have a reduced income. The Post Office also wanted to move my post office.
58. In the village people would gossip and they were putting together my post office closing and me standing down from all my positions. People would speak to my wife about the post office closing and our friends brought it to our attention that people were saying that something was going on and that I was obviously involved in the Post Office fraud.
59. A Post Office manager asked me if I was happy with my staff and if they were trustworthy. They were suggesting that if I was not responsible for the shortfalls then my staff were.

60. This made us suspicious about our trusted 60 year old assistant. I spoke to our assistant and she decided to retire. After she stepped down, the discrepancies continued and I felt awful about not trusting her.
61. I was convinced by Post Office Limited to correct shortfalls as they told me that if there were any accounting discrepancies with the new system they would be picked up and corrected and that if there was a problem with my inexperience which were making mistakes, those mistakes would come to light later and be corrected. They told me that in the meantime I was to abide by my contract and make good the shortfalls. I have never seen the contract, however, I was told at training that it was the subpostmaster's legal obligation to make good shortfalls.
62. Initially, I was not directly accused of committing a criminal offence, but during conversations with the Post Office it was made clear that this could be the eventual outcome. Later remarks were even more forceful. I believe that it was this that precipitated my depression, it was the final straw. I was confused and upset knowing that I had done nothing wrong, but I was unable to prove it. I had a total lack of control over the situation.
63. My wife and children said I was a monster to live with during this time and my wife and children would be in tears. They would spend time together rather than with me. I was withdrawn and stayed in my bedroom
64. Being diagnosed with depression had a major impact upon my marriage, and my relationship with my adult children, it took a heavy toll on my family. There were periods where my wife almost gave up on me. I feared we were heading for divorce as we were fighting shouting all the time. My wife felt that she couldn't carry on and if it were not for our children we would have separated.
65. I was heavily involved in our local community. However, the combination of depression, lack of free time, and fear of the shame involved if the Post Office were

to prosecute me led to my stepping down from my roles as Chair of LLanharan Community Council, Trustee LLanharan Community Development Project, and my involvement with our village football team, for which over the years I had been a player, manager, and Chair.

66. Luckily my family was 100% behind me. They never thought to question whether I stole the money from the Post Office. Even my son who is straight talking thought it was ridiculous.
67. As a result of the shortfalls, my depression got worse and my wife had to resign from her job as a chef, at the age of 56 she was unable to return to work. My depression brought about my early retirement, resulting in significant reduction in our living standards.
68. For many years, I have always felt that there was a stain on my reputation as suspicion fell on me when Post Office Limited closed the office after I left and moved it to a large convenience store. The community saw this as a betrayal as the post office had been the centre of the village for decades.
69. I had to employ a substitute subpostmaster which was over £100 a day for a period of 20 days as I was having to take days off as I was suffering with depression. This was a huge cost.
70. My daughter [GRO] wanted to run the post office. She was looking forward to stepping in and taking over as she knew the business and the area. [GRO] was really disappointed when we sold our post office as she had been saving up to buy and extend the post office, she couldn't afford to buy a post office on her own and that was why she'd saved up. She was going to live on the property and her goal was only 2 years away. [GRO] wasn't happy at her job as [GRO] and the plan of her taking over the post office was the light at the end of tunnel for her but she had to re-think her plans.

CONCLUSION

71. It is difficult for me to put in words how I feel the Post Office have affected me, my life, my standard of living and my family.
72. I am still feeling the effect of the Post Office now and it is difficult not to say I hate them. Especially the senior managers. I feel that the managers that came out to me were following orders and I almost feel sorry for them.
73. I was meant to sell my post office for my pension. We purchased a house when leaving the Post Office, but due to a continued drop in our living standard we later moved into rented accommodation on housing benefit.
74. We were used to regular family holidays in the summer and winter. We would go to exotic places like Florida and Cuba but that is all gone now. We have not had a major holiday in nearly 20 years.
75. I would like the Inquiry to publicly declare what the Post Office did and for people to know what happened.
76. By the end of the Inquiry I want people to see that it wasn't the subpostmasters who were responsible for the shortfalls.
77. I would like to be vindicated and get my reputation back, I know that people still think that something was going on when I left.
78. I gave up on recovering all of my losses a long time ago, but still hold out hope that the Post Office will eventually accept their responsibilities.

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signe
John

GRO

Dated..... 07-02-2022.....