

Witness Name: Mr Christian Clement

Statement No: WITN0284_01

Exhibits: None

Dated: 08/02/22

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR CHRISTIAN CLEMENT

I, MR CHRISTIAN CLEMENT 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.

BACKGROUND

2. I was a subpostmaster of Manselton Post Office, in Manselton, from approximately the 22 December 2007 to approximately October 2015. I lived in the attached residential premises, the post office was my home.

3. Prior to becoming a subpostmaster, I was a Branch Assistant at Trallwn Post Office in Swansea from approximately the 6 July 1999 to approximately the 8 September 2006.
4. I became a postmaster, just like my father, thinking it would provide a secure a prosperous future.
5. I operated a retail business from the premises; a retail shop which sold (amongst other things) cards, confectionary and stationery.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

6. I received one half day training session in October 1999 at Aberavon Seafront Hotel in Port Talbot, when the Horizon system was introduced at Trallwn.
7. The training covered several transactions that I would be expected to carry out daily at the Branch.
8. Overall, I did not feel as though half a day's training was long enough to prepare me to operate the Horizon system efficiently. I felt as though I had to learn how to process several transactions through trial and error at the Branch.
9. The training was particularly inadequate with regards to balancing the accounts, as I do not recall this being covered in the training at all. Initially, I found balancing the Horizon system to be quite complicated and I felt as though I had no support from Post Office.
10. I do not recall receiving any further training when I was appointed as subpostmaster at the Branch.

HELPLINE

11. I estimate I contacted the Helpline once a month regarding problems relating to shortfalls and /or balancing.
12. I found that the helpline advisors did not have sufficient technical understanding of the system to solve the issues that I was experiencing at the Branch.
13. I found it exceedingly difficult to get to speak to the right person at the Helpline who may be able to assist. I was usually passed through several different departments each time I called.
14. When I reported unexplained shortfalls, the advisors usually would tell me that there was nothing that they can do, and I should put the money in myself to make the losses good.

SHORTFALLS

15. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon IT System, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.
16. I would estimate that throughout 10 years working in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) more than £70,000.
17. The year ending 2008, I paid £1,068. I repaid the amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
18. The year ending 2009 I paid £4,566. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.

19. The year ending 2010 I paid £4,879. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
20. The year ending 2011 I paid £24,520. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
21. The year ending 2012 I paid £15,249. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
22. The year ending 2013 I paid £4,475. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
23. The year ending 2014 I paid £7,142. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
24. The year ending 2015 I paid £3,066. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
25. The year ending 2016 I paid £5,128. I repaid these amounts in full as they occurred. I settled all amounts centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.
26. In addition to these amounts, I recall a few occasions where I made smaller shortfalls good in cash. I estimate that these amounted to approximately £600.
27. A robbery took place at the branch in approximately October 2010. I had left the branch momentarily to go into my residential premises. As I did not lock the door during my brief absence, I was made to repay half of the money that was stolen. This amounted to £53,000.
28. It is important to understand, that although subpostoffices are small branches, they can carry very large amounts of money. This was particularly the case previously.

29. A small branch like mine would be responsible for handling tens of thousands of pounds, usually as much as 100,000 a week, as much as a building society or small bank branch. I had no choice in the amount of money I had to handle or keep at the branch, as this was a requirement of the Post Office. However, unlike a bank branch, a subpostoffice did not have the security or staff that a bank would have.
30. Despite this, I as an ordinary subpostmaster of a small branch, was held responsible for very large sums of money. A bank manager whose bank was robbed would not have to pay half of the money back to the bank, but the unequal relationship with the Post Office meant that I had to do so.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

31. I can remember the audits taking place. My branch was audited on an annual basis since my appointment in 2007. I was not given notice of the audits.
32. On each occasion, the auditors arrived at the branch before it was due to open. The audit was usually finished by approximately 2pm.
33. Every audit conducted at the branch revealed a shortfall. I was not given a chance to validate the auditors' findings at any point and felt as though I had no choice but to pay back the money.
34. The most recent audit took in approximately May 2017. This audit revealed a shortfall of approximately £6,000, which I repaid in deductions of my salary of £1,000 a month.
35. I requested an investigation into the shortfalls, as I could not understand why the shortfalls were occurring and was repaying a substantial amount of money.

36. Following the audit in approximately May 2017, an investigation was carried out. I had a meeting with my contracts manager, Colin Burston.
37. I explained that I could not provide any explanation for the shortfalls and that I was becoming increasingly desperate.
38. Colin Burston told me that I was on my last warning and that I would lose my job should any further substantial shortfalls occur at the branch.
39. Colin Burston told me that I was lucky that I still had a job and asked me how much I could afford to pay back each month. After this meeting, I felt completely unsupported and let down by Post Office. They refused to even contemplate that it may be their trusted Horizon system that could be at fault.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

40. I was suspended between October 2011 and December 2011 following an audit which identified a shortfall of approximately £2,000.
41. After an investigation by Post Office Ltd, I was reinstated to my position on the condition that I repaid the shortfall through deductions from my salary.
42. A temporary subpostmaster was appointed at the Branch from October to December 2011. I was not allowed into the branch during my suspension.
43. The shortfalls put extreme financial pressure on me.
44. It reached a point where I could no longer afford to use personal funds to make the shortfalls good.

45. I was advised that I was on a final warning and if shortfalls continued, my contract would be terminated. I was in an impossible position. I knew I was not responsible for the shortfalls; therefore, they would inevitably continue. It was either resign or be sacked and face public humiliation.
46. In approximately October 2016, there was a second attempted robbery.
47. The thieves did not manage to take any money, but I was hit over the head and knocked unconscious. I reported the incident to Post Office, but nobody visited the Branch to see me. I was just given a number to call if I felt stressed. I assume this was simply because no money was handed over.
48. This incident is again very relevant. After the first robbery I was forced by Post Office to repay half of the monies owed, despite not being provided with the staff or security measures needed to protect such large sums of money.
49. On this occasion I was assaulted by the robbers when protecting Post Office Ltd's money. I did not even receive a thank you, let alone a visit from a Post Office manager to see how I was.
50. I felt extremely let down and unsupported by Post Office and so made the decision to resign from my position. This was in March of 2016 or 2017. I am unable to remember the exact year. These events are still difficult to go over, as they bring back such bad memories.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

51. The Post Office did not pursue civil or criminal proceedings against me for recovery of the alleged shortfalls. However, I received threats from Post Office managers to compel me to make good shortfalls.

LOSSES

52. I have paid the Post Office more than £88,000. I was told that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls

Loss of Investment

53. I paid £230,000 for the initial investment for the branch.
54. I also paid approximately £10,500 for renovations to the branch during my appointment, which included the fitting of new post office counters and a new safe.
55. I managed to sell the business, but at a loss. The Post Office relocated the branch to a nearby supermarket and so I lost the footfall from the post office. I also lost the goodwill of the business.
56. I sold the residential property for approximately £120,000 and approximately £40,000 for the sale of my business, which was taken over by the local supermarket. I am still repaying personal loans I took from the bank.

Loss of Earnings During Suspension

57. Approximately £8,000 (gross pay) was lost during my suspension from October 2011 to December 2011.

Loss of Earnings Post Termination

58. If it were not for the events that occurred, I had planned to continue in my appointment at the branch until I retired in approximately 15 years.

59. Prior to these events, I thoroughly enjoyed my job and wished to continue to build the business.
60. I took approximately £48,000 per year (gross pay) from the branch. Therefore, over the next 15 years I would expect to have earned approximately £720,000.
61. I am yet to obtain alternative employment but do not expect to find a new position which provides me with as a high salary as my position at the post office.

HUMAN IMPACT

62. I suffered serious problems with the Horizon system including alleged shortfalls. Incorrect balances were initially in the region of a few hundred pounds but began to get larger and more frequent and could be as much as a £1000 at a time.
63. I was not involved in the mediation in 2013. I was party to the group litigation against Post Office Ltd, as a result I am excluded from the Historic Shortfall Scheme.
64. I estimate that over a ten-year period I had to pay as much as £88,000 of my own monies to cover these alleged shortfalls.
65. I have suffered from stress, anxiety and depression because of the unexplained shortfalls and the extreme financial pressure put on me as a result.
66. I was constantly worried about losing my job and the severe implications that this would have on my quality of life. I have been prescribed antidepressant medication by a doctor to treat my depression.
67. This period was the most stressful of my life. I was forced to move into my parents' house as financially I could not afford to keep own home on and pay the shortfalls. I cannot describe the embarrassment I felt.

- 68. Financially I was struggling. I could not afford the mortgage payments and household bills. I suffered endless sleepless nights. I could not understand where the missing money was going. I knew I was competent, but began to question my own ability. My confidence was eroded little by little.
- 69. I found it difficult to switch off, and at the end of the day I would take my worries home to my family, which caused arguments, tension, and mistrust.
- 70. I was aware that other subpostmasters had been prosecuted for having shortfalls. I was constantly worried that I would lose my job or even worse be prosecuted and go to jail.
- 71. My relationship of 17 years deteriorated and eventually we separated. The pressure the shortfalls put me under was immense. I turned to alcohol as a way of coping and became reliant on this to even sleep on an evening.

CONCLUSION

- 72. What happened to me and to hundreds of others is an absolute disgrace. I would like the Post Office held to account for what they have done.
- 73. They have ruined lives. I would like an apology for their actions and recognition that I have had my name and reputation dragged through the mud. I and others also deserve to be compensated for what was done to us.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this Statement to be true.

Signed... **GRO** ...

Christian Clement

...Dated... 08/02/22