

Witness Name: Ms Colleen Ingham

Statement No: WITN0263_01

Exhibits: none

Dated: 31 January 2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS COLLEEN INGHAM

I, MS COLLEEN INGHAM 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 subpostmistress of Cockfield Post Office in Cockfield, County Durham between August 2002 and February 2016. I lived in the attached accommodation.
3. I operated a retail business from the premises. I had a small cards and stationery store but mainly a stand-alone post office.

4. I ran the post office with my then husband and I employed one assistant, Phillip Leighton. Phillip worked with me between January 2015 to February 2016.
5. Prior to this, I worked with the Police as an administration officer for 14 years. I worked on the crime desk computer system.
6. My husband was medically retired from the Metropolitan police after suffering a stroke and we decided to move back up north to be near our mothers, so I resigned my post as an admin office with the met police.
7. My husband and I had often discussed working for ourselves, and looked into buying a post office.
8. We attended a seminar about post offices and decided it was right for us try to run a rural post office. We chose rural as my husband had been told he needed to change his lifestyle by his neurologist.
9. At our interview my husband was supposed to be appointed subpostmaster but because he was on three months gardening leave, he was technically still at that time employed by the police and so they appointed me as subpostmistress.
10. This was not a problem as the assessors had decided that we were both equally qualified for the appointment.

Training and Support

11. I had two weeks of on-site training before I commenced my role.
12. We had two weeks of in-house training. The trainer, John Wilson, would stand and watch us make the transactions and serve the customers.

13. There were no instructions given apart from what came up in the real time transactions with customers during those two weeks.
14. We later found the training to be completely inadequate because it did not cover the wide range of transactions we later had to process whilst running the post office. If a particular transaction was not requested by a customer during the two weeks of training we received, then we were not trained to do it.
15. Mr Wilson was present for two weekly balances during the training period. We did not have any difficulty processing these.
16. There was no guidance given regarding shortfalls or what should be done in the event of any problems balancing.
17. I was told to contact the helpline in the event of any issues.
18. I did contact the helpline and asked if I could undertake some further training on the Horizon system. Instead, I was sent the operations manual.
19. The answer to any further training requests I made to the Post Office was always that there was none available, and I was referred to the manual.
20. The Post Office assured me that the Horizon system was very similar to other operating systems. I was used to computer systems, having worked for the Police, but the Horizon system was very different, and so having no formal training left me at a real disadvantage when it came to operating my branch.

Helpline

21. I would contact the Helpline whenever I had a large shortfall, and I would ask them what to do.

22. On one occasion after a shortfall had appeared, I called the helpline and an advisor talked me through, step by step, what to do on the Horizon system. The shortfall doubled as he was on the line. The advisor assured me the Horizon system would right itself the following day. It did not.
23. When the shortfalls continued to arise, I would ring another subpostmaster or the National Federation for Subpostmasters for help. Again, I was told not to worry about the shortfalls and that it would appear the following day.
24. Another common piece of advice I received from the Helpline was to ignore the shortfall until I did the weekly balance, and it would right itself. I got the impression that the Helpline staff did not know the systems well enough to advise on it.
25. On one occasion after I experienced a shortfall, my Post Office line manager, Lesley Wilson attended the branch. She could not quite understand how it happened and so she rang the helpline.
26. My Post Office Line Manager asked for a 'Level 2' advisor to answer her query and the adviser was able to assist her and solve the problem. This gave me the impression that she knew that the frontline advisors that subpostmasters spoke to did not have a working knowledge of the system, and she had the authority to ask for those who did.
27. I asked Ms Wilson about this, and she said that she had the authority to do this, and she knew the system but that the 'level 2' advisors were not available to speak to subpostmasters with no such authority. I was utterly baffled by this.
28. I often asked the advisors on the helpline if other subpostmasters/mistresses were having similar problems regarding shortfalls. The response was that I was the only

one who had this issue. This made me feel particularly isolated, and increased my feeling that it must be me that was inadequate.

29. The helpline would always tell me that there was no remote access to my Horizon system. This always puzzled me as, during periods when I was not trading, for example the weekend and bank holidays, the stock figures could change.
30. One example of this was when I had a certain number of stamps on the Horizon system on a Saturday at close of business, and yet on a Monday, the system showed I had zero stock.
31. This meant that I had nowhere to account for this stock on the system and therefore would show a shortage. I would then call the helpline and they later sent me a transaction correction.
32. The helpline told me that the Horizon system should have processed this as a sale so that the figures were accounted for. This did not occur and so I was left with a shortage to make good.
33. On several occasions, I disputed the shortages and told the Post Office that I thought it was a problem with the Horizon system, and Helpline staff told me there was absolutely nothing wrong with the system and it had to be operator error. Meaning, myself or a staff member.

Shortfalls

34. 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, 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 (or Post Office deducted) in excess of £32,000. The below is not an exhaustive list but the shortfalls I can account for through paperwork I kept at the time.
36. On the 19 February 2010, there was a shortfall of £687.27. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. This shortfall was deducted from my salary.
37. On the 21 April 2010, there was a shortfall of £197.96. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
38. On the 14 October 2011, there was a shortfall of £445.20. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
39. On the 24 October 2012, there was a shortfall of £137.58. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. I agreed to make good the shortfall by the end of the trading period.
40. On the 14 December 2012, there was a shortfall of £1,007.93. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
41. On the 20 February 2014, there was a shortfall of £587. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
42. On the 17 March 2014, there was a shortfall of £740. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
43. On the 17 March 2014, there was a shortfall of £300. I contacted the helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
44. On the 21 February 2014, there was a shortfall of £2100. On this occasion the helpline referred me to the HR Manager in Chesterfield. In March 2014, I wrote a

letter to the HR Manager requesting that they investigate why the shortfalls kept occurring. I did not receive a response.

45. On the 17 March 2014, there was a shortfall of £300. I contacted the Helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
46. In April 2014 there was a shortfall of approximately £2,000, which was due to a shortage in a cash delivery. I contacted the cash centre and told them that the cash delivery was £2,000 short. However, the Horizon system was showing the cash as being on hand, and therefore causing a loss when I did the balancing. This was reported to the Helpline.
47. On the 14 November 2014, a shortfall of £43.50 was found on DVLA lost disks. This was repaid through my salary.
48. On the 26 November 2014, there was a shortfall of £133.48. I contacted the Helpline and it was declared the error. This was deducted from my salary.
49. On the 13 April 2015, there was a shortfall of £8,886.51. This was money stolen by my husband. This was deducted from my salary in 44 instalments of £200 and one instalment of £86.51. I contacted the helpline to inform them that I thought that this was as a result of a storm which caused a power outage.
50. On the 21 September 2015 there was a shortfall of £2,779.52. I reported this to the Helpline. This was deducted from my salary.

Audit and investigation

51. I was first audited on the 24 October 2012. I was not given any notice that the audit was going to take place.

52. The auditor's name was John Wilson. He walked straight into my branch, asked me to step aside and to hand over my keys. The audit discovered a shortfall of £137.58.
53. I was also audited when I was reinstated following my suspension in May 2014.
54. On this occasion, there was a shortage due to an issue with remming in cash. 'Remming' is the post office system. The cash centre sends money out to the post office once a week in my case. When we receive the case there is a bar code on the cash pouches. This bar code is scanned by the horizon system and adds the amount in the pouch to the balance held by the office. The cash centre had sent a cash delivery which was £2,000 short of the cash declaration on the Horizon system.
55. I contacted the cash centre and the helpline to inform them of this and was told this would be investigated. I saw no evidence that it was and during the audit after I was reinstated, the auditor told me that I had to make this good via deductions from my salary.
56. On the 19 October 2010, I received a letter from Alison Bolsover, a Post Office Ltd employee who had raised a transaction correction against my office. I had disputed this, but Ms Bolsover decided it had to be paid. This was for the sum of £1000.
57. I spoke to Alison Bolsover the following day at told her I was disputing the shortfall, as I believed it was due to a system failure.
58. I asked Ms Bolsover to investigate this as it was normally just me in the office and it was not possible for me to have made mistakes of this magnitude.
59. I told Ms Bolsover I was not happy with the Horizon system and that there was a computer error. The outcome of this was that the £1,000 shortfall was eventually deducted from my salary.

60. My Horizon system terminal was checked on three occasions. On two of those occasions, the base system was replaced.
61. I kept complaining about the wiring system, unbelievably the Post Office engineers 'fixed' this once with blue tack, but they told me that 'it would be alright'.
62. On the 24 September 2014, I was showing a loss of approximately £1,000. I contacted the helpline and the area manager, Mark Baker who told me to shut the system down.
63. I told the Helpline that I wanted someone to come and look at it. I was told that the money would likely come back tomorrow and if I did not open, I would be in breach of my contract.
64. As instructed, I opened the branch and found that the shortfall had doubled. I called the helpline and demanded they sent someone out to check the Horizon system.
65. A Post Office auditor did attend and looked through all the transactions and found nothing of any concern.
66. I then insisted that they send out an engineer. The Post Office engineer attended and changed the Horizon base unit and said that it would be fine in the morning.
67. It was not fine in the morning. The base unit was then replaced again, when eventually the third base unit was installed, the computer began working again.
68. When I went to balance that evening, I was a further £500 short. Again, I rang the helpline and they advised me to ask for a BT engineer to be sent out to check the telecoms and cabling.

69. The BT engineer said that there was noise on the line. This interfered with the data going up and down the line and would interrupt the data transfer and cause discrepancies.
70. The BT engineer did further checks and informed me that I had too much Post Office equipment on the lines. I had alarms, the Horizon system, printers and the pay station. The BT Engineer said, was too much for one line. The Post Office pay station was taken off the line and he engineer said the line was clear now.
71. I was somewhat confused by this as the pay station had been online in those circumstances for the past 13 years.

Suspension and Termination

72. I was suspended on 6 April 2014 and reinstated 22 May 2014.
73. I was suspended because my husband, Paul Ingham had been stealing from the post office.
74. This, however, was separate from the shortfalls that occurred on the Horizon system.
75. Even though my husband had admitted to the theft, I was arrested at the same time.
76. I was questioned and released on bail. As I was on bail, I was suspended.
77. Two weeks later, my husband Paul pleaded guilty to the theft and perverting the cause of justice.

78. I had not realised that my husband had stolen money, but by this time I believe he had a complete breakdown due to the stress of the constant shortfalls and having absolutely no help or support from Post Office Ltd.
79. My husband was by then totally reliant on alcohol, and I believe that, in his mind he was just getting back at the Post Office.
80. I remained suspended for two to three weeks.
81. I had a meeting at the Post Office headquarters in Durham. I was told that I should agree to make good the sum on which my husband was convicted, which was approximately £8,886.50. If I agreed to this, I would be reinstated as subpostmistress.
82. It was subsequently discovered that my husband, Paul had also been perpetrating a cheque fraud between September 2013 and March 2014. I knew there was a problem with the cheques, which I had reported.
83. Andy Winn, part of the Post Office Security Team told me they had put the amount into a suspense account and then would be later investigated. This later was found to also be my ex-husbands doing. I was also held to be liable for these losses, which I disputed because this had been going on for months without their noticing and I argued that it was their negligence.
84. I later had this amount deducted from my salary.
85. Paul Ingham, my then husband received, a 20-month prison sentence.
86. My branch was eventually closed as part of the Network Transformation Programme.

Civil and Criminal Proceedings

87. The Post Office did not pursue civil or criminal proceedings against me for the recovery of the alleged shortfalls, this was because I paid the many shortfalls that arose, because I believed I had no alternative. However, I was arrested and had to pay the Post Office for the monies my husband stole, despite the fact that the Post Office accepted that I had no knowledge of this, and that he was prosecuted and convicted for this theft.

Losses

88. I wish to be clear about the distinction between the shortfalls that appeared on the Horizon system and the monies my ex-husband took from the Post Office, and for which he served a prison term for.

89. The £32,000 was losses due to Horizon system over the space of 14 years. This is what was in my accounts.

90. The money my ex-husband stole was approximately £8,750. The Post Office took £200 a month from my salary for 18 months (£3600). I was then made the remainder of the money, approximately £5,500 when the Post Office closed the branch.

91. To clarify, my husband stole £8,750 and pleaded guilty. The Post Office still insisted I repay everything. I was so sick I just couldn't argue with them. I was totally devastated. I just wanted it to end.

92. I estimate that I had in excess of £17,295.65 deducted from my salary or have or paid back out of my pocket.

93. A final deduction of approximately £9,600 was taken from my closure payment, which was approximately £29,200.
94. I was led to believe that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls.

Human Impact

95. I suffered serious problems with the Horizon system which led to financial and emotional devastation.
96. I had to pay the Post Office £32,000 in alleged shortfalls from my own money. When I raised these issues with the Post Office and the helpline, I was told that the system was “infallible” and that someone must be stealing the money if there was a shortfall.
97. I was increasingly struggling financially to make good the shortfalls.
98. I was unable to pay my mortgage and I was forced to rent it out to make the payments.
99. The constant stress of worrying about the shortfalls led to arguments between my husband and me.
100. We blamed each other for the mistakes, we couldn't understand what was going on. My husband couldn't handle these demands and over a period he resorted to alcohol. He began drinking more and more.
101. Eventually we could no longer live together and separated. His hatred of Post Office Ltd and their inability to resolve the situation cost us our marriage.
102. The consequences of being held responsible for the shortfall ended in my husband losing his mind and being sentenced to twenty months in prison. The end of a thirty-year marriage.

103. I felt completely humiliated by the whole experience. I was the subject of gossip in the community. I lost my dignity and my reputation.
104. My arrest took place at my son's house in GRO I was taken to Croydon police station and held in a cell overnight and transported back to Durham the following morning. I was interviewed and released at 10pm that evening.
105. I was at my son's home because it was Mothering Sunday that weekend, and I had arranged to meet my daughter and grandchildren for Mother's Day. How more humiliating and totally soul destroying could things have been?
106. On my arrest, my name appeared in the local newspaper the next day. The affect was devastating for my mother, daughter and the grandchildren that attended the local school. They were humiliated belittled, people were nasty.
107. My children and grandchildren also faced hostility. I was very frightened for them and myself. I lost my home.
108. The actions of the Post Office wrecked my life and caused pain and suffering to me and my family.
109. I was left feeling devastated, terrified and confused.

CONCLUSION

110. The Post Office action against me devastated my life. I should have been running a successful business, providing well for my family, and enjoying life.
111. I have tried to give an indication of the consequences of the Post Office action against me in this statement, but it is impossible to give a full account of the nights and days when you can see no way ahead.

112. The Horizon system has been shown to be deeply flawed and that the Post Office knew.

113. I would like the full truth to come out. I want the world to know that I, and ordinary hard working, decent people like me, had their lives ruined by Post Office Ltd.

114. I would like it to be publicly shown that Post Office knew its computer system (Horizon) was completely flawed and unreliable, and that despite this Post Office pursued subpostmasters and subpostmistresses and ruined their lives for money that never existed.

115. I am entitled to be properly compensated for the losses I have suffered as a result of Post Office Ltd, and I would like this sooner, rather than later.

116. The Post Office and the Department of Business who own it, have known for years that Horizon was a broken system. I believe that they knew, or should have known, when they were destroying my life and the lives of others that their Horizon System was unreliable.

117. I would like compensation for not just the financial losses, but also to take account of the loss of the life I had and should have had. I would like them publicly held to account and shamed in the way I and my family have been.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this Witness Statement are true.

Signed... **GRO** Dated... *31 January 2022*
Colleen Ingham