

Witness Name: Ms Janice Attwood

Statement No.: WITN0211_01

Exhibits: None

Dated: 11/1/2022

IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS JANICE ATTWOOD

I, MS JANICE ATTWOOD 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 currently live in North Yorkshire with my partner. I have five children who are all grown up now and I am the manager of a Cancer research charity shop.
3. Prior to becoming Subpostmistress, I worked in the Civil Service for the DHS. I then took some time out to have my children and raise them.

4. My parents owned and ran Helperby post office in York, and I worked for them as an assistant in the post office. Unfortunately, my father died suddenly, and I took over the post office when I was pregnant with twins.
5. I was a subpostmaster from 13 September 1996 to June 2008 at Helperby post office, Main St, Helperby, York, YO61 2NT.
6. My family and I lived local to the post office. When I took it over we all moved into the house linked to the post office. It was our home.
7. It was a big house and allowed us to live a good lifestyle with five children and provided a steady income.

DECISION TO BECOME A SPM

8. I was happy to take over the post office when my father passed. I had worked there for many years and I felt I knew what I was doing and how to run it.
9. When I took over the post office I saw it as a long term career move. I had five children to raise and the adjoining house was the perfect home for us. The post office provided a stable income. It would have created a good lifestyle for my family.
10. I invested in updating the post office as it was very dated and I needed to comply with the Post Office regulations, for example, I had the security updated and screens fitted. I cannot recall exactly how much I spent in renovating the office.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT ON THE HORIZON SYSTEM

11. I received an Operations Manual and approximately three days of training. Two days of the training were held at the Crown Hotel Boroughbridge. This training covered very little other than a general run through of the system on Training Mode.

12. The sessions were wholly inadequate and were clearly rushed. I remember thinking that the session covered the bare minimum necessary.
13. The remaining training day was conducted onsite at my branch and covered the day-today usage of Horizon. I was not computer savvy beforehand and consequently lacked the confidence to fully understand the software based accounting system.
14. I received no further training after my initial training when Horizon was first introduced.

HELPLINE

15. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline once a week with regard to problems relating to shortfalls and/or balancing. On most occasions the helpline support failed to resolve my issues. They gave up helping me as soon as they realised that they could not resolve the issue.
16. On more than one occasion, the shortfall doubled as I was on the phone to the helpline trying to resolve the issues and they did not help to reverse it.
17. The helpline was absolutely useless. I felt they were reading from a script and their response was always the same. I was always told to roll over and declare the loss.

SHORTFALLS

18. 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.

19. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) in excess of £4,000.00.
20. While there were a number of shortfalls over my twelve-year tenure as Subpostmistress, I cannot remember the details of each one. However, if I had a loss, I would make every reasonable effort to notify the Post Office, via the Helpline, as I was never aware of any accounting issues or errors taking place within the branch.
21. As such, my frequent calls to the Helpline were made in the hope that any mistake/issue would come to light. Instead, I received demand letters and calls regarding outstanding shortfalls. I do remember occasionally allowing the sum to roll over as the shortfall mounted up and I adjusted the figures to ensure that the accounts balanced.
22. I felt increasingly as though seeking help from the Post Office was not helping to rectify the situation and I didn't feel as if I had any other option as I needed to continue trading.
23. I recall the discrepancies would sometimes double when I rolled over, so much so that I made my area manager, Kevin Duffield, stand next to me whilst I balanced to show him step by step what I was doing. Mr Duffield saw the discrepancies double and could not give me any explanation as to why this was happening or how to rectify this.
24. I used to dread Wednesdays as this was balance day. I would start at lunchtime and I often ran into the night trying to balance. I would have to roll over with an error notice and I often would spend the evening in tears going through every transaction with a fine-tooth comb trying to find the error and I would never be able to find it.
25. **Shortfall 1:** While I do not know of the exact figures for individual shortfalls my understanding is that by the time I resigned I had balanced shortfalls of over £4,000.00. I became aware of this shortfall in January 2001, when the auditors came and informed me on the spot that I was to be suspended.

26. I repaid the Post Office for this shortfall by cheque.
27. In order to pay the £4,000.000 back to the Post Office my husband and I had to take out a loan as we had just done up the house and at the time we were hand to mouth.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

28. I remember the first time the Post Office conducted an audit of my branch, it was without notice, but prior to the introduction of the Horizon system. As such, everything balanced and was in order. Unfortunately, I did not retain a copy of the auditor's report which was provided to me in this instance.
29. In November 2000 I made a telephone call to the Helpline regarding my shortfalls. Following this call I believe that the audit team were alerted to these shortfalls. While I can't remember the exact date, on a Thursday in January or February 2001 two cars full of auditors arrived at my branch and found there was a shortfall of £4,000.00.
30. Following completion of the audit, I was immediately suspended and invited to an interview in York. As Lynn Johnson was already on the premises during the audit and they allowed her to take over the running of the office.
31. I was told that there was an ongoing investigation while I remained suspended for 3 months. I believe that this investigation was instigated by Mr Bill Earnshaw. However, I have seen no evidence of any adequate investigation. I was interviewed at York branch with an NFSP representative, who, had no input during the meeting whatsoever.
32. I genuinely believed this meeting was to help me find out the cause of the shortfalls. I took all my papers and phone records which highlighted how many times I had rung the helpline seeking assistance, in the belief that we would go through these records.

33. In fact I would describe this interview as more of an ambush. The interviewer was hostile, direct and abrupt with me. He was extremely aggressive, demanding answers that I did not have. The investigator was forcefully asking me where the money was as though I had hidden it. I was in shock and found this interview extremely distressing.

PROSECUTION

34. I was suspended for a total of 3 months from the day of the audit in January/February 2001 in relation to the shortfall of £4,000.00.
35. My Suspension was temporary and the Post Office appointed a temporary subpostmaster by the name of Lynn Johnson in my absence.
36. After the 3 months, I received a letter to arrange a meeting with the Post Office. The same man who interviewed me in York visited my home and was like a completely different person. He was very pleasant and told me I could be reinstated if I paid back the £4,000.00 and pleaded guilty to false accounting. I was told that if I did not pay back the £4,000.00 I would not be reinstated as subpostmistress.
37. This left me with no choice as I owned the property, I had a mortgage to pay and children to feed and look after. I couldn't afford to lose our home and my income. Consequently, I admitted to false accounting and repaid the £4,000.00. I was then reinstated as SPM.
38. I continued as subpostmistress until 8 June 2008. I then resigned from my position and I sold the business.

HUMAN IMPACT

39. The requirement to make good the apparent shortfalls caused us severe financial hardship. We had really stretched ourselves financially buying the post office from my parents and having just renovated it meant that money was very tight for us.
40. Whilst I am grateful the shortfall was only £4,000.00. However, it was still money we didn't have at the time and we had to take out a loan to cover this. The financial strain this caused was stressful and I have never been the same since.
41. At the time my mother had **GRO** and she was terminally ill. My suspension affected me just as much as losing her did because I was suspended and accused of doing something I hadn't done.
42. I don't like cashing up at my current job because all the feelings from the Wednesday night balances in the post office come rushing back to me. I still get extremely anxious cashing up 20 years later. I lost all confidence in myself and my ability to handle cash.
43. And there is not a day that goes by where I don't think about being held responsible for the shortfalls.
44. I felt stricken with panic when I was being held responsible for the shortfalls, having four auditors aggressively asking me where the money was and to explain why it was missing. I went into complete shock.
45. My daughter ran me a bath a couple times after the audit to try and help me deal with the shock of the visit.
46. I had sleepless nights, crying my eyes out, unable to eat and wouldn't go out. I couldn't make sense of any of it as I knew I hadn't taken any money.
47. I still get anxious going into in a Post Office 20+ years later.
48. I was ashamed. I felt I'd let my own family down and I was utterly confused as to where the money had gone. I was totally let down by the Post office and there non-existent

support. I am still angry about it all and I would desperately like to face my accusers now knowing what I know.

49. I didn't go out. I hid the suspension from all my customers, as I felt ashamed and inadequate. I still find it difficult to talk about today. I was constantly living in dread of anyone finding out.
50. I was not convicted in court of a criminal offence. But I was threatened with prosecution if I did not agree to charges of false accounting.
51. I had to admit false accounting to the Post Office interviewer in order to get reinstated. I can't really describe how it feels to have to admit to something you haven't done. It was just so unfair because I am not that person but at the same time it was a relief to have my job back and have an income again to be able to support my family.
52. It makes me angry because how dare they make me admit to something and pay for something I didn't do.
53. I was lucky, my family never once questioned my honesty. They had seen first-hand how much difficulty I had when it came to balancing and the effect it had on me.
54. My mother was terminally ill and I was looking after her. I kept my troubles hidden from her, and in doing so my greatest sorrow and anger is that the Post Office robbed me of my precious time with her, as this horrible event was always at the forefront of my mind.
55. Today I manage a Charity shop and every day I get anxious when cashing up. I lost all my confidence with handling money and I am terrified of making the slightest mistake.
56. It affected our domestic life as we lived in the post office, it was our home and it was an awful experience to have to go through in your own home. We had a sorting office attached and I just hid away in the private part of the house for 3 months until I was reinstated.

57. I couldn't bear to show my face, my husband would take the children to do things without me. We couldn't have a holiday, our children missed out on fun experiences due the financial pressure we had been put under by the post office.
58. If I hadn't been reinstated, we would have lost our home as my salary was part of the mortgage repayments.
59. The working for the Post Office was the worst period of my life and I now dread going into one.

CONCLUSION

60. The whole experience still impacts my life to this day. It is now over 20 years later and I still get anxious when cashing up in my current job.
61. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about everything the Post Office put me through. Most of all that they robbed me of my final precious moments with my mother.
62. I do not use a post office anymore, I cannot stand them after the experience they put me through.
63. I want those responsible to be held accountable and admit what they have done. I want to find out who covered it up for all this time and I would like all SPMs to be paid back the money they lost.
64. I also want the Post Office to acknowledge how we all felt, the impact that they had on SPM and their families and recognise that we were all just trying to do a good job.
65. It is frustrating that these events still affect me all these years later.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signe **GRO**

Janice Attwood

Dated 11/01/2022