

Witness Name: Mrs Carol Edmondson
Statement No: WITN0246_01
Exhibits: None
Dated: 8 January 2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MRS CAROL EDMONDSON

I, MRS CAROL EDMONDSON WILL STATE 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 am now 70 on 13 December 2021. I was born in Warrington. I went to school in Golborne in Warrington, where I still live. Apart from a short time, I have never lived anywhere else apart from Golborne in Warrington.
3. Although I gave up my post office in 2010, I continue to work as a post office assistant in a post office in Culcheth, in Warrington. I still work in the post office at my age because I love the work and love working with people, However, I am no longer responsible for shortfalls, so I can enjoy my work and not feel frightened by it.

BACKGROUND

4. After school, I went to college where I studied maths and accountancy. After college, I worked in the wages department of a large factory that made seats for cinemas.
5. I married in 1972. My husband was an engineer.
6. I took a job as an assistant at Hindley Post Office, in about 1978. I worked there until 1984. This was the largest sub post office in the Wigan area at this time.
7. As a result of my experience working in this very busy large post office, I felt that I was well able to run a post office of my own. I had an accounting background. I also had significant experience of working in a busy sub post office. I really liked the work, and working with people. I felt capable of running my own post office.
8. I therefore did research into sub post offices in the Wigan area. I found a post office that I thought was ideal. I was a Subpostmistress of Duddon Post Office, Tarporley, Cheshire CW6 0EL from December 1984 to December 1988.
9. It was large enough to provide employment for my husband also. It was the only shop in the village and it was very busy. We opened at 6am and closed 6pm.
10. We ran this post office successfully for four years. However, the government at the time was changing and downgrading the services that post offices might do in the future. Rural post offices looked like they would be under threat in the future. I therefore looked for other opportunities out of the rural environment and back into a town, where we would have a better chance of long time success.
11. I found a new much larger post office. It was only about five miles from Hindley, so we could travel in easily.
12. I became the Subpostmistress of Robins Lane Post Office, 142 Robins Lane, St Helens, Merseyside WA9 3PB from April 1989 to April 2010.

13. This post office had three counters and a staff of three part time staff on the post office side and one part time staff member on the retail side.
14. Although I have been Subpostmistress in two separate branches, the Horizon system was only in use during my time in the Robins Lane branch.
15. I also operated a retail business from the premises (Robin's Lane Post Office), a convenience store. I employed four assistants.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

16. As I have said, I was a Subpostmistress of Duddon Post Office, Tarporley, Cheshire CW6 0EL from December 1984 to December 1988. This was before the introduction of the Horizon IT System.
17. Before the introduction of the Horizon IT System, I used the old paper ledger system to record transactions, to balance the accounts and to report to Post Office Ltd.
18. Although ledger system was time consuming, it was reliable, and if ever a discrepancy arose, I could check back through the ledger to identify where the issue arose and to resolve it.
19. Even when I moved to run the Robins Lane post office, I was still using the old ledger system. I later also purchased and used the Edward Jackson computer system, which also allowed one to check back through transactions.
20. However, when the Horizon System was introduced, there was no way of checking back through transactions to identify issues if they arose as there had been under the paper ledger system and the Edward Jackson system.
21. In terms of training on the Horizon System – In about April 1999. I received 3 days of classroom training in a hotel in St Helens.

22. The first day consisted of counter training, which covered day-to-day transactions. The second day covered receiving and recording stock. The final day covered balancing. I do not recall ever being given any information on how to deal with any shortfalls apart from being told that if they arose I would have to make them good.
23. Whilst sitting in the classroom, in the ideal environment, the training seemed adequate. However when I was operating the system in the real post office it was very overwhelming.
24. When the branch went 'live' with the Horizon System, I had a trainer with me for 2 days. It seemed that he was not there to make sure that I was confident and capable, but more to ensure that the technology was working properly. He also gave further training on the practical side of operating Horizon: inserting ticket rolls etc. He commented that if I had problems I should ring the helpline.
25. A trainer did attend to oversee the first balance, so after that training I was on my own.
26. I also attended a seminar given by the National Federation of Subpostmasters to subpostmaster members at a local venue. It transpired that some subpostmasters had to slot into available training in the area, which could be several months before the rollout of the Horizon system to their branch. By the time they received Horizon they had forgotten everything they had been taught.
27. The meetings and interactions between subpostmasters were the only way that we were able to work out how to deal with the shortfalls and other issues within Horizon, as the Helpline was useless.
28. As I have said, I had previously used the Edward Jackson computer system to help with balancing which I bought privately. Discrepancies on this system were much less regular and much smaller. They were also easier to identify.

29. I do not recall receiving any further training. Nor was I informed that it was possible to request further training.

HELPLINE

30. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline once a month with regard to problems relating to alleged shortfalls or balancing. I was usually told to consult the Horizon guide. If I did receive any further advice, it rarely helped me to solve the problem.
31. The Helpline operatives seemed far too busy to deal with all the issues, it was as though they only had a certain amount of time allotted to be on the phone for each call. They were also very difficult to get through to on the phone. The phone was often not answered, or they would say they would call you back, which they did not. The operatives seemed merely to follow a checklist of issues to look for, and gave stock answers accordingly.
32. Helpline staff never told me that other Subpostmasters had similar issues with shortfalls and balancing problems. When I reported shortfalls of balance problems the Helpline strongly suggested that the shortfalls had to be my fault and that I was the only person incorrectly completing transactions. I felt completely isolated.
33. It is important to say, that as a result of the information I received from the Helpline, that I thought I was completely alone in having these problems with the Horizon System. I started to question my abilities. I could not understand how, after so many years as a subpostmistress and post office assistant that I could suddenly become so incompetent. It made no sense. I later learned that I was not to blame, the Horizon System was.
34. By way of example, every single time that I did a foreign currency transaction there would be a shortfall on the Horizon System. It was like clockwork.

35. I got so used to experiencing shortfalls when issuing foreign currency that if I had ever carried out a foreign currency transaction in that week, I called the Helpline to check figures and exchange rates before carrying out my balance.
36. The Helpline verified my figures, so when I discovered shortfalls I paid the monies back. The Helpline reassured me that my figures were correct, so I became convinced that the fault must be my own.

SHORTFALLS

37. 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.
38. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) in excess of £30,000 in relation to shortfalls.
39. There were many shortfalls that arose weekly which ranged from £20 - £100. These shortfalls arose from the installation of the Horizon system in 1999 to my resignation in April 2010. I repaid the alleged shortfalls as and when they occurred.
40. I became so accustomed to the weekly shortfalls that I stopped searching my paperwork for the smaller figures. I paid the amounts back sometimes by taking money from the retail side of the business, and sometimes by paying out of my own pocket.
41. It became clear to me that there was something wrong with the Horizon System, as there were so many discrepancies.
42. As someone who had experience in accounting and payroll, this made no sense to me. In my view, it should have been simple, stock on one side and cash on the other side. If you sold £100 of stamps, you should have a £100 in the system. This is what I

- had in the old paper ledger system and the Edwards Jackson system. This was almost never the case with the Horizon System.
43. On a Wednesday night, you would press the 'variance' button. You would then hold your breath as the egg timer symbol spun around and around. No matter how careful you were, you never knew what the balance would be.
 44. I never had this problem under the paper ledger system or Edward Jackson system. You put in your stock and cash, and you knew what the balance would be.
 45. I also experienced larger shortfalls. If I experienced a large shortfall, I showed a loss in my accounts and reported it to Post Office to be checked.
 46. Post Office always responded that no cause had been found and I had to make the amount good. I suspect that they did not investigate at all.
 47. I used to be a National Federation of Subpostmasters representative at the Warrington Branch. I was an active member of the Federation until about 2006.
 48. I used to go to the National Federation meetings and the annual conference.
 49. At the Federation meetings, I routinely raised the fact that I was experiencing shortfalls. When I did this, other Federation members would also say that they were experiencing shortfalls. Everyone seemed to think that it was his or her own fault and wondered what they were doing wrong.
 50. Also, whenever my Post Office area manager would come to see me I would report the fact that the Horizon System kept reporting shortfalls.
 51. The area managers would always turn the conversation around to whether my staff might be stealing. They never took any action to check the Horizon System.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

52. The Post Office conducted at least five audits of my branch.

53. On each occasion, three auditors were present. They would arrive prior to opening and left after lunch at approximately 2pm. I was never given the opportunity to count the cash and stock to verify the auditors' findings.
54. On each occasion that a shortfall arose, I paid back the amounts in full as I took the auditors at their word.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

55. I was not suspended by the Post Office. I decided to resign, as I could no longer sustain the constant drain on my finances caused by the shortfalls.
56. I am certain that if I had continued as the subpostmistress I would have gone bankrupt.

LOSSES

57. I repaid the Post Office in the region of £30,000 in shortfalls over 11 years.
58. On one occasion, the Horizon system went down for 10 days. Post Office did not send engineers out to put it right. This resulted in me receiving almost no remuneration for a full month. As a result, I lost approximately £3,000 in remuneration.
59. I also had to sell my business. I bought it in 1998 for £98,000 and sold it 11 years later for £98,000. I am certain that I could not sell my business at this price because the Post Office's reputation had got so bad.
60. Also, if I had not been forced to use the Post Office's unreliable Horizon System, I would have continue running my post office until the present day.

61. I can demonstrate that this is true, because, after resigning from my post office I took employment as a post office assistance and have continued working in that position ever since.
62. As a result, I have lost 11 years of remuneration that I would have received in my post office.

HUMAN IMPACT

63. I feel that I did not suffer as badly as many. However, I suffered serious problems with the Horizon system including shortfalls. I had to pay over £30,000 of my own money to the Post Office in order to meet the cost of the constant shortfalls.
64. I developed debilitating IBS due to the stress caused by the alleged shortfalls.
65. On Wednesday, the day I did the balance on the Horizon System, my stomach would hurt terribly as a result of worry and stress. I was always up late on a Wednesday night trying to make the system balance or dealing with the fall out of yet another shortfall.
66. The Horizon system had many faults, the worst being foreign exchange. I always expected a shortage after exchanging foreign currency to sterling. The whole system was never fit for purpose.
67. I took part in mediation in 2013. I received nothing from the mediation. I was also party to the group litigation against Post Office Ltd, and received a mere £7,500; as a result, I am excluded from the Historic Shortfall Scheme.
68. During the Group Litigation, I discovered that I had been right, and that the Horizon System was deeply flawed.
69. I was a sole trader and ran the business with 3 part time staff. I was the main bread winner in our family.

70. On many occasions, I was unable to take a wage from the business due to having to pay back Horizon shortages.
71. Over time this meant that I was forced to ask for monetary help from my retired father, which was very embarrassing. This of course added extra pressure to what already was a very stressful situation. We all as a family suffered as a result.
72. My elderly father lived with me. For the first few years after the Horizon system was introduced, he could see the stress I was experiencing because of the problems in the Horizon System. I did not want to ask him to help me. However, sometimes I was so desperate, that I had to ask my elderly father to help. I found this so embarrassing; I should have been helping him in his old age, not having to go to him cap in hand.
73. The unexplained shortages caused me to question my own competence. I was an active National Federation member and I told other Federation members at local and national meetings, and they would tell me that they were also experiencing problems; but we all seemed to blame ourselves.
74. I would spend hours on Wednesday evenings (balancing night) trying to find the mistake. I questioned my own sanity and self-worth.
75. I felt like I was stuck in a hopeless situation with no way out and no help. I dreaded balancing. My health suffered. I was referred to a gynaecologist due to extreme abdominal pain and after scans and tests this eventually proved to be IBS syndrome brought on by stress.
76. It was ridiculous that I questioned my own abilities, given that I had so much experience of running and working in post offices. But Horizon and the Post Office made me question my ability and belief in myself. This was very wearing and wore me down to the point where I felt I had no alternative other than to resign.

77. As I have said, I was suffering from stress and crippling IBS, which was so bad that I was referred to a consultant at Wigan Infirmary. I had to take medication to treat the chronic pain.
78. However, within months of stepping down as subpostmistress, the stress had gone, the symptoms had gone, the pain had gone; and I no longer had to take medication for chronic pain.
79. The cause of my illness was working as a subpostmistress and constantly facing and fearing shortfalls on the Horizon System.

CONCLUSION

80. I would like to know when the Post Office first knew that there was a problem with the Horizon System.
81. I was a claimant in the Group Litigation, so I am certain that there was a cover up by the Post Office and perhaps government also; because the Government owns the Post Office.
82. I would also like to know if Fujitsu knew that there was a problem with the system they created for Post Office.
83. Fujitsu ran the Helpline. I am certain that subpostmasters were ringing the Fujitsu Helpline every day, and particularly on balance night on Wednesdays, reporting problems. If this is right, then Fujitsu must have known that there was a problem with their system. If they did, I want to know what they did about this, and if they informed Post Office of it.
84. However, I am also sure that Post Office knew that their Horizon System was faulty. I want to know when they knew this and what they did about it.

85. I have lost a lot of money as a result of faults in the Horizon System, over £30,000. I also lost the chance to continue to run my own post office; which was something I loved to do.
86. However, I know that others lost a lot more than me. I know that many were made bankrupt, lost their businesses, employment and homes. Those people deserve justice and compensation.
87. The Post Office was supposed to be a trusted national organisation. In my view, it turned out to be a dishonest and dangerous organisation.
88. The Post Office now say that they have no money to pay compensation to subpostmasters who have lost everything. That is no answer.
89. I want to know what the Post Office did with all of the money they took from subpostmasters in shortfall payments. Also, the Post Office is owned by the Government. The Government should have supervised the Post Office, so the Government should compensate subpostmasters, if it is true that Post Office cannot.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this Statement to be true.

Signed..

GRO

.....Dated.

08/01/22

Carol Edmondson