

WITNESS: ALISON HALL

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0145_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 14, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF ALISON HALL

THIS STATEMENT IS PROVIDED IN RESPONSE TO THE RULE 9 REQUEST OF
THE PUBLIC INQUIRY DATED 29/10/2021 TO ADDRESS THE HUMAN IMPACT OF
THE FAILINGS OF THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM

I, MISS ALISON HALL Date of Birth of
 will say as follows:-

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I am currently 53 years of age and live with my partner . I have two children, a boy and a girl who are now both adults but at the time of these events were teenagers.
2. I began working for the Post Office as a Sub Postmaster at the Hightown branch on 16th February 2005. I had no previous Post Office experience. Prior to working for the Post Office I had worked at the local primary school for some twelve years employed as an assistant cook and also as a non-teaching assistant. I have also worked at the local Tesco supermarket for

approximately 5 years. Due to working at the school and local supermarket I knew almost everybody in the area.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

3. I commenced work at the Hightown Post Office branch as a sub post mistress on 16th February 2005. **GRO** and I had known that the Post Office was for sale and applied to purchase the business and the adjoining premises. After one interview we were told that our application had been successful and accordingly we sold our own home and took out a business loan to purchase the business and adjoining premises at a total cost of £265,000. The premises adjoining the shop was going to be our new home **GRO** **GRO**.
4. I initially received 5 days training in a centre in Leeds, which was focused on sales. I then received one week on site support, where I received a one-time instruction on how to do an end of week balance.
5. I can't remember the name of my area manager as I hardly ever saw him. He attended site approximately every six weeks for about three months. However, he only stayed on site for approximately 15 minutes each visit.
6. The post office branch was limited in size and sold only basic post office services. The business began to grow and consequently we took out a £15,000 loan with Natwest Bank to expand the premises and the services that we could offer.
7. The business was growing, and we made enquiries about installing a National Lottery Terminal. This was itself approved and led to a substantial growth in our business. The National Lottery terminal was installed in 2007. The sales

- of the scratch cards went very well, and we were contacted by National Lottery to take more cards for sale.
8. The business was doing so well that in April 2010 we applied for and were approved to take over a disused post office in Roberttown which was very close to where we live. Our plan was for my daughter to largely run the branch with me splitting my time between the two premises. Our plan was to model the new branch on the existing branch as it had a similar demographic.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

9. On 28th August 2010 I had a visit from a member of staff from the Post Office. The lady who attended was going to update the Horizon system.
10. I told her that I had received approximately thirty six transaction correction slips and that the system showed a shortfall of about £13,000. I was at that point relieved that I had someone who could potentially help me to rectify the system. Unfortunately, I was offered no assistance and told to close the Post Office immediately.
11. I was then subjected to a formal audit in September 2010 and suspended. The auditor said the discrepancies appeared to be from scratch card sales. I believe the date of my suspension was 3 September 2010. I received written confirmation of my suspension in October 2010.
12. I attended an interview at the Leeds post office headquarters with proof of sales and stock of scratch cards for the period in question, however, they were completely dismissed. I was interviewed by Sue Mudderman. The Investigators were Christopher Night and Paul Whitaker, they were not interested in my material and refused to look at it. I appealed my suspension and my appeal was

- heard by Andy Bayfield at Leeds post office headquarters. My employment was terminated following the meeting and following my appeal, I received confirmation of the termination of my employment by letter which was received on Christmas Eve 2010.
13. It was only apparent I was not the only Sub-postmaster suffering a similar ordeal, when following my suspension my partner GRO spent days and nights searching google. He suddenly came across the Justice for Sub-postmasters Alliance.
14. The legal advice I received during my interview with the Post Office investigation team (28th September 2010) was minimal. After I was told the interview would be held under caution, my solicitor was told he wasn't allowed to intervene throughout the interview.
15. I was summoned to appear at the Batley and Dewsbury Magistrates Court after being charged with theft. I believe I attended twice. I was then ordered to appear at the Leeds Crown Court. The legal advice I received during my appearance in the Crown Court was to accept the plea bargain. I was informed that if I pleaded guilty to a lesser charge, I would avoid prison. I felt pressured to accept this advice and was convicted. I pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of False Accounting to avoid a full trial, and the probability of a custodial sentence for theft.
16. I was subsequently ordered to perform 120 hours community service and was subject to a confiscation order where I had to repay the shortfall of £14,842.57 and costs in the sum of £1,000 within a period of 12 months.
17. I carried out my community service over 6 months in a charity shop.
18. My conviction was overturned on 23 April 2021.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

19. The human impact which the failings of the Horizon IT System have had and continue to have upon me and my family are set out in the remainder of this statement. The section headings follow the particular questions posed by the Inquiry.

WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING REQUIRED TO MAKE GOOD APPARENT SHORTFALLS SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

20. I was required to repay to the Post Office the sum of £14,842.57 together with the sum of £1,000 in respect of prosecution costs. I also had to fund my own legal costs in the sum of £2,650.00

21. The confiscation order included a term that I was ordered to repay the money to the Post Office within a period of 12 months. I took out a loan in the sum of £10,000 and used up money from the remaining business for the remainder.

22. I was planning to open up the post office in Roberttown. I had engaged the services of a builder for this work, but due to my conviction, the approval for me to open up the post office was withdrawn, and I was unable to pay the builder for the works that he had undertaken.

WHAT WERE THE COSTS OF MAKING GOOD ALLEGED SHORTFALLS SHOWN BY HORIZON?

23. I made one payment of £665 from my personal savings account.

24. In order to try and cover the shortfall from the audit, after my conviction, we took out a loan of £10,000 from Tesco bank and we also paid £5,000 on GRO credit card.

HOW WERE YOU AFFECTED WHEN ALLEGED TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SHORTFALLS OR DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

25. I was in tears when I was told that I was responsible for the arrears. I had never told GRO of the problems and was now faced with telling him and my immediate family.

26. I had wrongly believed that the Post Office staff had attended to help me sort out the problems. I was angry and frustrated that no one would listen to me. I was horrified by the accusations.

WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

27. I was convicted of False Accounting offences as a consequence of being held responsible and forced to repay money to the Post Office that I knew was not owing. This required me to take out a loan and use funds from my other business.

28. I lost my salary and income from the post office and lost the opportunity to open a second branch which I had already invested in.

WHAT WERE YOUR FINANCIAL LOSSES CAUSED BY ACTION TAKEN AGAINST YOU IN RELIANCE UPON HORIZON DATA?

29. Following the audit at my office and discovery of the shortfall, I was suspended immediately with no pay. I never received another penny.
30. Our daughter worked full time in our shop whilst I ran our Post Office. As a result of my termination, her hours were cut to part time.
31. I also incurred interest on the loan we took out and the credit card payments. The interest on the loan was £2,032.64. I have no total of the interest incurred through the credit cards, but it did take over 5 years to pay.
32. I was given a period of 12 months to pay back the shortfall of £14,842 plus £1,000 court or prosecution costs.
33. As detailed above, I also had to pay my own legal costs of £2,650.

WHAT EFFECT DID IT HAVE TO BE ACCUSED OF COMMITTING CRIMINAL OFFENCES AS A RESULT OF SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

34. When I was accused of committing criminal offences, I knew that they were wrong. I had evidence to prove that there was no shortfall and had receipts to show that I was innocent. I was frustrated and angry at every step as no one was prepared to look at the evidence which I had.
35. I was not able to sleep at night and was sleeping in a separate room to GRO as I was tossing and turning each night and did not wish to disturb him. He was still working for the NHS on a full time basis.
36. When the Post Office was closed, I could not avoid being questioned about the reasons behind it as we still ran our other business from the same premises. I was forced to make up stories as I did not want to tell people the truth of my situation.

37. I also had to explain why our other branch was not opening. The local newspaper had run a piece about the branch reopening, and we had to explain why it was not. I was ashamed of the accusations and had been proud to be considered as a pillar of the community.
38. I knew all of my regular customers and if an older customer did not come into the shop at their usual time, I would check up on them. I knew that if the accusations were made public all of my previous community work would be for nothing, and I would never be trusted again.

WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING CONVICTED OF A CRIMINAL OFFENCE AS A RESULT OF SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

39. Once I was convicted, I was required to perform 120 hours of community service. This was completed by working in a charity shop. I would tell customers who knew me that I was helping out a friend and that it was only for a short time.
40. I was also required to repay the shortfall and needed to take out a loan for this to be repaid. I felt as though the Post Office were quite vindictive in this regard as I received a letter after eleven months stating that I had no intention to repay the amount outstanding. This was not true and was based upon the Post Office observation that the premises were not up for sale. I had arranged for a loan and had every intention of complying with the court order.
41. My daughter suffered financially as she was going to be running the new branch. She was 20 years of age at the time and was going to be involved in

- expanding the business and providing her with her own opportunity to be involved.
42. I no longer felt as though I could be an active member of the community and withdrew from community activities.
43. I have suffered problems with my mental health because of this injustice. I have recently been assessed by a counsellor and have been recommended to have at least 15 sessions of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

WHAT EFFECT DID THESE ISSUES HAVE UPON YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES AND LOCAL COMMUNITY?

44. I employed family members and friends to work within the post office and my shop. As I was no longer able to work within the post office and I could not keep all of the team working the same hours, I was forced to reduce hours or let people go altogether.
45. This was very difficult as I had not told any of my wider family or friends about the charges that I had faced. I was forced to continue to lie to my friends and family as a result. Relationships became strained and this was extremely stressful as it changed who I was.
46. I had employed a family friend to undertake work at the new branch. I owed him a considerable amount of money for the work done on my behalf and could not afford to pay him. This undoubtedly strained our relationship but as he was a friend it went no further, and no action was taken to recover the money outstanding.
47. When we intended to open up the new branch, it would have had an effect of needing more staff. I was intending on splitting my time at both branch offices

and this would require staff at my old branch to be offered longer hours or to employ more staff. The same would have applied at the new branch once the business began to grow.

48. The community lost the opportunity to gain this employment and also lost the chance for the Post Office to reopen in a community where the shop had been closed for several years. That community only had one convenience store and the presence of the post office would have made a massive difference in the area.

PLEASE DESCRIBE THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECT WHICH THESE ISSUES HAD UPON THE MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY?

49. **GRO** and I had intended to be in a position to possibly partially retire at 55 years of age and fully retire at the age of 67. We both feel as though that option has now been taken away from us and that we will both now have to work until state retirement age.
50. I lost significant income as a result of the prosecution and termination of my employment. I had proved that I could expand the business and was ready to invest in another branch. I have never received any payment for the loss of the goodwill from the post office as a relief postmaster was simply put in my place. That situation continues to this day.
51. In opening the new branch, my daughter would have been given the opportunity of employment in the Roberttown Post Office and store to help me grow the business. The conviction and termination of my employment stopped that opportunity from becoming a reality.
52. My mother died without the knowledge that I was innocent.

53. My wider family employed within the post office would have been in a position to earn extra money due to the expansion of the business.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

54. I always felt as though I was an important member of our local community and enjoyed helping whenever possible. I have lived in the area for most of my life and lost more than 10 years of actively participating in that community life.

55. My mother died in September 2020 and she died without knowing that I was not a criminal and that I had done nothing wrong.

56. Nothing can undo what me and my family have been subjected to; I can only hope that this Inquiry makes findings and recommendations that are taken on board and organisations like the Post Office learn lessons that ensure that law abiding citizens such as me do not have to face such an injustice again.

Statement Of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed:

GRO
A Hall (Jan 14, 2022 11:37 GMT)

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Name: ALISON HALL

Date of signature: Jan 14, 2022

FILE REFERENCE:

GRO

