

WITNESS: GREGORY CHARLES HARDING

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0158\_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 13, 2022

**POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY**

**FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF GREGORY CHARLES HARDING**

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, MR GREGORY CHARLES HARDING, Date of Birth  of   
 will say as follows:-

**PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

1. I live with my wife  and my son  who is 22 years old. We have lived in this house for the last 17 or so years. I am currently employed as a Fabricator Pipe Welder, which I have been doing on and off since I was 16 years old.

**POST OFFICE HISTORY**

2. I had qualified as a driving instructor prior to my appointment with the Post Office. Due to high petrol prices and other reasons, it was however challenging to have a viable income from this job.
3. When the opportunity came along to buy the Hipperholme Post Office branch, I thought it would be a good idea. It was a continuation of my experience of working with people and selling products.
4. I believe we paid in the region of £72,000 for the business. We paid rent to a landlord for the premises which was approximately £320 to £350 per month. We lived in a separate location to the business and we continue to live in that location now. I ran a retail store alongside the Post Office, selling stationary, cuddly toys, jiffy bags and a wide range of different cards amongst other things.
5. I worked as the sub-postmaster at the branch between 2004 and 2009.

**CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION**

6. I was charged with theft and false accounting following my suspension from the Post Office.
7. I was offered a deal by the Post Office that they would drop the theft charge and reduce my chances of prison if I pleaded guilty to false accounting. On the advice of my legal team, I pleaded guilty, and I was given a 20-week prison sentence, which was suspended for 12 months. I was also sentenced to undertake 200 hours of community service.

## **THE HUMAN IMPACT**

8. 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?**

9. The shortfalls started off small at first, perhaps £5 here or there. and I was just topping it up with takings from the retail side. They then began to increase to £10 here and there, then increased further to £20, then £50, then £100 and £500. The retail side of the business took between £200 and £400 per week.
10. The total shortfall reached £1,000 and I phoned the helpline. I told them I couldn't balance the system as I had a shortfall. They told me not to worry, and that they would put it in the suspense account to allow me to balance the account
11. The following month, at the end of the trading period, the system was £2,000 down. I phoned the helpline again and they told me that I should have personally settled the shortfall. I was told to settle with cash and put the shortfall amount physically into the system. I asked them where I was supposed to get that kind of money from. I ended up having to put a cheque in out of my own account. I tried to keep the business going, but the shortfalls continued to rise dramatically.

12. I remember the Post Office set a limit for a deficit of about £300 before the audit process would be activated, I was therefore anticipating that I would be contacted.
13. We rode the storm and contributed as much as we could from our own money. We were quite lucky as my wife earned good money as a nurse. Eventually we re-mortgaged our house with the hope of making some improvements to our home. The vast majority of the money from the re-mortgage was used to cover the shortfalls.
14. I subsequently settled two further shortfalls of about £2,500 each.
15. In September 2009 we were audited. At the audit a shortfall was found in the region of £20,000. After adjustment the figure was found to be £20,209.36. I had to settle this further deficit from the proceeds of the sale of our Post Office prior to my conviction.

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

16. The money was paid back to the Post Office out of mine and my wife's wages. Initially, I put a cheque of £2,000.00 in to cover the shortfall. We then contributed as much as we could afford out of both of our salaries.
17. We re-mortgaged our home and used most of the money from this to cover the shortfalls.
18. Eventually, I sold the Post Office and had to take a deduction from the proceeds of the sale to cover the final shortfall amount. This figure was £20,209.36.

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

19. I couldn't believe it, I had to keep pinching myself, I told the auditors I hadn't taken any money. It was beyond belief. I couldn't even describe to anyone what it was really like.

20. I definitely suffered with stress as a result. I still get stressed now thinking about it all. I'm that used to stress I don't class it as an illness. I was waking up with a twisted knotted feeling in my stomach, it was just part of my life and became normal.

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

21. I was audited on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2009. I believe I was suspended immediately after the audit. I never stepped foot behind the counter again. I gave them the keys and that was the last time I touched them. I remember shortly before the audit my relief staff had told me the system was down £18,000. I was so shocked as I only thought it was showing it was down £6,000. The Horizon system had trebled the shortfall in 24 hours.

22. I was interviewed on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009. I was interviewed by a member of the Post Office. Two members of the Federation of Sub-Postmasters were present. They asked me the same questions over and over again, "what have you done with the money?", "Did you steal it?". They tried to grind me down and trip me up, which they couldn't because I was telling the truth. I had no idea where the money could have gone.

23. I believe following this interview my contract was terminated. The Post Office employed a temporary Sub-postmaster to run my branch. I had access to the retail store and kept it open to try and keep things ticking over.

24. The shop remained running for about 5 or 6 months. We sold the Post Office and retail business in order to pay the shortfall.

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

25. I suffered a loss of income as a result of my contract being terminated by the Post Office. Eventually, I had to sell the Post Office and retail business and had to use some of the proceeds of sale to cover the shortfall.

**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?**

26. After the interview I wasn't made aware that the Post Office would be prosecuting me. I was under the impression there were to be no legal proceedings, but then I received a court summons. This was on my wife,  Birthday on  I couldn't believe it.

27. There was an occasion after my suspension where my former Post Office was ram raided whilst a temporary Sub-postmaster managed it. Due to my suspension and conviction a few people thought it was me. It was not.

A few of the people who accused me of the ram raid shouted at me saying, "Haven't you stole enough" and "get out of here". It was horrible.

28. The attitude of the relief Sub-Postmaster made it obvious he believed I was a thief. He didn't say as much, but I felt that he thought he was helping me because he had to. Whilst the retail store was open the temporary Sub-postmaster would run both the Post Office and the retail store. I went in to stock up on cards but tried to get out as quickly as possible. In all honesty it helped me a great deal not having to be there.
29. I found myself constantly living with a bitter feeling, and a feeling of "what have I done wrong", feelings of anger and resentment, I really didn't know who I could trust. My mental health really suffered during this time.

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

30. As detailed above, I was convicted of false accounting, and I was sentenced to 20 weeks in prison suspended for 12 months as well as 200 hours community service.
31. As part of my community service, I worked for an RSPCA charity shop for 4 hours every Saturday morning. I steamed elderly people's clothes, put clothes on hangers, but I wasn't allowed to serve people because of my conviction.
32. Eventually I was trusted with a £5 note to go and get milk and tea bags from the pound shop. I bumped into a few people and spoke to them, but I never knew whether they were aware of my conviction.

33. After my conviction, I had a period of unemployment. I eventually managed to secure employment back doing welding work. I hadn't welded for years, and I felt like a fish out of water. I also had other financial constraints as I was still paying a business loan on a lower income.
34. Revisiting that time is still very difficult for me and I suffered from periods of depression.

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

35. My good reputation within the community was lost. Often whilst shopping at the supermarket I would be called names. On several occasions people would throw eggs at my car. The period surrounding my suspension and subsequent conviction was a very difficult time. I was embarrassed by my loss of good standing and had guilt for putting my family through this. I also tried my best to protect my 10-year-old son hoping that he didn't hear about it in the playground. We also have to deal with being ignored by people who I had considered to be friends, this still happens now over 10 years later.
36. I would at times overhear people in the local farm shop talking about it. Most of my son's football team knew, including the parents, but very few people approached me as they were true friends. [GRO] and I are very close, and we helped each other through the tough times.

37. For a time, after my conviction, I struggled to enjoy family occasions like Birthdays or Christmas. I didn't feel happy. I had this conviction that I had to learn to live with.
38. I play chess and my chess team didn't find out despite the fact that they are local to Bradford. That was one small relief to me.
39. Until recently, nobody in my extended family knew. My dad didn't know. We hadn't told anyone directly. I only recently told my sister and she said, "I'm glad to see its all sorted".

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

40. My son GRO was only very young at the time I was convicted, and we have only just told him about the conviction recently. We did our best to protect him. We thought he might have an inkling at times that something wasn't right between GRO and I when we were particularly stressed, but we didn't want him to know.
41. My wife GRO is emotionally very strong. We've had good times and bad times and we have worked through it. Whilst it may have affected GRO I think she was more concerned about my wellbeing and state of health.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

42. I will never forget what happened to me and my family. For many years the enjoyment of life was taken from me. It was a very difficult decision for me to consider starting the process of challenging my conviction. As much as possible I had tried to draw a line under it and move on with my

life. The whole ordeal has caused considerable anxiety and emotional distress. I had never really discussed it with anyone apart from my immediate family.

43. My conviction was overturned on 22 November 2021, I am so happy and relieved. I feel lucky compared to others, I had **GRO** and she was my rock and got me through it, without her I don't think I would have got through it. The conviction being overturned does not undo what I have been through which will remain with me.

**Statement Of Truth**

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

Signed:

**GRO**

Position Or

Office Held:

Print Full

Date of signature: Jan 13, 2022

Name: GREGORY CHARLES HARDING

FILE REFERENCE: **GRO**

