

Witness Name: Julie Beisner  
Statement No.: WITN0006\_01  
Exhibits: None  
Dated: 10 - 03 - 2022

## THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

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### FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF JULIE BEISNER

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I, JULIE BEISNER , 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.
2. I was born in 1966 in North Kilworth, where I still live and remained single until 2021 when I married after leaving the post office.

#### **BACKGROUND**

3. I was educated at Portland House School in Leicester. I left school having obtained 7 O-level’s, and began working in our family's village post office. During the evening I studied for my A-level’s, which I then gained in English, History and Law. I continued

to study Law in my spare time and obtaining an honours degree in Law from London University in 2002. I was subsequently awarded a position as a Law tutor for the Distance Learning Partnership.

4. The village post office had been in my family's possession since 1847 and it was expected that I would continue the tradition. My forebears had long been respected and important members of the community which I was happy to continue to serve.
5. When my uncle retired as subpostmaster in 1996, I agreed to take on the role rather than pursue a full-time career as a lawyer. At the time it was rewarding to be in a position at the centre of and serving the community.
6. This changed however as the Horizon system was introduced and the whole system became increasingly unreliable, often preventing a full service to be offered (so called Limited Services). This led to customer frustration and abusive behaviour as well as loss of income.

## **TRAINING**

7. Prior to the Horizon system being installed, I had 2 days training at a hotel in Leicester. The first day was on transactions such as selling stamps etc. The second day was on balancing. I remember after the first day, my head was spinning with all the information you had to carry after just two days training.
8. I had never used a computer before. Before Horizon it was all COM (counters operation manuals), Branch Focus publications and various other paper documents.
9. Following the classroom-based training, a Post Office Field Support Officer came in branch for 3 or 4 days to shadow us. This was a good idea in theory but relied on customers coming in to do specific transactions. If no one came in, for example to cash pensions, then you had no opportunity to carry out that transaction.

10. I was given huge ring binders to take away. They were crammed with information, most of it irrelevant and confusing.

### **HELPLINE**

11. Following on from the training, we were advised to call the Post Office Helpline if we experienced any problems with the Horizon system, which I began experiencing very soon after its installation.
12. The Helpline was useless and you got mixed messages depending upon who you spoke to. I asked one advisor if she had worked on the post office counter or was familiar with Horizon, the reply was no. How can a helpline whose staff do not understand Horizon and have never used it provide help on how to operate it or carry out transactions?
13. The advice was always the same: press buttons and see what happens. If that did not work, you were told to reboot the system (switch it off, wait a minute then switch it back on). It was that basic.

### **SHORTFALLS**

14. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon 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.
15. Shortfalls became frequent in approximately 2006 when the system started to become fully computerised, and all paper records were progressively withdrawn. The shortfalls continued until I left in 2021.

16. Fortunately, with my long experience in the post office, I continued to keep detailed paper records and was usually able to spot computer generated discrepancies and negative stock values. So before attempting a balance, I would challenge them with the National Business Support Centre helpline before they became a cash shortfall (an example of this occurred in May 2018 when Horizon said I had 123 songbird Presentation packs, yet my stock holding was in single figures).
17. The response from the Helpline varied, but was often slow and drawn out, being passed from pillar to post, but with my own records and tenacity I was eventually able to get the computer errors corrected.
18. Cash error notices were another matter and could not be successfully challenged, so one had to swallow the loss personally.
19. In 2007, the Horizon system showed a loss of £300. I challenged this, knowing it to be wrong, but was threatened with further action and saw no alternative but to pay.
20. Again in 2007, a further shortfall of £333.58 appeared on the Horizon system, which I contested and refused to pay. The Post Office took the money directly from my personal bank account without my authority. A criminal act on their part.
21. I received letters from the Post Office Ltd Debt Team Leader based in Chesterfield chasing the money. The letters wanted a response either in writing or by phone. I never got anywhere trying to dispute the amount or where the shortfall had come from. It was pay the money or the money will be taken from your bank account.
22. I have a document entitled 'People Focus Error notices not brought to account - new process' it reads "*as from 27 November 2003 the amount will be deducted from the Sub Postmaster's remuneration. All these changes have been made in consultation with The National Federation of Sub Postmasters.*" This letter is from Victoria Noble, Head of Processing. It is a pity no one thought to consult with individual Subpostmasters before this measure was implemented!

23. Another significant event occurred prior to my final audit in February 2021. My manager informed me that the Post Office had requested the return of surplus cash to CRU. My manager said I did not have to open the office and serve customers. I only had to unlock and open the door for CRU then lock it again. The Post Office had been closed since March 2020 due to COVID restrictions. The Horizon system was down so I had to ring the helplines. I had to reboot the system, do various Compliance Tests and the advisor instructed me to Rollover 4 times. I was concerned about the impact this would have on the system because of all the figures being generated. I said this to the advisor and was told "*Do not worry about those figures all we are doing is rolling over to get into the correct BP so you can return the surplus cash to CRU*".
24. I followed the instructions, returned the surplus cash as requested and did a correct balance. I locked the door, alarmed the premises, and thought nothing more about this until that final audit nightmare.

### **AUDIT AND SUSPENSION**

25. I was not suspended from my position as I always paid the shortfalls. I was led to believe that I had no option but to do so. I was led to believe I was contractually obligated. I finally decided to leave in 2021, close the office and sell the premises.
26. The final audit was carried out on the 17 February 2021, it turned out to be one of the worst experiences in my life. There were 3 people from the Post Office present at the audit, my regional manager, a lady called Denise and the auditor Gurmet. The auditors are not pleasant people to deal with. They are intimidating and the whole experience is extremely stressful. It was like standing in front of a steam roller knowing at any minute you could be swept under the wheel. Unless you have experienced a post office audit you cannot understand just how traumatic the whole experience is.

27. The auditor does not speak they just tot up the figures then they say "*can you explain this?*" The attitude from the start was that I was probably a thief and, sure enough the Horizon system generated a mass of negative figures making a shortfall of nearly £2,000.
28. I argued that this could not be right, as mentioned above, the office had been closed, locked and alarmed since 2020 due to COVID when a correct balance was recorded. The auditor, Gurmet, appeared unimpressed and I told him and my manager, that I was prepared to go to court and prove Horizon was faulty, and that they knew it, if the Post Office pursued me for liability of the alleged shortfall. The post office has not so far done so.

### **CRIMINAL/CIVIL PROCEEDINGS**

29. I was not charged with any offences. I was very fortunate to avoid any criminal convictions, but I still had to bear the aspersions.

### **LOSSES**

30. I estimate that I paid back Post Office Ltd approximately £3,000 during my time as subpostmistress.
31. Due to the losses created by the faulty Horizon system, I was forced to sell the business that had been in our family for generations.

### **HUMAN IMPACT**

32. Firstly, there was the personal financial loss of over £2-3,000 over the years. However, what was far worse was the state of constant fear of ever escalating financial loss and the possibility of criminal action being taken against me which I was unable to defend.

33. I was made to feel under a constant state of suspicion and mistrust from many customers when they started to hear of criminal proceedings against other subpostmasters.
34. When I confided in my mother that I was suffering regular financial losses at the post office, she assumed the Horizon computer was correct and that I was being careless. This became a regular cause of tension between us.
35. I remember feeling utter despair at being unable to prove my innocence when effectively accused of theft. My experiences as a subpostmistress working under Horizon for about 15 years since 2006 have been demoralising, humiliating, frightening and have destroyed some of my self-esteem.
36. I felt helpless against the failings of the whole system, the attitude of the post office and the constant worry of shortfalls, not of my making, undermined what was once a respected and enjoyable position.
37. In spite of the post office's claims that Horizon problems have been sorted, I know that in 2021 they were not and, I suspect if my experience is anything to go by, SPMs are still suffering under this system and will do until it is completely replaced, which I understand is not to be until 2024.
38. I have been offered a small compensation for my loss in August 2007 under the Historic Shortfall Scheme, but acceptance involves being tied by "Gagging Clauses" which I am not prepared to submit to as I feel I have valuable information to help others less fortunate than myself, and to see justice done against those who continued to operate a system they knew to be faulty.
39. Over the years, I kept detailed records with dates and names of Horizon's systems and equipment many and frequent failings. Engineers and others told me they knew it was faulty as they had to keep making botched repairs. They also told me, when rebooting the system, it is important to log off from the screen first before switching

off the base unit. According to the engineer if you do things in the wrong order that can cause issues.

40. Coming from a long line of family who were proud to be part of the Post Office, I now regret that I ever became a subpostmistress and that I did not leave this corrupt organisation years ago. I am now unemployed, and, perhaps too late to pursue a rewarding legal career.

### CONCLUSION

41. I hope that the information I and others can provide to the inquiry will help bring about a full, fair and reasonable recompense for all those who have suffered so badly because of this mismanagement.
42. I would like to see full accountability, together with a duty of candour for all those who have allowed this terrible injustice to proliferate for so long. I would also like to see a very swift end to the whole Horizon system. A complete reorganisation, overhaul and replacement of the Post Office and its management.

### Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed:

**GRO**

Dated: 10 - 03 - 2022