

Witness Name: Mrs Sharon Bennett
Statement No: WITN0242_01
Exhibits: None
Dated..12/1/2022.....

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MRS SHARON BENNETT

I, MRS SHARON BENNETT 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.

BACKGROUND

2. I am now 53 years of age and currently working as a Teaching Assistant. I live with my partner and 11-year-old daughter, **GRO**
3. I became a subpostmistress in February 2005 of the post office at 66 Whinney Lane, Streethouse, Pontefract. I had worked as an assistant at the branch since 2003. Along with the Post Office, I also purchased the convenience store which the post

office was in. I took over the lease for the shop and the post office from the previous subpostmistress, Margaret Evans.

4. We made the decision to take over the post office as a family. My husband and I had young children at the time. This was to be a safe, secure business move that would provide for our future and at the same time, serve the community. I fully intended to run the branch until my retirement.
5. I employed one assistant.
6. After 4 weeks of taking on the post office, I sustained a serious injury to my back which left me unable to work for over a month. When I returned there were shortfalls of over £3000, which I had to make good.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

7. Prior to taking on my own branch, I had been employed since 2003 as a branch assistant at a post office in Featherstone. I was therefore familiar with the basic running of a post office. Margaret Evans, the subpostmistress I was previously working under, provided me with some training on the job.
8. Because I had worked as a branch assistant, when I took over the running of the Pontefract branch in 2005, the Post Office assumed I had the pre-requisite skills needed to use the Horizon system.
9. I did not receive any formal classroom or on-site training. I was not provided with any further training when I took over the Pontefract post office.
10. I soon discovered that there was considerably more responsibility as a subpostmistress as opposed to an assistant. I did ask for further training but again it was assumed by the Post Office that it was not required, and none was offered.

HELPLINE

11. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline at least once a month with regard to problems relating to alleged shortfalls and or balancing.
12. When I first took over the Post Office branch, I contacted the helpline to ensure that I was doing things correctly; as I was not confident using Horizon and I had not received sufficient training from the Post Office. I made the Helpline aware from the very beginning that I was unsure how to operate the system.
13. When the first shortfall of £3000 occurred, I was away from work with a serious back injury. I was also inexperienced in using Horizon, and the Post Office were aware of this as I often told them. I believed I had carried out a transaction incorrectly and had pleaded with the helpline to send a trainer to branch to provide further training, so I was able to ascertain where I was going wrong and how I was able to rectify the issues.
14. I asked the Post Office to carry out an audit. I was hoping that they would discover how the shortfall had taken place, advise me why it had happened and so I could prevent it happening again.
15. I was informed that there was no one available to deliver any ad-hoc training and that the auditors were too busy to come and audit the branch and the only thing I could do to rectify the shortfall was to make it good.
16. In addition to contacting the Post Office helpline I contacted my previous subpostmistress, Margaret Evans, hoping that she could shed some light on why I was experiencing these shortfalls as I was clearly getting nowhere with the helpline.
17. I demonstrated to Margaret how I was carrying out the roll over and she agreed that I was doing everything correctly.

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 £5,000.
20. On the 23 June 2005 a shortfall of £300 appeared on the system. I contacted the Helpline and requested that someone visit the branch to deliver training and/or conduct an audit to ascertain the cause, but ultimately, I was told to pay the shortfall so that the accounts balanced. I put my own cash into the Horizon system to make good this shortfall.
21. A further shortfall of £100 appeared on the 6 July 2005. I again contacted the helpline and made them aware of this. Again, I asked for extra training or an audit but was told I was liable for the shortfall, so I again deposited cash back into the Horizon system.
22. In or around April/May 2005, the system showed a shortfall of £3,000. I repaid this in full via cheque to the Post Office, as I believed that I was contractually obliged to do so.
23. At this time, I was short of money because I was making up all these small shortfalls. I had to ask my assistant, Christine Smith if I could borrow the money from her. This was deeply embarrassing. I have only recently been able to repay her the money.
24. At the time that the shortfall was discovered, I was absent from the branch due to a serious injury. As soon as I was made aware of the shortfall, I contacted the helpline

and pleaded with them to send someone to the branch to tell me what I had done wrong.

25. The Post Office did send auditors in June or July 2005, probably as a result of the £3000 shortfall, which I had paid back. I passed this audit.
26. Over the next 10 months the shortfalls continued, and I just kept making them good, which caused arguments between myself and my husband. I was using wages from the shop side of the business to make good the shortfalls we struggled with money and bills at home and in the shop.
27. The following year in April or May 2006 a further shortfall of £900 appeared. I cannot recall whether I repaid the money to the Post Office as I have suffered considerable stress and anxiety since my position as a subpostmistress was terminated.
28. The shortfall was discovered at an audit, I contacted the helpline to try and explain the circumstances, but I was subsequently suspended and terminated.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

29. I was first audited in June or July 2005. The auditors attended the branch at 08.30am and no notice was given ahead of the audit. The auditors checked the daily transactions, the cash and stock, lottery cash and the Hamco machine. The result of audit was clear.
30. In early 2006 I came into work and there were 2 auditors waiting for me. When they had completed the audit, there was a shortfall of over £500, because of this they contacted my Post Office area manager, Vicky Harrison.
31. Ms Harrison arrived at the Post office and immediately took me upstairs to the flat above the Post office. She was very rude in her manner and verbally. She demanded

to know where the money had gone. I explained that I did not know and that this had been going for nearly 12 months and that I had been asking for help, and that I found the whole situation soul destroying.

32. It was obvious from Ms Harrison's questioning and her manner that she thought I had taken the money.
33. Ms Harrison suspended me there and then. I was asked if I wanted the post office closed whilst I was suspended, or if I wanted someone of the Post Office's choice to step in and run it for me. I was really worried about my elderly customers and agreed to someone running it in my absence.
34. I was absolutely devastated at being suspended. I was told I would not be allowed back into the post office not even to collect my belongings.
35. I was basically interrogated by Ms Harrison. She clearly believed I had stolen the money. She wanted to know all my financial affairs, how my husband and I were managing financially, as she assumed that we were struggling, and this was the reason for taking the money. I felt harassed and intimidated by her. She made me feel as though I was a criminal and to confess to stealing the money.
36. We were a month behind on the rent payments for the post office to Margaret Evans, but that was in the process of being rectified. Ms Harrison knew that I was behind on my rent and questioned me about this, the only way she could have known this was through Margaret.
37. I was not allowed to see any reports used in the audit. I believed that the only reason why the money was missing was because I had entered something wrong into the Horizon system. I knew I had not taken any money.

38. I was not given any audit reports to indicate a fair and thorough audit. I do not believe that the Post Office ever conducted any investigation into the Horizon System's reliability.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

39. I was suspended by Ms Harrison, my area manager. The suspension was formally confirmed in writing on the 17 February 2006.
40. I was given the choice by Vicky Harrison as to whether to keep the post office open. I chose to allow the post office to remain open as the village had many elderly residents and I did not want any member of the community not to have access to their money. A temporary subpostmaster was appointed after I told Ms Harrison of my decision.
41. Upon my suspension I was not allowed back into the branch, I was prevented from accessing any records or information held in the post office.
42. My contract was subsequently terminated by Post Office Ltd, but I cannot recall the specific date.
43. I was told that the reason for my termination was because of the shortfalls, and they had lost faith in my ability to run the branch. I was brought down so low mentally, that I did not have the strength to challenge the decision.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

44. The Post Office did not pursue civil or criminal proceedings against me in relation to recovery of the shortfalls.
45. I was sent letters by the Post Office demanding that I made the shortfalls good, or money would be deducted from my monthly salary. I was always under the

impression that I could be prosecuted if I did not make up the shortfalls, so I always made sure I did, even if it meant borrowing the money.

LOSSES

46. I believe that I paid in excess of £5,000 in shortfalls. I was led to believe that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls.
47. I lost the value of the business, the post office and the retail shop but I am unable to quantify this without expert valuation evidence.
48. I lost earnings, approximately £1,200 a month whilst on suspension up to the date of my termination.
49. If it were not for the events that occurred, my plan was to remain in the role and continue to run the branch for at least a further 27 years, until retirement and build a future for our children. I therefore lost my future earnings as a subpostmistress as well as the profits from my retail business.
50. The Post Office's actions left me in debt. I was unable to repay £1267.70 Council Tax. I was unable to repay VAT and or related surcharges to HMRC in excess of £4000. I was unable to repay utility bills to the sum of £1735.09. I was unable to repay £514.87 for goods and stock contained in the shop.
51. I was also unable to repay my mortgage and subsequent charges to the sum of £75,219.64, and our home was repossessed.
52. When we purchased the Post Office it was to make a better life for our family. We knew it would be hard work and we were willing to put the time and effort in. This was all taken away from us by no fault of our own.

53. My losses as a result of the Post Office action against me were huge, devasteing and continue to this day.
54. I could never put a price on the emotional cost. My family has never recovered, and we are still feeling the impact to this day.
55. I was not party to mediation in 2013, but was party to the Group Litigation against Post Office Ltd. The compensation I received was a mere fraction of my losses. As a result of my involvement in the Group Litigation, I am excluded from the Historic Shortfall Scheme.

HUMAN IMPACT

56. It is impossible to put into words exactly how devastating this has been for me and my family. What I can say below is only a brief description of the torment I have been through.
57. From the minute my area manager, Vicky Harrison, walked into my post office I was made to feel like a thief and that everyone in the village believed that too.
58. Before my employment was terminated, I would have to open and close the shop and it got to the point where I couldn't bear to go there any longer. This was then left to my husband, who found it very difficult as customers were asking him questions about me.
59. One day when I did go with my husband to close the shop, we walked in to find two men waiting for us, because we were struggling financially, we had fallen behind on the rent for the building. They were baliffs. That night the shop keys were taken from us and this is how we lost our business.
60. The bailiffs took the stock and everything that was in the shop. The value would have been thousands of pounds, expensive items such as alcohol. The bailiffs took

the lot. We had been brought so low emotionally; we were drained and did not have it in us to fight.

61. I became an absolute wreck, I was too scared to answer the phone, I did not go out and if I did, I couldn't go alone, I avoided people and friends and fell into depression.
62. I lost my dignity. I was forced to borrow money until I could borrow any more. I was then suspended by the Post Office for something I had not done. The consequences of this were stark.
63. I lost the post office, the business, valuable time with my family, my own sense of self-worth, my confidence and in 2009 whilst 4 months pregnant we lost our home where we had raised our boys. There was only had 7 years left on our mortgage.
64. This was due to the business loan we had taken out to purchase the post office and shop had a charge on our home. If it had not been for my mother-in-law, we would have been homeless on the street.
65. I had two young sons who needed their mum to be her usual fun, happy self, but I just could not pull myself out of the depression I was in. My children did not understand the impact, but they were deprived of their mum, family holidays, Christmas's.
66. After I was terminated by the Post Office from my position, I did not find employment for around 2 years. I was not well enough to work due to the trauma and stress of my experience with the Post Office.
67. I have been prescribed anti-depressants. I blocked out a lot of what happened and when I came to give this statement and had to remember the events that occurred, this has made me anxious and nervous. I feel like it is never ending. I just want closure on this.

68. I hold the Post Office and my regional manager, Vicky Harrison, entirely responsible for what has happened to me.
69. I was led to believe that I would face criminal charges if I did not pay back money missing from the Horizon system. I did not know what to do, I knew I hadn't taken the money but could not explain where it had gone.
70. I lost friends due to my not going out and refusing to answer the phone.
71. In 2017 after trying for 10 years to make it work my marriage of 27 years ended. It is absolutely heart breaking even now to think that because of situation that we were completely innocent in changed us over the years and it eventually broke us.
72. In July 2017 me and my then 7-year-old daughter moved from Yorkshire to Derbyshire to try and rebuild our lives. This has been detrimental to both of us, and my boys who are living in Yorkshire and Sunderland. My family has been split up.
73. I realised that I had to try to build myself back up. I began working for Argos in a part time position and by the time I left in June 2017, I earned between £500 and £600 per month. I also worked as a dinner lady for 4 hours per week, and earned around £120 per month. I also worked in a shop for 7 hours a week and earned approximately £243 per month.
74. I began taking night classes and qualified as a Teaching Assistant. I now work full time and do enjoy the role, although I believe that my earning potential would have been much higher had it not been for the situation I have found myself in due to the conduct of the Post Office.
75. It is just me and my daughter now. She is 11 years old and suffers terribly with anxiety. She is waiting for a referral to a specialist for assessment for possible ADHD, but there is an 18-month waiting list.

76. Of course, I cannot prove there is a direct link with the problems caused by the Post Office, but I believe that the stress I was experiencing when I was carrying her and when she was very young has had a negative impact on her.
77. My eldest son, who would have been around 15 at the time of the problems with the Post Office, has suffered with anger issues and has had to have therapy. He was very affected by us losing the family home and the trauma this created. He was frightened and confused. He still finds it difficult to talk about it.
78. We have been torn apart as a family and the pain even after 15 years is still very real.

CONCLUSION

79. The Post Office action against me devastated my life. I should have been running a successful business, providing well for my family, and enjoying life.
80. I have tried to give an indication of the consequences of the Post Office action against me in this statement, but it is impossible to give a full account of the nights and days when you can see no way ahead.
81. I was treated as a criminal. My business was destroyed, my finances were ruined. We lost our home and I had to stop working due to my illness being acerbated by the stress I was placed under.
82. The Horizon system has been shown to be deeply flawed and that the Post Office knew that it was.
83. I would like the full truth to come out. I want the world to know that I, and ordinary hard working, decent people like me, had their lives ruined by Post Office Ltd.

84. I would like it to be publicly shown that Post Office knew its computer system (Horizon) was completely flawed and unreliable, and that despite this Post Office pursued subpostmasters and ruined their lives for money that never existed.
85. I am entitled to be properly compensated for the losses I have suffered as a result of Post Office Ltd, and I would like this sooner, rather than later.
86. The Post Office and the Department of Business who own it, have known for years that Horizon was a broken system. I believe that they knew, or should have known, when they were destroying my life and the lives of others that their Horizon System was unreliable.
87. I would like compensation for not just the financial losses, but also to take account of the loss of the life I had and should have had.
88. I would like them publicly held to account and shamed in the way I and my family have been.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe content of this Statement to be true.

Signed

GRO

Dated

12.1.22