

Witness Name: Ms Dionne Andre
Statement No. WITN0299_01
Exhibits: None
Dated: 31 January 2022

IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS DIONNE ANDRE

I, MS DIONNE ANDRE 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. I can confirm that I have been informed that a false statement verified by a statement of truth constitutes contempt of Court if made without honest belief in its truth.

BACKGROUND

2. I became the subpostmistress of a post office branch in 2006 in South Shields, Tyne & Wear. The branch was so successful that I was offered a further branch in 2008.

3. Prior to this I had been self-employed from the age of 19. I was in a business with my then partner. I also sang part time in a band.
4. Together with my partner, we worked and saved up for many years. We believed that running a post office would be a very sound business move. We were in our 30's it was a stable, secure investment.
5. We ran the first branch as a retail business providing full general everyday goods. It is important to highlight what a vital part of the community the shop and the post office were. We were a hub, a lifeline to many.
6. After running this successfully, we were approached by the Post Office and asked if we would like to take on a second branch. This branch was approximately a 5-to-10-minute walk. We were thrilled. We were succeeding and this was part of our overall plan to build on our business and investment.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

7. I remember having 5 days training in the main office in South Shields, this was followed by a visit in my first office for one day by the trainer. I received no training when I took on the second branch or when the cashpoint was installed in the second office.

SHORTFALLS

8. 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.
9. When I became the subpostmistress at the second branch, the Post Office installed a cash machine. It was after the installation that I noticed shortfalls. The transactions just did not add up.

10. I would spend hours trying to work out how the shortfalls were occurring but could not make any sense of it. The more I looked at it, the more confused I became. It made me increasingly paranoid, and I became suspicious of my staff too.
11. I contacted the helpline, at the beginning probably at least every day when I had issues. I started to call less and less as it was always a pointless exercise.
12. The advice was never of any use. Most of my issues were with the cashpoint and every time I called the helpline, they told me I had to contact the Bank of Ireland helpline but when I did that, they would say it was a Post Office issue and I needed to speak to them. I just got passed backwards and forwards pretty much with very little actual help.
13. The shortfalls came between late 2008 and 2009 if I recall correctly, I do not have any of the documents relating to this anymore.
14. Looking through old emails I can see around £31,000 between September 2009 and January 2010 and £59,000 in around April 2010. The losses occurred before then for some of it, but I was trying to resolve them with the helpline before putting them into the suspense account.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

15. I was always led to believe that I was contractually liable to make good any of the shortfalls. Doing so resulted in the loss of both of my businesses.
16. We were audited on several occasions; I cannot recall the exact dates of the audits.
17. During the audits I would ask to see any documents relating to where the losses may be coming from. I was never shown any.

18. I was very meticulous in my accounting, and I would know how much I had in stock. I knew I could not be making such losses. I was not stupid.
19. We were told by auditors that in total there was a shortfall of £90,000. I just could not believe what I was hearing. I was confused and totally demoralised.
20. I was interviewed (don't recall exact date but it was within 4-6 weeks of being removed from the offices so around June 2010) by the fraud investigation team. I was told that repaying the money would end what may be a long-drawn-out investigation and less likely to lead to a prosecution.
21. For a further 6 months I did not hear back from them. I was left in limbo. I did not know whether I was going to be prosecuted or not. It was absolute agony not knowing what was going to happen to me.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

22. I was suspended on the day both offices were first audited. I was contacted by my contracts manager at the time Andrew Carpenter during this period, he "advised" me that I should resign as if I did not my contract would be terminated.
23. Andrew Carpenter also threatened that I would struggle to get a job in the future with a dismissal for theft and/or fraud on my employment record from an organisation as big as Post Office Ltd.
24. I resigned shortly afterwards. I still have an email dated 10/5/2010 that I sent to him informing him of my resignation.
25. I do also remember at the time that a few weeks later Andrew Carpenter called me again late in the day asking how I was and apologising for how things had gone. I

remember this as I found it very odd, and my parents believed he felt bad about how I had been treated and was trying to ease his guilt. Of course, I have no proof of this, but it always stuck in my mind.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

26. The Post Office did not pursue civil or criminal proceedings against me for recovery of the alleged shortfalls. However, I was told by the Post Office that if I did not repay the losses I would be prosecuted. I would be sent to prison. I was hounded by Post Office Ltd for 2 years.

LOSSES

27. I was told by Post Office Ltd that I had to pay the £90,000 shortfall. In order to repay the debt, we sold the first business at a loss. I had to borrow money from my family, this included my parents and my grandmother. My sister gave me her holiday money. I also maxed out all my credit cards.

28. The second branch was freehold, so I had to try and sell the building. This was a long drawn-out process and I again was treated terribly by Post Office Ltd.

29. I allowed the post office to keep trading from the premises but was not allowed access to any part of the building.

30. I had to pay a relief subpostmaster to run it from my own money whilst trying to sell the business as a going concern. I had paid for a shop/newsagent to be installed in the shop not long before losing the branch.

31. I have all the specific details somewhere but in summary I had possible buyers twice lined up for the post office, shop and building but Post Office Ltd made it very difficult for me to sell. They in fact told one buyer they needed to invest more than £60,000

- to refurbish the office if they bought it and so making it too expensive to buy so they withdrew.
32. Post Office Ltd told the second buyer that I did not have their permission to sell the business with a post office branch in it and that the buyer should deal with Post Office Ltd directly.
33. After a lot of back and forth with the Post Office in the end I evicted them from my building and closed them down. That then enabled me to sell the property as an empty building but again making a significant loss.
34. I sent out in summary details of the investments and losses: The Horsley Hill post office we bought the premises for £150,000 and sold it for £94,290 (after agent and Solicitors fees). Leaving a loss of £55,080.
35. The Cleadon Park branch was purchased for £210,000 and sold for £162,000. After payments were made for the agent and Solicitors fees and repayment back to the bank, we gained a total of £25,750 from the sale. We lost £184,250 from the investment.
36. In total, in having to sell both the branches we made a total loss of investment of £239,930.
37. I intended to run the post offices until retirement, to build on our investments and expand our businesses. Before the issues with Horizon the combined offices were making a very conservative profit of £30,000 per annum. I lost both offices in 2010 at the age of 36. My retirement was planned at the age of 65. I therefore lost 29 years of business had I kept the offices, totalling £870,000.
38. I was part of a mediation scheme in 2013. I got nothing out of this. The Post Office's attitude was that I did not have a leg to stand on.

HUMAN IMPACT

39. The stress of going from having a life that was good and successful to a position of losing everything was huge. My family (especially my elderly grandmother and ill aunt) lived through every moment of it with me. It also meant that they too were left in a poor financial position, as everyone around me used all they had, to help me pay the debt.
40. I feel from the time of these events, caused by Post Office Limited, that my whole persona has changed and will never return to what it was before these allegations.
41. At the time I was convinced I had not done anything wrong, but to have such a large powerful company (the Post Office) persistently tell me that I was to blame for the shortfalls and that I was the only one this was happening to made me doubt my own sanity.
42. To this day I still second guess myself and question my own judgement.
43. I also know that I now have an irrational response to stressful situations. In a lot of areas, in my working life and within my personal life, I no longer have the ability to deal with some situations, I again believe this is due to the false accusations regarding the Horizon Systems.
44. I go out of my way to avoid anything that may be a stressful situation. However, on the reverse I find I have become very detached and hardened towards a lot of situations within life (this has often been pointed out to me by my close family). The result of both varied reactions means I can often feel as if I don't know my own mind anymore.
45. As stated previously, at the time of the accusations by Post Office, I lost both of my successful businesses. This resulted in massive financial loss.

46. However, even though I did try to move on with my life after this event, I believe my life did not recover. I eventually ended up separating from my partner of 24 years, with whom I had been with since I was 19 years old.
47. I still maintain contact with my ex-partner who has equally struggled, maybe more so than I have. I try to help him as we have that shared experience, but it is very, very difficult.
48. I believe being held responsible for the shortfalls altered the whole path of a life that I had had planned from a very young age.
49. My (then) partner and I had worked and saved to buy and run our post offices and had planned to start a family after we had established ourselves.
50. Since that time in my life, I have tried numerous times to regain stability and direction in my life. I did move onto another business but that failed again due to stress between my ex-partner and myself, my inability to deal with some stressful situations and the re-emergence of the post office situation when the Group Litigation began a few years ago.
51. I was initially reluctant to get involved in this Inquiry, as digging up all these emotions is so painful; but my mother persuaded me.
52. We need justice. We need closure.
53. I ran the 2nd and 3rd biggest Post Offices in my hometown, which I had lived in since birth. I was well known in the area. One of the post offices was round the corner from my aunt's home. We knew the community and they knew us.
54. After the accusations and one of the offices eventually closing, I could not walk along the street without having something said to me or without feeling as if I was under threat or scrutiny.

55. I had occasions where people would shout and call me names, because of these accusations. The community felt as if I had been stealing from them. This obviously effected my family too, as they lived and worked in the same area.
56. I again will stress that in years to follow I have often doubted myself in situations. Being accused of something I didn't do, but still must bear the consequences of, and having very few people believe in you, alters your own perception of yourself.
57. I became closer than ever with my immediate family, as they did everything they could to help me at the time. However, my grandmother found the situation to be very upsetting and she would often need consoling from myself and my parents.
58. My aunt was very ill with GRO at the time also. She was a big part of my life and would contact me or I would visit her every day during the worst first few weeks of the accusations the Post Office made against me. She was a huge help, but I also feel that her last few months with me and the rest of the family were ruined by what was happening in my life.
59. As I have already stated, my long-term relationship with my then partner ended a few years after the accusations. I am 100% sure that we, as a couple, never recovered from that time in my life. I am still in touch with my ex-partner, and he is suffering from long term depression, and was also badly affected by that whole period in his life.
60. Who knows how different our lives together would have been if it were not for this scandal.
61. All but 3 of my staff members at my businesses broke contact with me after the offices were taken from me. They all believed I had taken the money and so wanted no association with me at all.

62. And again, as already described, I could not be a part of my local community for a long time during and after the accusations, as they all believed I had committed these alleged crimes, and that I was the reason for their local Post office closing.
63. My parents and grandmother gave me any money they had worked hard for and saved, to help pay the alleged debt to Post Office. So, this was an obvious negative financial effect.
64. The more (in my belief) damaging indirect effect is that my family had to live through the entire experience with me and for a long time neither they (nor I) knew if I was going to be prosecuted or end up in prison for an offence I did not commit.
65. To this day my mother has followed every bit of this case (sometimes in an obsessive manner) and even when I said many years ago that I wanted to move on and forget about it all, she has never been able to forget and let go of it.
66. I believe also that my ex-partner did not deal with the issues very well and that (coupled with the ongoing illness of his father and eventual death a few years later) meant that even though we both tried to move on, start a new business and start our lives afresh, he is now in a depressive state and will never go back to the person he was before all of this happened.
67. Again, as mentioned, my aunt was very ill at the time of the accusations and I know that although she tried to hide it from me, I know it affected her very badly.

CONCLUSION

68. I have gone through so much and have felt this all so deeply. This statement only slightly represents how deeply I have been affected.
69. My life was totally derailed. This statement only highlights some of the impacts that I and my family have experienced. The true impact cannot be put into words.

Statement of Truth

I believe

GRO

statement to be true.

Signed

Dated

31/1/22

Dionne Andre