

Witness Name: Mr Baljeet Singh Sandhu

Statement No.: WITN0313_01

Exhibits: None

Dated:10/2/22

IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR BALJEET SINGH SANDHU

I, MR BALJEET SINGH SANDHU 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 am married and I live with my wife and our two children in Sunderland. I am originally from India, and I moved here in 2008.

BACKGROUND

3. Before I became a subpostmaster, I owned a different shop, but I sold that in 2014 thinking that the Post Office would be a good investment.

4. I was attracted to becoming a subpostmaster as I thought that it would give my family security and I trusted Post Office Limited as an institution.
5. I was the subpostmaster of West Boldon Post Office from 6 October 2015, I bought the business for £63,000 with a £60,000 bank loan to finance this.
6. I also ran a successful newsagents out of the post office. I did not employ any assistants. I ran the business with my wife.
7. My wife left her job at a university in order to begin work at the post office. We thought that it was a trusted institution that would give us financial security.
8. I was suspended on 30 June 2016 and my contract was terminated 27 September 2016.

TRAINING

9. I received very little training on the Horizon system. My wife and I attended 2 days of training in a classroom environment before being appointed. After we opened the branch a trainer named Victor attending the post office for further on the job support.
10. I cannot recall what was specifically covered in the training, but I do not think that it adequately prepared us to run the branch and deal with problems.
11. I specifically remember that during the training in was reinforced to us that we would be liable for any shortfalls that may occur when balancing the Horizon system. We were told that if this happened, we would have to make good the shortfalls otherwise the branch could be shut down. I took this on board, and it made me anxious to pay back shortfalls.
12. I do not recall receiving any further training by the Post Office.

HELPLINE

13. Shortfalls began appearing very early on after taking over the branch and I would call the Helpline to make them aware and to ask for advise on how to resolve the issue.
14. However, I did not find the Helpline to be of any use to me. The advisors would merely repeat what the trainers had told us and that the shortfalls were our responsibility, and we would have to make up the differences.
15. I would call the Helpline several times a month and it was very frustrating because they could never offer me any practical advice or explain why the shortfalls were occurring. I was also made to believe that no other subpostmaster was facing the same problem with shortfalls.

SHORTFALLS

16. 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.
17. I would experience shortfalls almost every day of around £100. I would use the profit from the retail business to make good the shortfalls on the day. I did this in order to make sure the Horizon system balanced and so we could continue to trade the following day.
18. As already mentioned, I would contact the Helpline regarding the shortfalls. However, they never helped to resolve any, but would simply tell me I had to pay the money back. The staff on the Helpline made no effort to investigate any computer problems, nor gave me any explanation as to why the shortfalls were happening.

19. Because the helpline was no help, I would decide to repay the shortfalls. I thought I had no other option but to do so.
20. On 30 June 2016 the Horizon system reported a shortfall of £5,218.73 following an audit. However, given the significant amount and the fact that I was not offered any assistance in trying to solve these shortfalls, I refused to pay it. This led to my suspension.
21. I have received multiple demands for payment by the Post Office's solicitors DAC Beachcroft LLP, including a "Letter Before Action". However, I never made the repayment.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

22. The Post Office conducted an audit of my branch on 30 June 2016. The audit was conducted by Victor Honeybell who arrived in the morning with no prior warning.
23. Following the conclusion of the audit, Mr Honeybell informed me that there was a shortfall of £5,218.73. He would not listen to my explanation about the clear computer causing regular shortfalls.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

24. I tried to explain to him that I had been having problems with shortfalls at the branch and I had been informing Post Office Ltd via their Helpline on a regular basis. He would not listen. Mr David Southall, a senior Post Office official then telephoned me to tell me that I was suspended without pay, with immediate effect. Mr Honeybell took my keys and sealed the safe.
25. My appointment was terminated on 27 September 2016 by letter from Mr Keith Bridges.

26. In the letter it alleges that I had told Mr Southall, the Post Official who I spoke to following the audit, that I had put Post Office money into my own bank account to pay for bills and cover debts but had not kept a tally of how much was taken.
27. The letter further stated, "I have taken into account that at the informal meeting on 15 July 2016 you advised that you had undertaken your own banking deposits into your HSBC account at the branch but had not physically transferred the cash into the branch as part of the transaction".
28. To clarify this, as we were in the shop all day, we had very little chance to go to our own bank, from which all our business standing order and direct debits came out from. We would therefore put cash deposits into my personal HSBC account from the branch, the only one we could access from there. Then from my personal account I would transfer the money into our business account. This was never a huge amount, only a few hundred pounds. Admittedly it was my fault as I was not supposed to make personal deposits at my own branch, but I would only ever do this if I could not get to my bank. The Post Office wrongly accused me of failing to make the cash deposits.
29. As already stated, this relates to a very informal discussion I had with Post Office Ltd. The bank statements referred to in the letter were sent by me to the Post Office to assist it with its investigation and I did not think that it would be used against me.
30. Mr Bridges further wrote to me on 5 October 2016 to inform me that I had no right to appeal the decision but gave no reasons for this. Had I been given the option to appeal the decision I would have taken it.
31. I have never taken any money from the Post Office to pay any bills or to benefit myself personally in any way. On the day of the audit and in the informal meeting that followed I was under an enormous amount of stress.

32. On 7 October 2016 I emailed Jenny Smith of the Post Office to agree that I would repay the alleged shortfall in instalments. At this time, I was very stressed and owing to my previous experience having to repay the shortfalls as and when they arose, I felt as if I was left without an option but to offer this.
33. However, Ms Smith did not respond to my email until 19 January 2017 and began chasing me for repayment in February and March 2017 before finally threatening me with legal action in her email of 10 March 2017.
34. Despite offering to make good the alleged shortfall I have always denied responsibility for causing the shortfall which both I and my solicitors at the time, Freeths LLP, have outlined to the Post Office. I was therefore advised not to repay the shortfall.
35. There was no proper investigation undertaken by the Post Office. I tried clearly to explain everything to them from the beginning and outline all the problems we had regarding the Horizon system, but they would not listen.
36. During the informal meeting on 15 July 2016, I was only asked a couple of questions and it soon became clear at the meeting that the Post Office presumed that I was guilty of taking the money and they did not appear to take my concerns about the issues at the branch seriously.
37. I have become aware that the previous subpostmaster at the branch, Mr Head, had also experienced shortfalls when using the same equipment and had had similar problems to me. I do not think this factor was considered by the Post Office at any point when they reviewed the problems I had.

LOSSES

38. My wife and I tried to keep the shop running after I was dismissed as a subpostmaster but it was uneconomical. We lost all the footfall that the post office brought in, and we could not keep up with rent and debt payments and arrears built up.
39. When the debts got to about £100,000 my wife and I decided that we had to sell the post office. I bought the business for £63,000 but had to sell it for £25,000, which was a significant loss.
40. I had to apply for an Individual Voluntary Agreement because of all the debts that had built up. Overall, I was left with £120,000 debt because of the Post Office's actions.
41. I only recently was able to discharge the IVA on the 5 January 2022. Although I am relieved to have paid this, my credit rating will continue to be impacted for some time.
42. We intended to run the business until our retirement, so the loss of several years' salary is a huge amount.

HUMAN IMPACT

43. In addition to the financial impact mentioned above, the emotional effect the Post Office's actions have had on us have been immense.
44. As stated, we intended to stay running the business until we retired. The post office and retail store would have provided us with a stable, secure lifestyle, but for the actions of Post Office Ltd and their failure to deal with issues that arose from the Horizon system.
45. We have been unable to provide our son and daughter with a secure future. There is only uncertainty ahead.

46. My wife left a good job at a university to help run the branch. This has impacted her career prospects.
47. The local community knew about the unexpected closure of my branch and suspected that I stole money. I have been mortified by the effect that my ordeal has had on my reputation and that has affected my health and mental wellbeing.
48. The situation put an enormous amount of psychological pressure onto me and caused a great deal of stress. The process was very traumatic, and I still suffer from health problems arising from it.
49. A great stress was placed on my family and my relationship with my wife became strained as our debts increased. I have tremendous worry that I have been unable to give my children the opportunities that I wanted.
50. I did everything I could to alert the Post Office to the issues I was facing. I received no help from them. I would spend countless hours trying to work out why the shortfalls were occurring.
51. I began doubting myself and my abilities. I became paranoid and would question everything.
52. I do not think I will ever be the same person I was before these events.
53. Through no fault of my own I was treated like a thief and a criminal.

CONCLUSION

54. The Post Office's actions have ruined me financially, destroyed my reputation and destroyed my mental health and the wellbeing of my family.

- 55. The bright, happy future we planned as a family has been taken away.

- 56. Post Office Ltd must be held to account. I believe they knew there was a fault with the Horizon system but were happy to let lives be destroyed.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed: **GRO** Dated..... 10/2/22.....
Baljeet Singh Sandhu