

Witness Name: Ms Louise Dar

Statement No.: WITN0289_01

Exhibits: None

Dated: 4/2/2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS LOUISE DAR

I, MS LOUISE DAR 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.

BACKGROUND

2. I am from Lenzie, near Glasgow, my husband is originally from Pakistan, but he has lived in Glasgow for the past 15 years. We have been married for 14 years and have three young children together.
3. I have a background in hospitality and IT; I worked for Hilton hotels as an IT analyst for 4 years. I was then made redundant whilst I was on maternity leave.

4. Following my redundancy, my husband and I decided to open a shop together. My husband had been working in cash and carry prior to this but, his family own retail stores in Pakistan.
5. We were running the shop for about 2 and half years before we decided to take on the post office.
6. The previous post office owners were about six doors up from us and my husband knew the previous subpostmaster fairly well. They were looking to move on from the post office so we agreed to buy it from them.
7. We were well known amongst the locals so we thought we would secure the post office for the community because we did not want them to have to go without a local branch.
8. We also saw it as a good opportunity to bring more people into the shop which would us provide a secure future for our family.
9. We undertook the process of becoming subpostmaster and in November 2014 we had the local post office model installed into our retail business called Day Today Express Lenzie.
10. I was a Subpostmistress of the Post Office at 118 Kirkintilloch Road, Lenzie, Glasgow G66 4LQ from November 2014 to March 2017. I employed one assistant, from November 2014 to July 2015.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

11. I had three days of classroom training around September 2014. This was in the Springburn post office and I recall that the trainers name was Leslie. This was in a training centre above the post office.
12. The trainer covered basic transactions such as selling labels and postage. I noted that management and troubleshooting were not covered as part of the training and I highlighted this at the time with Leslie, and he told me that this would be covered by the onsite training.
13. I did ask for further training on the Horizon system and asked the trainer who came to do the onsite training. The female trainer said that we should have had more extensive classroom training (five days instead of three) but this more limited training was delivered because of cost cutbacks by the Post Office.
14. My husband went with me for the classroom training, and there was a test at the end of the three days. I passed but the trainer highlighted areas requiring attention for my husband, so he did not work in the post office until he felt confident.
15. I did not find the training to be adequate at all. I used to be an IT analyst for Hilton hotels and have a background in IT and I am very aware of how much training is necessary to prepare for using a complex IT system such as Horizon.
16. I thought the training needed to be much more robust, and given that it is such a complex system three days training is simply not enough. I asked the trainers what to do if we had problems balancing and the trainer, Leslie, simply said that I should check the figures and if in doubt phone the helpline.
17. In addition, someone from the Post Office called Margaret Guthrie helped to set up my branch for opening and provided on-site training. Ms Guthrie showed me how to count and sort cash, stock and stamps.

18. The onsite training was entirely inadequate. Ms Guthrie arrived at 8am the first morning and she experienced login issues and as such she was unable to log into the Horizon system until about 10am or 11am.
19. I did stress to Ms Guthrie that I was not comfortable opening the branch without any troubleshooting training. In particular, I said to Ms Guthrie that no guidance was given at all as to what to do if we did not balance. I was simply told if this happened I should call the Helpline.
20. Ms Guthrie was very dismissive of my concerns and told me that I would have to just *"get on with it"* should I have difficulties. She made many mistakes before we opened, such as remming (putting stock into the system) the stamps in wrongly.
21. I later learned that Ms Guthrie was also an auditor. I had a discrepancy of around £977 when I opened that morning and Ms Guthrie suggested that I had taken the money. This was a totally unjustified allegation, and also an impossibility. Furthermore, Ms Guthrie had been with me constantly, it was an astonishing allegation. There was also a power outage in the first week, which Ms Guthrie then suggested that the alleged loss was caused by.
22. I was outraged that a Post Office auditor would leap to the conclusion that I would steal money on the first day of training whilst in the company of a post office auditor.
23. In fact, it was Ms Guthrie who had remmed the first class and second class stamps into the Horizon system wrongly which caused the discrepancy. She did not apologise at any time for her untrue allegation.
24. Ms Guthrie was an auditor, and when she looked into the shortage she could not identify where she had gone wrong to enable her to rectify the issue. I was very

- concerned about this as she was an auditor and could not even find her own mistake.
25. Astonishingly Ms Guthrie told me I had to pay back this £977, despite me not being responsible for causing this loss. Ms Guthrie then left my branch with the alleged shortfall outstanding, and said that she had other appointments to make and put the £977 into a suspense account.
 26. I subsequently called Brian Trotter, my Contracts Manager and the Helpline to question a) why Ms Guthrie was allowed to leave my branch with this issue outstanding; and b) why Ms Guthrie was allowed to be an auditor given her obvious lack of ability.
 27. They said they were looking into whether it was related to the power outage and the matter would be escalated to Fujitsu because it was “their system”. I later heard back from the Helpline and they said it wasn’t to do with the power outage and I had to repay it. This occurred around one month after I had opened.
 28. Around March 2014 Post Office issued a transaction correction through for the £977. There was a phone number on this and I spoke to someone at Post Office, Chesterfield and she said some kind of mistake had been made and then said that I could take the amount back out of the safe to reimburse myself.
 29. I requested that someone be onsite with me for longer for further training but the Post Office refused my request.
 30. I set out the above incident to demonstrate not only the obvious and immediate flaws that were apparent to me in the Horizon system, but also the post offices attitude to such shortfalls. In this case, the shortfall of £977 had been caused by the incompetence of the post office trainer/ auditor, Ms Guthrie, despite this she first accused me of stealing the money, then when it became clear that the shortfall had been caused by her error she simply advised me that I was responsible for the

shortfall and left. To make matters worse when I raised this with my Post Office contracts manager there was no adequate response.

31. This incident of a shortfall that occurred on my first day of trading encapsulates the whole problem with the Horizon system and the Post Offices response to shortfalls, even shortfalls that were demonstrably not the responsibility of the Subpostmistress.

HELPLINE

32. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline 2-3 times per month with regard to problems relating to alleged shortfalls and/or balancing.
33. On one occasion I called regarding stock issues and was advised how to 'get around' Horizon. I was advised to correct the number of stamp books in the system, run my monthly balance and then change the figures back again. They told me that they '*shouldn't be doing this*' but that I should alter the stock figures to balance.
34. When I did this on the system, there was a message saying to only do this if I had permission from the Helpline. They then said I could go back in and change the figures back after balancing to show the alleged shortfall. This advice was not resolving anything, and was simply manipulating the system to delay resolving an issue, leaving the issue still outstanding.
35. I had to do this because Deborah Lambley from the Post Office stock team in Chesterfield had phoned me to try and resolve an issue with Christmas stamps. I had remmed them in as second class stamps because I did not know where the correct button was. I had later worked out how to fix it and put them through the system correctly.
36. This is another example where the Post Office caused a shortfall but I was held responsible for it.

37. Deborah then said there were other issues with the stamps dating back to when Ms Guthrie was in branch for my training and comprising the mistake she made. Ms Lambley's advice caused a further shortfall, so I had to call the Helpline.
38. The issue was not resolved until an auditor queried the stamp book discrepancy and Chesterfield confirmed the stamps in fact had not been sent and the correction was raised in error by Chesterfield.
39. In general, I did not find the Helpline to be helpful at all. I had previously worked on an IT helpline and my experience was that you helped the customer no matter what their issue until it was resolved.
40. In contrast, Post Office's Helpline was not at all helpful, and they would say that they could not "*see the system*" and simply told me to do a re-count and go through the balance again, which I had already done. I felt that they said this because they did not know what else to say.
41. I also found that my training was at odds with the Helpline advice. For example, the helpline told me not to rely on the "*variance*" button, which Ms Guthrie had told me I should do. If I asked about a specific transaction they would tell me that they did not log the transactions because it was such a busy system.
42. The Helpline made me think I was the only subpostmistress in the country having this issue. They would say things like '*oh, that is strange*' when I described the problem, and they acted surprised that this was occurring in my branch. There was no acceptance nor indication that issues with alleged shortfalls were arising in other branches.

SHORTFALLS

43. 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.
44. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid or Post Office deducted in excess of £44,000.
45. I often had shortfalls ranging from £20-£100 when doing the daily or weekly balance. I usually just put this money into the Post Office to balance and then rolled over. Given my experiences with the post office trainers, auditors and managers I felt I had no alternative other than to use my own money to cover these regularly occurring shortfalls.
46. We had to use money from the retail side of the business to cover the shortfalls which of course adversely affected the shop because we couldn't afford as much stock; and our ability to pay bills and staff was restricted. We had to delay paying our newspaper bill which of course puts you in a bad position with your suppliers, in the long run it made the shop go downhill.
47. On 15 July 2015, during an audit a shortfall arose amounting to £10,461.90 in relation to cash, currency, postage, cheques. I paid this amount back in full to the post office monthly, through my remuneration. I paid £877 per month for 1 ½ years.
48. This shortfall was discovered at an audit and I was not aware of this shortfall as I had been on holiday in Pakistan to visit my family because my father in law had passed away.
49. Just after we finished paying for this shortfall, another shortfall amounting to £2,489 was discovered during a separate audit. This was repaid in full through deductions

from my remuneration. I was reassured that the money would come back that's why we paid, we had hopes to keep the post office running and alive.

50. In January 2017 there was discrepancy of £6,250 discovered during an audit. I was not aware of this shortfall prior to the auditors discovering it. This alleged loss has not been repaid.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

51. I was first audited on 15 July 2015. My branch was attended by Margaret Guthrie. Ms Guthrie had called around one week prior to the audit to inform me she would be coming. This audit was conducted when I returned home from Pakistan.
52. Prior to leaving, I had fully trained my assistant on how to use the system and she had also worked in a Post Office for around 8 years.
53. Later during the audit, another auditor also named Margaret arrived. Neither auditor left until after around 8pm. I watched over her counting the cash and stock and stamps.
54. The discrepancy was initially around £2,000 then things kept being added on by the other Margaret. The final amount was £10,461.90.
55. Additionally, I never received any data or information relating to this audit so that I could independently assess their findings.
56. I was also audited on 17 May 2016. This was conducted by an auditor called John and he arrived early in the morning and left later that afternoon. I had been given no notice of this audit but I was present.

57. John telephoned Brian Trotter, my Contracts Manager and the alleged shortfall discovered of £2,684 was added to the suspense account and we were allowed to reopen the next day. This occurred just after I had finished repaying the previous alleged shortfall (£10,461.90). The auditor, John undertook his balancing form what he considered to be the last cash declaration. However, I advised him the last declaration was done at around 9am the previous morning and had not been done at the end of the day.
58. The auditor claimed this did not matter. However, I was fully aware that it did. Our Post Office was in an affluent area where the majority of our customers take out their daily maximum amount on Post Office cash account cards - which is £600 per day. This meant that there would have been a big difference if the auditor did not take into account the number of customers served for cash out or cash back since the last balance.
59. I was advised by John (who had been in touch with Brian Trotter) that I could not reopen the branch without first agreeing to repay the alleged shortfall. I only agreed because I felt I had no choice and we had already made big changes to our shop in order to accommodate the Post Office counter and my husband and I had two young children and needed to earn our living. We felt completely powerless. We knew from this instance and previous instances that the Post Office simply did not care why shortfalls arose, the Post Office were simply determined to have their money from us, no matter what; even if the PO were obviously and demonstrable wrong in their calculations.
60. During this audit, I asked why the system never balanced and explained that in my previous IT roles, if there was a discrepancy of even a few pounds, we would search until the reason was discovered and the error could be rectified. John laughed and said that if I was only a few pounds down then I *'should be laughing'*. I asked why it was the case that the system was expected to be imperfect and he said because Horizon is a very busy system and had a vast number of transactions. John explained

- that the system should sort itself out by the time I did the weekly balance, but it rarely did.
61. I had a third audit on 3 February 2017. I think the auditor was called Brian. During his audit another Post Office employee called Caroline arrived to verify his findings. The two auditors left late afternoon. I arrived after the auditors had begun their audit because I was doing the school run.
 62. Before I had even got through the door of the post Office, the auditors were telling me that I had alleged losses. I could not believe that this was happening again, as such I told the auditors that I had had enough and was considering closing my post office. Caroline said that it would "*all get sorted out*". I told her that the situation was ridiculous and she said many people had said this. Caroline recounted the stamps, stock and cash several times.
 63. Neither Caroline nor Brian seemed too surprised or phased by the alleged shortages. Caroline, was a lovely lady and lives in my locality. Caroline told me not to worry about this and that it would get sorted out.
 64. Caroline later came back around one month later to remove the cash and stock from the branch. When she did so, she found further discrepancies. By this point I had been locked out of the system, as such I had no access to the post office at all. As such it was impossible for me to have been responsible for any further discrepancy or loss. I did not understand how there could have been more alleged losses accruing when I had not traded nor carried out any transactions at all.
 65. Despite this Caroline asked me if I was willing to pay this there and then. The final alleged shortfall was £6,870.85. This had been a £200 increase from the amount stated during the audit.
 66. At no time was I provided with the data necessary for me to independently check the auditor's findings. I was certain that their calculations were incorrect and that there

- were flaws in the Horizon system but I was denied any opportunity to check their figures or the system.
67. By way of example, after the first audit (in which the £10,461.90 shortfall was identified), my post office was closed for 6 weeks. After we were reopened, we were shown no records or evidence of an investigation having been carried out. Instead, I was presented with a list of what the Post Office claimed was missing. I had no independent way of checking if this was accurate or not.
68. Eventually the Post Office sent me a letter and an auditor named James came out to reopen my branch. James found another discrepancy when reopening my branch. This was despite me not having access to my post office or Horizon for the 6 weeks. As such, either the audit findings had been incorrect or there were still flaws in the Horizon system creating shortfalls. There could be no other explanation because I had no access to the post office or the Horizon system following the audit and prior to the reopening of my post office. I had not been trading for the previous six weeks, and yet I still had to pay back the alleged loss of £35.
69. There was no evidence of any investigation following the second audit. Following the third audit, I was suspended and my Post Office was closed for several weeks before my contract was terminated.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

70. I was suspended for 6 weeks from 15 July 2015 after the first audit took place. The Post Office did not appoint a temporary subpostmaster and my branch remained closed for the whole 6 weeks. I was locked out of the Horizon system, the branch safe and the tills so that the post office could conduct an investigation into the shortfalls.
71. The Post Office's investigation was inconclusive as to the cause of the shortfall of £10,401.61. Despite this I was still compelled by the Post Office to pay this shortfall.

- The only alternative was to lose my post office and therefore my livelihood. I was completely powerless in the situation. I had asked to see a breakdown of what had been put through the system but the post office refused to show me or answer my questions. As such I had no opportunity to independently check the figures I simply had to pay what the post office was demanding under threat of losing my post office and livelihood.
72. Following the third audit which took place on 3 February 2017 I was suspended in relation the alleged shortfall the auditors found. Again, I was locked out of the Horizon system, the branch safe and the tills and my contract was eventually terminated on 27 March 2017.
73. Between my suspension and termination the Post Office forced me to attend a formal interview. At the time my mother had just passed away, it was a sudden death and the interview the Post Office forced me to attend was the day before her funeral. The Post Office knew my mother had just died and was about to be buried and I was an emotional wreck at this time.
74. During this interview I was accused of stealing the money from the post office and questioned as to what I had done with the money. At the end of the meeting the Post Office informed me that they would be in touch with their final decision but I never heard back from them.
75. I had to chase the Post Office repeatedly to find out what was happening with the investigation. The Post Office did not respond to any of my calls but I eventually managed to get hold of the post office staff using my sister's number. I was informed that my contract was being terminated and I later received a letter from the Post Office to this effect.
76. We were unable to sell the post office so it just remained closed. We tried to continue running the shop and struggled on for about a year but the footfall had

massively decreased due to the closure of the post office and the shop started going downhill.

77. There is no question that I was treated completely unfairly by the Post Office. There had been shortfalls from the very first day I opened the post office, caused by and witnessed by a post office auditor, Margaret Guthrie. Other shortfalls were either not properly investigated, or not investigated at all; or such as in the case of the second audit were again a result of a complete failure of understanding basic transaction dates by the post office auditor.
78. The situation I found myself in was one where the Post Office had all of the power, and I had none. It was a completely unequal and unfair relationship, and the Post Office knew it and used that power against me.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

79. In the end the Post Office did not pursue civil or criminal proceedings against me for recovery of the alleged shortfalls. However, given the formal interview I was subjected to at the time of my mother's death I did fear being prosecuted. Also I believe I was not prosecuted because I simply paid the huge sums of money the Post Office unreasonably demanded off me.

LOSSES

80. I lost the value of the business. The Post Office was relocated to our shop following the advice of the Post Office. When we initially took on the post office we wished to keep it as a standalone Post Office, but we were advised against this.
81. I also lost my investment, I paid approximately £9000 for renovating and fitting out the branch as a condition of my appointment.

82. I also lost my income as a subpostmistress which I expected to enjoy up until my retirement.
83. I also lost the profits from the retail side of my business which had to close as a result of the loss of my Subpostmistress ship.
84. We also still owe large sums of money to the HMRC for unpaid VAT which we were not able to pay due to the Post office action against us.

HUMAN IMPACT

85. I suffered serious problems with the Horizon system including alleged shortfalls. Over a four year period, I estimate I had to use £44,000 of my own savings in order to pay the Post Office who demanded repayment after three separate surprise audits. I was suspended as I was unable to make a payment of an alleged shortfall in 2017.
86. I was party to the group litigation against Post Office Ltd, as a result I am excluded from the Historic Shortfall Scheme.
87. I was treated like a criminal by the post office and when I sought help the Post Office audit team were extremely callous and made no attempt to find the root cause of the alleged shortfalls. Specifically, Brian Trotter, my contracts manager, was particularly keen to get me to admit to falsifying the books. He asked me to admit to this several times.
88. The shortfalls resulted in our shop being affected financially. We could not afford to pay the day to day bills including cash and carry bills. The cash and carry took out an inhibition under my parent's names even though my dad paid the cash and carry off. This caused extreme anxiety for my family because my parents were trying to release equity from their home due to financial issues.

89. The Post Office Ltd was deducting £866 a month from our remuneration for one of the alleged shortfalls. This placed a huge amount of pressure on paying VAT, tax, rent and other bills as well trying to raise a young family.
90. This caused me a lot of anxiety and worry at the time and at this same time my mother died suddenly in March 2017.
91. We had put our life savings into this business. My mother-in-law even sold jewellery to support us and having to watch it be stripped from under us was horrendous.
92. The shop suffered so much that we eventually had to close. We are still thousands of pounds in debt to HMRC.
93. It caused a huge strain on me and my husband's relationship because we were both under so much stress.
94. I was eventually not charged with any criminal offences. However, the fear of such charges and the accusations of falsifying the figures were devastating.
95. Beyond the financial ruin, the reputational damage this caused me and my family was very distressing and still lingers to this day.
96. The rumours that were spread about my family and I were awful. Our landlady at the time tried to claim we didn't deserve our deposit back and we ended up having to take her to the tribunal. Our landlady stated in court document that I had been accused of theft, using this as ammunition against me to stop us from receiving our deposit back. The rumours about my family meant that people felt able to make such statements about me.
97. Within about 6 weeks of the post office being closed down my husband was racially abused and threatened by a customer who wanted stamps. The Post Office had shut our branch but had not updated the website so people were still coming into the shop expecting to be able to use the post office.

98. This customer was a University professor. We reported his attack on my husband and he was taken to court and found guilty of three counts of racial abuse and threatening behaviour. This assault on my husband was a direct result of the Post Office's actions against us.
99. This experience made me become very nervous and anxious. I lost a lot of self-confidence.
100. I found being in such a small village where everyone knows everything to be very damaging. A lot of people did not want to support us, even a member of the public who witnessed the racial abuse against my husband refused to come forward.
101. People in the local community were making their own minds up about us whether they knew the facts or not. I still have people questioning me to this day '*Why the shop actually shut?*'
102. Although he would never admit it, my husband's mental health certainly suffered. As an Asian man he does not like to speak about the affect the post office action had on him but I could see how depressed and anxious he became.
103. I found my own way to cope through running. I needed to run in order to try to clear my head of the constant worries I had. But all the time I could see the toll it was taking on my husband.
104. We both had find alternative employment, which was a bitter pill for my husband to swallow. To have to go and find a job after being self-employed for so many years feels like a huge step back in life.
105. We had put our life savings, blood, sweat and tears into our shop and post office all for it to be taken away from us.
106. We have been left with nothing but debt, and we are still struggling with the debt over 3 years later.

107. Our family were very supportive and helped us out as much as they could.
108. I lost my mother during this period. In her last few weeks of life she spoke to me and asked me to try and sort out all of the issues. This put enormous emotional pressure on me. My mother suffered from anxiety amongst other things and the circumstances the post office put my family and me in contributed towards her increased stress levels.
109. My dad made every attempt to support us throughout, but as a retired elderly man it put a lot of financial pressure on him and my mother. I still pay my dad back weekly as and when I can afford to.
110. My husband managed to get a job at cash and carry and I got a job at teleperformance. It was an awful job but I needed the money to pay the bills.
111. We were ruined financially and it is only now that we are starting to get back on our feet.
112. I am still paying £50 a month to HMRC and these payments will continue until 2023. My husband and I also still owe £6000 each in tax for PAYEE, I am still paying off debts that I cannot afford, not to mention the credit card debt I have because of the Post Offices actions.

CONCLUSION

113. We expected to be growing old in our shop with our children going to the local schools. Instead we were left high and dry renting from an awful landlady who tried to use our circumstances against us.
114. My husband and I both had to seek alternative employment, he now works in a shop near Edinburgh and I work for GRO as an assistant registrar in customer services.

115. We have worked extremely hard in recent years to try to get back on our feet. We have recently managed to secure a mortgage to buy a home for us and our children.
116. I am raising three young children and still having to pay off debts that we incurred because of the actions of the Post Office and it is not fair that we have been left in this position.
117. I am absolutely disgusted by the actions of the Post Office. The Post Office were aware of the faults in the Horizon system. However, even though the Post Office knew what was going on, they covered it up and used auditors to reassure me that the money (shortfalls) would come back in transaction corrections.
118. I and my family had to take the fall for the Post Office's wrong doings.
119. I would like this inquiry to get more media coverage in order to expose this scandal. The group litigation was heavily overshadowed by the general election and I feel this scandal did not get the attention it deserved.
120. I hope this inquiry gets more media coverage so everyone becomes aware that we did not steal any money. I also want it to become known how much it affected our life and every other subpostmasters life too.
121. I want it to be known that it was not our choice to close the post office, we were forced out of business by the Post office. We didn't ask for any of this to happen, it was done to us.
122. Compensation would also be a great outcome from this inquiry but I just want to be brought to zero again, I do not want any debts hanging over my head.

123. We now have a new born baby. This should be an extremely exciting time for my family and I but we are struggling to visit **GRO** with him to meet the rest of the family which is just heart breaking, because this is such an important thing in our culture. The poverty the Post Office plunged us into continues to affect us years later.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe that the facts stated in this Witness Statement are true.

Signed.....**GRO**..... Dated:..... 4/2/22.....

Louise Dar