
Witness Name: Mr Brent Whybro

Statement No.: WITN0274_01

Dated 21/01/2022 Exhibits: None

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR BRENT WHYBRO

I, MR BRENT WHYBRO 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 now 63 years old, I was married to Fiona Whybro for 36 years. We met while we were working as counter staff at a post office in Preston, where we both worked. Fiona passed away in November 2020.
3. Fiona started in banking and then moved to work in post offices for her whole life, apart from short breaks to have children. In fact, Fiona received a long service award from the post office for 20 years' service.

4. I had number of different jobs, before starting work with the Post Office in my early 20s. I worked in a Crown Post Office in Preston for some years, where I met Fiona, and gained a good deal of experience.
5. My father was a subpostmaster for some forty years. This background, alongside my experience, led me to decide to become subpostmaster myself.
6. Fiona and I lived very frugally, so that we could save the money needed to buy a post office, we also borrowed from our parents and took a loan.
7. I became a subpostmaster in Preston in 1987. Fiona and I ran this post office together. We used the old paper ledger system at that time, which was time consuming, but was reliable.
8. We decided to take a break from the Post Office in the early 1990s. I went into the civil service, in HM Customs and Excise, and later the IT section of the Department of Work and Pensions. I undertook a good deal of IT training in order to support the IT systems of the DWP. I did this work for 9 years, and then became IT contractor supporting the IT systems of a range of companies.
9. Once our children were toddlers, my wife wished to return to work with the post office. We decided that we would take over another post office and that Fiona would become the subpostmistress.
10. We found Bamber Bridge post office in Preston, which we purchased in August 1999.
11. My wife, Fiona Whybro was the Subpostmistress of Bamber Bridge Post Office, 230 Station Road, Bamber Bridge, Preston PR5 6SD from around July/August 1999 to 2 January 2016.
12. This was a large and busy post office. We also operated a retail business from the premises selling cards and stationery and operated a travel agency. We employed two assistants and one self-employed assistant.

13. I assisted with the running of the post office as time permitted, as I had a great deal of experience in working in the post office.
14. However, I did not do any work on the Horizon System, as I had been trained in the previous paper ledger system.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

15. Horizon had not been implemented in our post office at the time we took it over. As such, we continued to use the old paper ledger system. As I say, the ledger system was time consuming, but it was reliable. As such, if ever there was a discrepancy, this could be identified by working back through the ledger.
16. The Horizon System was implemented in our post office in the very early 2000s.
17. My wife received very basic training from the Post Office on how to operate the Horizon System. The training merely involved basic transactions.
18. Fiona did not think that the Horizon System was a good system, and thought that it was not a forward step from the previous ledger system.
19. Fiona found the system unreliable and asked for the Post Office to send someone to the branch to 'trouble shoot' the problems she was having.
20. As someone with a strong understanding and experience of the implementation of IT systems, it was clear to me that the system had not been rolled out well.

HELPLINE

21. My wife contacted the Helpline approximately once a month. However, on no occasion was the helpline able to offer any relevant advice, even if we were able to get through, which was very difficult.

22. Sometimes Fiona called in relation to transaction type queries, or when system had gone down.
23. I particularly recall one occasion when Fiona told me that she had a shortfall of £600 on the Horizon System on a balancing day (Wednesday). She called the Helpline, who told Fiona that no one else was having the problems she was having with the System. Fiona was told to make good the shortfall.
24. However, Fiona spoke with another subpostmaster in a nearby post office, and he told Fiona that he had also had an identical shortfall at the same time that Fiona experienced the shortfall on the same balancing Wednesday.
25. The system was so unreliable that on two occasions our terminal was replaced, as on each occasion the System would not balance despite everything that we did.

SHORTFALLS

26. 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.
27. I would estimate that throughout my wife's position in the branch (17 years) we paid (or Post Office deducted) approximately £30,000 in total, in regard of shortfall discrepancies on the Horizon System.
28. The shortfalls were a regular occurrence throughout the time we operated the post office.
29. Initially I was not aware of the extent of the shortfalls were occurring and that my wife, Fiona, was paying such substantial monies into the system to make up for supposed shortfalls.

30. Because we had been told that the Horizon System was sound, and we trusted the Post Office, Fiona thought the shortfalls must have been being caused by failures or errors on her part.
31. As such, Fiona chose to hide the extent of the difficulties she was having with the Horizon System from me. This put a great strain on our marriage, as she was spending more and more time in the evening at the post office and not at home. This was particularly the case on Wednesdays, which was the balancing day.
32. The problems became so severe that Fiona was balancing the system/accounts every night, rather than weekly. This meant that she was staying at the post office until 9pm. On the Wednesday 'balance night', she would stay at the post office till after 10pm. She would return exhausted and looked worried and harassed.
33. However, when the shortfalls on the Horizon System became more extreme, Fiona told her me about the shortfalls. Fiona told me that no matter what she did and how many hours she scanned the accounts, shortfalls would occur.
34. Previously, I had some understanding that the shortfalls were occurring, but not how serious they were.
35. Fiona came to me and asked me if I could put £2,000 – £3,000 into our personal current account so that she could pay shortfalls that had arisen.
36. I was shocked, as Fiona received a good level of remuneration from the Post Office. Initially her remuneration was £60,000 per annum, and it rose because of her hard work to £80,000. As such, it was a great surprise to me that Fiona could not meet the shortfalls from her remuneration and the profits of the shop.
37. As I say, I knew that there were problems, but not the full extent of it. We discussed it. Fiona was very upset and worried. She doubted her abilities.
38. Fiona also told me that the Post Office threatened to suspend her and she feared that the Post Office might take legal action against her.

39. This was a very difficult period, as I was often working away from home as an IT contractor.
40. The shortfalls continued, and all I could do was to provide more and more money to help Fiona pay the shortfalls.
41. Fiona was a strong person, and not someone who was given to complaining or sharing her worries. As such, she kept many of her worries to herself.
42. Although the shortfalls were continuous and significant, we were fortunate enough to have enough money to pay the shortfalls.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

43. I recall there being just a few audits during my wife's 17-year period as the subpostmistress.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

44. Fiona was threatened with suspension by the Post Office, and that the Post Office would terminate her contract, and that she feared legal action. However, as we had paid the supposed shortfalls, the Post Office did not pursue criminal or civil action against us.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

45. My wife was not suspended by the Post Office. However, because of the constant shortfalls it was impossible to continue running the post office.

46. We therefore took the decision to apply to the Post Office's Network Transformation scheme, in which the Post Office were seeking subpostmasters who would agree to close their post offices and in return, the Post Office would provide some payment.
47. We accepted a payment of approximately £180,000 from the Post Office under the National Transformation Scheme in February 2016; albeit we had to pay over £50,000 in tax on this sum.
48. We paid £215,000 for the post office in 1999, and had made substantial improvements to the post office, costing well over £10,000.
49. The payment we received under the Network Transformation Scheme came nowhere near the value of the investment we had made, the shortfalls we had paid to the Post Office, the loss of remuneration then and into the future. Fiona's remuneration was around £80,000 per annum. Fiona could have continued running our post office for another 9 – 10 years, which would have meant that she would have earned up to £800,000 in the following years, as well as the profits of our retail business.

HUMAN IMPACT

50. My late wife, Fiona Whybro, died in November 2020. Fiona was a subpostmistress for 17 years, and she put her heart and soul into running the post office for the benefit of the community.
51. Fiona loved her job and serving local people. Fiona and I came from a long background in the Post Office. My father was a subpostmaster for over 40 years. I was a subpostmaster. Fiona and I met and married when we were working in the Crown Office in Preston almost 40 years ago. Fiona received a long service award from the Post Office after 25 years' service. She was a subpostmistress herself for 17 years.

52. In all the years we worked in and for the Post Office before the introduction of the Horizon System, we had never had any difficulties with major or regular discrepancies. The job was hard, but not stressful.
53. However, following the introduction of the Horizon System Fiona struggled to cope with the shortfalls that were arising in the Horizon System. Initially she struggled alone. She believed that the Horizon System was robust, as this is what she had been told by the Post Office. She therefore doubted herself and her own abilities. She hid her worries and the shortfalls from me, which I know caused her enormous worry and distress.
54. The problems with the Horizon System caused us to experience a serious loss of income and having to subsidise the business from savings when Fiona's remuneration would not cover the shortfalls.
55. We were in the fortunate position of having a secondary income from my work, which meant we never found ourselves struggling to meet day-to-day expenses due to making good the shortfalls. However, the sums involved were large and continuous and caused us difficulty and constant worry.
56. As I have said, initially, I did not realise how serious matters were, and therefore did not fully appreciate the stress and anxiety Fiona was suffering. She would regularly be home late on balancing day having tried to identify the shortfalls.
57. For periods when the shortfalls were occurring frequently, Fiona decided to balance the accounts every night, which in a large subpostoffice was an onerous task, which meant she arrived home late each night and unable to take part in normal family life.
58. Fiona lost all trust in the Post Office, and her enthusiasm for the job she had performed for over 25 years disappeared.
59. She struggled to go to work on occasions, and if it had not been her own business, I feel she would have found any excuse not to go.

60. Fiona was threatened by the Post Office, that if the shortfalls were not made good, the Post Office would suspend her and terminate the contract, as an ultimate sanction. This meant she live under threat for years, which wore her down.
61. Due to the impact of the Horizon issues Fiona was not the same person, and as a consequence our family life was greatly impacted. Her relationship with our children, especially our eldest daughter deteriorated, only recovering much later.
62. Fiona lost faith in her staff, as she believed their mistakes were the reason for all the shortfalls being incurred. This damaged relationships with people she had worked with for years.
63. Fiona lost so much time she could have spent with family and friends due to the increased time she had to spend in the post office seeking answers as to why the shortfalls were arising. This is time that can never be recovered.
64. Our relationship suffered, as Fiona became distant as she was taken up with the issues at the post office.
65. I believe Fiona suffered ill health as a consequence of the constant shortfalls, coping with them and living under the fear of suspension and termination. She noticeably smoked more and drank more during this time, and she struggled to reduce this in later years. I am certain that this change in her behaviour was caused by the constant worry and stress surrounding the constant shortfalls and worry that the Post Office might suspend her.
66. I believe that the immense stress and anxiety which the shortfalls caused Fiona were a contributory factor in her early death.
67. Despite all that she had to cope with, she still managed to function as a mother, daughter and wife. I am so proud of her that she managed to deal with all of these problems.

- 68. I miss Fiona greatly, and think of her constantly.
- 69. I deeply regret the very many evenings that I lost with her, as she sat in the post office late into the night struggling with the Horizon System and the shortfalls it caused.

CONCLUSION

- 70. For me money and compensation are secondary issues. Accountability is the key issue for me.
- 71. We now know that the problems with the Horizon system were systemic and nationwide.
- 72. There must be persons within the Post Office, such as Paula Vennells, who oversaw the Horizon System and the actions that were taken against subpostmasters.
- 73. Those subpostmasters, including my late wife, who were decent hardworking people, suffered greatly.
- 74. No one within the Post Office has ever been held to account for this national scandal. I would like to see those responsible held to account publically, properly and fully.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

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

Signed..... **GRO**Dated..... 21/01/2022

Brent Whybro