

Witness Name: **Anonymity Order**
Statement No.: **WITN0293_01**
Exhibits: **None**
Dated: **4.2.2022**

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF **Anonymity Order**

I, **Anonymity Order** 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. It is important for me to say that, I am an honest, trustworthy, hardworking man and of good character. I am a stable family man and I have been married for **GRO** to my wife **Anonymity Order** **GRO**
3. I have lived in **GRO** since birth until the present time.

BACKGROUND

4. I believe that I have excellent interpersonal skills and a college education in the business field.
5. I joined the world of work through the YTS government scheme combining work and college to develop business skills.
6. I developed to an administration role with a leading supermarket supplier, Anonymity Order
7. I was very interested in purchasing and running the local post office branch in my area when an opportunity arose. I hoped to do this with the support of my immediate family and my wider family, including my parents and two brothers.
8. I decided to become a subpostmaster because I thought it was a sound business plan. I invested my earnings into a business model to create a better income and create jobs for my family members. I had a long-term future plan to increase sales and generate higher profits and wages.
9. I thought the post office would be good for my family life.
10. I wanted to run the post office into my retirement and for my children to join and eventually take over.
11. I was the Subpostmaster of Anonymity Order Post Office, **Anonymity Order** Anonymity Order from 17 September 2008 to 31 May 2017.
12. I believed that I had signed a document that may have been extracts from a Standard Subpostmaster Contract on 17/09/2008.

13. I now know that it was not a full copy of the contract as following my suspension I was shown a much longer document which outlined the full terms.
14. I operated a retail business from the premises selling cards, stationery, confectionary and drinks. The retail business was doing well at the time, it was very profitable and I added a lot of extra additional ranges such as handbags, textiles and purses.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

15. I received 2 weeks of onsite training from the Post Office. This training covered the day-to-day transactions using Horizon, and stock orders.
16. I requested further training and was told by a field trainer named Anonymity Order to ring the Helpdesk or a trainer if a shortfall arose.
17. I was told by Anonymity Order that small shortfalls might appear during the week but that these would resolve themselves by the time we undertook the monthly trading period balance.
18. I was led to believe that settling centrally would result in the Post Office carrying out a full investigation into a shortfall and that ultimately I would not be required to pay it back. This was not the case.
19. I do not feel this training was adequate as there was not enough time spent on learning how to balance the counter transactions or the ATM.
20. I received no further training.

HELPLINE

21. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline at least once a week with regard to problems relating to alleged shortfalls and /or balancing.
22. The Helpline operatives were never able to solve my problems; they simply made a record of the issue.
23. On more than one occasion, the advice the Helpline offered actually increased the shortfall that I was reporting. It would double further negatively based on whatever they had said do. This happened often. I would follow their instructions and ring back.
24. The Helpline would then give me a vague response that the shortfall would sort itself out in the future.
25. There was always confusion as to which advisor I had spoken to, and what the reference number for the issue was. It was confusion upon confusion. The Helpline would tell me to ring back and say that the issue was noted.
26. On other occasions, I was told that I should continue trading as I was, and wait to see if the loss sorted itself out.
27. The Helpline operatives appeared to give standard scripted advice. If they were unable to help me find the cause of the shortfall, they would then tell me that it was human error and not the system's fault.
28. The Helpline did not give me helpful advice, it was always a very scripted and formal response.
29. I went to a Network meeting where other subpostmasters said that they were putting money into the system from their own pocket and others said it's not worth it.

SHORTFALLS

24. 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.
25. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid (or the Post Office deducted) in excess of £50,000.
26. I experienced several shortfalls of between £100 and £300, which tended to be found when balancing the ATM. I checked back through my transactions and called the Helpline, but the Post Office made it clear that it was my responsibility to make the alleged shortfalls good. This was made clear to me through conversations with the Helpline, Beverley Hopper, a person in the contracts teams and by auditors.
27. Not making the shortfalls good was like a ransom, there was a threat from the Post Office of closing the branch, and we had heard stories of investigations into other subpostmasters, and didn't want that to happen to us. However, it did later.
28. I would pay the shortfalls by paying out of my own pocket or using the retail shop money. A lot of the profits from the retail shop went into making the losses good in the Horizon System. As a result of having to make regular shortfall payments, the businesses (retail and post office) appeared to have a poor performance in our annual accounts.
29. I received demands for payment from the Post Office, if I didn't settle the shortfalls quickly enough. The Post Office would send me demand letters. This happened often.

30. The shortfalls occurred regularly at the end of the monthly balancing period. I paid the amounts back using cash immediately. Larger shortfalls were deducted from my salary through a programme of repayment through my remuneration.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

31. The Post Office undertook three audits of my branch. I was given no notice in respect of these audits.
32. The first audit was in 2009. The auditors told me that I did not need to supervise them. An alleged shortfall of £2,000 was found. I paid this amount back through deductions from my wages, because I was worried that I would lose my job if I did not. I did not receive a copy of the auditor's report.
33. The second audit took place in or around 2010. The auditors told me that I did not need to supervise them. I do not recall a shortfall being found at this audit.
34. The third audit was in 2013. The auditors validated the stock, cash and ATM. An alleged shortfall of £10,500 was found. I was suspended immediately and my keys were taken from me.
35. I did not receive a copy of the auditor's report.
36. I have seen no evidence of any adequate investigation, although the Post Office informed me that they were carrying out an investigation following my suspension in February 2013.
37. I attended a formal interview during my suspension. The Post Office stated that the discrepancy must be a result of human error or staff theft. They told me that I should pursue my member of staff in criminal proceedings.

38. I do not believe that they investigated thoroughly.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

39. I was suspended in February 2013 for 6 weeks. A temporary subpostmaster was appointed through an agency in February 2013.

40. A few weeks into my suspension, I was told that the amount of the alleged shortfall had doubled, and was actually £21,000. I was told by a Post Office manager, David Southall, that I had to make the alleged shortfall good or I would be sacked.

41. Despite not being given any evidence as to how and why the shortfall had doubled since the audit, I agreed to pay this sum, to save myself from dismissal and from losing my business and livelihood.

42. Following my reinstatement, I paid this back money (£21,000) to the Post Office through deductions from my remuneration. As a result of this I received no remuneration for a year.

43. I was unable to access the records within my branch for the period of my suspension, because my keys were taken from me.

44. An amount was agreed that allowed a repayment programme and also for the mortgage on the building to be paid, as this was beneficial for the Post Office. I was allowed to use a quarter of my monthly wage to pay the mortgage and the remaining three quarters of my remuneration was used to pay back the Post Office.

45. It took just over a year to pay the Post Office back. During that time we survived off my wife's wages, she worked for the Anonymity Order She also took on extra work to financially support us.

46. Thereafter, I resigned from my appointment as subpostmaster.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

47. The Post Office did not pursue civil or criminal proceedings against me for recovery of the alleged shortfalls.

48. I was threatened with criminal action by my contracts manager, [Anonymity Order] and interviewed by Post Office investigators at their Leeds office following my suspension; but ultimately I was not prosecuted.

49. [Anonymity Order] threatened me, stating that if I did not agree to repay the supposed discrepancy from my monthly remuneration I would be personally prosecuted and taken to court.

50. It was a really frightening experience for me. I thought I would go to prison and lose my business, livelihood and reputation. I went into a dark depression. My wife had to shoulder the burden of these problems to help us survive. We kept the problems with the post office from our children, which was difficult.

51. We could envisage a prosecution of me by the Post Office and a court case, and my name being in paper, this would have been like a horror story and scared us both.

LOSSES

52. I estimate that I repaid the Post Office in the region of £50,000. I was led to believe that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls.

53. I lost my investment in the post office and retail shop. I sold the Post Office and retail shop for £47,000, which was approximately a third of its value. I did this because I

wanted a quick sale, as I could not cope with the stress of running the post office any longer and feared further shortfalls, which I would be held liable for.

54. I lost earnings whilst I was suspended; I was suspended for 6 weeks. Based on my average annual remuneration this is about £6,346.
55. I suffered stigma and reputational damage. The temporary agency staff told customers that I had been suspended and this ruined my good reputation. This made me feel betrayed, because the Post Office investigation was ongoing, however, the temporary agency staff were saying that I had been suspended and when customers asked 'what's wrong' and 'has he stolen' the agency staff allowed them to believe that I had stolen money from the Post Office.
56. Our loyal customers were contacting us and telling us what was being said about us. When I returned it was even worse, we had lost customers and my reputation.
57. The stress of the situation has caused me to have epileptic seizures. I had had epilepsy in my teenage years, which was dormant until 2009. The seizures increased frequency during my suspension. It has reduced a lot now. It has taken tablets and a long time for me to control the seizures, which were caused by the stress of the Post Office action against me.

HUMAN IMPACT

58. I suffered problems and shortfalls in the Horizon system at my post office. I reported these to the Post Office.
59. I was the subject of an audit and was suspended by the Post Office.

60. I was threatened with prosecution and with a civil suit by the Post Office in order to force me to make payments to the Post Office. I had to make up these payments from my own funds.
61. My losses amounted to well in excess of £150,000, not including lost remuneration, reputation or the other harms I and my family suffered.
62. I participated in the mediation scheme and received £25,000. I was party to the group litigation against Post Office Limited, as such although I have made an application to the Historic Shortfall Scheme, I will be excluded from it.
63. I experienced pressure and anxiety to make good the shortfalls that arose in the Horizon System, as if I did not make up the shortfalls I feared that Post Office auditors would come to the branch the next morning and I would be under investigation for the cause of the losses, which I would still be required to make good, for fear of losing my branch.
64. I experienced constant fear and stress that I would be accused of theft and lose my business, livelihood, my good character, reputation, my relationships and my family's trust and respect
65. I also worried I would lose the trust and love of my family.
66. My parents and brothers were supportive at the beginning, and would say the Post Office would find the money, as they were investigating. However, later my family questioned how the money could disappear. They would question how the losses arose. My family trusted Post Office Ltd, and in the end my family blamed me for the losses. I felt deeply ashamed and hurt that my family suspected me.
67. Although it was not said in words, my family's loss of trust in me was shown in actions. My family withdrew from me.

68. **GRO**
69. My wife was, naturally, very negative about Post Office Limited and the situation that the Post Office had put us in. She would say 'why did you invest in this post office' and 'look how bad it turned out'. I was constantly swinging between being fearful that everything would collapse and hopeful that it would all be okay. Prior to these problems my wife and **GRO**, we had been together since **GRO**
70. The whole dream of being able to build up a legacy of a successful business for my family and my children fell apart.
71. I feared I would be labelled a thief and that my reputation would be damaged permanently. The mental pressure led me to feel burnt out and exhausted.
72. I am very proud of my reputation as an honest and decent man. The threat of my name being linked to theft or false accounting was simply awful.
73. I made good the so called losses from my monthly income and therefore had no income to live on, so I lived from my wife's earnings. This was demoralising as the man of the house and bread winner. I was bringing nothing in, I was merely working to pay the Post Office for the so called losses instead.
74. I lost my appetite to eat and live and socialise. I withdrew into myself an. The things I ate were unhealthy and I gained unhealthy weight. As a result, I have developed diabetes because of an unhealthy lifestyle caused by stress. This has led to my being insulin dependent, and I experience lethargy and anxiety. The health effects of my experiences with the Post Office have lifelong consequences.
75. My wife supported me through the whole ordeal, without her support I would have given up on life, work and living. I was suicidal and had dark thoughts.

76. My wife also supported me in the post office. Due to stress and worry, I could not face going in to the post office. The less I went in to the post office, the more my wife had to go. This impacted on her work. She managed to keep her job, but it was a struggle.
77. [REDACTED] **GRO**
[REDACTED] **GRO** By that point she was burnt out also. Only recently, in 2020, my wife has been able to return to her previous strategic role.
78. My wife says that it was the worst stressful period of her life in all her years. There was a lot of stress because we were now working with a much lower budget compared to our previous earnings.
79. My wife's mental health suffered, in 2014 she was burnout. [REDACTED] **GRO**
[REDACTED] **GRO**
80. [REDACTED] **GRO** became suspicious about the accusation I faced from the Post Office. [REDACTED] **GRO**
[REDACTED] **GRO** I could not explain myself. Self-doubt and disbelief crept into my thoughts, there was a point I no longer wanted to live.
81. My local community doubted my honesty. The Post Office Ltd team deployed a relief team whilst I was under investigation. The Post Office Ltd relief team communicated with my customers relaying that I was suspended for losses and my customer took away the message that I had been caught stealing.
82. My reputation was ruined forever, as the story escalated within the community. Prior to this I had a strong relationship with the local businesses, providing sales and money change accounts.
83. I enjoyed a lot of respect, but all the hard earned relationships I had built in the community faced a breakdown, as rumours were spread that I was a thief. The local

businesses went elsewhere for their services. My post office and my suspension was the talk of the town.

84. Members of my family do not think I am a good business man anymore, as they feel Post Office Ltd was a bad investment, and that I never should have invested in the network. My family say I was scammed by Post Office Ltd.
85. My standing within my family has fallen so low, and this is hard to bear.
86. I was on medication for my mental health and I now use telephone counselling services from my GP. I am on diabetes tablets and insulin. I am also on medication for my epilepsy, which I will always have to take.
87. I trusted the Post Office as an institution, I believed in their product and I trusted the Network but I think the problem with the Post Office was their IT system.

CONCLUSION

88. I financially recovered from the losses I suffered with support from family. I managed to save up again, and as a result of promises made by the Post Office about improvements in the Horizon System, I decided to try again with Post Office Limited.
89. I returned to the Post Office sector in November 2019 as I couldn't get a job anywhere else. Anonymity Order
90. It took me a long time to re-build confidence to do this, but my son encouraged and supported me to return.
91. A lot of the day to day jobs at the post office are done by my son. The Anonymity Order post office is in a different town, as I feared loss of reputation. I travel to Anonymity Order most days but my involvement and attendance at the post office depends on my health and anxiety.

92. Since joining the Post Office Ltd network again, I am doing well. However, I still have panic attacks on balancing days, as I recall my balancing ordeal from years ago. This means I have shortness in breath. I also have fear and anxiety over the monthly balance. I have employed staff to help me through these episodes.
93. I feel Post Office Ltd are also learning from IT glitches and errors and have finally investigated their IT problems, so this is a good step forward.
94. Since returning, and now that the Horizon problems have all been brought to light it makes me feel better about Post Office Ltd but it does not make me feel better about my situation and what happened to me.
95. I would like financial redress to repay all my family for what they have lost, and to compensate me for this ordeal, as my health has paid a price and I can no longer work fulltime hours due to anxiety and mental distress that continues to haunt me.
96. I would like those who are responsible to be held to account.
97. I would like to repair my reputation locally.
98. If it was possible, I would like an apology that would offer assurance that the problems I have suffered would not happen again.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

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

Signed: **Anonymity Order**

Dated: 4.2.22

Anonymity Order