

Witness Name: Ms Rajpal Kaur
Statement No.: WITN0221_01
Dated... 13/1/2022 Exhibits: None

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS RAJPAL KAUR

I, MS RAJPAL KAUR 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 was born on Christmas Day in GRO I am currently living with my two sons, now aged 26 and 19. We are currently living in Leicester after a period of being forced to move between several temporary accommodations.

BACKGROUND PRIOR TO APPOINTMENT AS SPM

3. Prior to becoming a Sub Postmistress I ran a very successful shop. I built up the business and made a good living for myself, my husband and my 2 sons.

DECISION TO BECOME A SPM

4. I was very ambitious and decided that the next step would be to run my own post office, and I became the Subpostmistress of Hogsthorpe Post Office, High Street, Hogsthorpe, Skegness, Lincolnshire PE24 5PP from July 2015 to 5 June 2017.
5. The village was idyllic. We were across from a field of horses, 5 minutes from the beach. It was perfect for my family. We believed we would be there for the rest of our lives, and I would run the business till my retirement, at which point my eldest son would take over the running of the business.
6. The Hogsthorpe Village Store was an off licence, newsagents, and grocery store. I spent a great deal of time and effort improving the appearance of the store and would receive comments on how it had lifted the whole feel of the village. Others were compelled to make improvements to their own homes and there was a huge feeling of community spirit.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

7. I had 2 weeks of training approximately 1 month prior to starting my appointment as Subpostmistress.
8. This consisted of both off site and on-site training. The offsite training took place in a hotel and lasted for around 3 days, and this was focused on showing us how the equipment worked as opposed to how to work the system. The trainer did not seem interested in training us and kept saying that if I did not understand something or what to do, I would in time when I got into branch.
9. I also had on-site training which lasted for 5 days. We covered parcels, how to sell stamps and general running of the business. I felt the training was not particularly detailed and very rushed. There was a lot of book work and the trainer often referred to the operations manual. The balance period and trading period was not

covered in any depth. I felt that I needed far more training on the balancing process before I should have been left alone in branch. However, my concerns were brushed aside.

10. I do not believe that this was sufficient training to prepare me to use the system or for my role as Subpostmistress. Since any supposed mistakes would come out of my pocket, I do not believe that this training was anywhere near comprehensive enough.
11. I was not confident at all by the time I was left alone in my branch and told Post Office this, but my concerns were merely brushed off and I was told that my confidence would grow once I was in branch and using the system day in-day out.
12. I found it difficult to get the hang of the transactional side of running a Post Office such as money laundering, postage, and cheques, let alone also learning how to use a complex computer system on top of this. Two weeks of training was not at all adequate.
13. I asked Post Office for more training, and they told me I could not have it because once I started doing it myself, I would understand. I was simply told to call the Helpline with any problems relating to balancing and then I was left on my own.
14. Approximately 1 year after becoming a subpostmistress I did attend a one-day course. This was information about products to sell and how to make more sales and commission as opposed to the Horizon system.
15. It's worth noting that when I left the Post Office, the subpostmistress who took over from me asked me to go into the branch to help her because she also thought the training was so lacking. I did so and have helped her since I left. The new subpostmistress said that my help was of more value than the training offered by the Post Office.

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HELPLINE

16. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline 2-3 times per week regarding problems relating to alleged shortfalls and /or balancing. The Helpline would tell me to look back and start searching through the figures to try and work out how the alleged shortfall had occurred. I could not do this and did not know how it originated and this was why I was calling them in the first place. Contacting the Helpline never resolved any of the issues I was having.
17. The Helpline would often make my situation worse. I sometimes contacted them multiple times for the same problem and when I spoke to someone else, the advice would be contradictory. I felt I was in a no-win situation.
18. On one occasion, I contacted the Helpline because the system was showing a £5,000 loss and this increased to £11,000. This was never rectified and the £11,000 formed part of the total alleged shortfall that I had to repay when I left.
19. I expressly asked the Helpline if others had problems the way I did and they said no, they had never had a complaint such as this and I was the only one experiencing such difficulties.
20. I once went to another Post Office, and they agreed that the Helpline would be of little use and gave me the number of an auditor (I do not recall his name) who could help me. I called this auditor who explained that he could only come to my branch if my line manager authorised it. I did not know who the line manager was. I did eventually get a number but could not get through to him.
21. Eventually this auditor came to my branch in approximately 2016 and did a full audit of the system and said he could not find a mistake.

SHORTFALLS

22. 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 to provide some context to the awful impact this has had on me and my family.
23. I am only able to give approximate figures, although I do have a clear memory of payments having been made by me. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) in excess of £25,000.
24. **Shortfall 1:** £1,600 in 2015. I think that this occurred because there were certain things that I did not receive training on. However, I was in contact with the helpline and followed their advice. I therefore believe that it was the system that was at fault and not any error on my part.
25. **Shortfall 2:** £1,200 in 2015. I paid the Post Office back for this alleged shortfall from deductions from my remuneration. I declared this to the Helpline.
26. **Shortfall 3:** £500 six months after shortfall 2. I paid the Post Office back for this alleged shortfall from deductions from my remuneration. I also contacted the Helpline.
27. I would then get continuous shortfalls of between £500 - £700 every two to three months. The Helpline would repeatedly tell me this would correct itself and it was a problem only unique to me.
28. **Shortfall 4:** £24,000 to £25,000 in June 2017. This was an accumulation of other shortfalls within the 6 months prior to selling my branch, which I had been paying back incrementally. This included the £11,000 which was as a result of the Helpline giving me wrong advice and yet Post Office would not reverse or write off the debt.

This was paid back to the Post Office out of sales monies. I had been declaring losses to the Helpline.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

29. I did not have an official audit at all during my time in branch. The only time I have been visited by an auditor was when I arranged for someone to visit my branch to look for the shortfalls that were accruing in 2016/2017. The auditor did not identify any transactional errors. I was told that everything I was doing was completely correct.
30. I have seen no evidence of any adequate investigation even though I was assured, and believed, that an investigation was being conducted at the time. The Post Office would not investigate the alleged shortfalls when I asked them to.
31. I wrote to The Post Office at Chesterfield and asked them to investigate the alleged £24,000 shortfall in 2017. It was a large amount of money and of obvious huge concern for me. I spoke to someone on the helpline for this to be investigated. I knew that there was no way that I had made a mistake of this magnitude. I told this lady that I wanted this to be escalated and so I spoke to her manager who said there was no mistake on the system, and it must have been my error. I even went to another branch to find an auditor to ask that they attend my branch.
32. The Post Office would not send anyone out, they told me to look through my records and try and find the mistake myself.

RESIGNATION

33. Due to continued shortfalls at my branch, I was forced to resign. I was not suspended pending any investigation by them. I was made to feel I was a thief and a criminal. Word got round in the local community, and I felt shame and was constantly questioning myself.

34. I became increasingly depressed, and my marriage became strained. We were struggling financially because we were constantly having to repay the supposed losses each month.
35. I felt that I had no choice but to resign because I was losing so much money, and because of the amount that I was paying back, I did not get a wage in the end.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

36. The Post Office did not pursue civil proceedings against me for the recovery of the alleged shortfalls, however I lived in fear of being sued or prosecuted because of the size of the shortfalls and the Post Office's hard-line response to my requests for help.

LOSSES

37. I was led to believe that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls and I believed that a thorough and fair investigation had determined that payment was due.
38. If it were not for the events that occurred, I firmly believe I would still be running my store, my future would be secure. I invested everything into the business. It was a perfect location. We were settled there, and my children were happy.
39. My life took a downward spiral after the accusations. I am now on medication for depression as a result of what happened with the Post Office.
40. Things got so bad that I have made serious attempts to take my own life. I lost countless hours of sleep going over paperwork and figures to try to work out where the money was. The continuous losses were far too stressful, and I found it difficult to cope.

41. My marriage also broke down as a result of what happened with the Post Office. The events completely devastated my life.

HUMAN IMPACT

42. As I have said, I suffered serious problems with the Horizon system including alleged shortfalls. I was compelled to make payments to the Post Office who threatened me with suspension if I did not reconcile these alleged shortages. I estimate my losses directly from shortfalls to be in the region of £25,000. However, the consequences of these issues were much greater.
43. My husband and I divorced. We were arguing constantly. He even accused me of stealing the money.
44. I suffer from depression and often experience anxiety attacks, making it impossible for me to work. The suicidal thoughts continue, and I often find it difficult to leave the house for fear of being judged by the community. I also have awful anxiety attacks.
45. I was party to the group litigation against Post Office Ltd, as a result I am excluded from the Historic Shortfall Scheme. The compensation received was a fraction of what I lost and took no account of the loss of future opportunity or the harm to me and my family.
46. The impact I experienced with the failure of the Horizon IT system has destroyed my reputation, destroyed my family, and I was forced to sell the business.
47. As the shortfalls grew, I was forced to sell my car, my business and all I had to repay the Post Office.
48. I constantly asked for help from the horizon team, but they made matters worse.

49. The Post Office were quick to remind me that the shortfalls only happened to me. Further intensifying my level of isolation, inadequacy and guilt.
50. I also believe that as a direct result my marriage collapsed. I suffered abuse from my husband, mentally and physically. He accused me of stealing from the Post Office and he embarrassed and belittled me. That led on to the whole village knowing the rumors. These accusations ruined my reputation in the village, with friends and family. This abuse later led on to our divorce.
51. My husband also abused and accused my eldest son (his step son), as he helped me in the Post Office. He forced my son to separate from me and leave the family business and home.
52. All this happening, led to my inability to concentrate, sleep disturbance, loss of confidence and on many occasions attempted to commit suicide. I was so ashamed and embarrassed to face people, as I started to believe the accusations, which resulted in me feeling angry and restless. I spent hours trying to seek clarity to prove my innocence. Not succeeding to find the cause of the shortfalls, I seriously believed I was at fault.
53. It is only after consulting with other subpostmasters, who had experienced what I had, that I have come to realize I was not at fault. It is of little comfort though considering everything I have been through.
54. I wasn't convicted of a criminal offence, as I decided to sell the business. However I was warned, by the Post Office, that if I didn't pay the discrepancies I could end up in jail. This terrified me.
55. The impact and outcome of the shortfall discrepancies, has hugely went from having a functional business, which enabled me to become a landlord and homeowner to now, where I barely make ends meet.

56. I went from being a proud businesswoman to someone who is now on benefits with countless health issues. I have suffered mentally and physically, suffered the pain of divorce and hit rock bottom. I have had therapy to help with anxiety and depression and take anti-depression medication to cope with all the trauma.
57. I had to move far away because of all the embarrassment and as Asian, divorces are not accepted in our community. **GRO**
GRO My children have also suffered immeasurably. They lost their home, their security, their education. They are still angry and upset. They too have had to undergo therapy to cope.
58. My health has deteriorated with all the constant worry and depression. My diabetes is so unstable that it has affected my eyesight, feet and hands. I have had recently 9 operations on both my hands and still awaiting more. I suffer frequent migraines. I have Vitiligo (skin condition), that has spread all over my body and face, this worsened with stress. I have to use camouflage makeup to cover my face and neck. This has knocked my confidence, further more.
59. I have very low self-esteem and can't motivate myself. The Post Office scandal has stolen my life and confidence. Still up to this day, there's no justice or closure. I am still haunted by nightmares and frequent reminders. I want justice, compensation, closure and an apology

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed... **GRO** Dated... 13th January 2022
Rajpal Kaur