

Witness Name: **GRO**
Statement No: WITN0233_01
Exhibits: None
Dated: 07 January 2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF **GRO**

I, **GRO** WILL STATE 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 currently living in **GRO** I am 56 years old.

BACKGROUND

3. I was the subpostmistress of **GRO** between November 2006 and June 2010.

4. I operated a retail business from the premises selling greeting cards, gifts and stationery. I employed three assistants.
5. Prior to this I had been a GRO and in the past an Assistant Manager at GRO.
6. I was excited to be running my own post office. I felt I had all the qualities needed to run a successful business. I was computer literate, used to handling cash, good with customers and so on.
7. This was to be the beginning of a bright future for me and my young family.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

8. I received 8 days of training from the day of my taking over the branch. The training was on site and whilst the Post Office was open and trading. The training was on the basics of counter duties, stock control and balancing.
9. The training was completely inadequate as it did not cover the problems that cropped up within the Horizon System. There were many problems with Horizon, such as balancing that the trainer himself did not know how to deal with.
10. I experienced difficulties with the Horizon system from the very beginning of my tenure as a subpostmistress; in fact, the problems began to occur from day one.
11. Within the first month or so, my errors amounted to almost £6,000. As I hadn't received a copy of my contract, I had no recourse when I was told I had to repay it immediately. I had used all my savings and taken out a loan for the business. I had to apply for a Post Office credit card and used it to pay of the amount.

12. I asked the Post Office to investigate this. I had nothing to hide and wanted to understand why this was happening to me. There was no investigation to determine the cause of this or any other alleged shortfalls, despite my insistence.

HELPLINE

13. I needed to contact the Helpline around 4-5 times a week. Quite often I would report discrepancies, occasionally it was an obvious error on our part, but mostly it was errors that were untraceable and we did not get any further response.
14. I always made my Area Manager, George Sinclair, aware of the problems from the very beginning. He would always tell me that the error would correct itself and not to worry. It very rarely did. And the errors kept coming.
15. On one occasion I rang the Helpline for guidance when a discrepancy doubled, then trebled whilst I was on the phone carrying out their suggested inputs. This never was resolved and I had to pay the trebled shortfall.
16. On a Wednesday evening we had to do a weekly balance rollover of the branch. I came to physically dread it. I was always in negative figures and knew I would have to use my own money to make up the shortfall.
17. Some Wednesday nights I didn't leave until 11pm, as I was frantically trying to make sense of the errors.
18. This was a very stressful time – I wasn't experienced enough with Horizon to know how to locate the errors and was given no guidance or support. I spent many hours trying to work it out for myself.
19. I was mostly working a 60-hour week, as I was determined to get to the bottom of it. And the errors kept coming.

20. I had never been more than 10p out at the Building Society in 2 years. Yet, here I was having these huge discrepancies (eventually approximately £30,000) at my post office.
21. I wrote to my area manager telling him that financially, I couldn't continue running the Post Office with these unexplained errors, and that if he didn't help me, I would be forced to sell up. I was always told it was my error and I was inexperienced. He eventually sent a trainer (Paul Smith) to spend a week or a fortnight with me.
22. Whilst the trainer was working with me, the errors kept coming, and he couldn't figure it out either.
23. George Sinclair informed me that it must be a member of staff. Not once did either him or Paul Smith mention that there were any known problems with Horizon. I suppose I was just grateful that they didn't suspect me of anything, as I prided myself on being a respected, honest, trustworthy, upstanding member of the community, so that was a big worry.

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 estimate that over a 4-year period I and my husband paid over £30,000 to cover alleged shortfalls demanded by Post Office.

26. There was an unexplained shortfall of £6,000, as previously mentioned, soon after I started in or around December 2006. I was asked to pay the said £6,000 which I did not have the cash to pay, so I applied for and used a Post Office credit card.
27. When I raised these discrepancies with my Area Manager and asked for it to be investigated, I was told that I would get the money back when the transaction correction came in. It never did.
28. I took a manual record of the balances and shortages from January 2007 to April 2008; these indicate that I paid the post office at least £6,074.35 during that period in relation to the shortages. Unfortunately, I do not have a full record of the amounts I paid as they were generally paid in cash from my stationery sales.
29. Additionally, the Post Office deducted a total sum of £971.33 from my salary in April and May 2008.
30. I threatened to close the post office until the Post Office investigated where the shortfalls were coming from was resolved. George Sinclair told me that I would be in breach of my contract if I did so, and they would terminate it.
31. I identified times/dates of the errors and asked him to get proper transaction information for me from Fujitsu. The transaction reports that we had access to had very limited information on them and were only available for 42 days, then the information, conveniently for the Post Office, disappeared from the system. He said he couldn't do that, as it would be far too expensive.
32. I even offered to pay for the reports myself but was told that this was not allowed.
33. One Christmas, 500 second class stamps disappeared from my stock (according to Horizon) but there was no transaction to support this. This was yet another £300 I would have to make up.

34. I didn't even have sufficient funds to buy our usual Christmas stock of trinkets (which sold well at this time of year). My husband took pity on me and ordered me £500 worth of stock from his personal funds. This was the straw that broke the camel's back; I had had enough, but the errors kept coming.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

35. On the 17 May 2007 I was audited at my insistence. They found that there was a surplus of £8.78 in stock/cash in branch. But Horizon itself was showing a loss of £4,792.05 which I was already in the process of paying back and the post office was aware of. The auditors knew nothing about this.
36. I was shocked a few months later when George Sinclair stated that he had ordered the auditors in, which was a complete lie, as it was me that was practically begging the Post Office to send auditors. I challenged him over it.
37. I now wonder whether that was a deliberate lie to start the ball rolling with either terminating my contract, or a possible prosecution.
38. It was made clear to me that there was no issue with the Horizon system and therefore it was theft or fraud. On that basis, I suspended a member of staff.
39. There was only one member of staff who would have the opportunity to steal, that was my most experienced cashier, who deputised for me occasionally. I reported these concerns to the local Police, who said that the Post Office normally deal with these sorts of things internally – so weren't willing to help.
40. However, since I had no proof of any theft, I reinstated the staff member, but she soon left. Who could blame her?

41. Due to the substantial sums of alleged shortfalls that I had to pay Post Office Ltd, I had no income at all for many months. I felt completely alone.
42. I was offered no support to understand how the shortfalls were happening. I was constantly told that they could find nothing wrong with the Horizon System and it was my responsibility to make good the money.
43. I spoke to the National Federation of Subpostmasters. I had paid my subscriptions, and naively, I expected them to be able to help. Not once did they tell me it was a common problem – they too just suggested it must be a member of staff.
44. I would like to see the Federation of Subpostmasters investigated by this Inquiry also. I would like them to be forced to refund all the monthly subscriptions they have received from me and other subpostmasters they failed to represent. I believe they were aware of the common problems with the Horizon problems, but chose to be on the side of Post Office Ltd, and therefore were biased in their advice to us.
45. Not only that, the Federation added to our stress levels by making us feel the errors must be our fault. This also meant that we had no support at all from anywhere. I felt isolated, insecure and totally alone.
46. I was left trying to manage without my only full-time member of staff. My stress levels were through the roof and the errors kept coming.
47. I managed to recruit a replacement and trained up both of my daughters to help during their breaks from university.
48. My husband never saw me. Even he began to think I was incompetent losing all this money, and he wasn't going to bail me out again.

49. He has used up £50,000 of his own savings paying for our food/household bills, as I was not making any money due to repaying errors constantly.
50. It caused horrendous problems at home, and we came close to divorcing. My daughter was cooking all of our meals, as I very rarely got home before 7-8pm, and Wednesdays were much later than that. I was still trying to investigate every single error.
51. I was able to take a step back during the summer holidays when both daughters were trained up. I then needed to try to patch things up with my husband.
52. The errors hadn't gone away though, and I was back to my normal routine of finding the shortfalls, making up the difference and spending hours and hours worrying and stressing.
53. In the summer of 2009, I became pregnant, and we were overjoyed, as we had lost a baby a year before taking on the post office. I was hoping that the bad times were in the past.
54. I was conscious that I needed to look after myself, but the stress created by the situation with the Horizon system made this impossible.
55. I was forced to commence maternity leave 7 months into the pregnancy due to symptoms of pre-eclampsia. I had very high blood pressure.
56. Had I not complied, I was told by my consultant I would have to be admitted to **GRO** Hospital for the remaining 2 months.
57. I believe the stress I was under played a part in this. This was July, and the baby was due early September.

58. I had not intended to take such an extended maternity leave, and believe I would not have had to do so but for the stress I was placed under. I had to employ a full-time member of staff for over 8 weeks at my own expense.
59. This meant extra payroll bills to cover my hours, which I could not afford. But pre-eclampsia could mean the death of the baby and myself, so I had no choice. The stress levels at the post office were to blame for this, and I thank God that we both survived.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

60. In a final act of desperation, with no support from Post Office or the Federation of Subpostmasters, I wrote to George Sinclair.
61. I told him that financially, I could no longer continue with these unexplained errors and lack of support. I was putting the post office up for sale. The timing was perfect, as a new Horizon Online was coming, so I did not feel that I was passing on a defective system onto the next subpostmaster, as I assumed that the new system would have been improved.
62. On the 25 June 2010 I sold the post office and handed in my resignation. The feeling of relief was immense.

HUMAN IMPACT

63. The toll and impact this took on me and my family is incalculable.
64. What was supposed to be my first solo venture into running a business for which I had ample previous experience and was expecting great returns, turned out to be a living nightmare.

65. Even after resigning the consequences of what the Post Office put us through didn't end. A couple of years later, my daughter confided in me that, after suicide attempts and alcohol abuse, she had been raped during that period.
66. I was totally destroyed by this. She explained that she felt unable to confide in me at the time because I was always so stressed, and she did not want to put extra burden on me.
67. She kept this all to herself which resulted in a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, something which may affect her for the rest of her life. This is hard for a mother to contemplate.
68. I would like to see Post Office Ltd punished severely for what they have put us all through. I would like those high up, who were complicit in this arrested and charged with criminal offences.
69. We have already witnessed them prosecuting us for theft/false accounting, so the same process should be used where it is now proven the theft was the other way around (that is to say the Post Office took money from subpostmasters). I would like the Post Office to explain where the money taken from all those involved went.
70. The way they have treated people, the numbers involved, and the sums involved, is indeed the biggest scandal of the 21st century, and no longer can the Post Office be referred to as a 'trusted' brand.
71. Financially and emotionally, I suffered terribly. I estimate I was made to pay approximately £30,000. I was led to believe that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls.
72. I lost a well-respected member of staff soon after the audit, as the Area Manager stated that it must be a member of staff stealing. This, soon after an audit, raised

eyebrows in the local community. It was awful knowing that you were becoming a source of local gossip.

- 73. As a result of the stress of the allegations, and my preoccupation with finding the root of the problems, I did not realise my daughter had been raped.
- 74. During this time my marriage was on the brink of collapse and my husband resented, and still resents, that we had to use his £50,000 savings to keep us afloat.

CONCLUSION

- 75. I would like to see Post Office Ltd publicly held to account for what they have put me, and hundreds of other hard working, decent people through.
- 76. They knew there were failings with the Horizon system and yet continued to deny it. They have destroyed lives.
- 77. I would like an apology and compensation for what I have been through.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed **GRO** Dated 7/1/22

GRO