

Witness Name: Ms Elaine Illidge
Statement No: WITNO203_01
Exhibits: none
Dated: 17/1/2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS ELAINE ILLIDGE

I, MS ELAINE ILLIDGE will state as follows:

Introduction

1. I am grateful to the Chair to be invited to provide a “human impact” statement, concerning the consequences to me and my family as a result of the Horizon IT system and Post Office Limited’s actions toward me and my family. The introductory paragraphs below provide a brief summary of my background, and to provide context to the detail of the human impact of the scandal on me and my family.
2. I currently live in Bickerstaffe, West Lancashire. I was Sub postmaster at the Penny Lane Post Office in Allerton, Liverpool between November 2005 and 2010.

Background prior to appointment as SPM

3. My husband and I ran a Printing, Signs & Stationary business. We ran this originally from the building next to the post office. After buying into the post office, we relocated and ran our business from within the post office.
4. I personally never worked in the Post Office. However, I did participate in the training with my husband.

5. My husband ran both the printing and post office business with a team of staff, and I worked in the printing business. Barbara Brunt was the manager between 2005 and 2010. Julie Williams was an assistant between 2005 and 2010 and Mary Fox was assistant between 2005 and 2010.

Decision to become a SPM

6. We decided that we could make a go of the post office whilst continuing with our current business. We would also be providing a service to the community. It seemed like a win-win situation.

Training/Shortfalls

7. in this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon system, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.
8. My husband David and I completed one week of training offsite in Salford Crown Office. After the first week, I decided that I would take a back seat in the business. David continued the second week of training. I was allowed to continue as an absentee Sub postmistress.
9. Our Manager, Barbara Brunt was very experienced. She had run Post Offices for 27 years. She did not express the need to undertake further training.
10. Apart from when the ATM was installed in 2007, when we felt we needed further training, no other training was offered, and we did not know that we could request it if needed.

HELPLINE

11. We were always having issues with the ATM and I would call the helpline 2-3 times a month.
12. We also experienced shortfalls and I would call the Post Office helpline. This was never a positive experience. Their advice was always generalised, and I came away with the impression that they had no working knowledge of the system.
13. On one occasion, we contacted the helpline after noticing a shortfall of £1000. They instructed us to press a series of buttons. This resulted in the loss increasing to £3000.
14. We were told that this would correct itself when it came to balancing at the end of the month, it never did, and this error caused the 2nd and final suspension. We later called back and asked to speak with the same person as a way to maintain some continuity (we cannot recall the name) we were told that he no longer worked there.
15. There was always a sense that the advice given was scripted. The Helpline staff obviously had a lack of working knowledge.
16. We were always given the impression that the problems with the Horizon system were unique to us, no other branch was experiencing problems and it must be us that was at fault.
17. Eventually we stopped calling the Helpline because they could not rectify the shortfalls.
18. I would estimate that throughout our time at the Post Office, the shortfalls amounted to £36, 886.41. The Post Office always made sure we were aware that we were liable for the shortfalls, so this was deducted from us.
19. I can go into more detail regarding the shortfalls:

- a) £735.17. This was the yearly total paid back year ending 31 March 2006. This was deducted from our wages. We contacted the Helpline to declare the shortfall and we then received an error correction.
 - b) £5, 219.18. This was the yearly total paid back year ending 31 March 2007. This was deducted from our wages. We contacted the Helpline, and this was later sent back as an error correction.
 - c) £12,305.50. This was the yearly total paid back year ending 31 March 2009. This was deducted from our wages. We contacted the Helpline, and this was later sent back as an error correction.
 - d) £5,913.96. This was the yearly total paid back year ending 31 March 2010. We contacted the Helpline, and this was later sent back as an error correction.
 - e) £12,732.60. This was partly made up of a £7000 discrepancy from the ATM. We manually put this into Horizon because it was not automatically accounting for it. This was the yearly total paid back year ending 31 March 2011. This was paid by cheque on the day of the audit in February 2010. We rolled this over as though we had the cash, we knew this was a fault with the ATM.
20. Each time the system showed a loss, the Helpline would say to us that they could give us no details, no data or any documentation regarding the shortfalls. They said it was because they did not provide such information because they could not go back into the systems to access it.

Audits/Suspensions

21. We were audited in 2007, a shortfall was found, resulting in my suspension. The branch was closed for 3 days, and a temporary subpostmaster was appointed. The counter keys were taken from us, and we had no access to the office.

22. I was again suspended in February 2010 following an audit which showed an alleged shortfall of £3000. On this occasion I was told that if I resigned, a temporary subpostmaster could be appointed, and the Office would open again far quicker.
23. I was also told that if I resigned, less money would be lost as the post office could remain open. I agreed to this.
24. A temporary subpostmaster was appointed the same day. His name was Haroon Khan. He was in the Office during the audit. He appeared to know the auditors and they were laughing and joking. Haroon told us that he was running over seven different offices for subpostmasters on suspension.
25. He told us that during the time as Interim Postmaster at our office, one of Haroon's Post Offices had a loss of over £17,000 all the offices were closed for 2 days while the shortage was looked into and then Haroon was allowed to re-open them all without any form of suspension. I asked him why was it one rule for him and another for myself.
26. I was also advised by the Post Office that, as I had been suspended once before, it was unlikely that I would be able to remain a subpostmistress and it would be more cost effective to resign.
27. I would also like to mention that when suspended by the Post Office, and an interim Postmaster is appointed, they receive a full salary, and they pay the staff from that. They pay the suspended subpostmaster only a nominal amount, from which we were still had to pay the rent, rates and all other utilities and running costs.
28. The 1st time I was suspended, the interim paid £400 per month and the second occasion, they paid £600 per month. Our rates were over £1,100 a month alone.
29. As I had been suspended because of the shortfall, our financial position was in a critical position due to my husband working within the post office. We had to borrow money from family to make good the shortfall. This was very humiliating, as both myself and my husband felt like people thought we had stolen the money and stock.

30. Mr Khan remained the subpostmaster for a year. The Post Office was advertised as being for sale. I did find a potential buyer, but Mr Khan offered to purchase it. However, this did not transpire, and it was eventually bought by **GRO**

31. Our printing business declined dramatically due to the poor running of the post office, once the interims were in charge and even more when a new subpostmaster took over the business. I feel that this was partly due to the interim's having no interest in growing the Post Office business, but it had more to do with both mine and my husband's declining mental state. Caused by the actions of the Post Office.

Human impact

32. As I had been suspended because of the shortfall our financial position was in a critical position due to the fact that both myself and my husband worked within the Post Office. We had to borrow money from family to make good the shortfall. This was very humiliating as both myself and my husband felt like people thought we had stolen the money and stock.

33. As stated above, I had been suspended because of the shortfall which caused our financial position to be in a very poor state, this caused me to worry, and this escalated into severe depression and anxiety for which I sought medical help. I still suffer bouts of anxiety to this day.

34. I suffered depression and anxiety for which I sought medical help. Our financial position also suffered, and we needed assistance from family. Humiliation, financial difficulties, stress, depression & anxiety for both myself & my husband.

35. Even though we did nothing wrong, I was made to feel grateful that no legal proceedings were brought against me, I paid the money in full and was advised by the Post Office that if I resigned then no legal action would be taken, and a new Postmaster would be installed quickly.

36. However, the threat of criminal proceedings was always hanging over me. The worry was immense and intensified the depression and anxiety I suffered. It was also massively embarrassing and demeaning to think that people thought I was a thief and a criminal.
37. The financial impact was debilitating. The Post Office spent 12 months trying to move the Post Office to neighbouring shops and we had to pay all the bills for the property, which further affected our financial position, stress, and depression. I feel that the Post Office did their best to financially destroy both myself and my husband.
38. My depression and financial situation severely affected my family life and that of my husband and children. We had a family holiday planned, but I could bring myself to go on holiday for several years.
39. My youngest daughter had her prom and a family friend had to take her Prom dress shopping as I was in such a state mentally.
40. My children were upset and worried constantly for me and this added further to my depression. My husband put on a brave face but was secretly seeing a counsellor.
41. What we were put through is beyond words. It is a period of our lives that we look back on with only bad memories. What should have been the happiest times of our lives was ruined due to something we did not do.
42. It took us years to get back on our feet again. I would like the Post Office to acknowledge what they did.

Conclusion

43. What the Post Office has done to me, hundreds and possibly thousands of others is beyond words. They have destroyed the lives of decent, hardworking people and they need to be held accountable.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the content of this Statement to be true.

Signed... **GRO**

Dated... 17/1/22