

Witness Name: **GRO**
Statement No.: WITN0208_01
Exhibits: None
Dated: 18 January 2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF **GRO**

I, **GRO** 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.

BACKGROUND

2. I am now 67 years of age. I was married to **GRO** for 27 years. **GRO** was not only my life partner, but also worked shoulder to shoulder with me in the post office. Sadly, **GRO** has passed away. I have two sons, who are now 50 and 40.
3. My partner **GRO** was a business consultant, and I was retired after having run several newsagents over the years. Although I still did **GRO** paperwork and accounts.

4. **GRO** said to me that he thought that I needed a challenge in life and that, given my experience, he thought running a post office would suit me.
5. After being so active for many years, I found retirement to be somewhat stale. I thought **GRO** suggestion was a good one. I wanted to work, and run a business, and to be part of the community again.
6. **GRO** and I looked into the process of being a subpostmaster. I found premises and I applied to the Post Office to be a subpostmistress. I was interviewed at length and was accepted.
7. I was a subpostmistress at New Boston Post Office in Haydock, St Helens, from 1 June 2011 to 10 June 2016. I operated a retail business from the premises. I ran a general store at the branch; from 2013 I also developed and ran a bakery.
8. I upgraded from a sub post office to a main post office in 2012, which is when I started to experience shortfalls.

Training and Support

9. I remember attending 5 days of classroom training with Post Office in Chester. The training centre was set up like a working post office, with paper money and access to the Horizon System. I don't remember much of the specifics on what was covered during the training, but I believe the basics such as daily balances were covered.
10. At the time, I felt the training was adequate and that I had a good handle on the basics of the Horizon System, but the training did not cover every eventuality. I also remember receiving 5 days of onsite training at the branch on the first week I took up the position.

11. At the time, I do not remember experiencing too many specific problems with Horizon and the trainer seemed content with how I was running the branch and undertaking the daily balances. One of my employees, John, was an ex-subpostmaster who had sold his business and was very experienced. When I took over, I also employed Denise, who had worked with John for many years. She helped me with balancing and rolling over at the end of each month and with the more technical aspects of Horizon. As such, I felt I had a good amount of support from my experienced staff at the start.
12. It was not until 2012 when the branch was upgraded to a main post office that we started to experience any significant discrepancies on the Horizon System.
13. I received one further day of training when the branch was upgraded, and we were given additional products and services including road tax and more currency being added to our stock. We already had a lottery facility at the time of the upgrades.
14. When the discrepancies started to appear in 2012, I was confused as they made no sense, and I was convinced from the beginning that they must be occurring because of a fault with the Horizon System.
15. Until we became a Main Post Office, we had barely had any discrepancies at all. By this I mean that we did not even have one postage stamp that was not accounted for. As I say, I had run newsagents for years, and **GRO** was a business consultant, so we were very thorough in our accounting and bookkeeping.
16. However, after we became a Main Post Office, discrepancies began to appear for which we could not account. We would stay up late at night, to check every entry and the stock and to check the paperwork of our staff. However, it was all in order. As such, it became clear to both of us, that there must a fault or faults in the Horizon System.

Helpline

17. I called the helpline on a regular basis and specifically every time there was a significant discrepancy recorded, or when I couldn't balance the daily takings.
18. The advice I was given by the Helpline was to leave the shortfall on the system until the end of the month and roll it over. I was told to settle any shortfall centrally so they could be acknowledged and dealt with. I was told by the Helpline that shortfalls would be sorted out centrally. I trusted the advice I was given by the helpline, and I assumed that they were on my side. I was wrong; the Helpline was wrongly named, as it provided no help whatsoever
19. I remember having several meetings with Glen Cheshire, who was Post Office's Regional Manager. Previously, he had told me that he thought I was doing a very good job of running my post office and developing the business.
20. In fact, later when the problems with Horizon got very bad, Glen Cheshire told me in the post office that he did not believe that the problem lay with me or Peter.
21. When the system did not balance, I telephoned the helpline, they told me to simply roll the balance over to the next month. This meant that the problem was not addressed but only allowed to get worse. Glen Cheshire, the Regional Manager, called me to discuss the increasing deficit. I made it clear to him that we were taking every possible measure.

Shortfalls

22. In this section, I set out in brief detail my experiences 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.

23. I am only able to give approximate figures, although I do have a clear recollection of payments having been made by me. The Post Office should have full records of the payments made by me, or deductions taken by them.
24. My partner **GRO** looked after the financial side of the business. Unfortunately, he passed away April 2015. He died of a massive heart attack. Although I cannot say with any certainty, I believe the stress caused by the shortfalls contributed to his ill health.
25. Shortfall 1: It is clear from Post Office correspondence that I paid a sum of £5,748.71 in December 2015. It would have been my partner who processed the payment from my personal credit card. I do not recollect making the payment. I paid the Post Office in full for this alleged shortfall on 28 January 2016. The amount was never detailed in the accounts. It only appears in the central suspense account.
26. Shortfall 2: £2,623.58 on 25 February 2016. I settled this alleged shortfall centrally with the Post Office. The amount was never detailed in the accounts. It only appeared in the central suspense account.
27. Shortfall 3: £3,013.32 in March 2016. I paid the Post Office this alleged shortfall on 24 March 2016. The amount was never detailed in the accounts. It only appeared in the central suspense accounts.

Audit and investigation

28. I can remember the audits taking place; however, I cannot recall specific dates. The Post Office will have records of the audit dates and I can provide the following from my recollection.
29. The Post Office conducted at least 9 audits at the Branch. I would categorise some of these as informal visits, rather than full audits. I was never given an audit report

after the event, nor access to any of the evidence that underpinned the audit findings. I just had to accept the outcome.

30. Every time an audit took place, the auditors could not find a discrepancy in the branch which correlated with the discrepancies on Horizon. However, the shortfalls mentioned above were discovered during the audits and I was led to believe I had no option but to make good the shortfalls from my own pocket.
31. I did not trust the auditors. The reason for this is that I had caught the auditors making mistakes on at least two occasions. For example, one auditor told me that our stamps were 'out' (i.e., were missing). I denied this and insisted that they counted the stamps again. Once they were recounted, the auditor admitted that he was wrong. This happened a second time in the same audit, when I insisted another auditor redo his work, and he admitted that he had also made an error.
32. In approximately January 2016, the Post Office conducted another audit. I received a letter dated 4 February 2016 in which the Post Office claimed that I owed a 'central debt' of £31,494.56. I was shocked.
33. This sum fluctuated significantly in correspondence from the Post Office.
34. For example, I received a statement from The Post Office on 6 June 2016 which stated that I owed the Post Office £37,081.40. A payment plan was put in place for an initial deduction of £825 from my wages in February 2016, followed by 36 further monthly deductions of £825 and a final deduction of £969.56.
35. I had no say in this and the Post Office deducted the money without my consent. At no time was I provided with any evidence as to why this shortfall had occurred, and why it was my responsibility. I was given none of the data or information upon which this alleged shortfall was based.
36. I am unsure how much of this alleged debt was paid off before my contract was terminated. I do not have the relevant records and my partner dealt with some of

the finances of the branch, whilst I focused on running the floor on a day-to-day basis. From the records I have available, it is unclear how much of this deficit was paid. As I have said, GRO has since passed away.

37. I specifically remember an audit team arriving on 11 April 2016 to complete a full audit. The audit team were very rude and made me feel like a thief from the outset. The auditors would not let me near where they were working. I told them that this was ridiculous, as I could not know whether they were doing their job correctly. The audit team were there for a whole day. At the end of the day, they took my keys from me, put all the money in the safe and told me that I would not be allowed to re-enter the premises. I was told that my regional manager, Glen Cheshire, would call me.
38. On the same day, I received a call from Glen Cheshire. He told me that *"things couldn't keep going on like this in my office"*. I was suspended with immediate effect.
39. I asked him to explain why. I told him that he had been in the post office regularly; I had reported everything to the Post Office; I had been interviewed by him. He had no answer. He suspended me without pay that day. Mr Cheshire told me that I would receive a call from a man named Mike Shields.
40. The next day I received a call from Mr Shields. He asked me about the staff who worked for me, and the hours they worked. He told me that I should expect to receive calls from people who would be willing to take over the running of the branch.
41. I received a further call from Glen Cheshire inviting me to an informal meeting in Bolton on 29 April 2016. At that meeting, he brought a Post Office investigator who I was told was going to investigate the discrepancies. The Post Office Investigator asked me if any of my staff could have taken the money. I categorically said no and confirmed that I had no suspicions of my staff.

42. The Post Office Investigator said that there would be an investigation and that I might be prosecuted. I never met or heard from the investigator again. I have seen no evidence of any adequate investigation despite that I was assured, and believed, an investigation was being conducted at the time.

Suspension and Termination

43. I was suspended by the Post Office in relation to the alleged shortfalls on 12 April 2016 and the branch was closed from that date. The Post Office appointed a temporary subpostmaster a few months later. I was not allowed back into the branch after I was suspended.
44. My contract was terminated by the Post Office via a letter dated 10 June 2016. The letter stated that, as my contract was terminated within 3 years of my start date, I was required to pay back the set-up costs which were calculated at £20,226.90. The Post Office gave me no notice that my contract was being terminated.
45. I had to walk away from the business. After my contract was terminated, I lost all my post office customers, who had kept both the retail and bakery business alive. These both had to close, and I never had the opportunity to sell the branch. I had to give up the lease and a new subpostmaster was appointed.

Civil and Criminal Proceedings

46. Luckily, the Post Office did not pursue criminal or civil proceedings against me for the recovery of the alleged shortfalls. However, at the time, I lived in constant fear of prosecution or civil action because of what the Post Office Investigator had said to me at the formal meeting in Bolton.

Losses

47. I was led to believe by Post Office Ltd that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls. I experienced shortfalls of approximately £48,467.01. However, I am unable to determine how much of this sum I repaid, but it was substantial.
48. I was suspended for 3 months before my contract was terminated. During this time, I would estimate that I would have earned £7,800 (based on a net salary of £2,600 per month). Had I been given reasonable notice of 12 months; I would have received my salary of £31,200. In the alternative, if I had 6 months' notice I would have received £15,600, this is based on a net salary of £2,600 per month.
49. If my tenure had not been terminated, I would still be running the branch. I really enjoyed my job and would have liked to run the branch until my retirement, before which I would have earned approximately £156,000. In fact, I believe I would have continued past 65, as I would have like to have been able to continue to build the business and to hand it over to my children and grandchildren.
50. I had invested heavily in the retail shop and had established a bakery to increase sales. I was investing the profits from the retail store back into the business and was not taking a salary at the time. However, I expected it to begin making money soon because of my investment. After the termination of my position as subpostmistress, I continued to run the retail side of the business for around 2 months. However, the revenue fell so dramatically because of the loss of the post office that I was forced to close it.
51. Following the termination of my appointment, I was unemployed for 12 months. This was an extremely stressful time for me. I obtained part time employment in a pub and earnt around £120 per week and had to claim housing benefit.
52. Locally, people were saying I had stolen from the Post Office. I believe this was one of the reasons why customers stopped coming to the retail and bakery business after my contract with the Post Office had been terminated.

53. After my post office was closed, one of my former employees, **GRO** got a job around the corner in an off licence. When she was working there, a former customer of mine came in and told **GRO** that she had heard that I was in prison for theft from the Post Office. On another occasion, my son was pulled aside by a friend who told him that there was a rumour in our community that I was in prison for theft. My son was angry and embarrassed, and said that I was at home, and had not been convicted of anything.
54. My grandson was told, by other children at his primary school, words to the effect that, *"Your Nanny doesn't have the post office anymore, she got sacked for stealing"*. He went home very upset and told his mother, who told me. It broke my heart to learn that my grandson was being teased at school about what had happened to me.
55. This shows how widely this was being spoken in the community.

HUMAN IMPACT

56. It is impossible to give a true account of the impact all of this had on me and my family. I loved being a subpostmistress, however, the Post Office took this from me.
57. Every Wednesday I would have to do the balance on the Horizon System, with the final balance on Thursday to include the lottery. I came to dread Wednesdays, as I knew that Horizon would not balance. My assistant Denise would wait for me, as she knew that I was so worried. I would press the button on the system to accept the balance and send it through to Post Office headquarters. I just dreaded pressing that button, because I knew the system would report a shortfall. I would do it and look at Denise and shake my head.
58. I used to love getting up in the morning for work, but the worry became constant and wore me down.
59. The starkest example of the impact of the faults in Horizon, and Post Office's treatment of me, is that it drove me to attempt suicide.

60. I had been a successful businesswoman for much of my life. I took on and built up the post office and associated retail business and bakery. However, because of problems with the Post Office's Horizon System, everything was taken from me. I had to move out of my house, as I could no longer afford the rent. I moved into a flat above a garage. I could not see a way forward. My whole life had collapsed.
61. I decided that I could not take things anymore, and I decided to take my life. I waited for my son to leave. When he left, I prepared some tablets intending to overdose. However, my son had forgotten something. He came back unexpectedly and saw the pills on the coffee table in front of me with a tumbler of orange juice. He knew what I was intending and scooped up the pills. He told me that it was not the answer.
62. Since this time, in 2016, my son sent his oldest son to live with me so that I would never be alone. I was treated by my GP and prescribed antidepressants. My family have been deeply affected by all this, as they were put through the worry of knowing that I was so depressed that I had intended to take my life.
63. Another factor was the loss of trust and friendship with my staff. GRO and I used to stay up late into the night checking the figures and paperwork and the activities of all the staff. GRO and I would watch the CCTV for hours to see if one of the staff were stealing.
64. I had a very close relationship with my 7 staff, particularly those who worked with me in the post office. I had complete trust in them as people. However, the Post Office constantly suggested that my staff were stealing. The Post Office urged me to monitor my staffs' spending habits: had they bought a car, had they bought a house? Even though I did not believe that my staff were stealing, they could sense that I was monitoring what they did, and therefore our relationships were strained. This caused my key post office staff to leave my employment early.
65. I feel terrible about the loss of friendship and trust of my staff. Post Office destroyed these relationships.

66. Prior to becoming a subpostmistress, I was a retired successful businesswoman. I had a good home and a happy family. I took on the post office because I was simply too young and active to sit at home. I wanted the challenge of running a business again and building it up as something to pass on to my children and grandchildren.
67. The years between 2012 and now have been an unending period of increasing poverty, sadness and stress.
68. I am now 67. I would have thought that at this time I would be passing on a successful post office and retail business to my children and grandchildren. It was my dream that I would go part time but remain to help and support my family in a business in the centre of the community. Instead, I was treated like a criminal. I lost everything, my post office, retail business and bakery. I also lost the trust and friendship of my former staff. I have lost respect within the community.
69. I believe that the only reason that the Post Office and others did not sue me, was because I have nothing left but my state pension.

CONCLUSION

70. Nothing will make up for the years I have lost, the money I have lost, the respect and dignity that I have lost. However, what happened to me, and others was done by the Post Office, a government organisation. It cannot be allowed to go unpunished.
71. I know that no amount of money can give me back those lost years and lost dignity. However, the Post Office and government must be forced to do what can be done to put myself and others back in the position we should have been in, to bring us back from enforced poverty to a position where we can live again.
72. I was treated like a criminal. People in my community believe that I was a thief and that I was put in prison. Those who did this to me and other subpostmasters must be held to account. They must be made to feel like I felt every Wednesday before I pressed the button on the Horizon System to accept the balance.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this Statement to be true.

Signed.. **GRO** Dated.. *18/1/2022*

GRO