

Witness Name: Mr John Dwyer
Statement No.: WITN0329
Exhibits: None
Dated: 15 March 2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR JOHN DWYER

I, JOHN DWYER WILL SAY 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.

BACKGROUND

2. I was a Subpostmaster of the post office branch in Almada Street, Hamilton from 18 January 1996 until July 2016. I operated a Spar shop alongside the post office.
3. I ran a very successful, popular retail operation before the post office was installed in the same unit. My father was a shopkeeper before me, and I was happy to continue the family tradition.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

4. I received a day of training off-site, when the Horizon system was introduced, this was just a basic introduction to the Horizon system. Prior to this I used a manual system which I thought was prehistoric, but it worked, and you could check everything and know pretty much where any monies would be.
5. I found the training to be very inadequate. One day was not enough to train me to run a complex system such as the Horizon system.

HELPLINE

6. On completion of the training, I was advised that I could call the Horizon helpline if I encountered any issues.
7. I found myself contacting the Helpline approximately 4-5 times per week, as I began experiencing problems balancing the system and the figures just did not add up. I found the Helpline to be of no use at all. On raising a query or an issue, helpline staff would tell you that the system did not indicate that there was any fault showing on their systems, and that the error must be mine.
8. I was made to believe that it was not possible for the system to be wrong. I was continually told that the Horizon system was infallible, and it had to be human error. I was also told that I was the only one who was experiencing any problems with the Horizon system.
9. Eventually, I began to doubt myself and my staff. I was repeatedly reminded that I was liable for the shortfalls and had to make good the discrepancies, which I did.

10. Even when I ran the post office myself, I was checking the money every hour. I could not settle at all. My mind was continually racing.

SHORTFALLS

11. 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, in order to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.
12. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) in excess of £100,000. It was only because the retail store was so popular and profitable that I was able to maintain this level of shortfalls. However, in the end it became too financially crippling, and I was forced to sell.
13. The shortfalls would occur on various dates, in different amounts. It just did not make any sense.
14. The shortfalls were mainly coming from the lottery scratch cards. However, I had lots of problems with shortfalls. I became very paranoid and no longer trusted my staff, and so I ended up doing most of the work myself. I knew I was not stealing the money and yet the shortfalls kept occurring.
15. I would often take the money I made from the retail business and put it into the post office just so the system would balance, and I could continue to trade again the following day. It made me paranoid about my staff, and I ended up doing all the work myself. It was exhausting and beyond stressful. I could never take a day off.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

16. I was audited on at least 3 occasions. Each time, the audits showed that there were issues with the scratch cards being short. The auditors said that I needed to check the scratch card levels on a more regular basis, that I was following bad procedures and that my staff must have been stealing. I was told this so often that I began to believe it. It was extremely demoralising, as you have no option but to believe what the Post Office Limited are telling you.
17. Following the audits, I was told how much I was allegedly short, and the Post Office auditors expected me to pay the sum demanded there any then; otherwise the branch would be closed.
18. I had no option other than to make the payments demanded. I was also terrified that if I did not, I would be prosecuted for theft. I was also terrified that I would lose my business.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

19. I was not suspended. I resigned, as I had had enough of it all. I was given little support by Post Office, and spent all my hours in the branch trying to balance, rather than spending time living my life. Battling with the Horizon System and keeping the post office going had taken over and ended up ruining my life.
20. I resigned due to the shortfalls and the pressure that came from that. I needed to get out, as I was constantly trying to chase the shortfalls. I became obsessed with it to the point where my relationships both personally and with my staff were destroyed.
21. I had no option but to sell the branch for my own sanity. I was also at the brink of financial ruin. I could no longer afford to keep paying the shortfalls. I was able to pass it onto an individual I knew that the Post Office liked.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

22. The Post Office did not pursue civil or criminal proceedings against me for the recovery of the alleged shortfalls. However, it was implied that if I did not make good the shortfalls, I could face criminal prosecution.

LOSSES

23. I estimate that I have paid back in excess of £100,000. I took the money for the shortfalls from the retail side.
24. I estimate that my losses amounted to some £250,000 when taking into account the fact I had to sell my business. However, I also lost the income I would have earned had I been able to continue running my post office.
25. I was very reluctant to sell my business, as I could never tell if the shortfalls were caused by my staff or the computer system. I knew it must have been the computer system, but the whole scenario completely messed with my concept of reality. I went through lots of staff who worked in the retail side, and I had no problems there. If they were intent on stealing, why would they only do it from the post office and not the retail side of the business as well. It just did not make sense.

HUMAN IMPACT

26. I suffered serious shortfalls in the Horizon IT system. I sought help from the Post Office. I made them aware of the shortfalls and asked for advice, but it was never helpful. I was subject to audits and required to pay the Post Office large sums. The process led to me suspecting my staff of theft and led to the breakdown of my marriage and estrangement from my children.

27. I was party to the mediation scheme and received £42,000. I was party to group litigation against Post Office Limited; as a result, I am excluded from the Historic Shortfall Scheme.
28. The shortfalls and faulty computer system led me to distrust my staff and ruined a lot of relationships. I lost my wife and four children because I was never home. I was also failing to provide for them, as I was always having to make good shortfalls.
29. Eventually I made a lot of bad decisions due to selling the business, because of the stress I was under.
30. I became very paranoid and distrustful. I changed as a person. I was never like that before. I could not trust my staff and worked the counter myself. I was constantly checking money. My personal life suffered massively, as I was never at home. I was not there for my wife and children. I am left with a lot of guilt and regret because of this.
31. I refused to take holidays or have time off. Even when I was not in the branch, I was constantly anxious about more money going missing. It had a very detrimental effect on my psychological and physical health.
32. The stress and anxiety created a toxic working environment. I could no longer offer good customer service. It completely drained me. It really affected my whole life. I put the computer system first before personal relationships.
33. I could not work out what the problem was. I ended up disconnected from my family. It destroyed my marriage.
34. I have four children who do not want to see me. I have not seen them for over 5 years. I had an exceptionally good family business until I put a post office in. I ended

- up selling the business reluctantly. I was on and off universal credit for about two years. I have now found work as a counter clerk in a convenience store for 16 hours per week. I have had an awful time since my divorce, and now I am living with my mother.
35. I had a few stress related health issues due to the issues in the branch and the loss of my family life. I was constantly grumpy and angry.

CONCLUSION

36. I am a completely different person since the events with the Post Office occurred. They knew their system was flawed, but they continued to deny it. They happily stood by whilst innocent, hardworking people were struggling, their lives destroyed.
37. I have lost my family; I no longer live with my wife and four children due to the stress that that this all placed on my family life.
38. I do not know how to quantify the effects this has had on me, but I have been through hell.
39. One way of describing how I feel is grieving. I worked so hard to take on and build up a family business, working seven days a week until 10pm at night; with the purpose of providing for my family and a service to the community. Losing my business was like losing a child. My feelings of deep loss, including loss of dignity, continue every day.
40. I feared losing my business, I feared for my reputation and my children's future. I no longer have any contact with my children at all.

- 41. I would have my family business has the horizon system worked. It was my life's work and my fathers before me.
- 42. I would like to see Post Office Ltd brought to account. They need to know how much suffering their actions have caused.
- 43. I have lost so much because of Post Office Ltd. I will never get that back.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I confirm the contents of the statement to be true and correct.

GRO

Signed.....

.....Dated... 15 March 2022

John Dwyer