

Witness Name: Mr Victor Price
Statement No.: WITN0225_01
Exhibits: None
Dated...7/1/2022.....

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR VICTOR PRICE

I, MR VICTOR PRICE 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 was born in November 1958. I am married to [GRO] and am currently working as a self-employed Taxi driver. We live in Colyton, Devon. I began a career in retail on leaving college and rose to the position of area manager within the Spar company. However, due my negative experiences with the Post Office I have been compelled to find an alternative career.

3. After leaving school I worked in the local Spar shop in Redditch, Worcestershire. In 1992, through the company, I was able to purchase the leasehold of a Spar store in Redditch, Worcestershire. The shop was in a row of 9 other independent businesses on a council estate.
4. The shop was very successful. It was the largest convenience store in the area. Rapidly expanded sales growth in my store helped the other retailers. Business was very good. We were a tight, close-knit community.
5. Our row of shops also had a General Post Office. In 1995, there was talk in the area that this was going to be closed. This would have devastated the community. The closest Post Office was approximately 2 miles away. It would have been a huge inconvenience for many, particularly the elderly who relied on the local Post Office. I therefore decided to buy the store.
6. In 1997 I went on to buy a further Spar store in Stourbridge, and then in 1998 Quarry Bank, which also had an in-store Post Office. I refitted the business, and all 3 stores were initially very successful. I employed 4 assistants which were already in-post when I took over the branches.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

7. After the Horizon system was implemented, I undertook 2-day training sessions in Birmingham.
8. The sessions covered starting up the system and basic transactions such as pensions, stamps, and licensing. There was a lot of information to take in all in a very short period. It was very intense.
9. We were taken through how to do transactions by being shown pictures in a flip book rather than on an actual working terminal. We were not given any hands-on

experience. Balancing was covered but I do not remember going through it in much detail. How to deal with shortfalls was not mentioned at all.

10. Following this training, the Post Office sent trainers in to the store. They were there for approximately 2 weeks. The trainers would arrive at 10 am and it was apparent early on that they were keen to leave as soon as possible. More often than not they would be gone by 3pm.

HELPLINE

11. Shortfalls started to appear from very early on. I always noted these and made sure I made the Post Office aware. I was calling the Helpline approximately twice a week. Describing them as a 'helpline' was a joke, as I was never given any useful advice.
12. I was repeatedly told that the system would right itself, to 'let it run till next week and the missing funds would appear', and so on. The regularity of contacting the helpline with issues relating to shortfalls far outweighed having to call them for any other issues, such as the equipment or hardware issues.

SHORTFALLS

13. 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.
14. Shortfalls were appearing in both of the branches I ran. I was at a loss to understand how or why this was happening. I asked if this was a usual issue, or if it was this happening to other subpostmasters. I was repeatedly told that the problem was unique to me, and I was the only one it was happening to.

15. I was constantly on edge and feeling increasingly isolated. The stress was becoming unbearable. I did, however, contact other subpostmasters and they were also having the same issues, but I could never get any resolution. My calls to the Helpline were of no use. I was not told that this was an issue in other stores or that there was a potential problem with the system.
16. I was made to feel that I must be an idiot or a thief.
17. Despite my being aware of others having the same problems, I was not taken seriously. I began to question my staff. I knew I was not at fault, so it made me naturally suspicious.
18. I also felt embarrassed and ashamed that this was happening. Nearly every week there would be shortfalls. If ever there was an over ridge it would never be as much as the shortages and was always minimal in comparison. The systems in each branch were routinely down each week.
19. I would spend hours going through the transactions over and over again without success. I reported the shortfalls but the advice was always that I was liable. I estimate that I settled in excess of £7,000 in this way.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

20. It was very clear from the Post Office that it was my responsibility for the discrepancy, and I was liable. I had to make up the shortfall. The only shop out of the three I owned that was making a profit was the one that did not have an in-store Post Office. It was only because of this that I was able to make up the difference. I used the profits from my one sustainable shop to finance the others. It was a no-win situation.
21. I therefore made the decision in 2007/2008 to sell the shop in Quarry Bank.

22. 6 months after I sold the store, I received a letter demanding the sum of £3,000 that remained owing from the shortfall. The letter was very threatening. I was led to believe that criminal charges would proceed if I did not pay. I was not shown any documents relating to this shortfall. I paid the outstanding amount on a credit card, increasing the debt I was already in.

HUMAN IMPACT

23. I had substantial losses. I lost my business investment, my business, then and future income from the Post Office and future profits from the retail business. Nobody can compensate me for my loss of dignity and pride and the depression that came with that. It is hard to describe the effect this has had on me. I lost my livelihood, my career, my home.

24. I resigned my position in both branches and sold the businesses. I had no option as they were losing money. I had no passion left to run them. I felt defeated. The stress of the situation left me struggling with depression. It not only affected me, but my family and those around me.

25. There were rumours in the community. I was afraid to face people. I was reluctant to leave the house. I did at times turn to alcohol in an attempt to cope, and my health deteriorated.

26. After losing our home we lived in a caravan for two years. We had to literally sell everything. Even now we are still only able to live in rented property. I am an immensely proud man. I made sure my debts were paid but finding out that these were not my debts is hard to bear.

CONCLUSION

27. I went from being a confident, outgoing, successful businessman with hopes and ambitions to losing everything. I felt defeated and crushed. It has taken many years

to start to slowly build up again, but I fear I will never reach the same position I would have been in, but for the outright lies and cover-ups done by the Post Office and their associates.

28. I would like some closure on this. I want an acknowledgment of their wrongdoing and an apology.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed... **GRO** Dated... *07/01/22*

Victor Price