

Witness Name: Fiona Elliott
Statement No.: WITN0349_01
Exhibits: 1
Dated: 09/05/2022

IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF FIONA ELLIOTT

I, FIONA ELLIOTT, 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.
2. I live with my husband and our four children. I have been a childminder working from home since 2014.

BACKGROUND

3. I was the subpostmistress at the post office branch in Urney, Clady, in Strabane from 2005 until 2009. I operated the branch along with an accompanying retail/supermarket business.
4. Clady is a very close-knit community where everyone knows each other. My family have lived in the area a long time and is well known as my brother has a car dealership and my father owns a petrol station.

5. The shop and post office came up for sale in 2005, and my husband and I purchased it along with the attached house. The attached property came as a buy to let investment and we rented it out.
6. Prior to running the store, I had a successful career working in a medical practice.
7. My husband and I discussed buying the business and the property at length. It sounded like a sound business idea, working with a trusted and respectable institution – Post Office Ltd. It was to be an investment in which we could work in until our retirement. We hoped this would be our pension, something we could pass onto our children.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

8. The Horizon IT system was already installed in the branch when I took over the position in 2005.
9. I received one day of in branch training from a Post Office advisor when I took on the position. However, I did keep on the assistant, [GRO] who had worked in the branch prior to me taking over. [GRO] had more experience, and so I felt confident having her there, knowing that there was a lot to learn in such a short time.
10. However, discrepancies appeared very early on which neither myself nor my assistant [GRO] could explain or account for.

HELPLINE

11. After I began to experience shortfalls in the Horizon system, and I contacted the Helpline on more times that I can remember. I asked the Post Office for extra help and training. I felt I was doing something wrong and made it known to them that I wanted to understand why the discrepancies were happening.

12. The advice from the helpline advisors did not help at all. I was told that I was responsible for the shortfalls, and I had to put my own money in to make up for them. If I did not do this, I could not roll over the system and continue to trade.
13. I was not given any help from the Post Office as to why the shortfalls continued to occur even though I was notifying the helpline on every occasion.
14. My request to the Post Office for help and further training was ignored.
15. I kept a log of all my calls to the Helpline, which is exhibited to this statement. I did not see my area manager for approximately 2 years. My stress, anxiety and frustration levels were through the roof. I was continually let down by the Post Office. I felt I had no other option but to put any profit I earned from the retail business into keeping the post office running.

SHORTFALLS

16. 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.
17. I experienced regular and repeated shortfalls in the branch from the start of my tenure. I estimate that in total I used approximately £15,000 to £20,000 of my own money to make good the shortfalls.
18. I felt under constant pressure to keep the business running, not just for myself but for the community. I was putting in money from the retail profits to pay for the post office shortfalls. I felt I had no choice but to pay the money as I could not afford to lose my business.

AUDITS AND INVESTIGATIONS

19. The branch was audited in 2008/2009, I cannot remember the exact date.
20. I had requested the audit in the hope that it would help explain where and how the shortfalls were occurring. The auditors found a figure far higher than I was expecting, particularly given that I was making good these shortfalls out of my own money every week.
21. The auditors came back to me with a shortfall of approximately £6,000. I was told by the auditors that I had to pay this immediately. I was not given any information about how or why these shortfalls had arisen and at no time was I provided with any data necessary for me to independently check the auditor's findings.
22. At the end of this audit the post office was closed there and then, and I was threatened with criminal proceedings if I did not pay the money back.
23. I was terrified. My mind was all over the place. My only thought was that I had to avoid any charges for the sake of my family and my reputation even though I was completely innocent. I borrowed the money from my brother to pay off the Post Office.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

24. Even though I paid the shortfall I was suspended. My assistant GRO was put in place as a temporary subpostmaster by Post Office Ltd although I was still liable for the rent and other expenditure.

25. I was offered redundancy in 2009, which I accepted as I could not face working in the shop again after the awful experience. The redundancy offered me a way out as it was costing me money to keep the post office open.
26. Post Office Ltd downgraded their post office services to a mobile shop counter, which still was not working out any better. We still had the retail shop but with all the rumours circulating in the village about how we had stolen money from them, customers stopped coming into the shop. The business eventually became unviable, and we sold it at a loss in 2011.

HISTORICAL SHORTFALL SCHEME

27. In around August 2021 I applied to the Post Office's Historical Shortfall Scheme to seek some compensation for my losses. The Post Office Scheme was very complex and it made no provision for the cost of legal assistance in making the application. I therefore had to make the application myself, after consulting with my accountant. With my accountant's advice, I submitted a claim for around £1.2 million. My application was calculated from shortfall payments, loss of profits, loss of earnings, loss of property and the effect on my health and wellbeing.
28. The Post Office finally responded to my application on 31 March 2022, making an offer of £24,512.24. This was a tiny proportion of my own estimate of my losses.
29. In their letter the Post Office have offered a "good faith meeting" with their legal representatives, Herbert Smith Freehills, to discuss any concerns I have with the Post Office's offer.
30. However, after I have been so badly let down by the Post Office previously and now in the Historic Shortfall Scheme process, I do not feel that Post Office is capable of engaging with SPMs in "good faith".

31. I believe that the Post Office wishes to be able to say to Parliament, the public, and now the Inquiry that it has made a great number of offers of compensation to subpostmasters. However, the compensation scheme is so complex, so slow and the offers so small that I do not believe that the Post Office has learned anything from this scandal, and is still determined to treat subpostmasters as a nuisance, and not decent people who have been ruined by them.
32. I am unable to exhibit the correspondence I have received from the Post Office on the Historical Shortfall Scheme as they have marked it as "Without Prejudice".

HUMAN IMPACT

33. I have struggled to put into words what all this did to me and my family.
34. I had never done anything wrong in my life, but was made to feel as though I had committed fraud. This was made more personal because it was supposedly against the people within my community.
35. I was very close to my neighbours in the community and I felt a commitment to provide the postal service to them, so to have my honesty to that community questioned was profoundly hurtful.
36. Our property which was attached to the post office was repossessed. Although we had never lived in that house, as it was a buy to let property. We could not find anyone to rent the house, possibly because of my damaged reputation, and we could not keep up the repayments.
37. Fortunately, I have not been made bankrupt. I have an arrangement plan in place until Post Office compensates me for my losses. However, I have lost my home, my business, my future.

38. We moved out of our family home and into my parent's house. As an adult with my own family, this was demoralising.
39. Thankfully, I had a great deal of support from my family and my close friends. However, I was slandered in the village. My community was very tight-knit and I had been in a prominent person as the subpostmaster, so my husband and I felt a great deal of stigma when rumours of me being dishonest started to spread.
40. The ordeal that the Post Office put me through caused a lot of anguish, which led me to suffer anxiety and depression. I suffered chest pains from the stress and experienced weight gain. My husband was also very stressed and developed high blood pressure.
41. My self-esteem, pride, dignity and health were affected, and continue to be. I am not the same bubbly person I once was. I will be forever changed by this.

CONCLUSION

42. I feel very let down by Post Office. I would like those responsible within Post Office Ltd to pay for what they have done to me, my family and other honest people.
43. I feel Post Office Ltd need to be held accountable for all the lives they have ruined.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed: **GRO** Dated: 9/5/22

Fiona Elliott