

Witness Name: Maureen McKelvey
Statement No.: WITN0370_01
Exhibits: None
Dated: 09.05.2022

IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MAUREEN MCKELVEY

I, MAUREEN MCKELVEY, 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 on my own now. My husband has sadly passed away. I currently work as a self-employed interior designer.

BACKGROUND

3. I was the subpostmistress at the post office branch in Clanabogan, Omagh in Northern Ireland from approximately 1990 until 2001. Within the branch, I also ran a retail store selling general goods.
4. I had worked in the retail industry previously, and my late husband suggested I should take on the post office when it came up for sale. There was a shop within the branch, so I was confident that I could take on the role. I was excited to do

- something positive and to have a purpose. I had recently lost my daughter and my husband encouraged me to take this on. I fully intended to build the business and it would be what I would do until my retirement.
5. I trusted Post Office Ltd as a brand. The previous owner had not taken particular care with the business, but I knew I could improve and build on what was already there. I expanded into the premises next door with the help of a £120,000 bank loan.
 6. When I first took on the position of subpostmistress, the post office operated on the old paper-based system for many years before the introduction of the Horizon system. The Horizon system was introduced in approximately 1999 and immediately I began to experience shortfalls and surpluses.
 7. When the system showed a surplus, it was a minor amount however, when I experienced shortfalls, the amounts were more significant. I was led to believe that any shortfall was my responsibility. I therefore used any profit I made from the retail business to make good the shortfalls.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

8. When Horizon was introduced, myself and my female employee were promised 3 days of training. In reality, we had, at most, an hour in a local hotel.
9. On the first day of training one of the trainers failed to show up, so we were told to come back the following day. The next day the generator in the hotel did not work so we were sent home again. The advice given to us was to switch on the system, the only thing we had been shown to do, and to work it out for ourselves.
10. I do not remember being given any training manuals or literature to refer to. I was told that I could call a number for advice if it was needed.

HELPLINE

11. I began to experience shortfalls in the Horizon system and would contact the Helpline for assistance. The advice I was given was to simply make good the shortfalls, as they were my responsibility.
12. I found the Helpline to be anything but helpful. I was often told by the helpline advisors that they would investigate the problem and any money of my own I put into the system would be refunded. However, none of the money I paid in to make good the shortfalls was refunded back to me.
13. There was a local Post Office employee that I was given the specific contact details for. However, he would not answer the phone. A few years later this Post Office employee gave evidence at my trial for theft and admitted that he was overloaded with calls, and bombarded with requests for help. In spite of him stating this in court, I specifically remember being told by the Post Office that no other subpostmasters were having problems with Horizon.

SHORTFALLS

14. 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.
15. At the start of my tenure, the branch operated on the old pen and paper based system and it all seemed to run fairly smoothly, it was only when the Horizon system was introduced that things started going downhill.
16. After the introduction of Horizon, I estimate that in total I paid in the region of £25,000 to £30,000 in shortfalls. I was led to believe that the shortfalls were my responsibility. Additionally, the Horizon system had to balance to allow trading to

- continue. I had to balance the system to ensure I could open the branch and deal with customers.
17. I made Post Office Ltd aware of every shortfall. I asked for their help in resolving the issues and was repeatedly told the post office were working on it.
18. I had shortfalls most weeks, it was often £50-£200, which adds up when it's occurring week on week. The accounts were short more times than not, and each time I was told by the post office to pay back the money and a correction will come back.
19. I was always ringing the post office and complaining about the issues I was experiencing because I did not think it was right that I should be putting my own money in all the time. The helpline and area manager would also tell me if I cannot cover the shortfalls then the system will balance itself out the next week. The system never did balance itself, and any money I put it never came back.
20. I specifically recall a time where a local lady who ran her own business came in to pay money in through the giros, and there were a couple of occasions where, when I went in to check the giros, the transaction on the system had disappeared but I had the print out from the transaction I had completed. We confronted the post office about this matter and they just said that they were working on the icons.
21. I was often told by the post office that no one else was experiencing these problems but I didn't believe them for one minute.

AUDITS AND INVESTIGATIONS

22. Prior to Horizon being introduced, I would be audited yearly with no issues.

23. Following the introduction of Horizon and my making the shortfalls known to the Post Office I was audited. I am unable to remember the exact date, but I certainly remember being treated with utter contempt by the auditors.
24. The auditors marched in one morning and demanded my keys. I was then told that a shortfall had been identified and I would have no more access to the post office. They told me they were from Special Branch. It was terrifying and humiliating.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

25. I was suspended by the Post Office in 2001 as I was accused of stealing thousands of pounds.
26. I was served with a notice of prosecution for theft but I was left waiting years before my case was heard in court. I was left in limbo for 5 years not knowing what would happen.
27. Following my suspension, I was repeatedly warned by Post Office Ltd that I could face up to 10 years in prison for theft.
28. This impacted negatively on my mental health. Rumours circulated in the local community that I had stolen from Post Office Ltd. I felt alienated and despised.

CRIMINAL/CIVIL PROSECUTION

29. I have been in contact with the solicitor who represented me during my criminal trial. They are attempting to obtain the papers relating to my prosecution but due to the passage of time, this is proving somewhat difficult.
30. I was waiting for 2 ½ years from the date I was served notice of my prosecution for my case to be heard in court. Even just talking about it now makes me cringe; it was such an awful time in my life. I was mentally and physically broken. My body just broke down from the stress and I started having anxiety attacks.

31. I was under so much stress that my thyroid ruptured and I had to undergo major surgery. The doctor told me had this happened anywhere else in my body I would have been dead. He said it was due to stress.
32. I had three young children, and I had lost my husband only 2 years before all of this happened. The period leading up to my prosecution was mental torture.
33. I couldn't even leave my house anymore, If I am honest I thought I was on my way out.
34. I kept having to press the Post Office to get my case heard, because they seemed to be in no rush, but I knew my health wasn't going to stick it out because of all the stress I was under.
35. I even had the person who was investigating me approach me twice, once at the shop and once at my house, and he told me to confess to the charges otherwise I am looking at 10 years in prison.
36. This really broke me, and I knew things were going to get serious at this point.
37. In 2006, my case came to trial at Dungannon Court in Northern Ireland. I had to attend court for a full week. I was still on a lot of medication at this point because my health was not good.
38. My experience in court was dreadful. I had to sit and listen to all the evidence the Post Office had against me, and it was clear in their eyes I was not worthy of the Post Office.
39. The way the Post Office tried my case was by asking me to pick out a number of days at random that according to them I had balanced wrong and so owed the post office money.

40. They went through all the evidence and marked up everything they thought I had done wrong.
41. However, it just so happened that one of the days I picked out was actually a balance that I did not do but was still short. I was able to prove that I had not carried out the balance on that particular day because my son had an accident and I had to take him to the hospital. So a man named Gary Grugan, who was employed by the Post Office and was the manager in the Omagh Post Office did the balance in my office that day.
42. My Solicitor pointed this out to the court, and we were able to prove that Gary had carried out the balance, because he did it in a red pen and used a completely different method to me but still came up short.
43. It was this point that the judge and jury realised what they Post Office was trying to do, and you could see that the judge was less than impressed by the Post Office now. The judge took a very dim view of what the Post Office had done.
44. If I had not spotted that Gary had done the balance that day I have no doubt that I would have been looking at jail time.
45. Before I went to court, I hadn't really told my children what was going on because they were young. But on the first morning I attended court I explained to them what might happen, i.e. that I may go to jail. I had to have all my affairs in order because I really did not know what was going to happen.
46. I left my niece who was staying with me at the time in charge of everything and in charge of looking after my children.
47. I had to prepare for the worst case scenario, because I was up against the Royal Mail, and even though I had evidence I just could be sure I would beat the Royal Mail, they are not the kind of company you go up against and win.
48. I was found not guilty of theft. The whole experience was thoroughly traumatic but I was over the moon that I was found innocent.

49. Despite being found innocent of any charges, I was forced to sell my business due to the stress caused and financial pressure I was under.

LOSSES

50. I estimate that I paid between £25,000 to £30,000 of my own money to make good the losses. I also had to sell the business, as I could no longer cope with going in there. I sold it at a significant loss but I just wanted to be rid of the place. I also lost my Post Office salary, and the profits of my shop. Worst of all, I lost my reputation, and spent years in dread waiting to be prosecuted for something I did not do.

HUMAN IMPACT

51. I could not begin to tell you the impact this had on me. Physically and mentally, it has had a devastating effect.

52. I underwent surgery on a mass in my neck. Thankfully, this was a benign growth in my thyroid and a ruptured gland. My surgeon did put this down to the result of extreme stress. He told me I should be grateful that this had not spread to any other area as it could have been much more serious.

53. My reputation in the local area was wrecked. Even though I was found not guilty, this had been hanging over me for years and my trial had been in the news; so the rumours circulated. I had to suffer years of suspicion and rumours before being vindicated but still gossip remains.

54. I can only describe the attitude of the Post Office officials as 'Mafia' like. They were rude and abrupt. I did not deserve to be treated like this. I suffered with anxiety and panic attacks. I was diagnosed as being clinically depressed and on anti-depressants.

55. My health declined rapidly after the court case. Even though I had been found not guilty my health went downhill as a result of the years of stress.
56. I tried to continue to run the shop but could not face going in there anymore because my head just was not in it anymore, so I had no option but to sell and I sold it at a loss.
57. I was dependant on the income from the shop because I had built the new shop and I needed the income to pay for that; so having to sell the business put me in a really difficult financial position.
58. I was dependant on my brothers and sisters for years because I was just not fit for work. I was forced to borrow money from them, and for a proud woman, this was humiliating.
59. My finances were ruined after my case, I had nothing. I had to get family to help me cover my mortgage and then when my eldest boy got older and started working he helped me out and took over the mortgage payments.
60. It was a terrible time I was going through, I did not go out at all, I just minded my grandchildren as that was about all I was fit to do.
61. The Post Office took everything from me; quite literally.
62. They took my future; I had planned to run my business up until retirement. I built it up from the bottom, and it was going well, that's why I built the new shop, I had so many plans for it but the post office stole that all away from me.
63. I felt the Post Office robbed me of my home life as well. It feels as though my children just grew up, got married and on moved on without me because I just was not present anymore. I was there, but only in vision.
64. I have missed out on so much of life because of the Post Office.

CONCLUSION

65. I lost my business, my health and my reputation.

66. The least I expect from the inquiry is an apology from Post Office Ltd. I believe those high up in the organisation knew what was happening and there was a failure in the Horizon system.

67. I would also like to see everybody's name cleared that was done wrong by the post office.

68. I cannot see the Post office righting the wrongs they have committed, but I would love to see some compensation for the loss of my business and livelihood, but also for my lost reputation and my lost years with my children.

69. I want to be able to make it up to my family for what they had to do for me. I can never get the time or my health back, but I would like to be able to thank those who supported me.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed: **GRO** Dated: 09.05.2022
Maureen McKelvey