

WITNESS: VIJAY PAREKH

STATEMENT NO: WITN11980100

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: 4 FEBRUARY 2025

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF VIJAY DOLATRAI PAREKH

I, VIJAY DOLATRAI PAREKH, DATE OF BIRTH [GRO] OF [GRO]
[GRO] will say as follows:-

1. I am one of the sub-postmasters affected by the Horizon IT scandal and now a Core Participant in the Post Office Horizon It Inquiry ('the Inquiry'). I have drafted this statement with the assistance of Hodge Jones & Allen solicitors, my representatives for the purposes of the Inquiry.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

2. I was born in India. I came to the UK when I was six years old. I lived in Brent from the age of 9 and attended school there until I did my O-Levels, after which I started working.
3. My first jobs were in telesales and other clerical work. I began my career working on the railway in 1997. I was first based in Luton as a Train Dispatcher and Platform Supervisor, before moving to Virgin Trains at Euston Station in 1999.
4. In the early 2000s, I was having problems with my [GRO] and was diagnosed with [GRO]. I had a [GRO].
5. I wanted to find a less physically demanding job because of my [GRO]. I considered starting a restaurant business, but someone suggested the Post Office might be a good option.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

6. In 2004, I saw that the property that housed my local Post Office in Willesden was up for sale. Another buyer wanted to turn it into an off license, but I put in an offer to keep it as a Post Office. I knew all the shop keepers and most of the residents there as the Post Office was located on the road I lived on until I was in my mid 20s and even after, I lived very locally to the Post Office.
7. My offer to buy the Post Office Franchise was accepted and in 2005.I entered into multiple contracts with the Post Office to buy the 3 storey property the Post Office was housed in and then to lease them the ground and basement floors of the property to run the Post Office; as part of the same arrangement I was made Sub-Postmaster for the branch.
8. To buy the Post Office I took out a mortgage of on my property to put down as a deposit. I was short so I took out an additional charge of on the same property. I bought the Post Office building with an additional mortgage. of
9. We had one week of training provided by the outgoing Postmaster. The training was non-specific, general training about how to run the Post Office.
10. It was a busy Post Office with seven counters. My wife and I shared the load, but it was hard work.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS, PROCEEDINGS AND CONVICTION

11. Before taking over the Post Office in Willesden, I was not aware of any accounting issues. I inherited an imbalance from the outgoing Postmaster, but I didn't find this out until after I had signed the contracts and taken over the branch.
12. Any shortfalls did not show up straight away and only became apparent during the weekly accounting on Wednesdays. There was also monthly accounting, which revealed big losses.
13. Everything worked ok for the first two weeks, but then the losses began. In my second year of running the Post Office I had my first significant shortfall of £8,000. I was concerned and so rang the Horizon helpline. This was not helpful, so I took the problem to my area manager who approved a plan for me to pay back the shortfall in monthly instalments (£1,000 per month for eight months).

14. The losses continued and I continually reached out to Post Office management and the Help Desk to see where these losses were coming from but help was not forthcoming. I could not keep track of my running total. My brother-in-law helped me do the accounts and he was telling me that I was losing money, but I had no idea how this could have happened; I thought perhaps someone taken money out of the till but I did not know.
15. I think I paid around £50,000 into the Post Office to cover the shortfall and keep the Post Office trading during my tenure as Sub-Postmaster.
16. I was audited on 29 April 2009 and an additional shortfall of £78,000 was found. I was interviewed by the two investigators who were called by the auditors to come down. I was asked to sit in the staff room whilst the auditors and investigators searched the Post Office, this is where I was later interviewed. I sat there for the whole day not knowing what was taking place at my branch. I cannot recall whether I was cautioned or advised of my right to legal advice, but I did not have anyone there to support me during the interview. During my interview I explained to the investigators that I did not know how such a big loss could have happened, but the auditors told me multiple times that my Post Office was the only branch with such big losses, this hadn't happened before and that I was in a lot of trouble. They told me that if I signed their statement and did what they told me then the consequences of the loss would be less severe.
17. The investigators searched my house and tried to get me to confess, even after they had checked all of mine and my wife's bank accounts and there was no surplus money. They made a tape recording of the interrogation and asked me to sign it at the end, which I did.
18. The next day I was suspended and was not allowed to enter any part of the premises which I had used my life savings to buy. A few months later my contract was terminated. The Post Office sent someone to take over the Post Office temporarily, and my wife and I were not allowed to continue working in the branch. My daughter GRO continued working, but she was not allowed to take over as Sub-Postmaster.
19. I was told that this was a severe situation and had not happened at any other branches, but I note that they had someone available to step in as Sub-Postmaster immediately;

I now understand that there was a specialist company of ex Sub-Postmasters who were drafted in to take over Post Offices in similar circumstances.

20. I was charged with Theft and False Accounting. On 10 January 2010, I pleaded not guilty at Willesden Magistrates Court and my case was sent to Harrow Crown Court.
21. On 8 November 2010 I pleaded guilty before Mr Recorder B Kogan to the theft charge on the advice of my criminal solicitors. I was advised that Horizon was completely accurate, and that if I entered a guilty plea and submitted character references I would be unlikely to be given a custodial sentence.
22. I paid back the £78,000 shortfall prior to sentencing in an effort to avoid prison. As a family we owned a retail and residential property near Willesden and we sold this to pay the shortfall back to the Post Office.
23. On 10 January 2011, I was sentenced to 18 months in custody by Mr Recorder B Kogan at Harrow Crown Court. I was told the sentence had been reduced sentence because of my guilty plea.
24. I spent three months at Wormwood Scrubs, then was transferred to Ford Open Prison on account of my good behaviour for another three months. I was released after a total of six months in custody. For the six months after this I was subject to an electronic tag and curfew, then for a further six months I was required to report to the probation service each week.
25. My lawyers helped me to appeal my sentence on the grounds of my health issues but this was not successful. I have seen that my court of appeal case reference was 201100665A6 and I was granted a representation order by Mr Justice Supperstone on 14 March 2011.
26. My daughter lodged a complaint to the CRCC regarding my conviction and in April 2021 they wrote to me advising that they had written to the High Court and stated that my sentence was unsafe. Thereafter my conviction was overturned at the Royal Courts of Justice by the Court of Appeal in April 2021.

SHORTFALLS SHOWED BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM

27. During my second year running the Post Office, I paid back an £8,000 shortfall in monthly instalments. I also paid the Post Office a further £50,000 to cover shortfalls during my tenure. I used my own money to make up these shortfalls.

28. When the branch was audited in 2009, an additional shortfall was found. I paid the Post Office £78,000 to cover the shortfall found during the audit prior to the conviction using money from sale of our family home.

FINDING OUT ABOUT HORIZON ISSUES

29. I was not aware of the systemic issues with Horizon until long after my conviction. I came to know about this through my daughter [GRO] sometime after July 2012, when she was working in a legal call centre.

30. [GRO] took a call from someone who had been through a similar experience with the Post Office; when she phoned this customer back to check if she had been able to access legal support, the customer told [GRO] that she had contacted Alan Bates. [GRO] noted this down and we contacted Alan soon after this. Alan made us aware of the numerous others affected by Horizon.

CONVICTION - FINANCIAL IMPACT

31. Following the conviction, the Post Office building was repossessed because I could not keep up with mortgage payments. The reasons for this was not only because suddenly mine and my wife's Post Office incomes had stopped but also because, as we later found out to our detriment the Post Office contracts were only favourable to them and not the Sub-Postmaster. After they removed me from being Post Master they had no contractual liability to pay me rent to run the Post Office from within a building which I owned. Not only did I become unemployed, I was in danger of losing my home and the investment properties in a matter of a few weeks.

32. As mentioned above, as a result of the Post Office's actions we had to sell our family home. With my children, we later pulled together and bought a home in Harrow, moving away from the area we had lived in all our lives. From owning three properties in central London we now had a home in the outskirts of London with a very big mortgage.

33. I was made bankrupt on 19 December 2014. Initially the receivers wanted £99,000 but this grew to over £200,000, and the bankruptcy was eventually settled at £235,000.

34. A restriction had also been placed on the residential and rental properties owned jointly by my brother, my Dad and me. This was during Post Office's investigation and before I was convicted. This made it more difficult to re-mortgage the properties in order to pay the bankruptcy receivers. It was not until 2020 that I was able to reach an agreement with the trustees in bankruptcy by selling the last property I owned.
35. Through the restriction, my Dad and brother were financially implicated by my conviction even though they had nothing to do with it. The Post Office did not have to involve them but instead they were forced to suffer the effect of this.
36. The Post Office also pursued a civil claim against me to recover a further £8,000. We could not afford legal advice to help with this but eventually reached a settlement out of court. I paid back the £8,000 in monthly instalments until 2014.

CONVICTION - PERSONAL IMPACT

37. The time I spent at Wormwood Scrubs was a very difficult period. My criminal solicitors had advised me that it was unlikely that I would receive a custodial sentence because I had paid back the shortfall and I was not expecting to go to prison.
38. I was 50 years old when I went into Wormwood Scrubs. I have a long history of [GRO] [GRO] and take [GRO] to manage this. Although I was able to access this medication in prison, I could not keep it with me to use when needed and would have to go each morning and evening to get my medication from the pharmacy. It was nerve wracking to be without full access to [GRO]
39. As mentioned above, my family and I were could no longer afford to continue living in Willesden, where I had lived nearly all my life. There was local media coverage of my conviction and, even now, I do not feel comfortable going back to Willesden because I worry that people think I am a thief. I only go there if I am passing through in the car because I don't want to be questioned by local people.
40. My family have been supportive throughout, and visited me in Wormwood Scrubs, but the whole episode has been a strain. No compensation will clear my mind or my family's minds.

41. There has been a particular impact on my three children; the years immediately after my conviction were tough for them, and our relationships became distant. We will not get that time back. By the time I was convicted, my daughter **GRO** had finished university. She wanted to become a barrister, but felt she could not spend time doing the (often low or unpaid) work experience that this career requires, because she felt she needed a salary to help pay our bills. She has a very successful career now but she feels angry that choices were taken away from her. My two sons were at university at the time, and I worry that the strain affected their grades. As well as this, my children and family have had to support me financially and emotionally since these events, and the impact of this cannot be understated.
42. I found it difficult to find a job after coming out of prison; if a prospective employer asked whether I had a criminal conviction I would have to say yes.
43. In 2017, I started working at the High Commission of India as a chauffeur. They understood that it was likely that my conviction would be overturned and gave me a chance. I was given a permanent role in 2018 and worked there until April 2024.
44. I am currently employed as a driver: **GRO**
45. I work long hours, and am in a much less financially comfortable position than I thought I would be at this stage in my life.
46. I bought the Post Office property as a long-term investment. It had a 15-year mortgage, so by 2021 this would have been paid off. The building was three storeys and my plan was to convert the top two floors into flats to rent out. We had plans drawn up for this, but when I was prosecuted these were abandoned. I recently passed by the property while driving and saw that work is being done to convert the top floors into flats.
47. We would have had a steady income from the Post Office and the rental properties and although I wouldn't have completely retired by now, I would have got someone else to manage the Post Office day-to-day. I would be taking things a bit more slowly and certainly wouldn't have to do my driving job, which **GRO**
48. The Post Office was an investment for my children's futures as well and this has been taken from them.

CONVICTION - IMPACT ON HEALTH

49. My health has suffered because of everything that has happened. Seven years ago, I had a [GRO] I had a procedure to [GRO] and I am on medication to [GRO]

50. I still have problems with my [GRO] and had a [GRO] [GRO] in 2002. I still have some [GRO] and take medication to manage this.

51. Before I was prosecuted, I had no trouble with my mental health. I found the prosecution extremely difficult [GRO] [GRO]

52. I find the [GRO] helpful but they do not improve things completely. I have not had any counselling or therapy, but this is something I would like to do in future.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed

GRO

Print full name: Vijay Dolatrai Parekh

Dated: 4 February 2025