

WITNESS: CHRISTOPHER TROUSDALE

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0255_01

EXHIBITS: 0

DATED: Jan 26, 2022

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER TROUSDALE

THIS STATEMENT IS PROVIDED IN RESPONSE TO THE RULE 9 REQUEST OF THE PUBLIC INQUIRY DATED 29/10/2021 TO ADDRESS THE HUMAN IMPACT OF THE FAILINGS OF THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM

I, MR CHRISTOPHER TROUSDALE Date of Birth of
 will say as follows:-

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I am 39 years old. I am married to Joanne, and we have 2 young children.
2. Growing up I had a happy childhood.
3. I currently work in the family business, which is a printing company. Although it is a challenge, I try my best to keep as healthy as possible following the situation with the Post Office. I try to eat well and walk as much as possible. It has been effective, greatly.

POST OFFICE HISTORY

4. I commenced work for the Post Office in 2002. The background to this is that my family have over 150 years of Post Office service and my grandfather had run the Lealholm Post Office for 40 years. He had retired due to a heart condition and the Post Office was leased to one of his staff who became the Sub-Post Mistress.
5. The Sub-Post Mistress stayed in her position for about a year before tendering her resignation.
6. The Post Office was advertised for sale, but no one seemed to be interested in taking it on. After all of the hard work which my family had put into the business and the value it had for the community, I did not want to see the Post Office close.
7. At the time, I had completed an HND in Graphic Design in Newcastle and was planning to continue onto a degree course and stay in Newcastle.
8. Instead, I decided to apply for the Sub-Postmaster role. The business not only included the Post Office but also an associated small petrol filling station and shop. Lealholm is in a small rural village and the services of the business were vital to the community.
9. I applied for the position with my business plan and the Post Office invited me for an interview. I travelled from Newcastle to the interview.
10. After the interview, the interviewer said that he would recommend me for the Sub-Postmaster role and if I was successful, then I would have been one of the youngest Sub-Postmasters in the country. During the application process, I was only 19 years old. I think that there was one Sub-Postmaster at the time in Scotland who was younger than me.

11. I started my design business at the same time as starting at the Post Office. They wouldn't let me take over the Post Office without the extra income.
12. I was offered the Sub-Postmaster's role in a letter from the Post Office of 11 July 2002. I do not fully recall what document the Post Office made me sign but I think that it was a small document and the Official Secrets Act/Privacy agreements. I recall that my Grandfather was very proud.
13. When I took over the Post Office in July 2002, I had little experience in running things. The Post Office's trainer spent the first two weeks with me. She showed me the very basics of the Horizon accountancy system. This took about 3 days of training. The training mostly involved customer service and sorting old marketing materials out in branch - horizon specific was limited and the mantra was "ring the helpline". The rest of the period was spent sorting through old defunct Post Office literature and ordering numerous missing manuals and the other training was focused on selling products.
14. The trainer also spent time with my girlfriend at the time, Joanne, who is now my wife. Joanne was going to work in the business with me. The Trainer spent time with my mother **GRO** too as she was going to cover the Post Office when I was on holiday. My mother had grown up in the Post Office but had not encountered the Horizon system before.
15. I found the Horizon system poorly designed and difficult to follow and did not have an adequate grasp on how it properly worked. I was told to refer to the manuals, when they eventually arrived, or contact the Helpline. This was totally inadequate and in practice did not always work. The Helpline was frequently engaged and when I did eventually get through to the Helpline, the staff seemed stressed and no better equipped to deal with the problem than I was.

16. During the day to day running of the business, there would be errors and these would be picked up by the Post Office. The error notices would vary from a few pounds to a few thousand pounds. Sometimes, the Horizon system would say that there was more money than there should have been, rather than a shortfall.
17. I had several visits from the Area Manager who was called Julia Stephenson. I asked her for more training, but none was ever arranged. The Area Manager did not have a good knowledge of the Horizon system either and was often more interested in sales and customer service.
18. I didn't become aware of others going through the same thing as me until years later.
19. The situation over the year of 2003 was that frequently discrepancies would show, which would vary from a few pounds to a few thousand pounds. I was always confident that any shortfalls would right themselves.
20. By September of 2003, I noticed that the shortfalls had increased. I was having sleepless nights and was spending my time trawling through files, bags and bins in case I had accidentally thrown out a cash remittance. I was told by the Helpline and the Area Manager that the Horizon system was never wrong. I thought that I was going mad. I couldn't reconcile the mistakes.
21. The only option I had at that time was to pay the shortfalls. I did not want to let my family down. I decided to take out a loan to pay the shortfalls. This was organised a few days before the auditors arrived.
22. The Post Office's auditors arrived at about 8 am on 16 September 2003. I knew that they would find shortfalls and I told them this; I was hopeful that they would be able to correct the system errors.

23. I recall signing some kind of statement without my rights being read to me. I felt wasn't told exactly what the role of my investigators was by my area manager.
24. Initially I was told that there was an £8,000 shortfall, and this was later revised to £7,846.34. My Area Manager arrived and reassured me that two system specialists (who subsequently turned out to be investigators) were driving from Scotland to find out where the money had gone. I felt some relief as I assumed that this meant that they would properly investigate Horizon to find the discrepancies.
25. The investigators arrived and we went over the road, to my house. The interview was conducted at my home, so I didn't have access to a duty solicitor. I recall the investigators were called Jude Trotter and Tony Robinson. The interview started at about 6:30 pm. The day had been fraught; my mind was twisted inside and out, and I was interviewed for 2 hours without any representation. This was after a week of worry and not eating and sleeping.
26. The investigators took advantage of my young age and my fragile mental state. I was diagnosed with PTSD after this interview.
27. The interview was tape recorded. Before the interview, the investigators asked me if I had a Post Office colleague to sit in on the interview with me. I said no, as I did not have one. Before the tape recording was switched on, they warned me not to, "look stupid on tape." They also said things like, "we have to say some things at the beginning of the interview, but don't worry they are just standard and nothing to worry about". I felt this was to try and distract me when reading my rights. They also said things like, "You realise you have signed the Official Secrets Act so can't talk to 'anyone at all'(emphasis) about this situation as breaching it is a 'serious crime' (emphasis)." They said, "with this in mind,

would I want a solicitor?”. Because of the suggestive questioning, I thought I could not talk to anyone, so I declined.

28. In their own statement, I am sure I recall seeing the time the investigators arrived at Lealholm and the time the interview started; there was a time disparity. Most of this time was spent talking to me before the tape had even been turned on.
29. The investigators were only interested in telling me that I had taken the money when I knew that I had not taken any money. I naively tried to help the investigators as much as possible in the thought that they were there to help me to find out where the money had gone. In hindsight, it is clear that the investigators’ remit was to collect evidence for a prosecution rather than help me to find the money.
30. On at least two occasions during the interview, my family tried to gain access to my house to stop the interview. The investigators refused them entry and even told them that I did not want them there. The investigators used many tactics including shaking their heads whilst I was talking, interrupting me whilst I was talking and making facial expressions to rebuff or put me off. They tried to put words in my mouth, suggesting that I had financially benefited from the shortfalls, that it was an interest free loan or that I had carried out some giro fraud. The giros were in fact waiting to be scanned onto Horizon due to one of the regular power failures that afflicted the village.
31. The whole interview was conducted in an aggressive manner; in my mind they walked into the interview believing that I was a criminal and they were looking for some shred of evidence to gain a prosecution at all costs. When the auditors and investigators had left, I was a wreck. They took all of the paperwork from

32. the Post Office, including personal and retail documents and bank statements, which were never returned or made available to me. They took the keys for the Post Office and the safe. I was suspended from the Post Office too.

CRIMINAL ALLEGATIONS AND ANY PROCEEDINGS/CONVICTION

33. My next interview was on 16 October 2003 at Whitby Police Station. I told the duty Police Officer that I was on medication and should not be there. The Post office Investigators wanted to proceed, and it was allowed.

34. I was given limited access to a duty solicitor who was Tubbs & Co of Scarborough; this consisted of a 5-minute chat in the corridor and then my solicitor made little, if any, comment in the interview. Initially I was represented by Franklin Garvey. I didn't feel properly supported. I knew at the time I had done nothing wrong, so I knew I had nothing to hide. I felt Mr Garvey was used to dealing with minor misdemeanours and breaches of the peace rather than complex cases. I think the Post Office presented their motives so that Mr Garvey might not have been fully aware of their powers. I went along with this interview as I hoped that the problem would get sorted and they would find the shortfall. I was not in a fit mental state for this interview. I remained with Tubbs & Co throughout my case all the way to trial but, because of the nature of my case, the director of the firm, Nick Tubbs, acted as my solicitor after the initial interviews.

35. Following the shortfall or discrepancies found by the Post Office auditors and investigators, I was subsequently convicted of False Accounting and sentenced to a Community Service Order, Probation Order and a fine of £800.00. I also had to pay defence costs.

36. My conviction was overturned on 11 December 2020.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

37. The human impact which the failings of the Horizon IT System have had and continue to have upon me and my family are set out in the remainder of this statement. The section headings follow the particular questions posed by the Inquiry.

WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING REQUIRED TO MAKE GOOD APPARENT SHORTFALLS SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

38. After this I was suspended from the Post Office on 16 September 2003. My mother covered the branch in the short term to make sure that it was kept open and then eventually took over the branch.

39. My contract with the Post Office was terminated on 7 November 2003.

40. I was asked to pay the "shortfall" figure the auditor had calculated to be £7,846.34. The total figure presented as a shortfall was in fact false and, when scrutinised, it was clear this had been inflated by over 15%. The Post Office had added items to the calculation, for example cheques on hand, that should have been subtracted alongside discounting giro dockets that had a real cash value.

41. A few weeks later the area manager was made aware of stamps and foreign currency that had been found in the office after I was removed, but these values were never re-paid to me.

42. The Post Office were told in court that they had falsely accounted the "shortfall" figure, which they acknowledged, and they agreed in court to present an accurate figure at the subsequent hearing, but never did.

43. I believe this was a malicious act to increase the apparent severity of the matter in the eyes of the court and to maximise the 'reclaim potential'.

44. After the audit I didn't pay any further money but spent many years trying to reclaim the additional sums on the inflated false account.

45. I recall the National Federation of Sub-postmasters instructed me to write letters of contrition and apology advising, that if I did, I may be reinstated, when really I believe these letters were used against me in court to try and demonstrate my guilt.

WHAT WERE THE COSTS OF MAKING GOOD ALLEGED SHORTFALLS SHOWN BY HORIZON?

46. The Post Office removed all my documentation including records and personal paperwork.

47. I believe I paid around £7800 in total by way of shortfalls. There were also various other costs involved with the business and living. I didn't pay any further money after the audit.

48. My parents loaned me £15,000 which has accrued interest. They re-mortgaged their home to pay the shortfall. Our view was that they would get their money back once the shortfalls had been located. As a family, we always hoped that this would be the case. This resulted in financial restrictions for them. I repaid my parents after receiving an award from the High Court. It was a Post Office investigator who took the payment from my parents, telling them it was a non-prejudicial payment whilst they investigated; from the impression they gave, we all assumed this meant investigating Horizon, which never happened.

HOW WERE YOU AFFECTED WHEN ALLEGED TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SHORTFALLS OR DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

49. I felt as though they were my mistakes; the Post Office made me believe that I was wrong, and it was all my fault. I felt like I was going mad as I couldn't, for the life of me, work out what had happened.

50. The accusations had an incredibly detrimental effect on my mental health. The interview in October 2003 at Whitby Police Station was only the tip of the iceberg; but it was incredibly hard. I had been made to feel as though I was going crazy. The pressure to get things right was immense. On the night before this interview, I was in turmoil. I had become delusional. I was so bad that I had to be restrained as I was trying to claw my eyes out and I fell over and hit my head on a gas fire. I could not even recognise members of my own family. The interviews at my home and at Whitby police station were only the tip of the iceberg.

51. During this period, my mother contacted my GP as she was so concerned about my mental state, and that I was not of sound mind due to the medication and the situation with the Post Office. She was worried about my fragile state of mind and told them as much. It must have been awful for my mum to see. I was taking high doses of medication at the time. I was diagnosed with PTSD and Depression.

52. I remember telling my GP that I was innocent of something which it was alleged I had done. I was terrified of having the consultation with my GP, whilst I knew that it was in confidence, I had to speak to them thinking that I would then be accused of breaching the Official Secrets Act, as per my Post Office Contract. I didn't know whether I was coming or going and what to do for the best. I had prescriptions for Diazepam and Seroxat. The prescription drugs had mind

altering effects on me and I suffered from several fits and episodes whilst taking them.

53. I recall episodes of shaking uncontrollably, having difficulties holding a pen, being forgetful and being in blind shock over a lot of the allegations. I was constantly anxious; I couldn't sleep and felt exhausted. My family was concerned about me, and my mum was beside herself with worry.

54. I was still not in a fit state when I attended the hearings at the Magistrates Courts. At one of the hearings at Scarborough Magistrates Court, when I had sight of one of the investigators, I collapsed due to the emotional strain and trauma. I had to be taken to the A&E Department at Scarborough Hospital for treatment.

55. The whole thing was incredibly hard, it was like a nightmare. I can't describe how much my mental health suffered. I had gone from being an incredibly confident and relaxed person in their 20's, who was enjoying life and had a good future to look towards, and was reduced to a nervous wreck.

WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

56. The consequences that resulted were enormous, to include the criminal prosecution, suspension of my job, loss of income and livelihood and a career on which I had become focussed.

57. After initially being suspended by the Post Office, I then had my contract terminated. As stated above, I was then charged with 3 counts of False Accounting on 2 December 2003.

WHAT WERE YOUR FINANCIAL LOSSES CAUSED BY ACTION TAKEN AGAINST YOU IN RELIANCE UPON HORIZON DATA?

58. The losses I have suffered are large and include those suffered by my family.
59. The whole thing was financially crippling. When I took over the Post Office, I was assisted by the Prince's Trust. There was stock in the business, and I lost this and the potential value and income from the Shop and Petrol Station.
60. During the period of time when I was running the business, I also assisted my grandfather with his long running military vehicle business. I had agreed with my grandfather that for handling the ordering, re-packing and shipping of spare parts that he was selling, I would receive 10% commission of the gross value of the order. I also lost this opportunity of income. Our relationship broke down and he also stopped the opportunity for me and my wife to buy the cottage as we had previously agreed.
61. By way of explanation, when I moved to Lealholm from Newcastle, as a condition of taking on the Post Office, my grandfather allowed us to stay in the associated cottage with the payment of a reduced monthly rent of about £200 - £300. The arrangement I had with my grandfather was that the rental payments would be a down payment for us to buy the cottage when we had the money to buy it. Joanne and I had no choice other than to move home and rent a different property, which we remain in today.
62. As a result of my conviction, I had to forfeit the Post Office, and **GRO** took over as Sub-postmaster.

WHAT EFFECT DID IT HAVE TO BE ACCUSED OF COMMITTING CRIMINAL OFFENCES AS A RESULT OF SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

63. Following the conviction, I saw a psychiatrist. I was told that I had anxiety and PTSD. At the time I felt frightened, I couldn't leave the house properly. I had to move the furniture in the room where the interview took place to try and get rid of all the negative thoughts and flashbacks that I was having. I was constantly anxious. I was irritable, had nightmares and couldn't sleep. There were times where I had a lapse in memory and could not account for parts of the day. I would find that I had fallen and, on several occasions, hurt myself on furniture edges. I continued with medication and counselling was recommended.
64. Following on from this, things deteriorated. I felt so low. My confidence was at rock bottom. I needed help with basic tasks, like making tea, getting washed or dressed. I had no energy and couldn't focus. I barely left the house. I didn't want to see anyone. Medications changed and people checked in on me to make sure that I didn't do something stupid – like leaving the gas heater on. I felt worthless and like I had let everyone down. The Probation Officer came across as accusatory and unkind. I couldn't get away from the feeling that I was being constantly punished.
65. I carried out community service at a local charity shop. I was always kept in the back sorting and folding clothes, to avoid public interaction.
66. I stopped exercising. I couldn't find the energy. I had been fit and active beforehand, but put on weight. My GP told me that I was morbidly obese and needed to lose weight.

67. My personality is different. I can't help but feel suspicious of people; I over analyse everything that is said to me. I feel like people are out to trick me and I constantly feel distracted by this possibility. It impacts on my work and productivity. If I am out and about then I don't really like to interact with people that I don't know. I will make sure that all my belongings are safe and that I'm in the least vulnerable position that I can be.
68. Even now, I feel exhausted. I need time to myself, away from the children, just to try and process everything that has happened.
69. Prior to events I ate well, had good relationships with all of my family, and I felt resilient; I could cope with situations. Personality wise, I think that my family and friends would say that I was very outgoing, kind, personable and friendly before the Post Office events. I always got on well with people and friends used to invite me everywhere, because I was easy company and could pretty much talk to anyone. I used to be very sociable.
70. I also used to be quite confident. I was active and sporty and used to go running, cycling, swimming and do weightlifting. I would frequently go for long walks, and it wouldn't be unusual for these to be in the region of 20 miles. I was healthy.
71. This all changed. I stopped looking after myself, exercising and eating right. I hid away. I didn't want to face the world. I lost confidence and the ability to socialise in the same way. My personality changed because I was so damaged by the events.

WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING CONVICTED OF A CRIMINAL OFFENCE AS A RESULT OF SHORTFALLS AND DISCREPANCIES SHOWN BY THE HORIZON IT SYSTEM?

72. I attended my first hearing at Whitby Magistrates Court on 18 December 2003.
73. I attended another hearing at Whitby Magistrates Court before my case was transferred to Scarborough Magistrates Court.
74. There were various adjournments of the case at the beginning of 2004.
75. I felt pressurised into pleading guilty for False Accounting. I was told by my Solicitor that I would get leniency if I pleaded guilty. I could not explain where the money had gone. I was under the impression that Horizon was always correct, I just couldn't understand the errors. I was doing everything right at my end, but no one would believe me. I was still taking prescribed medication during my criminal proceedings. I could not have survived a custodial sentence and as such I went with the legal advice.
76. On the 8 March 2004, I was convicted of False Accounting and sentenced to a Community Service Order of 100 hours, a Probation Order and a fine of £800. Thankfully I walked away without a custodial sentence, but still had a criminal record.
77. I could not get home insurance as I had a criminal conviction. There is a multitude of little things that have had an impact on my life. I cannot sign any documents without reading it a hundred times and getting reassurance on the contents. I find it difficult to trust people and there are only a handful of people that I would let help me. This is a burden.
78. After my conviction, and due to the stories about my case appearing in the newspapers, I could not find a full-time job. I did some casual work, such as working in a local pub.
79. As mentioned above, I started my design business at the same time I worked at the Post Office. My dad accommodated me within his business so I could set

up on my own. The graphic design business was separate from the printing business. Later, we became partners in the business. As time went on, with natural progression I ended up working more for my father.

80. Eventually, employment support was needed, and a role was created for me, which is when I became involved in my dad's business. It took a number of years after my conviction for my mental health to improve enough to enter a normal workplace. Even now, I would not be employed by a 3rd party business. I wouldn't have got a job without the family business.

WHAT EFFECT DID THESE ISSUES HAVE UPON YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES AND LOCAL COMMUNITY?

81. My suspension, the termination of my employment with the Post Office and my conviction had a significant impact on my family.

82. **GRO**
GRO. Her commitment to serving the community was foremost.

83. My grandfather, who had always worked for the Post Office, could not accept my conviction. Our relationship broke down and we hardly spoke before he died. I would try to keep it civil for the sake of my mum. My grandfather never learnt that my conviction had been wrong. This was heart-breaking as we were always so close before all of this. This is one of the most damaging things from my point of view.

84. We had always been a very close family. My grandfather was someone who was respected and who I respected. There was a lot of expectation on me taking over the family business. It was prestigious and I was proud to be (what

I was told) the second youngest Postmaster at that time. I was proud to continue the family tradition and my grandfather couldn't accept that there could have been errors in a Post Office system. Instead, I took the blame and it split the family.

85. At the time of the audit Joanne and I were planning to marry, but this completely disrupted our plans. Life was on hold; we married 7 years later when I was 28 years old. We delayed starting a family because of these events. There was no way that I could have coped mentally with raising a family whilst I was living this nightmare.

86. I became paranoid and suspicious of everything. I felt as though I couldn't trust my brother or his judgement, whereas before I would have trusted him implicitly.

87. I feel guilty about the hardship, stress and anxiety that I have brought to the door of those I love and care about the most in the world. The people I would have stepped forward to protect, I actually caused to suffer hardship and emotional turmoil.

88. I avoided going out. I avoided going to the dentist as a former employee of the post office worked there and she told the dentist that I was a thief. I didn't go to the local village shop for 14 years.

89. In 17 years, only twice did I have the courage to meet old school friends at Christmas. Before, this would have been an annual occasion. I had some negative comments and it put me off. I couldn't face the community or the public.

90. There was a lot of negative press surrounding the conviction. I had brought shame on the family and there were lots of gossips in the community. I had a lot of negative comments when I was out. I think that this probably started to

diminish around 2008 when I took a casual short-term job in a pub kitchen but comments were still made, and occasionally I would sneak out of the pub so as people wouldn't see me.

PLEASE DESCRIBE THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECT WHICH THESE ISSUES HAD UPON THE MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY?

91. It has caused hardship and emotional distress to my family. We had gone from been very close knit, to being a divided family.
92. Joanne herself was interviewed. I saw her reduced to a nervous wreck and the emotional impact on her has been enormous. As explained above, our marriage and family plans were also significantly set back as a result of the investigation, conviction and the impact on my mental health.
93. My conviction was particularly hurtful for my grandparents. My grandparents thought that I was guilty; this caused a strain on their relationship with my mother, an only child. They said that I had brought shame on my grandfather's name, and they refused to spend any time with me. Family occasions, such as Christmas were different from there on. As explained above, I hardly spoke to my grandfather again before he died, and he never knew my conviction was set aside.
94. Financially it hurt many of us; this has been difficult to overcome. As explained above, my parents had to provide the money for paying the audit shortfall to the Post Office. They provided this by re-mortgaging their home which resulted in financial restrictions on their life together.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

95. I was 21 years of age when my Post Office career came crashing down. At the time I thought that I was sorted for the long term. My family had supported me and helped set me up to succeed. It was never the plan to take over my grandparent's business, but it was to keep on going and offering my services to my grandparents.

96. I could have done all of this had the Post Office not suspended and prosecuted me. I had gone from planning an idyllic life to my plans crashing down around me.

97. I am still feeling the ill effects now, as are my family.

Statement Of Truth

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

Signed:

GRO
Christopher Trousdale (Jan 26, 2022 15:03 GMT)

Position Or

Office Held:

Print name: CHRISTOPHER TROUSDALE Date of signature: Jan 26, 2022

FILE REFERENCE: **GRO**

