Thursday, 17 February 2022
(10.30 am)

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Good morning everyone. We've come back, so to speak, today so we're doing our best to come as and when we can, but I think to date the remote working has seemed to have gone reasonably well. So I hope everybody's satisfied with it.

## Yes, Mr Blake?

MR BLAKE: Thank you very much, Chair.
We have Ms Hazzleton here my name is Julian Blake and I'm going to be asking questions today on behalf of the Chair. You should have in front of you a witness statement.
THE WITNESS: I do indeed.
MR BLAKE: That's dated 12 January --
Ah, sorry you have to take the oath. I'm sorry.
SUSAN HAZZLETON (affirmed) Questioned by MR BLAKE
MR BLAKE: Thank you very much.
You have before you a witness statement and it's dated 12 January of this year; is that right?
A. It is correct.
Q. Could I ask you just to look at the final page of that witness statement, I think it's page 16, and is that your signature?
A. It is my signature, yes.
Q. Can you confirm that that statement is true to the best your knowledge and belief?
A. Yes.
Q. I will start by asking you a bit about your background. How old are you now?
A. I'm 68.
Q. Whereabouts are you from?
A. I'm from Barnsley in South Yorkshire.
Q. What area do you live in now?
A. In Chelmsford in Essex.
Q. Before that, I think you were abroad for a while?
A. Yes, we lived in -- my partner Steven and myself lived in Australia for 11 years. My son and daughter, who are twins, were born there.
Q. What did you do in Australia?
A. Admin work, which is what I'd normally done, reception, secretarial. Steven had, for a time, a business putting in racking into warehouses, things like that.
Q. At some point you moved to Essex?
A. We did. We came back from Australia when James and Siobhan were one and we lived for a while in my sister's house in Warrington, in Lancashire. She'd recently moved and so we lived in her house for quite 2
obviously, the location was due to it but we just wanted to have a business that -- the Post Office provided their business really, they provided the stamps and everything like that, we provided the other things for the general store, but it seemed like a partnership and we were quite pleased with that. We thought it was something that we could really work on and grow.
Q. Do you remember how much you paid for the Post Office?
A. The actual building or the business?
Q. The business itself.
A. The business, I believe, we paid $£ 46,000$ for -I believe.
Q. Yes. How did you pay for that?
A. Just before we came back from Australia, my partner's father had unfortunately passed away and he had left us an inheritance.
Q. You became a subpostmistress, I think, on

1 March 1995; is that right? Thereabouts?
A. That would be thereabouts. Yes, I can't -- I thought it was -- no, yeah, you're right, '95, yes, sorry. Yes.
Q. At that stage, it was before Horizon was in place?
A. Yes, it was before Horizon, a long time before.
Q. What did you use instead of Horizon, at that stage; do
you remember?
A. Paper-based. I used my brain.
Q. Apart from a Post Office, I think you also had a shop; is that right?
A. We did. We ran alongside it a little grocery store,
as most Post Offices do, selling the usual: milk, bread, sugar, things like that.
Q. Who worked there?
A. I worked in the Post Office. Mr Hazzleton worked in the shop.
Q. When Horizon was introduced, did you receive training?
A. I did.
Q. How was that arranged?
A. It was arranged by the Post Office. It was, I believe, in a hotel in Margaretting, which is not far from where I live, perhaps 30 minutes' drive.
Q. Was it free?
A. Yes, it was free.
Q. How long did it last for?
A. Again, from memory -- I'm going to say a couple of days.
Q. Was it useful?
A. In part, yes. I -- like a lot of people at that stage, I'd never touched a computer so, for me, it wasn't totally straightforward and for other people on 5
Q. When you say everything went wrong, can you give --
A. Yes. So, for the first week after this had happened, I did my balance and it was let's, for example, say it was $£ 160$ out, that was a bit scary but I thought that might come out with error notices within time, a couple of weeks. But the next week it had doubled and the week after that it doubled, and it was like a snowball collecting more snow. It was growing and it was frightening and I kept asking for help.
Q. Did you call the helpline?
A. I did. I called the helpline once a week.
Q. Did they help?
A. No.
Q. Can you describe the kinds of conversations you had with the helpline?
A. I would tell them the history of what was happening and their attitude on all occasions was to put it -no, eventually it was to put it in a suspense account. Weekly, it was "Don't worry about it, it will all work itself out".
Q. So the first response was: it will work itself out?
A. Yes.
Q. Did that change at some point?
A. By the time it got to $£ 4,500$ or $£ 600$, I was really, really, really worried and they said "You can put that
the course it wasn't straightforward. The two chaps that were running the training were very pleased with themselves that they knew all about computers and were whizzing through this information at a rate which I couldn't keep up with, and I did ask them on a couple of occasions, as other people did, could they please backtrack a little bit, so that we could catch up on this information.
Q. I think in your witness statement you said that you actually paid $£ 3,000$ for --
A. That was for the initial training, for the

Post Office, from when we first took it over. That was for that training, not for the Horizon. Sorry, if | --
Q. No, not at all?
A. -- misled you.
Q. I'm going to move on to problems that you experienced with Horizon. What was the first time that you noticed a problem; do you remember?
A. Yes, I can remember. I was contacted by means of -I can't remember whether it was telephone or a message on that computer, I can't remember, that on a particular Saturday night I had to leave the computer on for updates and, from then on, everything went wrong.
money into a suspense account for six weeks", that's as long as you are allowed to leave it in the suspense account and then, being the subpostmistress, I was responsible for that money.
Q. You say you were responsible, you were responsible for paying it?
A. Yes.
Q. Did you pay it?
A. Yes.
Q. How did you pay it?
A. I can't actually remember what methods of payment we had 21 years ago but if we did them over the phone it would be that way. It might have been a cheque. I truthfully can't remember.

But what I will say, if you don't mind, is that for a big organisation putting in a computer system, they didn't have a computer helpline, an IT helpline, and I believe that the people who were operating the helpline had no more idea about the computer system than I did. I don't think they knew where to turn. So they had a stock answer for everyone who rang up, "It's not happening to anyone else, just leave it as it is and it will sort itself out".

But you can't leave it forever, especially when it's snowballing out of control, which I thought it

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was.
Q. You said that you were told that it wasn't happening to anybody else?
A. Mmm .
Q. Is that right?
A. $\mathrm{Mm}-\mathrm{hm}$.
Q. Did you think that there were others affected at that time?
A. No, I believed what I was told.
Q. I'm going to take you chronologically through one specific problem that you had. I think in October or November 2000, towards the end of 2000, I think you experienced a shortfall of $£ 6,000$; is that right?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. Do you remember the circumstances of that one?
A. Only that -- that was a collective amount. It didn't just suddenly become $£ 6,000$. It was a collection of everything that had built up and, by error notices, that actually came down to 4,300, which is what I ended up paying.
Q. So when you first noticed that it had reached $£ 6,000$, did you phone the helpline?
A. I phoned the helpline every week because there was something wrong but they didn't have an answer for me, except "It will all sort itself out".
A. No, I accepted it, that that's what I had to do.

Obviously, I was very naive and didn't and, because I was told I was the only one with that problem, and also I was going on holiday and we to pay somebody when we went on holiday to come and look after the Post Office, another subpostmaster who did local work, for example, and as well as paying that money in, it meant, in my mind, it wouldn't cause him any problems because the account then would be as it should be.

But I have to say that when I spoke to the helpline on the last occasion and I paid that money, I paid that money and I said that "When I come back from holiday, I want these accounts looked at and I want that money back".
Q. So you said that you wanted the accounts looked at. Was that an audit that you asked for?
A. I didn't particularly ask -- well, yes, I didn't particularly refer to an audit but an audit or somebody in the IT -- if they had an IT department -to look at the system and see what was going wrong.
Q. Back in early 2000 -- sorry at the end of 2000/early 2001, you had that $£ 6,000$ shortfall. Did somebody from the Post Office come and look at that?
A. No.
Q. And then by March 2001, when it had slightly reduced,
Q. When it reached $£ 6,000$, did you call anybody else other than the helpline?
A. I don't think so. I don't think there was anybody else to call. The area manager at that time wasn't always available to get hold of, so it would have been the helpline. I can't think I would have called anyone else.
Q. By February 2001, you've said that there were error notices. Can you explain that, please?
A. Well, if you've done something wrong on the -- it would have been originally paper-based but then by computer. Say, for example, if someone came into my Post Office to pay in a cheque but I put it as a debit instead of a credit. That would throw the finances out and, eventually, when it got to wherever it went to after that, somebody would have noticed that I'd done that wrong and correct it. So that would have generated an error notice.
Q. So the $£ 6,000$ went down to $£ 4,300$ ?
A. $\mathrm{Mm}-\mathrm{hm}$.
Q. What did you do about that $£ 4,300$ ?
A. I had to pay it. I was told I could keep it in a suspense account for six weeks and then I had to pay it. It was my responsibility.
Q. Did you speak to anybody about that? 10
did auditors come then?
A. The Post Office -- when did the Post Office auditor come? The Post Office auditor -- I had had several audits throughout running the Post Office. There was no problems with them but the last time I remember the auditor coming was the day that they closed it and there was nothing wrong with the audit. There was no money missing, there was no stamps missing, there was nothing. All the errors, all the shortfalls, for example, they were just on paper.

There was nothing missing and that's what I couldn't understand. It's not like I'd taken money, all the money was there, the stamps were there, anything of value, it was just there. It's just unbelievable.
Q. Did you have a conversation with somebody called Angela Reed?
A. Yes, she was an auditor.
Q. And can you tell us about that conversation you had, about problems with pension allowance, is it?
A. Ah, that wasn't her. No, I didn't have that conversation with her. I had that conversation with the auditors -- not auditors, with the team -a couple of people they sent to investigate because, while this was going on, I'd just paid them $£ 4,500$ and 12
then the auditors came -- sorry, let me re-track because this is quite a long time ago.

The auditors came back -- after l'd put that money in, the auditor came back along with two investigators. They closed the Post Office and they said that I'd claimed in the region of $£ 300$ more than I'd paid out, so l'd frauded them, or l'd stolen that money, even though they'd just taken $£ 4,300$ from me. So I said -- they questioned me, they were very intimidating, and I said to them "If you've got proof or when you get proof take that $£ 300$ out of the money I've just paid you, for nothing apart from your computer saying I owe it".
Q. Where was the conversation happening with the investigators?
A. In my house. In my living room.
Q. Were you legally represented at that point?
A. No. My partner Steven wasn't even allowed to be there. He had to stand in the shop whilst the auditor did the audit and while they questioned me, and they were very intimidating. There was a tall chap who stood up all the time and another one who sat down who -- it was like bad cop/good cop scenario and, at the end of the conversation -- obviously, I'm not a shrinking violet, and I said to them, you know, what 13
A. Because I'd stolen money.
Q. How long were you at the police station for; do you remember?
A. Yes, I do, because it was nearly time for the children to come home from school. They wouldn't allow me to go and pick up my nine-year-old children from school. Sorry, it must have been school coming out time, which is about 3.00 and I got home at 10 o'clock.
Q. Would you like to take a break?
A. No, I'm fine, I'm absolutely fine. It's just that they said I couldn't go and collect the children from school. They would collect them in the police car and they would take them to the station and they would have to stay there until they finished questioning me. Now, what mother wants that for her children, to be taken to a police station, to sit there worried, frightened while their mother's being questioned for -- they wouldn't have known why.

Eventually -- and they were very -- they weren't very keen on doing it, but eventually they let me make a phonecall. They weren't going to let me make a phonecall.

So I rang a good friend who, without asking the reasons why, picked up my children from school and kept them with her and her children until I got back.

I thought, and at the end of the conversation, before they left, they said "We'll see you in court".
Q. Did they take anything with them?
A. Well, they took all the -- no -- yes, they took everything. They audited it. She did the audit, she took all -- everything, and that's what I'm saying, there was nothing missing, the audit was fine. So she took all the books, all the things of value, and just left us with an empty Post Office, an empty safe and their stupid computer.
Q. Looking back at that day, do you recall what your -where your children were at that time?
A. My children would have been at school. It's -- sorry, I'm getting things a little bit mixed up and I do apologise.
Q. Not at all.
A. Yes. No. Yes, the children would have been at school that day. Well, every day, they were nine years old but it was about six weeks after that episode that they came back with police and charged me for fraudulently taking $£ 300$, and I was taken to the police station and questioned.
Q. Who took you to the police station?
A. The police did and their investigators.
Q. Were you told why they were taking you there? 14
Q. Do you remember who interviewed you? Was it the police or was it the investigators?
A. It was a combination. It was a combination. It was -- it was unbelievable, totally unbelievable. And just to set another scene on this day that they came, I had just, before they came, I had just had a mobile hairdresser in my house, she'd cut my hair, so I washed my hair and thrown on a T -shirt while she cut my hair. Soon after that, this is when they knocked on the door and came in, so I had no bra on, I had damp hair and I felt quite vulnerable and I said, "If you're going to take me to the police station, I need to get dressed properly", they wouldn't even allow me to go upstairs on my own to put a bra on.

The female officer came up with me and she was opening my cupboards, my drawers, and I said to her "What on earth are you looking for?" It was totally over the top.
Q. As far as you were aware at that time, it was concerning a $£ 300$ shortfall, was it?
A. Yes. But they wouldn't -- but when I was at the police station being questioned, as I said, I'm no shrinking violet, and I can stick up for myself, and I wanted to talk about the money they had just taken from me, the $£ 4,300$ they had taken from me. They 16
wouldn't talk about that. I said "Well, why won't you talk about it? You are wanting to talk about this imaginary $£ 300$ ", that, by the way, they had no evidence of and never did provide any evidence, "but you won't talk about the $£ 4,300$ ". And eventually I was shut down, if you can understand me, I was shut down. I was told "We're not going to discuss that".
Q. You were suspended as subpostmistress?
A. I'd already been suspended when they came and did the audit that day, when they came and questioned me at home.
Q. I'm going to move on to the prosecution.
A. Oh, gosh, yes.
Q. Can you remember what you were charged with?
A. Theft.
Q. How did you plead?
A. I pleaded not guilty because I didn't do anything.
Q. Did that involve going --

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Let me be clear was it theft of $£ 300$ ?
A. Yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Fine. Thank you.
MR BLAKE: Do you remember which courts you went to?
A. It was Chelmsford.
Q. I think it may have started in the Magistrates' Court, did it? Do you remember?
A. It possibly did. I'm really sorry, some things are a bit misty over time.
Q. How long did you have these court proceedings hanging over you?
A. 18 months. 18 horrible months, which was a cruel thing to do to somebody because every time -- every time they set a date to go to court -- sorry if I'm shouting but I'm little bit cross. Every time they set a date to go to court, I would build myself up psychologically and be prepared, only to find then they'd changed their mind, they weren't going for it.

This happened twice and, on the third occasion, whoever makes decisions said that they either went to court or dropped it and, on the 11th hour, the day before I was meant to make a court appearance, they dropped it.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Before Mr Blake asks you any more about that, can I explain that my colleagues and I want to hear your evidence in the way you want to give it, Ms Hazzleton, okay. So don't worry about shouting or don't worry about being upset, we just want to hear you tell us what you want to say, all right?
A. Thank you.

MR BLAKE: During that 18-month period, what did you think was going to happen? 18
A. I thought I was going to go to prison because I'd been told I could get a custodial sentence. I don't know by who, whether it was a solicitor or the police or these two clowns from the Post Office. Somebody told me that I could get a custodial sentence. So I'm not familiar with laws. I don't know what goes on. All I knew was I was frightened, I'd done nothing wrong and I was frightened. I was frightened that, even though l'd done nothing wrong, they were not providing any proof, but for some reason I was going to end up in prison.
Q. Were you told why your case wasn't going ahead?
A. Because they had no evidence or they couldn't provide any evidence, or words to that effect. But as it came out, the words were, to me, twisted because, even though I was -- I wasn't prosecuted, it was -- he had this impression that, "Well, we know you've done it, but we can't prove it". So it still wasn't truthful and honest.
Q. With the criminal proceedings gone, did they stop pursuing you for money?
A. No. Some time later, which I can't remember the date, I received a letter from them saying I owed them $£ 1,800$. I haven't got the letter anymore, unfortunately, but I do remember getting it and
a contacted a solicitor in Chelmsford who very kindly told me what to put as a reply.
Q. Do you remember what you put as a reply?
A. That the court wouldn't take favourably to them pursuing this, as they didn't pursue the court case, or something along those lines.
Q. Do you remember how you felt on receiving that letter?
A. Angry. Angry, confused, here we go again. I just felt that this was just going on and on. Surely the court -- dropping of the court case, that's it, it should be the end of it. But then suddenly, I don't know where this $£ 1,800$ came from, what it was for, just "You owe us this money".
Q. I'm going move on to the impact on you, financial and personal. I'll start with financial. How much did you pay the Post Office overall, do you recall?
A. For the business?
Q. No, during the course of the business for the shortfalls?
A. The $£ 4,300$.
Q. 4,300 . What happened to your branch?
A. It was just closed. We tried to carry on with the general store for a while but nobody was coming in, so we couldn't really survive that way. We'd got a mortgage to pay, two young children. It wasn't
good.
Q. What happened to your mortgage?
A. We had to go from a -- fortunately, we didn't lose the house and we were so close to losing it but we didn't. So we negotiated with the bank to have an interest-only mortgage, instead of a prepayment mortgage and, unfortunately, in the next few weeks, we're going to have to put the house on the market and sell it because we haven't got the money to pay what we owe them, what we owe the bank. So --
Q. What happened to your salary?
A. My salary?
Q. The money you were earning through the Post Office?
A. I didn't -- once it stopped, it stopped. Do you mean whilst I was working for the Post Office?
Q. No, no, afterwards?
A. The salary stopped. I had no money. We were just left. It was, you know, "Thank you very much, we'll take all our stuff, you're just left with an empty shell". It was awful. It was -- it was just like, you know, somebody had pulled a rug from under you. Suddenly you've got no income, you've got no -- we had a little bit of savings so we used that, not very much.

And, eventually, we got other jobs but the jobs 21
A. Oh my God, it was awful. A friend called me and she said "Have you seen the Essex Chronicle", and I said no. She said "I think you need to look", and there it was, my name and that I'd been charged with theft or fraud, I don't know which way they put it then, and where I lived, et cetera. So I did look at the Chronicle and I was absolutely shocked.

When my children got home from school, I sat them down and I said to them that "You're going to hear things about Mum. They're not true, just ignore them but there's something in the Chronicle that says I've done something wrong. Just ignore it, because I haven't". Not an easy thing to do.
Q. How has it impacted on your children, do you think?
A. Well, they were nine years old at the time, so it was impacted at school because they were mildly bullied until I went up and spoke to the school and said "You need to stop this, please do whatever you can to stop this". It was, you know, "your Mum" -- you know what children are like; they're mean and nasty. "Your Mum's a liar, your Mum's a thief, it's your Mum's fault that we haven't got a Post Office and a shop anymore". So, you know, it's all down to me.

I think it's affected them also from a financial point of view because, although I don't think they've
market wasn't particularly good then and both myself and Steven ended up working at Stansted Airport. And a great place to work but money's not fantastic and we took shifts so that we could look after the children. So I did an early shift, I started at 5.00 in the morning until 1.00 and then Steven did afternoon shift, so that he took them to school in the morning, I picked them up in the afternoon.
Q. We've heard some evidence from people who were prosecuted and convicted that they've received interim payments from the Post Office. Have you received anything?
A. No, I have not.
Q. You joined the group action the Bates and others case --
A. Yes.
Q. -- and I think you were awarded some money through that --
A. Yes, that's correct.
Q. Do you remember how much?
A. I think it was around $£ 15,000$.
Q. Moving on to the personal impact, it was reported in the paper at the time, I think, the prosecution?
A. Yes.
Q. How did that impact on you?

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missed out on anything particularly, we didn't have the money to do perhaps what some families were doing.
Q. How were you treated by the local community?
A. Not great. To start off with -- don't get me wrong, my core group have always been friends and they're friends now. They would have been here today if I'd have wanted them to.

But, in essence, I was ignored, people would cross the street when they saw me, things like that. I could hear people talking about me. My house is -you've seen a picture of my house, where the Post Office is. People standing outside who didn't know it was closed, so they're trying to the door and then someone would walk past and say "Oh, it's not open anymore, this is what happened, it's in the Chronicle", blah, blah, blah. So I could hear them talking about me. So I would close the curtains so that I didn't have to see them or I would go out in the car so that I didn't have to hear them, and that happened for a long time.

I think it's different now in the village because a lot of people who were there at the time are newcomers and they wouldn't know that but the people who were there then, they were just -- they just ignored us.

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Q. What would you like from the Post Office?
A. What would I like? For myself and everybody else who's gone through this experience, I'd like fair compensation, I'd like to be put back in the position that, if all went well in the world, that I would be in now. I wouldn't still be working at 68, I'd have a lovely little shop and Post Office that perhaps my children might want to run, or not, as the case may be, but they'd have that. I'd have a house that was paid for because I would have been able to afford the repayment mortgage. I want to be back in that position, if I can.

I want a huge apology because I did nothing, absolutely nothing, and it's gnawed away at me for nearly 21 years. It's gnawed away at my peace of mind, it's gnawed away at my trust in organisations, it's made me wonder what the legal system's like in this country that I had to go through all that -18 months' worth of not knowing what was going to happen and, on the day, the last day of that -- the last suggested date for the trial, when it was cancelled, I think it was 6 o'clock in the evening, the night before, I had been -- I had filled up my freezer with nutritious meals for my partner and my children. I had done a lot of things so that if I did 25
go to prison, and I didn't know what was going to happen, that they would be well cared for a certain amount of time.
Q. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?
A. Referring to that particular day? In that week -- in the week -- you know, you won't be in this position and it's only people like us who have been in this position would know what it's like. You've got to psyche yourself up for this trial, that you don't know what's going to happen, because it's something that's totally unfamiliar, something totally out of your comfort zone. You don't know what's going to happen, what they're going to say to make me go to prison.

Every day that week, I was physically sick because I was frightened. I was frightened for me, I was frightened for my family and I hated being in that position. And unless you've gone through that, it's hard to believe.
MR BLAKE: Chair, do you have any questions at all?
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, I don't have any questions of you, Ms Hazzleton, but I want to use something you told me to make some enquiries publicly of both the Inquiry lawyer and your own legal team, and I don't expect instant answers from anybody, I make that clear.

But you have told me that you were prosecuted 26
and, in the end, acquitted?
A. No, no I wasn't prosecuted, sir.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, no, you were prosecuted.
A. Was I?

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Yes, you went to court --
A. Oh.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: -- and, in the end, you were acquitted. I think l've got that right. My understanding of the settlement in the Bates litigation is that those who might have a claim for malicious prosecution, those rights were preserved, I think I'm right in saying that, notwithstanding the full and final nature of the settlement in other respects.

First question: can a person who has been acquitted sue for malicious prosecution? I'm not going to make any definitive legal rulings but the answer, I think, is yes. If that is correct, it appears to me that there may be a loophole or a lacuna, in the sense that those who have been convicted and had their convictions quashed are entitled to an interim payment but those who may have been acquitted may fall into a hole, so to speak.

I must say, I'm reasonably unhappy about that state of affairs, given that their rights to sue for malicious prosecution have been preserved, apparently.

Accordingly, I would like at some point in the not too distant future for your legal team to write me a short note explaining the position that I've set out with some answers to it and my own legal team will do its research as well, because I want to understand whether the interim scheme, which is apparently being applied as we are going along, so to speak, is being fair to everyone who might take advantage of it.

Now, I'm saying all this, I hope, in entirely neutral tones and there will be people listening, I am sure, who will have views about this, but I would not want a category of potential Claimants to be disadvantaged if, as my understanding is, that is a possibility.
MR STEIN: We will address this in writing and return to you. Can I just mention one matter to Mr Blake?
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Of course.
MR BLAKE: Your barrister has asked me to ask a further question and it relates to a paragraph in your witness statement. After your Post Office closed --
A. Yes.
Q. -- can you tell us what you saw in SubPostmaster Magazine?
A. Yes, as I said earlier, this is 21 years ago, and so I can't remember the publication. l'll check with 28
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Mr Hazzleton when I get home because he has a better memory of these things, but I seem to think that there was some sort of magazine Subpostmasters' Monthly, or whatever it was called, and, in there, was a segment of another postmaster who had had problems with the computer and had a discrepancy, for want of a better word, of about $£ 20,000$. And it was then, and only then, that I knew categorically that someone else was going through this and it wasn't just me, which l'd been told on a lot of occasions, "Nobody else is going through this problem". And I categorically knew then that there's somebody else out there who was going through the same thing.
Q. You said that you were told several times that nobody else was going through it?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. Can you recall who told you?
A. The helpline, definitely. I think the area manager Tony Newman, I think he mentioned it. It would have been those. It wouldn't have been the police because they wouldn't have known anything about that. So someone to do with the Post Office said, on more than one occasion, "There's nobody else going through that, nobody else with these problems". But then I knew that there was and that was quite -- a bit comforting, 29
know, and I'm asking questions on behalf of the Chair. The Chair sits here, as well, in person today.

Although I'm looking at you on a screen over there I think actually I'm going to look at the camera there because that should help you see me. You should have before you a statement, which is dated 12 January of this year; is that right?
A. Yes, I have, yes.
Q. Could I just take you to the final page of that statement, page 18 ?
A. Yes.
Q. Is that your signature at the bottom of the statement?
A. Yes.
Q. Is the statement true to the best of your knowledge and belief?
A. It is.
Q. I'm going to start by just asking you some questions about your background. Where in the country do you live now?
A. I'm in York.
Q. Who do you live with?
A. I live with my partner and my 12 -year old daughter.
Q. I think you have two other daughters?
A. I have two sons. They're in their 30 s. One lives in Canada and one lives in Edinburgh.
in a way, to know that I'm not an idiot, it's not just me that's going through this, there is someone else, at least one person. It turns out there's 500 of us but, at that stage, I thought: well, there is at least one more person who is suffering from these computer issues.
Q. Thank you very much.
A. Thank you.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us.
A. You're very welcome.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: We greatly appreciate it.
So shall we have a short break while we prepare for the next witness?
MR BLAKE: Yes, I'm grateful, Chair. Perhaps a 10-minute break, so 11.20.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Fine.

## (11.11 am)

(A short break)
( 11.24 am )
MR BLAKE: Thank you, Chair. We have Ms Martin, who is joining us remotely.

## WENDY MARTIN (affirmed) Questioned by MR BLAKE

MR BLAKE: Good morning, my name is Julian Blake, as you 30
Q. Can you tell us what your first jobs were before the Post Office?
A. Well, I started out as -- I went to a business training school and I started out in accountancy. I worked as a credit controller for a large building firm, I worked at a building society and then I was working at the Environment Agency doing their admin, and then I was pregnant -- I left because I got pregnant, and I was quite ill when I was pregnant. I was married young and I went on to have two children. I had a break for several years until I went into the Post Office when we were a bit older.
Q. I think that was 1999 when you first started working at a Post Office branch?
A. It was.
Q. Where was that?
A. It was in Liphook in Hampshire.
Q. I think you then worked in York; is that right?
A. Yeah. My ex-husband's father was ill. We'd moved back to York and I was working at the main Post Office, the Crown Office in York centre.
Q. While you were working in the Crown Office in York, did you work any other jobs?
A. Yes. I worked for other Post Offices providing holiday cover. I was helping out at a small

Post Office where the manager was struggling, and I left my job at the main Post Office to go work more hours for him, again in York, in a place called Clarence Street in York.

I was also covering for Mr Murray on weekends, so I'd work both jobs together. I'd work the days that I was working at one I wouldn't work at the other, and if I was on holiday from one, I would go work at the other.
Q. Sorry, you mentioned Mr Murray. Who is Mr Murray?
A. He was the previous postmaster of the Post Office that I took over in Clarence Street -- in Crichton Avenue, sorry, in York, and he was my boss for a while, who then became my landlord once I took on the Post Office.
Q. Up until the point when you became a subpostmistress, how long had you worked or been associated with the Post Office?
A. 16 years.
Q. Can you tell us how you became a subpostmistress?
A. Alistair wanted to sell up and the people who'd wanted to take it on, the Post Office had said there wasn't enough space and were really acting up. I'd spoken to my partner and things had been going really well for us. You know, we'd managed to -- we'd only been 33
together a relatively short amount of time.
Our daughter was 4 . We'd managed to buy our home, I passed my driving test, he'd relocated to York because he was originally from Crawley, and everything seemed to be going in an upward momentum. He found a job in York very easily and, as I say, we bought our council home. And it was just an option of -- because I loved the Post Office.

I really enjoyed it. It was the best job I'd ever had. I really got something out of it. I felt like it was my calling. I was going to be doing it until I retired, regardless of whether I worked for myself or I worked for anybody else and, until that point, I'd never actually thought about taking on a Post Office of my own. I was happy to work for somebody else. I just enjoyed the work. I still enjoyed going and l just felt that was such a big thing because every other job I'd never really loved, you know.
Q. In addition to the Post Office, did you also run a retail business?
A. Yes, just selling like cards, stationery and a few toys, and bits and pieces.
Q. What did you have to do in order to become a subpostmistress?

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refurbishment?
A. Well, I borrowed 20,000 straight away from the bank. I had 8,000 of my own savings, and I borrowed 5,000 from my father. So 33,000 was the figure that I sort of started off with but, as soon as I took the bank loan out, from day 1 of taking the bank loan out, the interest was added, so I actually, instead of owing the bank the 20 , I owed the bank $£ 28,000$.

The refit itself was about $£ 16,000$ and then I had to take over all the stock and things like there was furniture and stuff like that that we had to have things. I got things specially made. I bought all the fittings for the walls and stuff like that. So I wasn't left with any money.
Q. You have said that the Post Office was responsible for installing some things. What were they responsible for?
A. They were responsible for the wiring, they were responsible for the location of the safes and providing the safes and the equipment and getting them fitted. Their team fitted them. My team did the refurbishment.
Q. Moving on to training, you said that you first worked in a Post Office role in 1999. Did you receive training then?
A. When I worked in Liphook in Hampshire, we were one of the trial offices for Horizon, for the original Horizon system, and we went off for -- I think it was a few days, I can't remember exactly how long it was. It was just a short course and, basically, it was just role play of when somebody came in, this is your screen in front of you, how to basically sell a stamp. But, to be honest, it was just on like a training module. You learnt more as you went along.

In fact, I was the youngest person at the
Post Office and I actually found the job fairly easy. I didn't find it too complex at all. I'd had other people who'd gone for it who couldn't handle it but the way by brain works, it worked, it wired right for me. And, obviously, being the youngest I was a bit more computer literate at that time because, obviously, I'd been to business training college, and stuff like that, so I'd had a little bit of time on computers and stuff, as well.

So the older ones who struggled with the computers, they knew the job better. They would teach me the job and I would show them the way round the computer.
Q. When you moved to the York Post Office, the central one, did you have any involvement with Horizon at that
stage?
A. Yes, we were still working on Horizon at that stage because this was two years on, after l'd started, by which time Horizon had been rolled into every office. So we were still on Horizon in York and, obviously, there was a lot of people worked around -- it was no longer a small office. You always had eight or nine more members of staff working alongside you. So if there was anything you were unsure of, there was enough people there to ask and somebody would have done it before, you know.
Q. How about when you became a subpostmistress, was there training then?
A. No. What we did was they sent -- it was a lady to sort of see how things had gone. She was about 20-odd years old. She'd only done the job for a few months. She really didn't have a clue and she stood round for a couple of hours and said "Oh, you know more than I do, I'll give you a ring tomorrow and see if I need to come back". And she shot off after about two hours.

But actually, in the time that she was there, we had issues with the safe where it would lose its memory. So it was a special safe. It was done on a computer program, you couldn't go to it with a key 38
and open it. You had like a special part in each -it had separate sections.

Now, I was what you call in the secure area, I was behind the glass. I used to call it the goldfish bowl. So I was in the goldfish bowl and the other lady was out the glass. The lady out the glass could only keep a very, very small amount in her till at any one time. So she'd be in and out this safe constantly because if she needed $£ 600$ and she could only keep 500 on the counter, she'd have to immediately go get another $£ 500$ out of this safe. And she'd said to me "Wendy, it won't give me the money it's telling me it's empty", and the girl who was there didn't know what to do. So I'd had to ring up the helpline and they told me "Oh, you have to find the special pod and you'll have to empty it", and you had to go through each section until found some money and then take it out. Once it was completely empty, we loaded it back up again, and the girl didn't know why that had happened.

We just assumed it was first day. We were only actually open for four hours on the first day. We didn't open until the afternoon. So we'd already had our first issue on the first day, plus we were getting to grips with the fact that obviously the girl on the
non-secure area couldn't do certain transactions. So I'd be in the secure area trying to maybe count the safe, or whatever, and I kept getting called off jobs because the safe had lost its money and, of course, I'd have a business customer in who wanted to pay in a larger amount of money and she couldn't take it.

So, initially, for that first few weeks, you worked in separate units. So each person had their own stock unit. Because I kept getting called off jobs that I was doing, I'd end up working in the wrong unit which -- it was easy enough to sort but I just initially, for the first few weeks thought I was just being a numpty, and it was me, it was just because I kept getting called of my jobs and having all these problems with the safe.

And I had the alarm company kept phoning up telling me "Your alarms going off, you've touched your, you know, your buttons underneath", and I was like "Well, there's nobody even working at that counter, so we can't have done".

Actually, after that, it turned out that the safe wasn't wired in correctly as well, and it was linked to the wrong office. So what was working -some things weren't wired in, things like the panic button was never wired in. So had I pressed it, had 40

I had an issue, the police wouldn't have come. But the rest of it was linked to the wrong office.

So it must have been -- apparently it was linked to an office in Leeds, so the chances are that they were there having a trial but because they'd told them they were in Leeds and my office was York, when they pressed the panic button for the trial, that's why they thought I was pressing my panic buttons.
Q. So there are a range of initial problems with the safe, with the alarms and I want to talk to you about problems with Horizon. What did you think was the cause of those early problems that you were having in your Post Office?
A. I just wasn't even sure. I just know that we'd gone from an office that worked really well to where I was coming home on a night and I just didn't know where the cash figures would sit, because what was happening was I would check my figures and check the cash and it would show a discrepancy. So l'd think on "What have I done?"

And you'd go round everything and you'd recheck it and, by the time you rechecked it, you put in the same figure and the discrepancy figure would have changed. But you could put the two things side by side, your figures were identical, but the discrepancy
showing this $£ 350$ short. So I really thought: this has got to be a genuine discrepancy.

So it was there on the Thursday night and it was there on the Friday night. So on the Saturday, I was a bit quieter on the Saturday, I pulled out every stock unit, I checked every stamp, I checked everything, made sure each person's unit was correct. I then checked the main safe and the discrepancy amount had gone up from $£ 350$ to $£ 850$, and I checked everything, and I pulled out every bag of money. I took it all apart, I recounted everything, redid everything and I did this loads of times in the afternoon. I was sat in tears.

We'd arranged to go out that night. I'd already spoken to my ex-boss and told him what was going on and he'd actually been talking to the union man who told him "I think you need to get her to get in touch with me" but, at that time -- when I very first started Alistair had said to me, "Look, I wouldn't recommend you going to the National Federation of SubPostmasters because they're absolutely useless, they no longer represent the interests of the postmaster but the CWU are very good".

And he left me the forms to join but, because of all the issues I'd been having, I just hadn't had time
amount had changed. One time it went from saying it was $£ 3,500$ short, within 20 minutes, to saying it was a few hundred pounds short.
Q. You experienced problems. Did your customers experience problems?
A. Yes. I had customers phoning me up telling me "We paid a bill and they're still chasing us for it and they're telling us it hasn't been paid", and I'd say "Well, have you got your receipt", and a lot of the time people didn't keep receipts, so l'd have to pull out all the back office stuff to find the transaction to give them the reference number, and then I'd give them the reference number and l'd hear no more from them. So I just always assumed it was rectified. But I never knew what was causing it.

There was one Saturday afternoon where it started on the Thursday. I did the money on the Thursday and it was the balancing week the following week, so anything you put in on the balancing week you have to physically put the money in. So on the Thursday night I was $£ 350$ short. But because at this time I was having so many of these random discrepancies, by the time I checked the next morning, quite often it wasn't showing a discrepancy. But the next day when I did the cash again, I was still 42
to fill in these forms, because I'd spent all day on the phone either to the helpline or to customers with issues.

I just didn't have time for anything else, plus I was getting to grips with having a new business, I had to learn how to do, you know, the tax and the wages, and everything else, and we were due to go out and I was just sat in tears. I was sat in streams of tears, and I checked the money so many times, it wasn't there and I got really annoyed with my other half who -- he always used to come in on Saturday afternoon and help me do the cleaning ready so it was clean for Monday. And I said "Just go home, I don't want you here. I just need to be able to check everything. I need to be able to concentrate".

So he'd gone home, taken my daughter home, and the dog and, no matter what I did, I couldn't find this money all day.

Just before I finished, I checked for the final time and the full $£ 850$ had come back from nowhere, and I just didn't know what was going on, and I was sat in tears at this night out that we were having. It was a bit of a closure celebration. It was meeting up with Alistair, with Janice, who was our person we worked with, and I was just sat in tears. And he said
"Look, I've spoken to Mark, he's agreed to speak to you, but you have got to put the form in to join the union". So I put the form in to join the union but the paperwork had actually not come through

When I spoke to Mark and told him what was going on, he said all he wanted me to do was he wanted me to go in the next day and look at the modem to see if the light was red or green, and that's when I started watching the modem and realising every few seconds the light went red. Well, apparently that meant we lost connection, so it transpired that, once l'd spoken to Mark, he told me what was happening was that I was losing connection. There was a problem on my line.
Q. Sorry to interrupt. Was that the very first time that you realised what the core of the problem was that you were facing in your branch?
A. Yes, it was, yes.
Q. You mentioned the helpline having called the helpline. Was that ever discussed with them?
A. Yes, I was ringing the helpline -- every time the red light came on after that, I would ring the helpline and the helpline's response every time was "Right, take out all the wiring, put it all back together, has the green light come on", and I'd say "Yes, it's on now". And they'd say "Well, it's fine now", and then
me to watch the thing, I'd rang him to say "Oh, yes this light goes red every few seconds", and that's when he told me that that meant that I was losing power on my --
Q. You said that he was called Mark. Mark?
A. Mark Baker, yes.
Q. Did he tell you who else you should speak to?
A. Well, we were speaking for quite a while and he was sending emails on my behalf to people to try and get things done. So I kept thinking somebody would come and I still kept phoning the helpline and nobody would come. Every night when I got home, I'd phone up and speak to Mark and I'd tell him what had been going on during the day. And this happened for several months, until the point when I said to him "I just can't work like this anymore".

At this point, I was so stressed out I wasn't sleeping. I was spending so much time on the phone arguing with either customers or -- well, not fully arguing but speaking to customers who were shouting me down because bills hadn't been paid and having to solve other people's problems, when I had this problem going on, or on the phone to the helpline all the time, and then Mark every night.

I'd close the Post Office and I rang the 47
two seconds later the light would go off again, and I'd re-phone the helpline and they'd tell me the same thing and l'd say "But l've just done this, there's a problem on the line".

I kept asking them to send somebody out and I was phoning time, after time, after time, every day, so much so that it transpired that they weren't even noting when I'd rung up. I was phoning that many times in the day and if I didn't phone back the same day, if I just took it all apart and mended it because that's all they were going to tell me to do anyway, they wouldn't send anybody out. They would say "Ah, well, that was yesterday, so today it's a new day, so we assumed we'd close the case".

I was just having this all the time.
Q. I'm going to take you through various people that you spoke to, other than the helpline, one at a time. So let's start with the Communication Workers Union. You mentioned that you spoke to somebody from there?
A. Yes.
Q. How did you first get in contact with them?
A. Well, he'd actually -- he was a friend of Alistair's so Alistair gave me his phone number and, obviously, as soon as I've sort of told him what was happening about the figures and that, and I say after him asking 46
helpline and I told them "I'm closing the office and I am not reopening until we get something done about what's going on with this line". So I told them I wanted a senior member of staff to phone me back. Nobody did.

And I went to the press, our local press, and they ran a story, and they got in touch with the Post Office who said they were going to be speaking to me , and they did speak to me. The senior manager rung up, Patricia Bursley, I think she was called, rung me and she shouted at me like a bulldog and she threatened to charge me for closing my Post Office and she told me that if I didn't reopen my Post Office I was against the terms of my contract and that there they would be taking the money that they had paid for the refurbishment off me.

I told her "In your contract, it's stated you were going to be giving me working equipment. You haven't given me working equipment, so your contract it's not worth the paper, it's written on, and won't be reopening until this is rectified", I said. By this time, Mark had advised me that start making a diary of when you lose connection and when you have a discrepancy because you'll probably find that all these things connect together.

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And I told her I'd been making this diary and I had it in my diary that on the days that I was having all these issues, where I was losing connection, were the same days that I was having all these major discrepancies.

Now, sometimes the discrepancies would come back, like I say, you know, but not every discrepancy was coming back and I went from an office that ran fairly well to where I was just putting in money every week to balance and --
Q. In terms of who you spoke to did you speak to somebody called Kevin Gilliland?
A. I did, yes. So Mark had advised me that Kevin Gilliland was probably going to be my best person to speak to. So I had emailed Kevin Gilliland and said about -- by this time, I'd been closed over a week and Patricia Bursley had still done nothing, and I told her I was going to be speaking to this Kevin Gilliland. And she tried to stop me and told me they were working on it and getting people sorted.

He said "l'll get it sorted", and he sent emails on my behalf. Then I wasn't hearing anything. I thought, well, if I'm emailing him and he's emailing somebody else why am I -- I should be emailing them, who he's emailing.

So that's what I did and I emailed and I was, like, "Is there any updates?" and that's when they sent me all the internal documents about who was chasing who. What you'd find is -- when you were kids and you used to do something wrong and you had sisters and your Dad would say "Which one of you was it?" and you'd all point at each other, well, basically the internal emails: "I've passed it to somebody but they're not here at the moment, so they've passed it to somebody else, who's passed it to somebody else", and all that was happening is they were just passing it along to somebody else. Everybody telling everybody "Keep me updated on what's going on" but nobody actually doing anything.

At this time I was still short, I couldn't pay my business loan because I wasn't earning anything because, that's the point, if we weren't open we weren't earning and I still had to pay my business loans and my rent.
Q. Was one of the people that he pointed you in the direction of Angela van den Bogerd?
A. Yes, he said he would be getting this

Angela van den Bogerd to look at my case.
Q. Who was she?
A. She was a Post Office director and she actually came 50
out to see me. So she came out to see me. At this time, they'd convinced me to reopen. I demanded that I had an audit for reopening and when the auditor had come out to do this reopening, we checked the money, which l'd left correct, and we checked the cash, and the figure was one thing. And we checked the cash and we looked again at the figure, and the figure had altered only by $£ 5$, but it had altered in front of him. But because we hadn't printed the original figure against the next figure, he said "Oh, well, maybe just re-thing it".

Then he tried to tell me "Oh, well, it's just a delay in the system, so it doesn't matter, things are getting there, it may be slow, it may not be right but they are getting there, so ..."

But I was like, if the auditors walk in and I'm $£ 20,000$ short, I can't say, "Well, can you hang about for a few minutes because most of it might come back". They're going to shut me down there and then and they're going to be taking me to court, you know.
Q. After people from the Post Office came to your branch, did things improve?
A. No, they didn't. They kept telling me they were. I was emailing them and what happened was, at this point, I was still going home with a lot of
discrepancies. Nine times out of ten, by the time I came in, in the morning, it would be sorted and it would all be square.

But what had happened was I'd had a customer in who'd been told -- he'd sent a MoneyGram, and he said "They've sent this MoneyGram back and they've told me I can't send it. So they've given me a code for me to reclaim this money". So what happened was I'd done this MoneyGram and we'd lost connection, like we did, so I tried to redo it. But when I tried to redo it, it told me I couldn't redo it and that the code had already been used. So I phoned up MoneyGram and they said "Well, you've just done this transaction", and I said "I didn't". So I did a transaction log. There was no sign of this transaction ever happening on my system, there was nothing on my paperwork to say it had happened but it had happened, for several hundred pounds.

So I phoned Angela van den Bogerd and she said, "I'll deal with it and what we'll have to do is we'll send you a transaction correction so then you can pay your customers". The customer wasn't very happy, he'd had to go away with -- his transaction had been used and he was going away with no money, until I rung him to say that he could come and get his cash back.

They sent the transaction correction and l'd written a letter to the Post Office saying "That is 100 per cent proof that this is happening to me. It's an acknowledgement that l've done a transaction that is nowhere on my accounts". It's nowhere -- it's not to be seen anywhere? It's as if it's not happened. I didn't get any receipts, didn't get anything off the system, it just threw me off like it used to.

So "It's 100 per cent proof and I am not putting any more money into this system because it's proving there's a problem and why I should I pay when there's problems?" I kept saying to them, "I'm not paying for the Post Office's issues. I'm sick of putting money into the system because it's faulty". And I'm telling everybody.

I mean, at this point I wasn't sleeping more an hour or two hours a night. I was like a walking zombie. By the time this had all been going on, I was open for just under two years and I probably slept five hours a week, if that, for those five years.

I was getting so many kidney infections constantly, that the doctor would actually leave me prescriptions in reception, without me ever going in, because didn't have time to go to the doctor's. My staff was so stressed out, one of them she left --

Janice left, because she couldn't deal with it anymore. We were all just falling apart.
Q. You have given quite a few examples of discrepancies and shorffalls and you've set out more in your witness statement as well. Can you estimate in broad terms how much you think you had to pay the Post Office as a result?
A. Well, I would say roughly about $£ 8,000$, because what was happening -- in the end, Alistair said "Look, what I'll do is I'll work one day a month, so you can have a day a month off". But, actually, every time he worked, there was an issue and he'd have to ring me anyway because, obviously, it wasn't just happening just when I was there, it was happening to everybody who worked there.

It was -- you know, so he rang me to say -- the first day -- that I was $£ 4,000$ short and he couldn't find it and he'd been through everything and he could find nothing on his paperwork, and the next day he rang me to say that he was $£ 2,000$ over, and he couldn't find it. But he said -- but this time, because the last one had turned out he'd not looked at -- or he thought he hadn't taken in any transfers, but he had taken in the transfers but it wasn't on the system when he'd done it but, by the time he finished 54
doing it and re-looked the transfer was in the system.
This time he said "I know I did that at 8.00 this morning". He was doing his cash last thing at night and the transaction had only just gone into his system. So it had been delayed in the ethos(sic) for all those hours and he wrote an email, which I again forwarded to the Post Office, to say that in all the years that he'd worked on the system he'd never seen it behaving like it was working -- behaving when I was there, you know.
Q. We've heard about, in some cases, shortfalls increasing when subpostmasters have tried to rectify them. Is that something that ever happened to you?
A. Yes, it was. I once put a cheque in for a discrepancy and when I went to go REM my cheques out, I was showing more of a cheque. So I tried to REM it out and it doubled, and I tried again to REM it out, and it doubled again. And I kept having to reverse it, so it never did get rectified. I don't know what happened to that.
Q. Can you explain, for people who might not be familiar with the term what you mean by REMing it out?
A. Basically, at the end of each working day, any cheques or anything had to be sent to the Post Office through the internal post. So what you had to do was you had
to tell the system "I'm going to be sending this through the system", and that's what we called a REM. So you would tell the system "I'm sending a cheque for" -- I think the cheque was $£ 750$-- "sending this $£ 750$ cheque to the thing", and it would take it off your system.
Q. I'd like to move on to the audit and the investigation that followed. You had an early -- something called a count of cash; is that right?
A. Yes, it was just a young lass who come in. It was just my six-month check that she wanted to just check the cash and stock. It was just one girl. She just came in, checked everything very quickly said, to the best of her knowledge, we were about $£ 10$ adrift and just went off.
Q. But that wasn't a formal audit?
A. No, it wasn't a formal audit, no. The only formal audit I actually had was the one I requested and the one at the end.
Q. You say you requested it. Was that after you had closed the Post Office?
A. After I closed it and I told them I wasn't reopening until I had an audit. I tried to fight for them -because they kept telling me if I didn't reopen my Post Office, that how could they check what was going 56
on with my line, because they couldn't test it. But even if they stood there next to me and I opened it and I had a major discrepancy, they wouldn't write it off. I'd still have to pay it, even if they watched me do everything.

I tried to fight to make them do it but, at the end of the day, I was very getting very concerned that I couldn't pay my business loans. I was relatively new at that point, you know, and I was getting very scared that what am I going to do? I mean, like I say, I just wasn't sleeping.
Q. When they carried out that audit, did they identify any problems?
A. I say, just this bouncing $£ 5$. At the very end, the last audit, there was no issues. I think they did find something, I just paid it in cash. I think it was a stamp that was missing on the final audit.
Q. Did the time come when you closed your Post Office?
A. It did. I closed just before Christmas and I told them if they didn't come and sort it out I wasn't reopening after Christmas. The doctor had rang to say that my liver was showing signs of shutting down, that my blood tests hadn't been very good because, at that time, I really felt like I was dropping dead. My blood pressure had increased to a point where it was 57
dangerous, they were still trying different medications, trying to get my blood pressure to a more acceptable level but it got much worse after I closed.
Q. You said December, so that's December 2016, is it?
A. 2017.
Q. Did you take advice, I think, from the Communication Workers Union?
A. I did, yes. Well, I was taking advice all along from Mark but, in the end, I just couldn't do it anymore. I'd gone to a shade of grey that a human shouldn't be. I really felt like I was going to drop dead. My parents were begging me, "Please, close because look at the state of you, look what's going on".

My sister said to me "Wendy, you're going to go bankrupt anyway because if you stay open" -- I mean, I was so worried about figures, that when I was sending money back -- because I was a high-volume office, I sent a lot of money back every fortnight to the Post Office and when I was bagging money up to sent back to the Post Office, I would be videoing my figures before I start, I would video myself bagging the money up and then I would video the figure after, to make sure the two things agreed, because had that money gone missing in the ethos, there was $£ 26,000$ in each of those bags and I had several of those bags to 58
do each week, you know.
Q. So you were videoing yourself to keep evidence of --
A. Keep evidence of this money going into the bags, that the money had gone into the system, that I'd told them that the money was going back.
Q. Why did you feel it was necessary to do that?
A. Because my discrepancies were getting so, so wild. You know, my worst discrepancy on any one day was over $£ 30,000$, it was just so worrying, because I was always liable for it.
Q. I'm going to move on to your involvement in the group litigation, the Bates and others case. How did you find out about that?
A. Well, to be honest, I'd actually joined it while I was still open, because Mark felt like the evidence that I had was very strong. So he really wanted me to get involved. So I was still open at the point when I joined the case. But, obviously, when I closed I had to do a second part to my story because I'd sent them the first part of what was going on and how I'd written this and they'd written that. But a lot of the stuff, when things went wrong, the Post Office wouldn't write me anything in writing. They would phone me up and speak to me verbally because they didn't want the paperwork, they didn't want the paper
trail of accepting that there'd been issues in my office.

But regardless of the issues in my office, all they ever did was send Royal Mail -- sorry, send BT to test the line and I kept telling them "You're sending the wrong person. The problem isn't the line. You have sent BT three times. Stop sending BT. Send the people who have done the wiring". And, like I say, when some of it did come, nothing had been wired in correctly. The alarm system wasn't wired correctly, they hadn't fitted the device that I was supposed to use so that the alarm doesn't use your phone line.

Also, obviously, there was also -- the gas and electric machine was on that same line, and so all these things would fight for this connection and I was getting phoned out in the middle of the night saying the alarm was going off and that would be the figures going through the system. But I'd still had to physically go to the Post Office, just in case I was being broken into.
Q. So you provided all of that information as part of the litigation. Did you receive damages in the court case?
A. I did. I received about 24,000 .
Q. Do you feel that that fully compensates you for what

## you experienced?

A. No, l've lost my business and that business was my retirement. I don't have retirement. I've worked for the Post Office for 16 years and walked away with nothing. I'm in debt now until I'm in my mid-70s and I'm not looking to get out of that debt. The bank still has a right to come after my home because I still owe them this money. We can't pay off the debt. I mean, all that money really did was do things like the boiler had been broken because of the problems in the system.

What I should say is, of the time that I was open, of those 20-odd months I was open, there was never a week I wasn't closed because of the problems with the system, because I couldn't work on the system, because it would lose connection all the time. So I couldn't serve customers. So what was happening was the customers would get so frustrated because, every time they came, the Post Office was shut.
Q. So you lost money during the course that the Post Office was open because you couldn't open?
A. Yes.
Q. Presumably, you've lost the money that you invested in the Post Office?
A. Lost the money I invested. I've also -- I've lost my 61
as well.
Q. Did it impact on your reputation as well?
A. It did, the rumours went round that she stole from the Post Office, that's why it closed, especially because I closed so quick. Now, what I did at the end, the last few days, was I took the makeup off, so people could see how ill I looked and, obviously, there was a lot of concern from people when they came in and saw how ill I was looking and "Bloody hell, what's going on, what's wrong with you?" You know.

But I heard the rumours that I'd stolen from the Post Office. Everywhere I went, I was Post Office -"Oh, it's Post Office lady, it's Post Office lady". I'm no longer a Post Office lady. All I hear anybody wants to talk about now is the Post Office and I really don't want to talk about the Post Office.
Q. What would you like from the Post Office?
A. Well, firstly, we need compensating in full for what we've actually lost. I also -- I don't just want the Post Office to take responsibility for what they've done to us, the Government claimed that they weren't party to anything. Now, the Post Office and the Government have an agreement that if the Post Office had to spend anything, by 50 million, that the Government need to be involved in that.
retirement, I've lost my income. You know, what was supposed to be this nice standard of living, it never transpired. All that happens is it made me very ill, I'm still not well, my organs still don't work efficiently.
Q. It's right to say you weren't suspended or terminated by the Post Office?
A. No, I wasn't. So, I mean, I am one of the ones that, officially, I'm not going to be paid out.
Q. You've mentioned quite a few effects on you personally, in terms of lost sleep. Psychologically, how would you describe the impact on you?
A. I had a complete break down after. I just shut down as a person. Myself and my partner grew a bit distant. We moved into separate rooms, which we still sleep in separate rooms and, although that partnership is coming back together a bit more now, we've lost that intimacy that we used to have.

Obviously, there was a massive impact on my daughter. I mean, when she was little we used to live in this lovely pristine house. I just -- I didn't have energy to get in the bath, never mind clean the house or anything, so my partner was going to work trying to come home, do what he could, but the house was dirty and, you know, he got very, very depressed

Now, our settlement for all of us were 57 million so the Government can't say "We weren't party to that", because their own situation says "We were party to that", because the Post Office has to go to the Government if it's over 50 million.

So the Government giving it all "Oh, it's not our responsibility, it's a Post Office thing", it's not just the Post Office, it's the Post Office and the Government. So the Government should be looking at repaying us what we've lost as well.
Q. Is there anything else that you would like to add at all?
A. Yes, what I would like to say is, on the state of the compensation. Of the 555 , a vast majority were like me, who weren't prosecuted but we still had the same outcome. We still lost everything, you know. Just because I haven't physically lost my home yet, doesn't mean it's safe. I lost my business, I lost my income, I lost myself. I lost my relationship, I lost so much of me that I need -- I need to have some happiness back, and the only way we can do that now, unfortunately, is by getting compensated in full for what we've lost, and also what we've been through. You know, my health is still not good.

What I should say is, I mean, I had a suspected 64
stroke after I closed, as well, just down to the thing. At that point, my blood pressure was 295 over 195, which is classed as critical, and it was pretty much stable at that. It nearly killed me, you know, and for people to say "Oh, it's all right, it don't matter", it does matter. It devastated our lives and we need repaying and we need compensating, and we need everything put back the way it should have been.
Q. Thank you very much. Chair, do you have any questions?
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, I don't have any questions of you, Ms Martin, but I would like to thank you so much forgiving us a comprehensive account of the way in which all this has impacted upon you. So thanks very much for taking the time and trouble to give evidence to us.
A. Thank you.

MR BLAKE: Sir, Mohammed Amir is ready to give evidence before lunch, if you would like to hear from him before lunch.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: I'll be guided either by you, Mr Blake, or Ms Hodge, who may be taking that evidence. If you think that we can conveniently fit him in, within, say, about a half an hour because some people obviously taking longer than others, so that he
completes his evidence by, say, about 1.15, then I think, probably, we would prefer to do that. But let's have five-minute break and you decide which is preferable, all right?
MR BLAKE: Thank you very much.
( 12.18 pm )

## (A short break) <br> ( 12.28 pm ) <br> MS HODGE: Mr Amir, can you see and hear us? <br> A. Yes, I can. <br> Q. Our usher will take you through the affirmation. <br> MOHAMMED ZUBAIR AMIR (affirmed) Questioned by MS HODGE

MS HODGE: Mr Amir, as you know, my name is
Catriona Hodge, and I ask questions on behalf of the Inquiry.

Please can you state your full name?
A. Mohammed Zubair Amir.
Q. You made a witness statement on 11 January of this year; is that correct?
A. That's correct, yes.
Q. Do you have a copy of that statement before you?
A. Ido, yes.
Q. Please could you turn to the final page of your statement at page 10 ?
Q. For how long did you run those two businesses?
A. It was approximately three to four years.
Q. What sort of hours did you work?
A. It was night shift, so I started around $4.00 / 5.00 \mathrm{pm}$, until the early hours.
Q. Would you describe yourself as a hard working man?
A. Yes, I do, and have been since I left school. I went to college briefly. I was the eldest and I started a business when I was 17 years old and I worked 12 to 14 hours a day then at a retail shop at the beginning, and, in the takeaway, again I worked 10 to 12 hours a day.
Q. When you sold your takeaway business, you decided to become a subpostmaster; is that right?
A. That's correct, yes.
Q. What attracted you to the role?
A. What attracted me was it was a good job I seen with the Post Office, reputable, and, you know, it was partly retail as well, because there was a retail side to it, as well, because I'd already done that, and it was a reputable company, the Post Office, and that was the reason.
Q. Were you attracted to working within your community?
A. I was, yes. I wanted to, you know, stay in my local community and that was one of the attractions, yes.

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Q. How did you first become involved with the Post Office?
A. My brother initially took on the Post Office and then I joined him in 2001 or '02, it was. Then we got another Post Office. He started another business, so I took over as subpostmaster at both the offices and I started off from there
Q. At which branch was --
A. Westwood Park, it was in Winton, Eccles, and Little Lever Post Office in Bolton.
Q. You said that your brother took it on. Was that in the role of subpostmaster?
A. Yes, he was subpostmaster for a few years and then I took over his role.
Q. You say you took over. Was that in about 2004?
A. I officially took over but I was working in the Post Office since 2001.
Q. But you became the subpostmaster of the office in 2004; is that correct?
A. Yes.
Q. For how long did you run the branch at Westwood Park?
A. I ran it from -- I was initially there from 2001, then we bought, literally, the Post Office in 2002, I went there and I ran both of them. Westwood Park I ran until I sold it in January 2009.

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Q. You've mentioned a second branch which you purchased; is that right?
A. Yes, that's right.
Q. Which branch was that?
A. That was the Little Lever Post Office.
Q. Can you recall when you purchased that branch?
A. Yes, my brother purchased it in 2002. Like I say, I took over the role of subpostmaster in 2004 of Westwood Park and Little Lever Post Office.
Q. Do you remain a subpostmaster of that branch today?
A. I do, yes.
Q. You purchased a third branch, I believe, in 2007; is that right?
A. That's correct, yes.
Q. Which branch was that?
A. That was Farnworth Post Office.
Q. Were you the subpostmaster of that branch?
A. I was, yes.
Q. For how long did you run that branch?
A. I ran that -- bought it in July 2007 and sold it in July 2015.
Q. Did you employ any staff to assist you in running the three branches?
A. Yes, I had numerous staff on all three branches and each office as well.

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Q. Can you recall roughly how many?
A. At Westwood Park there was, including the retail side, there was about four staff there, at Farnworth Post Office there was approximately eight to nine staff, and it Little Lever Post Office there was about four staff as well.
Q. What was your relationship like with your staff?
A. At the beginning, it was brilliant. It was a mixture of staff that I took on at the offices and some of my -- I employed some of my friends, and also some family friends as well. So it was a good -- at the beginning it was quite good, yes.
Q. What role did your businesses play within your local community?
A. In the local community -- l'd done quite a lot in the local community. I'd done a lot of charity work, we sponsored the school football teams, and we had a good role in the community, yes. One of my office, Westwood Park, was in Manchester the other two were in my local vicinity in Bolton, so I was quite active, especially in them.
Q. What were your hopes and expectations in terms of running these businesses?
A. I wanted to, at that time in 2006/07, when I bought the third one, my plan was to expand, to get a few
more Post Offices and just stay within the Post Office for the remainder of my career.
Q. I'd like to ask you now a little about the training and support you received when you started running your Post Office branches. Was the Horizon system installed in the Westwood Park Post Office when you started working there?
A. Yes, it was already in there when we took over.
Q. Did you receive any training on Horizon?
A. Yes. We had a trainer. My brother was the subpostmaster, so he took the training at -- I think it was Stockport Post Office, I think for a day or two, and then we had a trainer come in for about a week or two to help us out. But then when I took over the Post Office as a subpostmaster, I was sent to Stockport again, which was useless, to be honest with you. It wasn't practical. But I did have a trainer as well, which, to be honest with you, I probably -because I was already working there, I probably knew more than them.
Q. Did the training you receive cover balancing the branch accounts?
A. Yes, it did do.
Q. Did it do so in any detail?
A. No, I wouldn't say it was. It was more like of
self-training, to be honest with you, whilst hands on at the offices. So I learnt mostly everything ourselves, and plus, because I had experienced staff from -- who were already there, from the previous subpostmaster, which I took on, we got a lot of help from them. So we learnt everything ourselves mostly.
Q. Did you receive training from the Post Office in branch?
A. We had a trainer but, I have to say, it wasn't much of a help, to be honest with you.
Q. What other support was available to you when dealing with the Horizon system?
A. We had an area manager, who we could call, and a helpline. That was the biggest help we thought we had, the helpline.
Q. Why would you contact the helpline for support?
A. If we had any issues with the Horizon or any problem regarding customers or anything, we'd have to get in contact with them to get help.
Q. How often did you contact the helpline?
A. On a regular basis. We'd get in contact with them with over small things and then, especially when on balancing, when we were quite short on the money, we'd get in contact with them on a regular basis but it wasn't much of a help.

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has it doubled, I have called for help to resolve this but it's doubled", but it was, you know, no help at all from anyone.
Q. Did you repay the sum?
A. Yes, I had to pay that back.
Q. Having doubled, that was now $£ 4,400$; is that right?
A. That's right, yes.
Q. You've explained that you experienced discrepancies. In which of your branches did these arise?
A. All of the branches I had issues with but one of the branches, mainly at Little Lever -- well, all three of the branches, really.
Q. Can you give an idea of how frequently these discrepancies were arising in your branches?
A. Well, at the beginning it was started off as small amounts and then it started getting frequent and more, you know, at every branch I tried everything, to be honest with you. You know, I tried taking different steps. We had shared stock units. I changed that. We got separate stock units because, at that point, it could be staff, you know, doing these discrepancies or taking money out, but it just never stopped, to be honest with you. It carried on.
Q. How did it make you feel to be experiencing these frequent discrepancies in your branches?
Q. By "regular", can you give an indication roughly how many times a week you might have contacted the helpline?
A. Easily two or three times a week.
Q. Did they assist you in resolving the issues you encountered?
A. Some they did do but, when it come to discrepancies, it was of no help at all.
Q. I'd like to ask you about one particular discrepancy you experienced of $£ 2,200$. Did you contact the helpline to seek help in relation to that discrepancy?
A. I did do. I'd come over at one of the branches Little Lever, it was and we couldn't find this money, it had been there for a couple of weeks. So I went over time and time over again, but I had a manager there who was very experienced. We both went through everything, all the paperwork, we couldn't get why we were this money short.

So I rang the helpline and explained everything
to them. They assisted me but when we -- according to them, I followed their steps, exactly what they told me what to do, when we'd rolled it over the amount had doubled.
Q. How did you resolve that discrepancy?
A. Well, I told my manager. I asked them, as well, "Why 74
A. At the time, to be honest with you, the Post Office everything come to a head when I bought my third Post Office at Farnworth in 2007. There was a big office and had quite a lot of staff there and I was putting my head down trying to, you know, make changes and make it profitable, put a retail side to it and everything. And then I had a problem with one of my offices at Little Lever, so I ended up going there and that's when it all really started off for me, to be honest with you.

That's when I had my heart attack as well. I didn't know at the time. I went to the office, we went to -- my friend was working there, close friend by this time, of which I got to know through the Post Office. He'd worked at another, at Westwood Park office for us, and I put him there in charge at Little Lever. We went through everything, we couldn't find, I think it was about $£ 3,000$ shortage, there. We couldn't find it and I think he got a bit frustrated and probably thought, you know, I was accusing him, my friend, and he'd left.

I was there for a few days. We went over it and over it, all the paperwork, with another member of staff. Couldn't find what -- where the discrepancy was and, on the second day, it was, in the evening 76

| 1 | I suffered a heart attack, at the age of 33 and | 1 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 2 | I think, at that time, I didn't realise, to be honest, | 2 |
| 3 | because I was young, even after my heart attack, | 3 |
| 4 | I tried to carry on. | 4 |
| 5 | My family did ask me to take a step back and, | 5 |
| 6 | you know, get rid of one of the offices. I had two in | 6 |
| 7 | Bolton, I had one in Manchester, so to get rid of the | 7 |
| 8 | one in Manchester, so I did not have to travel much, | 8 |
| 9 | and the other two were in local -- my local area. So | 9 |
| 10 | I got rid of that and I tried to carry on but, you | 10 |
| 11 | know, everything, I think, catches up with you, sooner | 11 |
| 12 | rather than later, and I just carried on experiencing | 12 |
| 13 | problems with the system and with, you know, and it | 13 |
| 14 | affected my health. | 14 |
| 15 | I think I did have -- looking back at | 15 |
| 16 | everything, going through everything again and looking | 16 |
| 17 | back, and it's been 14 years since I had that episode, | 17 |
| 18 | of the heart attack and everything. At the time, | 18 |
| 19 | I didn't know why it was caused because I was fit and | 19 |
| 20 | healthy at that time. I was a regular gym goer I was | 20 |
| 21 | a smoker, which I'd given up, I think it was | 21 |
| 22 | nine/ten months I'd given up smoking. I was looking | 22 |
| 23 | after myself, eating healthy and ended up with a heart | 23 |
| 24 | attack. I was the youngest person in the surgery to | 24 |
| 25 | have it. | 25 |
|  | 77 |  |
| 1 | managers numerous times and the helpline, but all that | 1 |
| 2 | we were getting told was it was just our branch, and | 2 |
| 3 | hearing everyone's statements now it seems like it | 3 |
| 4 | wasn't just me and my offices. | 4 |
| 5 | What was the approximate value of the shortfalls that | 5 |
| 6 | you were experiencing on a regular basis? | 6 |
| 7 | On a regular basis it was in the hundreds, then it | 7 |
| 8 | went into thousands quite a number of times. You | 8 |
| 9 | know, I think the biggest one is that probably | 9 |
| 10 | $4,500-£ 4,400$ but, you know, they were on a regular | 10 |
| 11 | basis, to be honest with you. At least every couple | 11 |
| 12 | of months, there was a few thousand pounds. | 12 |
| 13 | What did you do when you experienced these shortfalls? | 13 |
| 14 | At the beginning, it was okay because I was just | 14 |
| 15 | paying that out of my own pocket and then it started | 15 |
| 16 | getting -- it got to a point where, to be honest with | 16 |
| 17 | you, there wasn't much left from the salaries, and | 17 |
| 18 | I started borrowing off -- thankfully, I had a good | 18 |
| 19 | supportive family. They helped me out, and friends, | 19 |
| 20 | and then, you know, eventually that stopped. | 20 |
| 21 | I started using credit cards, and et cetera, and just | 21 |
| 22 | carried on accruing debt. | 22 |
| 23 | At the time these shortfalls occurred, what did you | 23 |
| 24 | believe was causing them? | 24 |
| 25 | At the beginning, I suspected my staff, sometimes, you 79 | 25 |

I didn't know at that time, to be honest, because, like I said, because I was young and I didn't realise that, you know, it could be because of this. I thought it could be because I'm running three offices, I'm running around, but I took a step back and, looking back at everything now, it's opened old wounds up, to be honest with you, and, you know, I do blame Post Office for, you know, causing that, to be honest with you.

But, even after that, I suffered and am still suffering from severe depression, and it just changed my life and it's never been the same after that.
Q. Mr Amir, you have explained there were frequent discrepancies. Did you ever raise any concerns about the number and size of the shortfalls you were experiencing in your branches?
A. Numerous times but, like I say, all we were told was -- or I was told it's, you know, it's just me, my offices, and that's the impression I got off them, as well. And, even having to chat with the area managers, fair to them, you know, they were focussed on sales, and et cetera, getting our branches to do more sales, and they weren't really particularly interested in, you know, what our financial status was or anything. But I did mention to all the area 78
know, myself, you know, maybe not doing something right but, like, I've stated before, I had experienced staff with me who'd been in the Post Office for a very long time and with the help of them, as well, I knew it wasn't me and -- because it couldn't have been, you know, all -- (interruption)
Q. You said you initially suspected you might be at fault or your staff but you came to reject that as the explanation?
A. That's right, yes, because I took the numerous steps in -- like I say, we had one stock unit for everyone. When I got the third office, there was separate stock units, or I decided to go with that concept and change it at all the offices, but still it carried on.
Q. What did you ultimately conclude then was the cause of these shortfalls?
A. Must be the Horizon system because there was numerous times where we'd get a balance report, which is, you know, of all our stock unit, what we had in the office cards, stamps, all -- and I take it out after, like, you know, 10/20 minutes later on, next morning, and the figures would be different. So I couldn't understand why we'd left the office in the evening and next morning why would it be different.

And numerous times that happened, even like 80
half-an-hour later when you were checking the stock, sometimes when we couldn't find the money, we were there late in the evening $8 / 9$ o'clock, after we had closed the office at 5.30 . We were there until late in the evening, trying to find out, and we'd do these reports and they'd show different figures. So I was convinced it was the system but I couldn't prove anything or, frequently, the only help we had was from the helpline and they were of no help.
Q. What effect did the shorffalls have upon your relationships with your colleagues?
A. A lot of my friends -- I had two or three friends in the offices, a couple who were family friends because they were in our local area and we knew them. They had left because of these discrepancies and, you know, that relationship wasn't there at the end of it. To be honest with you, I still see some of them now and, you know, (unclear) and I don't think they're comfortable, and neither am I meeting them or speaking about our experiences about, you know, what happened why they left.

So not a very good experience now.
Q. Can you estimate how much you paid out to the Post Office to make good the shorffalls that you experienced in your branches?
A. In the 20 years I've been running these offices, altogether I estimated about 130,000.
Q. Were your branches ever audited?
A. Yes, numerous times.
Q. Were shortfalls found during the audits of your branches?
A. To be honest with you, it was very scary and we'd had that over our heads all the time, about the auditors coming, so I was very careful trying to make sure that if there was a shorffall I'd make sure that, you know, wherever I got the money from, by hook or crook, I'd make sure that the money was there.

Because it was whenever they'd come, they'd -it's, like, worse than the police raiding you and it was like -- it was very scary at the time because they'd come in three of the branches and I'd have to go to all three branches eventually and go through the audits, and so I'd make sure that the -- I mean, we were down maybe a couple of hundred pounds here and there which we'd make good straight away whilst the auditors were there, but I'd made sure we weren't down with the money or anything.
Q. How were these audits conducted?
A. There'd be four or five people come to your branch about an hour before you opened. They'd be there 82
waiting for you. If I had a retail shop that was already open, they'd inform them. They'd ring me up. I'd come to one of the branches and open up. They wouldn't let -- maybe if, you know -- if I was there, then I'd have to accompany them and go through all the stock, the cash, the stamps and everything and if I wasn't there one of my staff members would go through with them with the audit and go through all the stock.
Q. What was your impression of the thoroughness of their investigations?
A. It was like -- you know, you were -- I felt like, you know, they'd found something, they already know something which I didn't know and I was -- every time, it was very scary because you didn't know what the outcome would be. So it was a bit scary when they come, to be honest with you, every time.
Q. Did you ever challenge any of the auditors' findings?
A. I did do once. They said I was $£ 1,000$ down at one of my offices and so I went -- I challenged it and I went through everything with them and there was a bundle of $£ 1,000$ missing which they didn't see, which I told them that "You've not added this in" which they said -- you know, they stated that I was lying and I'd put it there myself. I said, you know, "You'd
accompanied me inside the office. How could I in front of you put it there?"

So it was things like that. This was at the beginning of my role as subpostmaster, probably in around 2004/2005. So I think that caused, you know, that thing in your head and I was, you know, always wary of them every time they come, to be honest with you, and I'd go -- I'd make sure I'd go through with them. And they did make mistakes and, like I said, they were human at the end of the day as well and we'd help them go through the stock they probably didn't see searching things, and ... yeah.
Q. Were you allowed to continue trading when shortfalls were discovered during audits?
A. I had to make it good more or less straight away or they'd put it into the suspense account and give me time to make it good as soon as, which most likely it was probably a few hundred pound. I'd have the retail side next door, just get the money from there and I'd just make it good straight away in front of them.
Q. Did the Post Office ever take any action against you in relation to the shortfalls?
A. No.
Q. You've explained that you've sold two of your branches that you had. What led you to sell those branches?
Q. What has been the financial cost to you of giving up
A. After I had my heart attack, back when my family stated that I take a step back and get rid of, you know, one of the offices and take it a bit easy because they were a bit concerned about my health. So that was the reason I sold one of my branches and -because I was under quite a bit of stress at the time because of these shortfalls, and I was running a lot of staff, et cetera. So I sold that office and then, after I sold that office, you know, these problems carried on and it was getting bigger and bigger and my debt kept on going up.

So I decided to sell all my offices because, by this time, in 2010/'11 I started suffering from depression and I think that's when everything caught up to me and I decided to sell all my offices because I wasn't making anything out of them because whatever I was earning it was going back into the office and, you know, it was pointless and, you know, I had to -I was going through a lot of hardship, so I thought what's the point? So I decided to sell all of them and eventually I sold another one in 2015. I've been trying to sell this third one for the past maybe ten years or so, but I suppose no-one really wants to get into the Post Office now.
through there.
Q. Are they being -- is your sister making good the shortfalls in the branch?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. Have you been able to find work since you stopped running your Little Lever branch?
A. No, I haven't. I've -- to be honest with you, the last probably five/six years have been difficult for me. I've had a lot of issues with my heart and with the depression. I hardly get out of my house, to be honest with you. I'm mostly inside at home. I have tried doing a couple of things but I find it difficult to, you know, go out and even meet people, to be honest with you. I don't have no social life or anything. It's just a bit difficult to go through day-to-day life.
Q. How has your reputation in your local community been affected?
A. Because my offices were in my community and I was employing some of my friends, some of my family friends, reputation isn't very good. I think people think ill of me of what I've probably put them through as well. Yeah, it's just hard to be honest with you.
Q. Has there been an impact upon your relationship with your family?
the two businesses that you sold?
A. Well, I've lost an income which I really didn't have but at least I'm not accruing more debt. But I'm just -- it seems like 20 years of hard work -- well, the last four or five years I've not really been working at the Post Offices but all my time I've spent in the Post Office, my office, one of them was awarded numerous awards for best sales in the whole region, et cetera. I've done a lot of, you know, work in the community. I think it's, you know, gone all to waste, to be honest with you, and I've ended up worse off than probably I was 20 years ago when I started.
Q. You have explained that your sister is now running the Little Lever branch on your behalf. Do you know if that branch is continuing to experience discrepancies and shortfalls?
A. They tend not to talk to me much about all these problems but I do know that they still are experiencing, yes.
Q. Do you have an idea as to what the amount of these shortfalls are?
A. Not too sure exactly what they are but I know they're, you know, in hundreds of pounds, yes.
Q. And do you know how they are being resolved?
A. Yes. Obviously they get a salary, so it's all going 86
A. Yes, it has with all my family in different ways. My family parents and my brothers, it's affected them in a different way. My own partner and my children it's affected in a different way. The last ten -- like I said, the last ten years, and especially last five or six years, I'm in my bedroom most of the time all day. And I don't really have that relationship with even my children, to be honest with you. I think I've missed out on a lot.
Q. You've mentioned that you borrowed money from family members. Have you been able to repay them?
A. I've paid more or less -- no, I probably not paid everything back to them but they've probably written it off as well, my family have. But the money that I've borrowed off my friends, et cetera, I paid back but l've still to this day -- l've got huge debts, you know, on my credit cards and l've had to remortgage one of my houses a few years ago as well, so ...
Q. You mentioned that your wife has been affected. Can you describe how it has affected her?
A. The first thing is through the hardship, obviously money worries all the time, and then again, you know, we sleep in different rooms. It's affected us. We don't have that kind of relationship as it used to be and I just find it hard, to be honest with you, myself 88
interacting with a lot of people.
Q. And your children?
A. My children -- obviously when I went into the Post Office that was -- when I bought my third office that was my plan to get my children into the office, expand and they could join as well but, obviously, that never happened. And I feel like I've let them down not being able to do what I should have as a parent, and it's just been very difficult.
Q. Have you received any compensation for the losses that you suffered?
A. I was part of the 555 litigation back in 2017 which I received $£ 20,000$ a couple of years ago but nothing after that.
Q. Does that amount that you received reflect the losses which you believe you suffered?
A. Nowhere near.
Q. How do you feel about the Post Office's response to what's happened to you and other subpostmasters?
A. Well, I can surely say that they've ruined our lives, a lot of people's lives. That's the bottom line, to be honest with you.
Q. What do you feel the Post Office needs to do now to put things right?
A. Well, they need to, I feel, compensate us personally 89
Q. Thank you, Mr Amir. Chair, do you --

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, no, I don't have any questions but thank you very much, Mr Amir, for taking the time and trouble to tell me all that you've spoken about this morning and into this afternoon, and you should rest assured that I will take it all on board and treat it very seriously, all right?
A. Thank you very much.

MS HODGE: Chair, that concludes the evidence for our morning session.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Yes.
MS HODGE: Shall we resume at 2.15?
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: That seems fine to me. So 2.15 everyone, please.
( 1.12 pm )
(Luncheon Adjournment)
( 2.15 pm )
MS HODGE: Good afternoon, Chair. Our next witness is Mr Scott Darlington.

SCOTT RICHARD DARLINGTON (affirmed) Questioned by MS HODGE
MS HODGE: Mr Darlington, as you know, my name is Catriona Hodge and I ask questions on behalf of the Inquiry. Please can you state your full name.
A. Scott Richard Darlington.
Q. You made a witness statement on 8 January of this year; is that correct?
A. That's right.
Q. Do you have a copy of your statement upon you?
A. Ido, yes.
Q. Please could you turn to the final page of your statement at page 24 . Is that your signature that --
A. It is, yeah.
Q. When you made that statement on 8 January, was the content true to the best of your knowledge and belief?
A. Yes, it was, yes.
Q. I'd like to begin by asking you a few questions about your background, Mr Darlington?
A. Okay.
Q. How old are you?
A. I'm 59 .
Q. As a young man you attended music college; is that right?
A. Yes, that's right.
Q. Music is and was a big part of your life?
A. Yes, it was actually. Yeah, still is to a certain degree but, at the time it was, yes.
Q. You obtained HND in sound engineering; is that correct?
A. That's right.
Q. You later obtained an apprenticeship at ICI Pharmaceuticals?
A. That was before, actually. When I left school, I did ICl .
Q. You had a number of jobs, I understand, in the music and engineering industries, is that right, after that?
A. Yes.
Q. When your mother fell ill you helped her to run her business; is that correct?
A. Yes, that's right.
Q. When your mother passed, you sold that business; is that right?
A. Yes.
Q. And went on to use the proceeds to buy a Post Office branch?
A. That's right.
Q. Which branch did you purchase, Mr Darlington?
A. Alderley Edge, which is in south Manchester in Cheshire.
Q. Can you describe the village in which it was located, please?
A. It's as very wealthy area, actually, it's, sort of, a footballer's area. It's not a very large village but very well to do.
Q. Why did you decide to purchase that particular branch?
A. I wasn't actually looking to be a postmaster at the time. I was looking for a business to buy that I could improve and, basically, to, you know, steady the ship financially for me and my daughter and partner at the time. And when I saw the Alderley Edge branch for sale I went to have a look at it and all the figures that came with it, it all seemed to add up, so I took it on.
Q. What did you know about running a Post Office branch?
A. Nothing when I first -- you know, when I first applied to do it.
Q. What did the previous subpostmaster tell you about his or her experience of running that branch?
A. They told me that it was a nice place and the people were very nice and it was busy and I could see from the figures that we had from his running it before that it was profitable and a good going concern.
Q. In which year did you take over the running of the Alderley Edge branch?
A. 2005 .
Q. Did the previous subpostmaster alert you to any problems that they'd experienced with Horizon?
A. No.
Q. How much did you pay for the branch?
A. 154,000 .

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Q. What did that purchase price cover?
A. That purchase was basically the goodwill, really, because you didn't buy the property, you just took over, and the fixtures and fittings and the stock.
Q. Were you able to purchase that goodwill, the business, outright?
A. Well, with some help from my brother, who also put a little bit of money in at the beginning. He bought the stock, basically. But apart from that, yes, yes.
Q. Did you require a mortgage to purchase the branch?
A. Yes. I actually borrowed some money against my house 110,000, I think it was, against my house plus my input and my brother's input to get to the 154,000.
Q. So you owned a home at the time?
A. Yes?
Q. With whom did you share that home?
A. This was with my partner at the time, who is the mother of my only daughter.
Q. Forgive me, what was the value of your mortgage, I think you --
A. For the Post Office.
Q. The mortgage on your house?
A. The whole thing. I think with the Post Office as well about 145 to 150,000 .
Q. When you purchased the branch, you were appointed the
subpostmaster is that correct?
A. Yes.
Q. Do you recall how you came to be appointed?
A. I remember it taking a long time from the initial application to actually taking it over it was pretty much a year. It's a long process.
Q. Did you attend an interview as part of that process?
A. Yes.
Q. What were you told during your interview about your obligation to repay any accounting shortfalls?
A. I wasn't told anything about that then, only on reading the contract.
Q. Do you recall when you started working at the branch? What the date was?
A. I think it was March -- I can't remember the exact date if I'm honest. It was February or March 2005.
Q. What types of products and services did you sell from your branch?
A. Everything really. Post Office -- everything that a Post Office does, foreign currency, absolutely the full range, the full range.
Q. Was it solely Post Office products and services?
A. There was a shop, quite a large shop attached to the front, as well, but at the back was a three-position Post Office at the back of the shop.
Q. Did you employ staff in the branch?
A. Yes, I did yes.
Q. How many?
A. There was a mixture of about five people but, apart from myself, two people at any one time, somebody in the shop, somebody working with me behind the Post Office.
Q. What was the salary that you received from the Post Office as your -- for your work as a subpostmaster?
A. About 56,000.
Q. Forgive me, was 56,000 from the time you started or is that a figure --
A. That was what the previous postmaster was getting and pretty much -- it varied, slightly, because a lot of it was based on transactions but it was around -between 52 and 55 , for the time I was there --56 , sorry.
Q. I think you mentioned Horizon had been installed in the branch before you arrived?
A. Yes, it was already in, yes.
Q. What training did you receive on the use of Horizon when you took over?
A. I did actually receive ten days' training in Liverpool at their main training branch there.
Q. Did you find the training to be of practical use?
A. At first it seemed to be okay, taking you through everything but it was generally role play, you know, customers pretending to come up and then you doing the transactions like that.
Q. What training did you receive on how to balance the accounts?
A. Only one occasion did we do the balance and nobody could quite understand it to be honest. There was only one run-through.
Q. Did you receive any further training in branch, for example?
A. For a week, the first week that I took over the branch, I did have a trainer that sat in and watched what you did for the first week.
Q. Did you experience any discrepancies in your accounts during that first week?
A. A small one, yes, $£ 6$, about $£ 6$.
Q. What advice did you receive from the trainer in relation to that discrepancy?
A. I was told that it was very unlikely for it to balance to the penny every time because there's always going to be some kind of human error and, for small discrepancies, it wasn't really worth investigating, drilling down to find that because it was only a small 98
account through the Post Office. It was a very large book with the total breakdown of the cash that was paid in and, obviously, you check that against the -stamped their portion, stamped your portion tore that off, you gave them the book back and this would go into your till for reconciling with at the end of the day.
Q. How were giro cheques processed when you first came in? You described what sounds like a paper based system?
A. Yes, it was paper-based and, at the end of the day, you print out all the giro cheques that had been put in and you would make sure that they tallied with what you'd actually got on a physical basis and if that did, what was done is you'd cut that off so any further transactions would go onto the next day and these giro slips were then posted off to I think it was Chesterfield, to their sort of centre that dealt with all the paperwork.
Q. You've talked about a paper slip. Was that something that you retained as proof of the transaction?
A. That's it. I retained that, yes.
Q. That was then -- you would then send it to the Post Office?
A. Once you'd verified that everything that had been

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entered on the computer did tally with everything you'd received, that would then go off to the clearing centre, yes.
Q. How did that process change?
A. All of a sudden, it became automated with a barcode on the paying-in books. So when the customers came in you just scanned their barcode, it came up on the screen who they were, you put in -- you entered the amount of money and the denomination of money that they brought and then when you okayed it there was nothing for you, you just stamp their entire book and gave it back to them.

You just had a little slip with no details on it really, no information, no account number, really, properly, just a little slip and that was all. There was no way of checking things properly afterwards.
Q. So you retained a slip you say. What information was recorded on that?
A. Literally just the time and how much.
Q. What effect did that have on your ability to verify the transaction?
A. Well, the postmaster I was working, we looked at each other and thought, "This is strange, how we going to check the reconciliation against this?" So I did actually ring the helpline to ask how this change 101
rang, it was -- basically it was engaged, because everybody was doing the balance on a Wednesday night so there was a lot of people that were ringing up to have things checked for them and you couldn't get through. Then, eventually, the line would close, you know what I mean, and you still hadn't got through.
Q. Did you try and resolve discrepancies yourself?
A. Yes, generally, you could, you know, like I say, most of the time if, for instance, if you'd finished a transaction to a cheque and it was actually cash to put it in, when you came to actually do the reconciliation at the end of the evening, you can see that you'd got a cheque, and know you hadn't put it in as a cheque, so you could reverse that and put it in correctly and everything was fine. You know, you could do things like that.
Q. I'd like to ask you about a discrepancy which occurred in around May 2008?
A. Mm-hm.
Q. Do you recall what the value of that discrepancy was?
A. 1,700.
Q. To which stock did the discrepancy relate?
A. This was against stamps, the stamps holding in the branch.
Q. What did you do when the discrepancy arose?
would affect our side of things. I asked them how I can reconcile these transactions when I haven't got the slips that they used? So they escalated this phone call to a slightly higher area of Horizon help and they rung me back and their exact words were "We don't know".
Q. Did you receive any further advice or clarification?
A. No, no. So alarm bells did ring slightly with that from the off.
Q. How did you resolve the problems you had with the discrepancies with giro cheques?
A. There was no way of doing it really. You didn't even know if any discrepancies were down to the giro cheques, because you'd got no paperwork to actually check them off to what you'd done.
Q. At what times of day were you able to contact the helpline?
A. You could, sort of, contact them any time in the day up until -- I think it was 6.00 at first, and then they made it 8.00 , I think, on a balance night.
Q. You've mentioned on balance night it was open until 8.00?
A. I think it was, yes.
Q. Was that sufficient, when you were --
A. Not really, actually, because quite often, when you 102
A. Well, we couldn't understand it because the previous balance had been correct within the odd stamp, you do get the odd slight mistake where a second class has been sold instead of a first, things like that. But within a stamp or two, it was correct, and I had had no further deliveries of stamps in between that balance and the balance where it said I'd got $£ 1,700$ worth of stamps more in the branch than I'd actually got.
Q. You knew that couldn't be right because you hadn't received any more stamps?
A. I hadn't received any more and there was no way that we'd actually hand out $£ 1,700$ worth of stamps by mistake, because it's an enormous amount.
Q. What did you think at the time might have caused that discrepancy?
A. I just couldn't understand it at all. We couldn't get our heads round the fact that we'd got more now than we had on the last balance and we had no deliveries and we'd been selling them in between. So we presumed it was something the computer was showing that was not correct.
Q. Did you contact the Post Office about this discrepancy?
A. When it came to the balance, yes. Once we realised we 104
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couldn't find how this could have happened I contacted the helpline, yes.
Q. What did you ask them?
A. I told them that exactly that, that we've got more stamps now than I had previously and we've had no deliveries, and the response was "It's cash or a cheque, how you going to pay? You know, you're responsible for paying for it".
Q. How was that discrepancy resolved?
A. They took $£ 850$ out of two consecutive remuneration salaries to claim it back.
Q. How did it make you feel, to be made to repay that amount?
A. I still, at that time, was naive enough to believe that a transaction correction may come through to put this right.
Q. I'd like to ask you a little more about some of the shortfalls that you experienced. You've mentioned a transaction correction. What was the first discrepancy that you experienced when you took over your branch?
A. The first is -- it wasn't so much a discrepancy -yes, yes, it was, it was. A transaction correction came through, I'd only been in there a very short time, I'm sure it was less than two weeks, and for 105
quite a few hundred pounds it was from the previous postmaster, because a lot of the time transaction corrections used to take weeks to come through and this was a strange thing because any discrepancies that were down had to be made good straightaway, but when it was -- say it was up, or anything like that, or it should have been up, it used to take weeks to come through.

In the meantime, you had make it good until the correction came through and then you could take the money back out again. But with this case, when I rang up about and it was from the previous subpostmaster that had had it before me, and they told me that I had to pay it and I'd have to sort it out with him, with the previous owner.
Q. Did you recover the money?
A. No.
Q. You told us about the shortfall you experienced of $£ 1,700$ in May 2008. You then experienced a significant shortfall in September 2008; is that right?
A. Yes.
Q. What was the value of that shortfall?
A. I get a little bit mixed up. I'm pretty sure it was 6,000 it might have been 4 , because it was going up in 106
chunks like that. But it was either 4 or 6,000 .
Q. I think your statement mentions two shortfalls, in fact, in September ' 08 the first one of $£ 9,000$ ?
A. Oh, right.
Q. Does that sound correct?
A. Yes, it does, yes.
Q. What efforts did you make to investigate the cause of that shortfall?
A. When that one came up, it was -- well, it was obviously startling, and the guy that I'd worked with who had had his own Post Office for 30 -odd years, who had been working with me quite a long time, he stayed until midnight with me, while we got absolutely every piece of paperwork out that we could and tried to trace any possibility that a $£ 9,000$ transaction had been entered incorrectly, and there was no sign of anything like that. So we knew straightaway alarm bells were going off about the system, about anyway we can reconcile this, and this is where the proper nightmare, sort of, started really.
Q. So you said you tried to investigate it, you couldn't get to the bottom of the problem?
A. No.
Q. What did you do?
A. Well, from how they treated the $£ 1,700$ one, this is --

I didn't tell them, because I knew that they were just going to immediately make steps to remove this $£ 9,000$ and there was no way I could absorb that. I managed to absorb the $£ 1,800$ with my -- you know, with the turnover and the savings and the business and everything, but 9,000 , I was not going to be able to do. So I decided not to tell them about that and we'll carry on working to try and get to the bottom of it.
Q. When it came to balancing, what action did you take at that stage?
A. Well, you know, I inflated the figures just so that we could roll this over, so that we could carry on the next day, which I've heard a lot of people have said the same thing.
Q. You experienced another large discrepancy in the same month, September 2008. You mentioned a figure of $£ 4,000$. Does that sound about right?
A. Yes, it was either 4 or 6,000 was the next one, yes.
Q. What action did you take to investigate that shorffall?
A. Same thing, really. We'd already got all the documentation from the previous one and we started trying to do the same thing but the panic was setting in. I was already panicking, to be honest, at 9,000

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but when this shot up more, panic was starting to set in because we knew we were only going to be able to get to the same sort of paperwork out of the system to go through it again? So we had to go through every single transaction to see if any large ones had gone in that was like, what's this, that wasn't quite right, and things like that. And there was nothing there again to show any dodgy transaction that we'd accidentally done, or anything like that.
Q. What did you do to try and rectify?
A. Again, there was no way of rectifying it yourself because you couldn't get into the system any further than just the printouts that postmasters are allowed to see.
Q. You've described the figure increasing in your statement. How did that come about?
A. Every balance was a nightmare and you'd literally be -- your heart would be pounding, really, because you're putting all the figures in, you're checking all the stock in the branch, and then you press the infamous button to see how it balanced and it would come up with even more -- more discrepancy.
Q. You have explained in your statement that particular discrepancy escalated. Do you recall, ultimately, what figure it came to?
A. I remember when it was at 16,000 -something and then -it's all a bit of a blur, really, because it was just every balance it was going up. There was no balances from the original one that were close or much better. They were all just larger and larger discrepancies. It was only us two working there and we were both panicking about the whole situation. There was no way anyone was actually pocketing this money or anything like that you know?

We were drilling down as best we could into -and we were watching each other, checking what each other were doing, to make sure neither of us were making some silly mistake. We knew we weren't but we just doubled down on it, you know, and it was just going up, and up, and up.
Q. I am going to ask you now about an audit of your accounts which took place on 12 February 2009. Do you recall how that audit came about?
A. Yes. Similar to what somebody else said, I was asked to remit out of the branch some money. Because Alderley Edge was quite a wealthy area, we had a surplus of money, more than paying out benefits and things like that, so when it got to a certain stage you remitted it out of the branch to keep a sensible level of cash in. And they asked me to remit out 110
people came to do the so-called audit, which wasn't really an audit, they just did another balance, just the same as I would have done.
Q. What did they find when they balanced --
A. Well, I knew at this stage it had grown to
$£ 40,000$-and-so-many, but when they -- I had to sit in my office at the back, I wasn't allowed behind the counter, so to speak, and they came up with the final figure, and had had gone up another 4,000. So it was 44,000-something, and that was my final discrepancy, you know, that they gave to me.
Q. You have said the fraud investigation team arrived at your branch. What did they tell you?
A. Well, the first thing they said was "Anything you say may be used -- we suspect you have committed, you know, committed a crime, everything you say maybe taken down and used in evidence against you", and things like that. So I realised straightaway that I was going to be treated as a potential criminal, even before anything's even been looked at properly.
Q. So they cautioned you?
A. Yes.
Q. How did that make you feel?
A. Well, I just thought "Oh, you know, right". I felt that this was deepening straightaway. You know, that 112
the trouble for me, so to speak, was deepening straight away.
Q. Did you receive contact from your contracts manager at that time?
A. Not then, no.
Q. You were interviewed the same day; is that right?
A. Yes.
Q. Where did that take place?
A. I was driven from Alderley Edge to Macclesfield, which is about six miles, to their main branch, and I've been using that branch for years. I was surprised to note that, when you went upstairs, there was an interview room with tape recording facilities, just like a police station, really. So I was taken into there.
Q. Were you represented during the interview?
A. No.
Q. Were you told that you had a right to be represented?
A. Now, I can't actually remember whether they actually offered me that or not, being completely honest. I couldn't say for sure that they didn't offer me that.
Q. Did anyone accompany you?
A. No.
Q. Who carried out the interview?
A. There was two chaps from the Post Office their fraud people, yes.
Q. How was the interview conducted?
A. It started off -- it seemed to be a little bit like this, sort of a fact-finding, but it soon turned into "Where's the money, have you taken the money?" And he kept repeating that and I ended up having to say to him "It doesn't matter how many times you ask me 'have I taken the money', I'm not going to change my answer because l've not taken the money".

So he then stood up and became a little bit more aggressive, leaning over me, "Have you taken the money?" you know, in a more aggressive sort of manner. And I just carried on telling him the same thing, that I had never taken the money, there's no point me taking the money, I was responsible for everything in the Post Office. But he carried on with that, you know, line of questions.
Q. What other enquiries were made by the investigators?
A. He then told me that they were going to search my house, either with a warrant or with my permission. So I said, "Well, come now, come and have a look at it now", to which they did. I jumped in their car and they drove me to my house, which wasn't too far away, and they searched the house.
Q. Did they request access to your bank statements?
A. Yes.
Q. Did you agree to provide them?
A. Yes, they had full access to -- I think I've got two accounts and my business account. Full access to everything, yes.
Q. On the day of your audit, the branch was closed; is that correct?
A. Yes.
Q. Your appointment as a subpostmaster was suspended; is that right?
A. Yes.
Q. What effect did your suspension have upon your salary from the Post Office?
A. Well, it immediately stopped. They did actually -they paid me up to that day, if you see what I mean. Whatever I'd accrued from the previous salary, up to the day of suspension, they did pay me but then it stopped.
Q. You have explained earlier that when you purchased the branch, you weren't actually purchasing the premises themselves?
A. No, that's right.
Q. Who owned the premises?
A. It was owned by a company that -- actually, their
offices were above, but they did own quite a lot of the things in Alderley Edge and in other towns as well. They are quite a big concern in the area. But, luckily, they were upstairs so I did know them slightly from that, being upstairs.
Q. Did you pay rent to use the premises?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. When your salary with the Post Office stopped, did that relieve you of your obligations to pay rent in respect of the premises?
A. No, it didn't, no. They told me that they could put somebody else in to run it, and the first person, they said, "We've found somebody that will run this", but he'll only give you 10 per cent of the salary. Well, I knew straightaway that this was going to cause big problems with the rent, because the rent was 19,000 and business rates were another 7,500 . So the 10 per cent of the salary coming from the Post Office was going to put me in arrears straightaway.

So I refused that and somebody locally from the village, who had worked in there before, as a temporary person, agreed to take it over.
Q. What did they pay you?
A. They agreed to pay me the original portion, basically, of the business, that was the rent from the 116

Post Office but, after a few weeks, he started to pay me about half of that saying they weren't getting enough in, and immediately trouble was happening with the landlords upstairs, who then accused me of subbetting, really, which technically I was, I was allowing somebody else to run that, pay me, to give them.
Q. What effect did this have on your business?
A. Well, it was already snaring up quite quickly because, with the Post Office, especially this one, there's a lot coming in, a lot of money coming in and a lot going out, but it left enough to have a decent living. As soon as that dried up, the money going out didn't dry up and it didn't take long before I was in arrears.
Q. Your appointment as a subpostmaster was ultimately terminated; is that right?
A. Yes.
Q. What was the reason given for the termination?
A. They believed for false accounting and --I can't remember whether they said theft on it, but for falsifying the accounts was their first --
Q. Do you recall when you were terminated?
A. No. It was a few months later but I can't recall exactly now.
landlord and, with a commercial lease, you were liable for it to the end and there was another five years on this lease, which would have equated to 90,000 , and he asked me if I got property and I said, yes, and he was like this, as if to say "We'll probably have to have that", you know. But luckily, looking back, next to the Post Office was actually a bar and the bar expressed -- and landlords, they were the same landlords, they expressed interest about expanding into the Post Office, and I think if it wasn't for that, they would have probably bankrupted me and gone for my property.

But because they were going to go move in, I got an email saying "You've got seven days to get $£ 5,000$ together and you can walk away from the lease".
Q. How did you raise that money?
A. I managed to sell all my things that I'd got at the time, which was guitars and musical instruments and everything that I could get my hands on there and then, I managed to sell and raise near enough the 5,000 to get out of this lease, which was a relief because I genuinely believe they were going to come after my house.
Q. You had suppliers who had been providing stock to your business. What action did they take when you closed?
Q. What did you do when they terminated your appointment?
A. Well, I'd still got the shop part at the front. I was not allowed -- from the moment of being suspended, I was not allowed behind the Post Office branch anymore, and I'd still got the shop part at the front. But, obviously, I couldn't afford to keep stocking this, because the money that was coming in from the Post Office and from the shop I was giving it all to the landlords to try and keep this going because, at that time, we'd got a possible buyer for it. Who, even though I'd paid 154,000 , he was going only to pay me 57,000 but at that time, it was anything we could do to mitigate the circumstance.

As it turned out, the day before I was supposed to exchange, not contracts but, you know, go ahead with it, he pulled out and that just really did -that meant it was ruined, because the landlords had been -- they were sympathetic to my situation but only for so long and when they found out that this guy pulled out they just foreclosed me then.
Q. What was the effect of that on your business?
A. Well, it was finished. It was closed down.
Q. How did you resolve the obligations you had in relation to the lease on the premises?
A. I couldn't. I went for a few more meetings with the 118
A. Obviously, I couldn't pay the stock and so I had county court judgments, quite a few against me.
Q. You were charged by the Post Office with theft and false accounting; is that right?
A. Yes.
Q. What effect did it have on you to be charged with these offences?
A. It was absolutely terrible. It was awful. It was just getting worse, and worse, and worse. It was humiliating really because, at that time -- before I was foreclosed, I had to sit in the shop part at the front. I wasn't allowed behind the counter, so people were coming up to me saying, "Come on, Scott, what are you doing here, get behind the counter it's busy", and I couldn't say to them "Oh, l've been suspended through possible theft and false accounting". So it was just humiliating from there onwards and it just got worse.

But once the summons to be, you know, actually taken through to court came then, obviously, my world fell in a little bit, really, you know. I knew this was going to be very, very serious. I knew it was already but it was just getting worse and worse.
Q. What steps did you take to obtain legal representation?
A. I only managed to be able to get the basic Legal Aid, which I don't think you can even get that now, almost like a duty barrister, if you see what I mean, that was prepared to accompany me to Crown Court, and stuff like that.
Q. What advice did you receive?
A. Well, basically, he said to me, despite the stuff about the computer, and stuff like that, as far as he was concerned, there was no way of getting to the bottom of the information that they needed. So, on balance, because I had signed the accounts off, despite not being guilty of theft, I have -- you know, it's going to be very difficult to say not guilty about false accounting, when I'd signed them off, so he advised me to plead guilty.
Q. Your first court appearance was in, I think, January 2009; is that right?
A. Yes, I think it was, yeah.
Q. That's as you recall?
A. Yes.
Q. The first time your trial was listed, it didn't go ahead; is that right?
A. It didn't go ahead. The Post Office didn't come. Everybody else was in position but the Post Office didn't come, citing bad weather, and things like that. 121
going to drop the theft charge. This was about five or ten minutes before actually going in for my trial.
Q. How did it feel to learn that you had been charged with theft when the Post Office investigator had concluded there was no evidence against you?
A. I was amazed that it was like this. It did start to feel like a bit of a sort of game, if I'm honest. One minute I'm going in for theft, even though there was no evidence, and the next minute we see a document saying there was no evidence and it was only the fact that we highlighted that we'd seen it, that they dropped this charge of theft.
Q. The charges of false accounting were proceeded with?
A. Yes.
Q. How did you plead to those charges?
A. I was advised that I'd probably have to plead guilty, I would have to plead guilty.
Q. Is that what you did?
A. Yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Could you tell me if you remember anything about what your barrister said about how it came to be that he saw this document, if it was a he?
A. I vaguely remember him saying "I don't think we were supposed to see this", as if to say it had come through to us with other documents that possibly

So it was adjourned.
Q. When your trial was listed for a second time, the Post Office dropped the charge of theft against you?
A. That's right.
Q. How did that come about?
A. Well, on the day, we were sat in the consultation room before going in and my barrister said "Oh, look, what I've got here", you know, and he'd got Post Office headed notepaper that said despite investigating Mr Darlington's accounts, and everything else and bank balances, and his lifestyle, through searching my house, we can find no evidence or indication of any theft. But I believe that they would have still tried me for theft if it wasn't for the fact that we'd got sight of this document.
Q. You were shown a document --
A. Yes.
Q. -- that was produced by the Post Office --
A. Yes.
Q. -- which said there was no, in fact, no evidence of theft by you?
A. Yes.
Q. What did your barrister do?
A. Well, he took it to see their legal team and came back to see me about five minutes later, saying they're 122
wasn't for us, you know, but that's all I can really remember about that.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: So, just to try and put some flesh on that, you probably understand, at least in basic terms, that the prosecution had to disclose relevant documents to you, but -- so on that morning before the trial, did they actually disclose some documents and this was amongst them?
A. I think it might have been that because he just said "Hey, hey, hey, look what we've got here", you know, like this, and I was like "Oh, right", and he went off to see their legal team and came back saying they'd dropped the theft charges.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: I see. Thank you.
MS HODGE: Having pleaded guilty to the false accounting, you were sentenced to two months imprisonment --
A. Yes.
Q. -- is that right? But it was suspended for two years?
A. Yes.
Q. You were also ordered to carry out 120 hours of community service; is that correct?
A. Yes.
Q. Was your conviction reported in the press?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. Do you recall where?
A. It was in the Macclesfield Express, which is where I live, and it was in the Manchester Evening News as well.
Q. What effect did that reporting have on you?
A. Well, the Macclesfield one, it was embarrassing, really, because there was a big picture of me, you know, and everything, and I'm relatively well known where I live, and obviously there's me pleading guilty, you know. What are people going to think? You know, he pled guilty, and a picture of me, the shots from the court, coming out, and a big article about me. So I had to face the humiliation and embarrassment of you know facing this up.
Q. You explained in your statement, after you were convicted, the Post Office brought an application against you under the Proceeds of Crime Act; is that right?
A. That's right. It was a little short time after. I would just like to say, as well, the Manchester Evening News one said "Postmaster who cooked the books is spared jail", and big picture of me, that was the headline, and we complained to the Press Complaints Commission about that, and they upheld it, and then they had to come out and do another more, shall we say, balanced article about it.
A. I wasn't allowed to travel anywhere. I had to -I can't remember everything that was on it but I basically had to inform them of my whereabouts, and things like that, if I wasn't going to be at home, that kind of thing.
Q. How did the application under the Proceeds of Crime Act conclude?
A. I do remember when I got this Proceeds of Crime Act I typed it in to Google and the first thing -- because I'd never even heard of this, to be honest, the first thing it said was Proceeds of Crime Act are notoriously difficult to remove. And I was just like "Oh, God, you know, this is getting worse and I'm going to have to tell" -- at this point I wasn't with the mother of my daughter, although we still shared the mortgage, and things like that, on the house, "But I'm going to have to explain this now to my, you know, my ex-partner", who we're friendly, about the possibility of them taking the house and everything.

So the horror of that was appalling, you know? I showed it to my barrister that had represented me in the court case, and I can't remember the full details, but it got thrown out. I can't remember exactly the process that it got thrown out with but it got thrown out.

But the damage -- you know, the damage had been done then, l'd already got comments online saying "Trusted person in that position, you deserve everything that happens to you", and "Not trustworthy". There's a lot of comments like that, which obviously is not very nice to read, especially when you know you haven't taken any money or actually done anything wrong, really.

But then, after that, after the court case,
I didn't think it was over, as such, but I was relieved that whatever had happened to me, it was over. And then the next thing through the post comes the Proceeds of Crime Act, yes.
Q. What was the purpose of that application?
A. It said that they believed that I had been paying my mortgage on the proceeds of crime and they wanted me to surrender the lease, my mortgage -- the lease to the shop, the keys to my car, passport, driving licence, stuff like this. I wasn't allowed to leave the country or travel anywhere without telling them.
Q. You have explained a restraining order was put in place against you, whilst the application was pending; is that correct?
A. Yes, yes, that is right.
Q. To what did the restraining orders relate?
Q. I'd like to ask you now about the effect that these events have had on you. Dealing firstly with the financial impact, how much do you think you have paid to the Post Office to make good the shortfalls that were showing by Horizon?
A. Well, I never paid them back anything from the 44,000 but l'd paid them the 1,800, and there was a few other few hundred pounds here, few hundred pounds there, so I would reckon about 2,000 to 2,500 . But I didn't pay them anything back from the original shortfall.
Q. You've explained your landlord terminated your lease. What losses did that cause you?
A. Well, it meant that I couldn't pay the mortgage because I was still 80,000-odd outstanding on the loan that I'd taken out against my house to buy the Post Office. I couldn't pay this anymore. I couldn't pay any of the debts to the suppliers, which I just had on an ongoing quarterly basis, and now there's county court judgments everywhere, and I was in the mire. I was even told I couldn't claim unemployment benefit because I was behind on National Insurance payments, even though the Post Office took them from the source. So it just got worse and worse. I was put on like a safety net benefit, you know, a $£ 52.25$ a week to survive.
$\qquad$
Q. What did you do with the loan that you had taken out from the bank?
A. Had to -- with my ex-partner, I had to sign my half of the house over to her, for her to change it to an interest-only mortgage, they wanted my name off it -- off the mortgage, so I signed over the ownership fully to her, so that an interest-only mortgage could be negotiated, so that she could pay this, by reducing it a lot down to an area where she could actually afford, because I couldn't afford to contribute at all.
Q. You have explained you lost your salary from the Post Office as a result of your suspension and then you were later convicted. What effect did your conviction have upon your ability to obtain other work?
A. It was devastating, really, because I'm now aged, I think, 49/50, with a new criminal record for dishonesty, and I did actually apply to AstraZeneca, quite sooner after my conviction and passed my interview and assessment but, because they are one of the firms that can turn down employment based on CRB checks, I got an email saying, "Unfortunately, after the CRB check, we're not going to take you on, we're not obliged to and we're not going to take you on",

## of your business?

A. Well, there's still the outstanding mortgage to this day.
Q. What's the value of that?
A. I think it's probably approximately 65,000 still being interest only but my ex-partner is paying herself.
Q. What financial losses have your family suffered?
A. Well my, father had to pay $£ 1,200$ council tax to get me through the last month of this having the Post Office branch, and I'd not been able to pay maintenance to my ex-partner for my daughter or anything. So, you know, she's had consequential losses and has been paying this mortgage on our behalf essentially because the money was set against the house.
Q. What effect did the actions of the Post Office have upon your health?
A. Well, extreme anxiety. I mean, humiliation and embarrassment turned into depression and anxiety, really, when you realise it's going to be very, very difficult to get out of this situation and at that point there didn't seem to be any way of starting, any way of trying to reverse the situation, you know, because I've been put through the courts, I'd pled guilty, all the rest of it. I'd almost dug a deeper 131
and I spent three and a half years unemployed then, after that.
Q. How did you survive without any income?
A. I just had the $£ 52.25$ a week to survive on, and housing benefit. At that point, I was house sharing with somebody, and the benefit went down and I had to explain to the guy I was house sharing with that it's going down, the housing benefit that they're going to pay, are you okay with this, and he just had to put up with it, so he was affected too.

The whole thing was so humiliating and embarrassing. I was in such a deep hole with this, you know. I couldn't get any job. Filling in forms saying you have got a criminal record, I could tell that this was not going to go anywhere really, especially at my age, you know, as well of being in that age.
Q. You've explained you signed your house over to your wife -- forgive me, your partner.
A. Yes.
Q. Where did you then live?
A. I was housesharing with somebody where it was his house and he let me have a bedroom for three-and-a-half years.
Q. Have you been left with debts as a result of the loss 130
hole almost, if you see what I mean.
But I was in a pretty bad state and I didn't want to go out. Every time I went out, people would say to me, "Oh, how's it going with the Post Office?" You know, you stop wanting to go out and bump into that situation, so you end up becoming a bit withdrawn, and -- yes, depression and -- I'd say anxiety, the anxiety was the worst part linked to depression and everything.
Q. Did you seek any medical help?
A. This was another thing. I didn't really because also on applications for jobs there's a box to tick where you've got to say if you've got any mental health problems or you've been treated for any psychological problems and I didn't want to exacerbate things by: (a) a fresh conviction; and (b) I'm having treatment for mental health as well. I didn't think -I thought this was going to make things worse for getting a job and I was desperate to try and get some sort of work to have some kind of income. So I didn't go to the doctor's about it.

In hindsight, I should have done. I have been to the doctor's a few time but, during that period, I avoided going to the doctor's and just tried to live with it.

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Q. You had been living with your partner, your ex-partner, originally when you first took on the branch?
A. Yes.
Q. How is your relationship with her affected by what happened?
A. Well, funnily enough we split up before the actual problems of the Post Office, but obviously it exacerbated our relationship because we'd got this nightmare on top of the split and everything. But, in fairness, she's been pretty level-headed about the whole thing and somehow she's managed to put up with it and carry on paying the mortgage for our daughter's sakes, and her own of course. And we're okay, we're okay on a general level.
Q. How has your daughter been affected?
A. I mean, she was eight when this started and she's 22 now; so the whole of her childhood really, formative years, have been through her Dad having -- you know, during her Dad having this problem and, surprisingly, she's been very good but I know, I know, it must have affected her but she's been very good at not showing many signs of that.
Q. Your conviction was overturned in April last year; is that correct?
A. Yes.
Q. What steps did you take to secure the overturning of your conviction?
A. Well, originally, feeling like I was the only one with this problem, you know, I discovered the JFSA. Through just basically using the internet, I realised there was other people. I came across Alan Bates and started going to the meetings in Huddersfield and that gave you some hope when we all realised there was something wrong here. And Alan was, you know, determined to try and get something going. So it all stemmed from that really all the way through to having my conviction overturned.
Q. How long did it take?
A. Well, from 2010 to 2021.
Q. Your father's still alive; is that correct?
A. Father's still alive, yes.
Q. He learned that your conviction had been overturned; is that correct?
A. Yes, yes. Amazingly, he's managed to survive, still been there for hearing that, yes.
Q. You have now found a new partner; is that right?
A. Yes.
Q. Has she been affected by what happened to you?
A. Very much, yeah. She's had to put up with the whole 134
Q. Thank you, Mr Darlington. I don't have any further questions for you. I will ask the Chair if he wishes to ask you any questions.
A. Okay.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, and, as you will have observed, I asked my question when I felt like it. So thank you very, very much for coming and what you've told me is invaluable and it's just, with all the other people who are coming, building up a very vivid picture for me to look at and understand.
A. Right. Thank you, Sir Wyn.

MS HODGE: Forgive me, Mr Darlington, there's one matter I would like to raise, if I may.
A. Of course.
Q. You have a brother; is that right?
A. Mm-hm.
Q. Has he supported you through this process?
A. My brother's helped me throughout it and I'm not sure how I would have coped the same if it hadn't been for my brother.
Q. Can you describe a little what he's done to support you?
A. He's been incredible really. He's dug into it as much as possible, he tried to help during the doomed mediation in 2013/14. He's been there all the way 136
through and the amount of hours he's put into this on top of his own life and job, it's just -- I don't know how he's been able to do as much as he has.
Q. Has that had a cost for him?
A. It must have had, yes. Well, for a start he put 17,000 in at the beginning and he's never once brought that up. He hasn't been doing this to try and get that back. He's been doing it to try to help me, his younger brother, and I could never thank him enough.
Q. Thank you. Is there anything that you would like to say that we've not covered in your evidence?
A. I'd like to say what I'd like to happen from here. What I would like is, first of all, the correct compensation not some sort of argued-down, watered-down compensation, which I'm sure the Post Office will try to do. It needs to be the correct amounts, not some kind of legally argued-down situation about it.

I'd like to know who okayed the attritional strategy that was used against the subpostmasters, especially after Second Sight released their interim report, and I think which was 2013, which left them in no doubts there was problems. To actually -- to dumb down and go even further attritional from there to me is astonishing and, well, I just can't see how they
revealed, otherwise it won't feel like justice just handing out some money and one or two people getting a slap on the wrist about it.

The lessons learned thing and we got things wrong, it's not true. It was a deliberate policy to treat us like this and especially after they found out there was some problems. I would like to know how that has come about and been through to this day.

So it's those things really. Yeah, I don't want another apology because you can't says sorry for that. They weren't genuine mistakes; this was an attritional policy used against us which, to this day, I cannot understand why they went as far as they did to ruin us and carried on trying to close -- I mean, we've heard what people have had to say. It's been tear-jerking hearing previous people to me, and to think that the Post Offic 11e was still trying to stop it during the Horizon trial and appeals and ever since up until pretty much this public inquiry.
Q. Thank you very much.
A. Thank you.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Thank you again.
A. Thanks very much for letting me speak.

MS HODGE: Chair that concludes our evidence for this afternoon.
can explain that. I'd definitely like to know who's okayed all that and who put that lot together.

The anxiety that they piled on time and time again throughout this, closing Second Sight reports when we thought something was very helpful to us, they closed all that down. We get to the Horizon trial: they undermined that as much as they could. Every time this undermining came along, it just rose the anxiety for everybody because I'm sure the other postmasters will say the same -- and if not, it's just me -- just when you thought that things were -- some truth was coming out, they pull the rug out or attempted to pull the rug out, trying to get the judge to recuse himself, appealing everything, throwing whatever money was required it, just increased the anxiety. Even now, I'm suffering from anxiety about the compensation. We're not there yet. Is this going to be an insult? Is it going to be correct? You can never trust how this is going to work out.

The settlement agreement, they've been saying since then that it was all done in good faith. There was no good faith in my head there. There was no good faith. Saying that they only learned about the big costs we had were from the media -- I mean, it's just like an insult really. So the whole truth has to be

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Back to 10.00 tomorrow morning, Yes, Mr Blake? Yes. All right, then 10.00 tomorrow morning.
( 3.10 pm )
(Adjourned until 10.00 am the following day)

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