Friday, 18 February 2022
(10.00 am)

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Good morning.
MR BLAKE: This morning we have Mrs O'Dell as our first witness.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Very good.

## JENNIFER O'DELL (sworn) <br> Questioned by MR BLAKE

MR BLAKE: Can you state your full name, please?
A. Mrs Jennifer O'Dell.
Q. As you know, I'm Julian Blake and I'm asking questions today on behalf of the Chair. The Chair appears on the screen in front of you.
A. Good morning

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Good morning, Mrs O'Dell. I hope the weather isn't too bad in your part of the country.
A. So do I, thank you.

MR BLAKE: Do you have in front of you a witness statement?
A. I do, yes.
Q. Is that witness statement dated 22 January of this year?
A. Yes, it is, yes.
Q. If I can ask you to turn to the final page, page 19, is that your signature at the bottom?
A. Yes, it is, yes.
Q. Can you confirm that that statement is true to the best of your knowledge and belief?
A. Yes.
Q. Can I start by asking you some questions about your background?
A. Of course.
Q. What area do you live in?
A. I live in a small village in Cambridgeshire.
Q. How long have you lived there for?
A. Well, at the moment, 32 years but I moved up from London 50 years ago to the village, but then I moved away from the village for eight years and then moved back because I remarried. So I've been there for another 32 years, yes.
Q. Can you describe that village for us?
A. Well, I say small. I haven't really got anything to compare it with.
MR BLAKE: Sorry, there's a fire alarm.
(Fire alarm test: pause)
MR BLAKE: Sorry about that.
A. That's all right.
Q. You were saying about your village.
A. Yes. I suppose it's a medium-sized village.
Q. Is it a friendly place?

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Q. What about your other Civil Service role? What was that?
A. I was a civilian clerical staff in the Prison Service.
Q. For those jobs, presumably you had some level of vetting or some sort of enquiries before you were employed?
A. Absolutely, yes. Yes, I did.
Q. During your career as a subpostmistress, I think you were also involved in local politics; is that right?
A. Yes, I was, yes.
Q. What did you do?
A. I had been chosen, just before what had happened, to be the PPC, which is something --
Q. Parliamentary candidate?
A. That's the one, Provisional Parliamentary Candidate for the general election of that time. But when this all happened, I stood down because I didn't want to bring the party that I was being for into disrepute.
Q. But you were selected by --
A. I was.
Q. -- the local party --
A. Yes, I was.
Q. -- to become their Parliamentary candidate?
A. Yes.
Q. How did you decide to become a subpostmistress?
A. There's always been a Post Office in -- well, when I say "always been", there's been a Post Office in the village for a long time and it was going to close, and my brother-in-law, who used to live next door to us, jokingly said one day "Well, why don't you become the subpostmistress", and we laughed it off. But he'd sown the seeds and we happened to have a spare room in our home, as you do, and we realised some money and I put in to become the subpostmistress, went for the interview and I was accepted, and we refurbished the room, completely gutted it out, refurbished it all and everything else, and became the subpostmistress.
Q. So the Post Office was actually in your home, was it?
A. Yes, it was a room in my home, yes.
Q. Did you have to pay for the Post Office or pay for the refurbishment?
A. Oh, yes. I mean, we put about $£ 35,000 / 40,000$ because we completely -- sorry, the room that we used was in a very old part of our home. So when you took the floor up, there was the bare earth. That's how old it was. So we had to dig some out, put proper footings in. So, yes, it did cost an awful lot of money to refurbish it all.
Q. Alongside the Post Office, did you have a retail business of some sort?
A. Well, I did of sorts. There was a garage in our village who sold groceries and I didn't really want to go down that route. So I just used to sell greeting cards and some jewellery and some handbags, but I sold those that people from the village they actually made.
So I tried to --
Q. Local crafts?
A. Absolutely, yes.
Q. Who worked with you?
A. Towards the end, my son had turned 18 and he was home sometimes from college, so he -- towards the end, he worked as a counter assistant but there was a woman in the village who used to work at the old Post Office so she was fully trained. So, at the beginning, she used to stand in for me if I wanted time off.
Q. At that stage, do you think your son wanted to join you in the business?
A. I don't really know, to tell you the truth. It would have been handy. It would have been good. I think my husband wanted him to do so but ...
Q. In terms of training, did you receive training on Horizon?
A. Yes. It is rather vague. I think I was supposed to have had two-day training and I went to a hotel in Bedfordshire, arrived there about 10.00 , we stopped 6
you call the helpline?
A. It could have been approximately once a month. Mainly we used to be sent every week a booklet, that's the only way I can describe it, and it used to update us on how to carry out things on the Horizon system. So we would have to kind of update certain things on it and 99.9 per cent of the time those instructions were wrong, so you'd have to ring up the "helpline" -- and I say that because it wasn't -- saying, "Well, we received this and it's wrong" and they said, "Yes, we know, we're going to correct it in next week's booklet". So it could have been at least once a fortnight.
Q. You described them like that, in speech marks. Why have you described them in that way?
A. Well, they weren't helpful whatsoever.
Q. In broad terms, why not?
A. Well, when I had my shortfall they didn't want to know. They just kept telling me to pay the money back. You know, they were shouting at me. I was saying to them that the Horizon system is wrong. They just didn't want to know. It was pay the money back.
Q. Moving on to problems that you had with Horizon --
A. Yes.
Q. -- do you remember what year your first significant
discrepancies were showing?
A. It was the beginning of June 2009. I was doing my May balance.
Q. So let's go through that chronologically, if we can.
A. Okay.
Q. So starting for the balance for May 2009, what did you notice?
A. It was approximately $£ 1,000$ shortfall.
Q. What did you do about that?
A. Looked for it everywhere. The way my office was laid out I had the counter here, down there was my safe, there was my cash drawer, and there was a bit of a gap and then there was my post bag there. So, in the safe, I used to keep bundles of 20 s in $£ 1,000$ bundles and $£ 10$ notes in $£ 1,000$ bundles and my $£ 5$ notes in $£ 500$ bundles.

Well, after looking through all the paperwork and recounting my stock, recounting all my cash, I thought, well, had I taken out a bundle of 1,000 and, instead of putting it in my cash drawer, I'd put it in the post bag, or had I taken it down into the kitchen and put it in the freezer. You know, like you do, you put it down somewhere and turn round and then when you go back it's not there.

So after several hours of scratching my head and 9
Q. Did you call the helpline as those months went by?
A. I then told my husband because I hadn't told him. I went to the bank and I could raise $£ 750$ cash from the bank, and I put that into my till. I hadn't called the helpline by then because I just thought it's somewhere, it's got to be somewhere. So when I balanced the following month, having put in the $£ 750$ cash, there was $£ 3,000$ gone. So I then realised that there was something going on. So that's when I rang the people.
Q. So the 3,000 shortfall, I think that was July 2009 or thereabouts?
A. Yes, roughly, yes.
Q. You said you called the helpline. What was their response?
A. "Pay the money back". That's all. And I said to them "No, money has not gone missing. There's a fault, there's something going on on Horizon". "Pay the money back", that's all I got and she was shouting at me down the phone. So, in the end, I just hung up.

And I kept saying to my husband it felt as though there was somebody in the depths of an office block, the lights were dimmed and they were at a Horizon terminal and they were manipulating figures. It -- I couldn't prove it but that's just how it felt
looking everywhere for it, I put on the system that I had the cash that the Horizon system said I had, so that I could then open the next morning, because if you didn't do that, then you couldn't open the next morning and work.
Q. What happened to the shortfall over the following months?
A. The next month when I balanced, it was another $£ 1,000$, give or take. As I said earlier, my son used to help out when he was home and he was home on the day of the balance, and I called him in -- and I told him what had happened and I said, "Look, you know, if you have taken this, tell me now but, if you have, I'm the one that's responsible and I will be the one that's taken away and sent to prison. So tell me, we'll fix it, we'll sort it somehow, but you've got to tell me now". And he said, "Mum, I haven't taken it" and he said "Well, if I haven't taken it, have you?" and of course I hadn't taken it.
Q. So at that stage, how was your relationship with your son?
A. I believed him. It's awful to have to say but it was a little bit strained, which is awful to say because I believed him but there was still a nagging doubt, you know. 10
and I couldn't check up on it. But that's how it felt. But the help -- well, the people just wasn't interested.
Q. The people on the helpline, were you aware of whether they could see what was on your screen or not?
A. No, I wasn't aware of that at all. And then the following month, and again another $£ 1,000$, and I rang them up again. You see, having worked in a call centre, you have your basic call handlers and then you have supervisors, and I thought, well, surely a supervisor will pick up that I've called a second time and that this is ongoing and I will get a call from them to say "Right, got a bit of a problem, let's see if we can sort it out". But there wasn't anything.

So the second time I called them, the woman said to me, "Have you been having problems with the PIN, pad?" And I said "Well, not really, a couple of times it won't accept the PIN number and on the screen it says I have to swipe" -- there was -- by the keyboard there was a swiping -- swipe it and on the screen it was how much you wanted to withdraw. So I put in and then it would say put the card back in the PIN pad ...

So I explained that to her. So she said "Well, I'll get an engineer to ring you back but you've got
to pay the money back". So an engineer did ring me
back and he told me to press this button and that button, which I did, and he was going to send me a cleaning pad for the PIN pad, which he did, and I've still got it, but it didn't make any difference. But I thought: that's a bit strange that she's asked me that, where's that coming from?

But anyway, so then by November I'd just about had enough because nobody had rung me, so I rang them up again
Q. I think by November 2009, the shorffall had reached $£ 7,000$, is that right --
A. Yes.
Q. -- or thereabouts?
A. Yes.
Q. You said you phoned the helpline again.
A. Yes.
Q. What happened?
A. Well, again, it was just "Pay the money back", but this time I'm afraid I shouted at them and they said, "Well, do you want me to escalate it to tier two?" and I said "Well, why hasn't this been offered to me before?" Well, of course, they couldn't answer me. And I said, "Well, yes, of course I do. If this is going to sort the problem out, well, yes".

So Ms Muddeman, tier two, rang me the following day, told her what had been happening, but I expected her to know all about it but it seemed as though she didn't and all she said was -- when I said to her it was the Horizon, there's a problem, all she said was "Well, prove it". That was it. Nothing.
Q. At that time, did you think that other people were having problems with Horizon?
A. No. I wasn't told at all. Nothing.
Q. By, I think, 16 December it had reached around $£ 8,500$ ?
A. Something like that. I can't remember, yes.
Q. But then did it go down?
A. Right, my son worked -- I think -- I can't remember whether it's a Thursday or a Friday. He worked that day and my husband and I went out shopping but I always made certain I was back to help with the balance -- sorry, not the balancing, the end of day balancing, sort of thing, and I was in the kitchen and my son came down and he said "Worries are over, l've got roughly 8 " -- no, I can't remember the exact amount but "l've got more than I should have".

I said "How come?" And I went down there and the cash declaration -- for some reason, instead of using cash declaration 1 , he had used cash declaration 2 and I said "Oh, don't worry about that, 14

I did that at the beginning of when the Horizon was installed". I said "Don't worry about that, it will sort itself out", and we left it. And I thought "Oh, well, if it's" -- so when I went back on the Monday and it showed a plus sign, I thought "Going to have a good Christmas, I haven't got to worry about it anymore".

And then 6 January two people from Post Office walked in.
Q. That was the audit?
A. That was -- well, I beg to differ. It wasn't an audit. They weren't auditors. I refuse to call them auditors.
Q. Why do you refuse to call them auditors?
A. Because they didn't audit.
Q. What did they do?
A. They walked in. I was so pleased to see them because I genuinely thought that they -- I mean, I said to them "Ah, I'm really pleased to see you, we are going to sort this problem out. You're going to find what on earth is going on". So they walked round into the counter and Lesley Frost --

And I'd like to digress a little bit. When I was opening, I didn't go away for training, I had two employees come in to train me on the job and the
first woman was Lesley Frost. She came in on Monday morning at 9 o'clock and it was manual. It wasn't the Horizon system. And on the Wednesday afternoon she brought the big blue balance sheet and she showed me how to balance and we were a few pounds over. Her exact words were, "You will never balance to the penny, so we're going to take that money out and we're going to put it into a plastic bag and we're going to put it in the safe, so next week you might be down, so you can take that money out and you can then balance".

I thought: well, she's an employee, she's been sent here to train me. So I took her word for it. But, of course, looking back, that was legally false accounting. So when these two people walked in, she was one of them, which I found quite ironic.

I had logged into the Horizon system at about 8.55 that morning but she logged me out and I was no longer able to access the Horizon system, and she put a laptop on my counter. So she took the figure, the Horizon system figure of what it had said I should have on her laptop.

She counted the cash, Mr Skelton counted the stamps and he said to me "Why didn't you declare your stamps at the end of December", and I went up to him and I said "I did declare them". And he mumbled
something and I didn't hear what he had said and I said "Pardon", you know "What did you say?" and he'd gone "Oh, nothing, nothing, nothing". And they kind of inputted into this laptop ...

Sorry.
Q. It's okay. Take your time. We can have a break if you'd like.
A. They alleged I'd stolen $£ 9,616.66$, and I broke down. And they then asked me -- they told me I was suspended. They asked me if I would keep -- I would let somebody come in to work the Post Office, and I said "Of course I do, the village needs it". Well, they couldn't get anybody and they asked me if I could get somebody but I couldn't. So the Post Office, it was shut.
Q. So having been suspended, you were asked whether you could provide somebody to take over your role?
A. Yes.
Q. Moving on to the investigation, the audit was on 6 January.
A. Yes.
Q. When did you meet the investigators?
A. Oh dear, it was Jon Longman, wasn't it? I can't remember.
Q. Same day or soon after --
Q. What was the role of the union representatives there, as far as you understood it?
A. Well, it was a bit peculiar, really, because they didn't do anything or say anything. There was a tiny bit towards the end where I got a little bit upset and one of them turned round and said "Calm down". But apart from that --

What I did find a little bit off-putting at the end, I walked out and my husband was outside, but the union rep on the NEC, he stayed in there and the door was open and he was talking to them and I thought, that's -- I don't know. I just felt that was bit uncomfortable for them to do that. Surely they should have been with me rather than talking to the Post Office? I just found that really quite strange.
Q. You have said that your husband was there. Was your son also there?
A. No, he wasn't at that. He was at college on that day. They then rang me up and said I'd been unsuccessful with that interview but I could appeal. I had to go to Peterborough for that appeal and, again, I didn't see the need for any legal representation because I hadn't done anything wrong. But both of those interviews, it was just like a kangaroo court. You know, I walked in, the body language from them was
A. No, no, no, no. I went for an interview before I met with the investigators.
Q. Where was the interview?
A. That was in Cambridge city in the Crown Post Office with two union people, Tim and Jim, who had been to my house previously and sat in my kitchen and had coffee and I told them what had happened and they sat in with my interview.

But before the interview, we were early and we had a cup of coffee and, as we got up to go to the interview, my husband looked these two people in the eye and he said "Well, is this happening to anybody else?"
Q. Yes.
A. "No, no, you're the only ones".
Q. Those are the union people that said that?
A. This is the NFSP people. One was on the National Executive Committee and one was a subpostmaster.
Q. Were you legally represented at the interview?
A. No. I didn't see the need for it because I hadn't done anything wrong.
Q. Who was the interview with? Was that auditors or investigators?
A. No, as far as I know, it was just a Post Office employee. I can't remember her name. 18
"Oh, she's guilty, that's it", and I had to go through it all again.
Q. Who accompanied you to your second interview?
A. Well, my husband stayed outside but nobody else.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Mrs O'Dell, can I just interrupt for a second. These interviews that you are now describing --
A. Yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: -- l'm getting the impression that they were interviews which were to do with whether or not your suspension should remain in place?
A. That's right, yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: I've got that right, did I?
A. Yes, sorry. I didn't make that very clear. Yes.

MR BLAKE: Were there any other interviews carried out?
A. Yes, it was with the investigation -- Jon Longman, the investigation chap.
Q. Where was? Don't worry --
A. I seem to think that was at Cambridge as well. I think that was at Cambridge and my son and my husband went to that.
Q. How was that experience?
A. Again, I was guilty. At the end, towards the end, Mr Longman showed me a computer printout. Now, this was roughly -- and I want to say April or May but 20

Q. You said your son was with you, I think?
A. Yes. When the interview finished, I came out and there was a woman with Mr Longman and I can't remember her name. He called my son into the room. Now, my son was -- how old was he? 18? 19? I can't remember. I was a little bit concerned because he was suffering a bit from anxiety, because of all of this, and I made certain that the door was left open.

And when my son came out, I said "You all right?" and he said, "He asked me if I loved you". Mr Longman said to my son "Do you love your mother?" and he said "Yes, of course I do", and he said "Well, do you think she took the money?", and he said "No, she didn't take the money and I didn't either".
Q. Did your son take any further steps at that point?
A. No, he didn't, but he did have an idea of what could possibly have gone wrong and he did write to Mr Longman to make the suggestion but that was just thrown out of the window.
Q. Were you aware of a response to that?
A. Yes. I can't remember whether I rang Mr Longman or he rang me. They wanted me to sign something to see that I had taken the money but I can't remember whether I rang him or whatever and I said "Well, my son made a suggestion, we haven't heard anything". "Oh, yes 22
A. Okay, yes.
Q. Can you tell us, do you think that you were taken seriously at that meeting?
A. Well, can I backtrack a little bit because before the mediation, the Post Office wanted to have meetings with our MPs and my MP, who had been told about -I had been in contact with him all the way through, contacted me saying that the Post Office wanted a meeting with him, would I allow that? So I emailed him back and I said "Yes, I want to be there and I want certain provisions at that meeting. I want to know who will be present and in what capacity. I don't want any recording of it and I'd like to know beforehand exactly what they are going to say".

Most of the criteria was met, so I went to London and we met in the building next to the Houses of Parliament. I can't remember what it's called.
Q. Portcullis House, perhaps?
A. Yes, that's the one, and Angela van den Bogerd was there, she sat next to me, and Patrick somebody or other -- l've forgotten his name -- he sat opposite me and I really don't know what capacity, I think he was a legal chap, but I wouldn't swear to it, and my MP.

And the previous night, somehow I had a printout, a Horizon computer printout, and I looked
at it and the very last piece input was Wednesday, 6 January 2010 and it was approximately 11 o'clock and it had my detail -- my password -- not my password my -- sorry, what is when you log in to something, you have a sign in.
Q. Username?
A. Username, that's the word. Had my username to it and then some numbers and I thought: well, I couldn't have because they'd logged me out and blocked me on the Horizon system at 9 o'clock, so how could I have logged in at 11 o'clock and what were those numbers?

So at this meeting with my MP, with Angela van den Bogerd, I mentioned this and I showed it to her, and I said "That couldn't possibly have happened, I hadn't got -- I couldn't use the Horizon system and at that time the two employees were there, so they would have stopped me but I don't know what that is". So she said "Well, I don't, but at the mediation beforehand tell them that you want to know what this is and we'll find out and we'll let you know at the mediation".

So Howe \& Co represented me at the mediation and I went to their offices and a few weeks before that I'd had ...

I'd had a cancer scare and I'd had a little 25
just one discrete issue that I'd like to take up with the witness, if I may.

Would you look, please, at your witness
statement, Mrs O'Dell?
A. Yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: It's page 10 and it's paragraphs 64 and 65 , all right?
A. Yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: In those paragraphs, you talk about Mr Longman who, as I understand it, was one of the people who interviewed you under caution.
A. The investigator, yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: He was sending you something by post to sign --
A. The caution.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: -- which you describe as a caution.
A. Yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: I just want to understand what that document was because I'm familiar with the police sometimes offering a caution to people who are suspected of crime, as opposed to prosecuting them, and is this what was being offered to you, Mrs O'Dell, or can't you remember now?
A. I remember the piece of paper and I remember it had caution on it.
operation, so I wasn't at my best. So we went into the mediation and Angela van den Bogerd was there with a solicitor and I had to go through it all again, what had happened. And I mentioned this Horizon printout, and she said "Oh, yes, well, that was postal orders". So I said "Well, I couldn't have made that entry and I went through it all again". I said, "And we didn't count the postal orders because they didn't have monetary value at that time". They did when you -when somebody came in to buy a postal order you would put it in the printer and it would print out a postal order with the amount that the people wanted it for. So there was no monetary value, we never counted the postal orders and I couldn't access the Horizon system at that time.

And, again, she bluffed her way out of it and then she became extremely intimidating, extremely bullying towards me, demanding that I ... I sign a piece of paper that I had stolen the money and if I didn't they were going to take my home away -- they would take me to court, take my home away.
Q. I'm going to ask you about the impact on you generally. First financial and then personal.

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In terms of financial --
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SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Before you do that, Mr Blake, there's 26

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Right. Anyway, if you can't remember, it doesn't matter, but if there are any details about it that you could help me with I'd be grateful.
A. I'm so sorry. It was a caution and I remember the terminology, I said to him on the telephone, when he said -- that's right, he phoned me and asked me about signing the caution.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Yes. And does this jog your memory as to why you wouldn't sign it? Because the police will only administer a caution to someone if they actually admit that they've done something wrong. Does that ring any bell?
A. It does. I'm wracking my brain.
Q. I said to him -- I said to him "Do you think I came down with the fairies? I am not going to sign anything because I didn't take the money".
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Right, okay.
A. And that's why I wouldn't sign it.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: That's fine. Thank you very much, Mrs O'Dell. Sorry for interrupting.
A. No, no.

MR BLAKE: Not at all. Financial impact.
A. Yes.
Q. The Post Office was in your home.
A. Yes.
Q. What happened to the premises?
A. Well, when I realised that they weren't going to open reopen the Post Office, I -- we converted it back into living accommodation.
Q. Did that cost money?
A. Well, yes. I sold the screen for a pittance, I sold bits and pieces. I had a problem with the Post Office taking the safe away as well.
Q. What happened there?
A. So when they shut me -- when I was first suspended on 6 January there was some cash and stock, so they put it in the safe, they took my keys away, so I couldn't access it, and they said that they would get the van to come round on the following Wednesday to collect it all, that they would let me know, and they didn't.

It took a few weeks before the van was coming round and the chap from the Post Office said "I'll get there at 9 o'clock in the morning and the van will come and I'll take all the money and the cash -- you know, all the bits from the safe". I said okay.

So he came at 9 o'clock and we stood there. By 12 o'clock the van still hadn't arrived. So he rang up whoever it was in the Post Office and they said "Oh, we don't know anything about it, but we'll tell them to come and collect". And I said to him "Well, 29
we've stood here for three hours, if they're not here by 12.30 , that's it, I'm not spending any more time". Well, they weren't. So we had to put it all back into the safe, take the keys away.

It was reconvened for another date. So at 9 o'clock he came back, the van came, he took the keys, and I said to him, I am turning off the electricity because I hate waste. I drive my husband mad turning lights off over the house. I said "I'm turning the electricity off with the alarm, so that's it".

So a few weeks later I got a letter from the Post Office on the Wednesday night saying that they were coming on the Thursday to take the safe away. So I rang up the chap, Steve Smith, his name was, and I said "No, you're not". I said, "You're not coming, you want to enter my property you make a proper appointment, you don't just write to me saying your coming the next day".

So then he wrote, made a proper appointment, they came and they couldn't get into the safe because the electricity was turned off, which I'd informed them. So they had to go away.

So I decided that I would invoice them for keeping the safe, storage. So I invoiced the 30

Post Office, sent an invoice.
So then one day I was out shopping with my son in town and I got a phone call. Oh "Mrs O'Dell, this is the Post Office, we're outside your property, we've come to collect the safe". So I said "Right". "Well, nobody's in". I said "No, I'm out". "Well, can you come home so that we can get into the safe and take the safe away". So I said "No". I said "You make a proper appointment".

So they had to go away. They made a proper appointment, came, still couldn't take the safe away, so I'm still invoicing for storage. So, eventually, a chap came and he had to drill through into the safe and it took about -- well, it took all day for him to do that. Then he went away.

I'm still invoicing the Post Office. Anyway, to cut a long story short, they eventually came. I think it was about six/eight months later, they came and they actually took the safe away and they didn't pay the invoices. So I took out a County Court summons and I got a letter on a Saturday morning from the outside solicitors that were -- is it Womble \& Dickinson that they used to use -- saying that I can't do that, I can't possibly do that, I can't take them to County Court. So I ignored the 31
letter.
I couldn't take them to County Court, ring us. So I ignored the letter.

They then sent another letter but it was a Special Delivery, so they had a signature, "Ring us, you cannot do that, you know you can't take us to County Court". So I ignored that letter, and they rang me and they'd used a Latin phrase, so I looked it up on Google, and it was they had loaned me the safe to carry out their business but because I hadn't carried out their business they had closed me down since January, yes, that Latin phrase didn't mean anything. So I was storing their safe.
Q. Were you successful in the dispute?
A. Yes. They settled the night before it was due.
Q. What about the retail business that you had on the premises?
A. Well, as I say, it was just a few greeting cards but I also ran another business. I used to breed pedigree cats and, of course, when all of this happened I lost interest with it all and finished.
Q. Presumably you weren't being paid by the Post Office anymore?
A. No. I must say, I was a pensioner by then because I'm in my 70s now, so when it all happened I did have 32
(8) Pages 29-32
a pension. My husband was a self-employed electrician, so he had to carry on working as well.
Q. Moving on to the personal impact, how were you treated by your local community?
A. My very good friends were fantastic but, living in a village, the gossip was -- well, the most that the gossipmongers were saying was that I had stolen $£ 250,000$. That was the most I heard.
Q. How did people in the village know about it?
A. Well, because a villager had written to the Post Office asking why the Post Office was shut and the Post Office had written back to him saying I had resigned, and he had printed it, that letter, in the village magazine. So everyone thought I had resigned and, of course, then the gossip had started. People would cross -- well, I didn't go out much. When I did try and go for a walk, people would cross the other side of the road. People I'd known a long time.
Q. What happened to being a Parliamentary candidate?
A. I stepped down. I didn't want to bring it into disrepute.
Q. You mentioned it was in the village newspaper or --
A. Yes, the Life magazine.
Q. Was it publicised anywhere else?
A. It was in the local newspaper. I'm sorry.
Q. That's okay. Would you like a moment? (Pause)
A. I feel so weak. I was innocent and they did that to me.
Q. Would you like a moment?
A. No, I'm okay.
Q. Okay.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Mrs O'Dell, can I say that I can tell from the line of questioning that Mr Blake is now adopting that he probably hasn't got that much longer with you.
A. Okay.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: So it probably is, I guess, but it's a matter for you, but I would guess better if you completed now.
A. Yes, absolutely. Yes.

MR BLAKE: Was it in a Post Office publication?
A. No, no, it wasn't. No, I don't think so. I never saw anything, no.
Q. What was the effect on you psychologically?
A. Went to some very dark places, extremely dark places. I even worked out how to commit suicide. I had to have antidepressants. I had to have sleeping pills. I had night terrors when my husband had to wake me up, and it wasn't just once every so often. It was two or three times a week. I had high blood pressure as 34

It's been over two years since that court case -- two years and people are still being prosecuted. The Post Office could do it within a few months, of sending those poor people to prosecute them, convict them and send them to prison. It's been over two years that Judge Fraser handed down what he said about the Horizon system. Over two years that one of the executives sat in that seat and didn't tell the whole truth.

Has anything happened? No. She's sitting on two boards of directors with a healthy pension. How do you think my psychological feeling has been? One of them had an honour. She was given an honour. What a slap in the face to us. Alan Bates from the JFSA hadn't been recognised at all. He's worked tirelessly and effortlessly for us. He got us to that court case where it was said that we were innocent. He should be given the honour, not her. I'm sorry, I'm extremely angry about this.
Q. That's okay. Is there anything that you would like to add at all?
A. I just want them brought to account. Not blame each other, and that's what's going to happen. I want them brought to account and I want to be able to afford my electricity bills, and everything else. I want to 36
spoil my grandchildren.
Q. Thank you.

Chair, do you have any questions at all?
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, thank you, Mr Blake.
You will have seen, Mrs O'Dell, that those few questions that I did want to ask I've already asked you. So all that remains for me to do is to thank you very, very much for coming to answer all those questions in detail. I appreciate how difficult all this is for both you and the other witnesses who come before me, and I can only say how grateful I am to you all that you're telling your stories in this brave fashion. Thank you.
A. I'd like to thank you and everybody else. I want to be able to be alive, Sir Wyn, to see that happen because, as I say, I'm in my 70s now and it's been 13 years. I don't want any more night terrors, please. I really don't.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right. Well, I think that I've made many public statements saying how important it is that I complete my work as quickly as I reasonably can and everything you've said reinforces me in my view that I should try and do just that.
A. Thank you.

MR BLAKE: Thank you, sir. 37

Mr Stein will be reading a statement from Mr Vinall but perhaps we will take a ten-minute break first.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Certainly.
MR BLAKE: Then after that we will hear from Ms Little and Ms Powell as well.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: That fine, thank you, Mr Blake.
MR BLAKE: So perhaps 11.10.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right.
(10.58 am)

## (A short break)

(11.12 am)

MR BLAKE: Mr Vinall is unable to attend today due to his health and you, sir, have given permission for Mr Stein to read a summary of his evidence and he will do so now.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Before we do that, Mr Stein, I think the lady, I presume it's Mrs Little, who is due to give evidence remotely, I can see and hear her and I'd be grateful if she could mute her machine, if she hasn't done it, so that we won't get an unintended interruption, so to speak.

It's all right, Mrs Little. The fact I can see you doesn't matter but if you could just put yourself on mute while Mr Stein is reading something out that 38
felt that he was totally thrown in at the deep end, despite having worked in the branch for five years prior to this.

Mr Vinall rang the helpline almost every time he experienced a shortfall, which was on numerous occasions. He describes the knowledge of the staff on the helpline as being "fundamentally flawed".

Mr Vinall's Horizon terminal in the branch was replaced by the Post Office as they said it was broken. Shortly after the replacement of the equipment, Mr Vinall began experiencing very significant shortfalls. Mr Vinall was threatened with prosecution by the Post Office, due to a $£ 28,000$ unexplained shortfall.

Guy Vinall's contract was terminated by the Post Office by letter dated 5 January 2010, as a result of alleged shortfalls and other alleged breaches. Mr Vinall and his elderly father both had to take out loans to pay the shortfalls demanded by the Post Office to stop him from being prosecuted.

Mr Vinall maintains that the treatment that the Post Office subjected him to caused him to have a mental breakdown. He turned to alcohol and sank into depression. Mr Vinall attempted suicide on several occasions and was admitted to a mental health 40
institution twice. His marriage broke down as his wife was no longer able to cope with his depression.

Mr Vinall's life got so bad that even his dog, called Dylan, was taken away from him. Mr Vinall says that this was a "killer blow".

Guy Vinall feels that he cannot ever be fully compensated for what the Post Office has done. He says that they have "literally ripped the life out of me".

It is Mr Vinall's hope that the Inquiry will recognise the harm that has been done to decent people like himself and direct that full compensation be paid for the financial losses and for the emotional stress and for the loss of a life he and other subpostmasters loved and lost. If he had been able to attend today, Mr Vinall had wished to read a few words from his daughter to you in his closing statements. He has provided his solicitors, Howe \& Co, with the words his daughter wrote yesterday, which he feels sums up the experiences and the impact these events have had on him and his family.

I now read his daughter's words:
"My Dad has not been able to have inner peace since this happened. He needs peace to come from this Inquiry. We have tried every way, every type of help,
medication, everything, to improve his mental state. These may provide a temporary plaster for a period of time but without the true inner peace and closure of this ordeal, my Dad will never truly be able to improve his mental state. It is an illness in itself. He is paranoid and struggles to form or maintain normal relationships with people now. He either wants to hide away or feel he has to overcompensate to prove his worth to people.
"My Dad's relationship with new colleagues after the Post Office was hard. His relationships with all of us, his kids, have been more difficult at times, and his mental well-being has undoubtedly meant that he has seen grandchildren, friends and people he loves dearly far less.
"Each day is still a challenge to try and survive for him. His suicidal thoughts are still very real and the reality we all still deal with daily, all of these years later. He is not living his life or thriving. He is simply struggling to survive.
"The life this Post Office scandal has created for my Dad is so hard to face that he still often feels not being here is a better alternative."

Sir Wyn, thank you very much for allowing us to read that statement on his behalf.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Thank you, Mr Stein, for reading it.
MS KENNEDY: We're now going to call the next witness, which is Mrs Linda Little.

## LINDA LITTLE (affirmed) Questioned by MS KENNEDY

MS KENNEDY: I think you know my name is Ruth Kennedy and I ask questions on behalf of the Chair. Could you just confirm your full name please.
A. Linda Carol Little.
Q. Have you got a copy of your witness statement there with you?
A. Yes.
Q. I think it should be dated 21 January 2022?
A. Yes.
Q. Is that your signature on page 12 ?
A. Yes.
Q. Have you read this statement through recently?
A. Yes.
Q. Is it true to the best of your knowledge and belief?
A. Yes.
Q. So I'm going to start by just asking a couple of questions about you. How old are you now?
A. I'm 63 now.
Q. Where did you grow up?
A. Worcester.
Q. How many children do you have?
A. One.
Q. Who do you live with at the moment?
A. My nephew.
Q. Could you just tell the Chair how long you worked in a Post Office for?
A. I started as soon as I left school when I was 16.
Q. Where was the first Post Office that you worked in?
A. St John's in Worcester.
Q. What job did you have then?
A. I started as an accounts clerk and then at the age of 21 I was made officer in charge, and I was the youngest within that group that had been made into officer in charge.
Q. Then I think you moved to another Post Office. Which one was that?
A. I then went to Henwick --
Q. I think you also -- I'm sorry. I think you also worked in another Post Office on the weekends at that time as well; is that right?
A. Yes. Sometimes I used to help the gentleman out at Wickfield's Post Office.
Q. Why did you leave the Henwick Post Office?
A. The Post Office closed it down.
Q. I think that was in 2004. What happened then in your
life?
A. My husband passed away in the July of that year.
Q. After that, where did you work next, which Post Office?
A. Dines Green.
Q. You say in your statement you then went on to become the subpostmistress of Dines Green. For a while, you worked as an employee; is that right?
A. That's right, yes.
Q. Why did the previous subpostmaster leave?
A. He was suspended, unfortunately.
Q. Do you know why that was?
A. There was a shortfall.
Q. When you took over as subpostmistress in 2013, you also trained Louisa Powell, who I think we've already seen on screen today; is that right?
A. That's right, yes.
Q. How did you feel about working for the Post Office when you took over as subpostmistress?
A. I loved the job. I absolutely loved it. I mean, it was a dream come true, really.
Q. Is that why you bought the Post Office at that time, having worked there for quite a long period of time?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. How long did you intend to run that Post Office that 45
you bought for?
A. Well, I intended to run it until I retired and then pass it on to my daughter and my nephew.
Q. I'm just going to ask you a few questions about the training you received. What training were you provided with when you joined the Post Office?
A. When I first, joined? Crikey.
Q. If you can remember.
A. You're going back a bit now! Well, they trained me up -- it was a hands-on kind of training. You didn't get -- we didn't go anywhere for training.
Q. How adequate did you feel that training was, if you can remember?
A. Well, it was fine, yeah. It was fine.
Q. What training did you receive then when you took over the Dines Green Post Office?
A. Well, I had the training previously at Henwick for the Horizon system.
Q. What did that involve?
A. I did a week training.
Q. Where was that?
A. I think it was at Bank House Hotel.
Q. How did you feel about that training that you received then?
A. Well, the counter training wasn't too bad but the 46
Q. I think in your statement you give an example of a cheque being entered incorrectly. Can you just tell the Chair a little bit about that?
A. Well, I reversed it, which it did that okay, to put it into the right place. But then it just -- you couldn't get rid of the cheque. It just stayed there. And then I spoke to the helpline and whatever they told me to do, it was doubling, and doubling, and doubling. So how many times I actually paid for that cheque, I don't know.
Q. What did the helpline advisers tell you that you had to do to remove the alleged shortfalls?
A. Put the money in.
Q. What support did you feel that you had from the Post Office at that time?
A. Absolutely none.
Q. I think you said in your statement you tried various steps to understand why these alleged shortfalls took place, you and Louisa. Can you just explain some of the things you tried, to try and understand what was causing the shortfalls?
A. Well, at that time, my grandson was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, which is a cancer of the eye. So, at that time, we were going through the fact that he was going to have to have his eye removed and I kind of -48
(12) Pages 45-48

I blamed myself. I thought: I'm not concentrating properly, I'm doing something wrong. But obviously not.
Q. I think you say --
A. It was a terrible, terrible time, because there was all that going on, as well as my grandson. It was awful.
Q. I think you say in your statement that you used to take two weeks on -- you used to share it with Louisa; is that right? You would try two weeks just one of you, and then two weeks the other?
A. Yes, we tried that, to see if it would show anything, show it was either one of us but, no, it was the same for both of us.
Q. You also say in your statement that often the system would crash. How often would that happen?
A. Once an hour, sometimes. It was -- they couldn't get -- because of the Portakabin, they couldn't get the signal for the system, so it kept crashing and, every time it crashed, you were left with a huge shortfall. But they said that was nothing to do with it.
Q. How much money do you think you paid into the Post Office to make good the shortfalls over the years?
A. Well, I definitely lost my 65,000 that was left from my husband's pensions and I think, to be perfectly honest, it's in excess of probably 90,000 .
Q. I think you mention that they deducted some of the alleged shortfalls from your salary; is that right?
A. Yes, they used to do that. If you settled centrally, you only had up until the next balancing period to make it right, so they used to take the money out the wages for that.
Q. I think you say in your statement that there were three audits when you were a subpostmistress. I think the first, you say, was in September 2014. What shortfalls did they find, or alleged shortfalls did they find, at that time?
A. None.
Q. Why was that?
A. Because l'd put the money in and made it straight.
Q. Then the second was in August 2015 and, again, what alleged shortfalls did they find then?
A. None because l'd put that right too.
Q. So then the third audit was on 27 September 2017. What were you initially told by the auditors about an alleged shortfall in relation to stamps?
A. For some reason, they came up with a figure of nearly $£ 3,000$ short in the postage stamps. 50
Q. What did you do when they said that?
A. Well, me and Louisa went through the stamp book again and said "No, look, this is what it is", and it just went on, and on, and on. They just couldn't get it right.
Q. What figure did they come back with? Do you remember?
A. No, I don't.
Q. Do you remember if it was a different figure?
A. Yes, yes. They kept coming up with different figures.
Q. When the audit was completed, what were you told was the alleged shortfall then?
A. I think it was 62.
Q. Yes, in your statement you say 62,000 . That's about right, is it?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. What information did they give you as to how that figure was arrived at?
A. Well, I knew because I had to -- we had to inflate the figures anyway, to be able to continue opening.
Q. What steps, if any, did you take to challenge that figure, the audit?
A. Well, you couldn't challenge it really. They just suspended me straight away.
Q. So you were suspended following the audit, immediately afterwards; is that right?
A. No, I was suspended during the audit.
Q. What did the Post Office say about the alleged shortfall that they found? What did you have to do?
A. Well, I said I wanted a full investigation into it because it wasn't right and the system wasn't right but never heard any more about it, really.
Q. Who did you go to --
A. Apart from --
Q. Sorry, go on?
A. Sorry.
Q. No, you go.
A. Apart from when I had the interview under caution at home.
Q. Who did you go to for advice?
A. I went to Freeths. Luckily, they'd -- I'd signed up about two weeks prior.
Q. I think you also mention you went to the NFSP. Did you speak to them at the time?
A. No, because l'd read that they weren't being very helpful to subpostmasters and they were more linked with Post Office, so I didn't bother with the NFSP.
Q. How did you feel you were treated by the Post Office representatives at that time?
A. Absolutely awful, awful. They've got no feelings, they've got no morals, they've got no nothing.
Q. I'm going to ask you some questions now about the financial impact that this has had. We touched on this already but are there any other financial costs that you suffered as a result of this?
A. I've lost everything. I've lost everything. I really have. We used to take out loans with Provident and, you know, big companies like that, but the interest rate is so incredible that it just got worse and worse. So I'm still owing them the money I borrowed to cover the shortfalls.
Q. You mentioned some loans. Who else did you borrow from? Did you borrow from anyone else in your life?
A. Yes, I borrowed from my daughter.
Q. What impact did that have on your relationship?
A. She was -- she was fine, bless her, yes. Yes, yes. She was very understanding.
Q. I'm going to ask you some questions about the impact this has had on your health. What impact did this have on your mental health?
A. Well, I'm convinced it sent me crazy, and I'm still crazy. I went to the doctor because I didn't want to get out of bed in the morning. I just wanted to go to sleep.
Q. I think that --
A. Let me just turn my phone off. (Pause)
away the pain, if you know what I mean, which is what we were doing it for.
Q. You say in your statement, and I think you also said this a moment ago, you said that you don't feel like yourself even now. Could you just explain what you mean by that to the Chair?
A. I used to hide myself if I went out of the house. I didn't want to go out the house. I still don't want to go out of the house. I don't want people questioning me, I don't want people to see me. I don't want to do anything, I'm not interested in anything, I can't get motivated with anything. It's just -- it's always there in your mind. It doesn't go away.
Q. You just mentioned a moment ago about not wanting to go out of the house. How do you feel this impacted on your reputation in the community?
A. Well, I've seen a couple of customers when I have been out, and they've been really nice and understanding and, as more has come out of the Post Office, I suppose, they've seen more about it but, some of them, I'm sure that they thought we'd taken the money. You know my daughter was questioned about it, my sister was questioned about it, and even my grandson at school was questioned about it. So it was

Right, sorry. Where was I?
Q. You were just describing the impact, I think, on your sleep.
A. I didn't sleep. We didn't sleep. We -- we used to, spend hours, and hours, and hours, going through paperwork, trying to find something but, because you hadn't got anything to check back on, there's no paper trail of anything really anymore. You can't really check. You've got to accept what the computer says.
Q. What medication did you take to help with your mental health?
A. The doctor prescribed me sertraline, and I started on 50 milligrams, and I'm now on 200 milligrams and I also take the amitriptyline. I've been taking that since 1996 when I was involved in a Post Office raid.
Q. This is to help with your depression?
A. Yes.
Q. Did you use any substances to deal with the difficulties?
A. Yes.
Q. What substances did you use?
A. Alcohol.
Q. How much did you drink?
A. Far too much, far too much. But it -- I don't know. It didn't really have the effect to, sort of, take 54
horrible. It was horrible.
Q. How do you feel like all of that impacted on your relationship with your family?
A. They -- my family have been totally supportive, they really have. Without them, I don't know what I would have done. They tried to talk to me about it, tried to get me to open up about it but, of course, I didn't want to, really, because you feel such a -- you feel such a failure. You feel like you -- it's just you, it's just you who's done it, you know.
Q. What would you like from the Post Office now?
A. Where shall I start? If I go through my conclusion, and then l've written something as well.

The Post Office literally took everything from me. They ended my career that I'd built from the age of 16 and I absolutely loved my job, I really did.

They took away my retirement plans and my daughter's and nephew's, future because they were going to take over the business from me. They took -they had every single penny spare that I had and I'm in debt. I don't even go into a Post Office anymore. I'd rather use Hermes, or somewhere like that.

I would like an apology but I would like it to be meant, not just "sorry".

Also, I've written here: who knew and why was it 56
$\qquad$
just allowed to carry on? They carry on with their lives. When are they going to be questioned and held accountable for this largest miscarriage of justice in this country? How has Paula Vennells been allowed to just say "sorry", as she was the one who authorised all these poor subpostmasters to be convicted?

I would like to be fairly compensated for everything they have put me through, and my family and friends. I want to treat all of them for their unwavering support because, without them, I really don't think I would be here today.

At the end of the day, they have totally destroyed all of us.
Q. Is there anything else you would like to say to the Chair?
A. No, I don't think so. Thank you.
Q. I'm now going to turn to the Chair and see if he has any questions?
A. Okay.

## Questions from SIR WYN WILLIAMS

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Just one or two, if I may, please. You mentioned just a moment or so ago that your relatives, your sister, your daughter, and even your grandson, were questioned about this. Did you mean by that that they were questioned by representatives of the 57

Post Office or by other members of the public?
A. No, by members of the public.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Fine, right. Thanks, I've got that clear.

Then when you'd been interviewed under caution --
A. Yes.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: -- obviously, at that stage, you didn't know whether or not any further action was going to be taken against you.
A. No, no I didn't, no.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Did the Post Office ever tell you what they were going to do after that interview under caution? For example, did you get a letter saying they would be no further action or anything like that?
A. No, no, nothing.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: So between 2017 and even now, they've never said what their intentions were?
A. No, not at all. Nothing.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right. Thank you.
A. Thank you.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Well, thanks very much for giving evidence.
MS KENNEDY: Just one moment. (Pause)
Can I just ask one further question about the 58
loans that you took out?
A. Yes.
Q. Could you just describe the nature of the loans and how long term they were, what the interest rates were like?
A. Well, they sort of started at, sort of, $£ 500$ but I think the last one was about 3,000 . The interest was astronomical. It was purely to cover shortages.
Q. Thank you.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right. Well, thanks again, and sorry there was a little bit of confusion about which one of you was going to go first, but we've sorted it all out now.
A. That's all right.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Thanks very much.
A. Thank you. Thank you. Do you want Louisa now?

MS KENNEDY: Yes, please.

## LOUISA POWELL (affirmed)

MS KENNEDY: Hello. As you know, my name is Ruth Kennedy and I ask questions on behalf of the Chair.
A. Hi.
Q. Could you confirm your full name please?
A. It's Louisa Claire Powell.
Q. Have you got a copy of your witness statement there with you?
A. I have, yes.
Q. I think it should be dated 21 January 2022?
A. Yes, it is, yes.
Q. Is that your signature on page 15 of the statement?
A. Yes, it is.
Q. Have you read through this statement recently?
A. I have, yes.
Q. Is it true to the best of your knowledge and belief?
A. It is, yes.
Q. I'm just going to start with a few introductory
questions about you. How old are you now?
A. I'm 43 .
Q. When did you move to Dines Green?
A. When I was 17.
Q. Who did you move there with?
A. My husband. I'd met him in 1996, had a daughter and then I moved in with him.
Q. What kind of jobs did you do before you started working at the Post Office?
A. Nothing really, apart from like the odd helping my Grandad with the milk, because I got pregnant and I wanted to spend all my time with my daughter.
Q. How did you meet Linda Little, who we just saw a moment ago?
A. Well, my husband was friends with the subpostmaster,
who originally had it before Linda did, and he'd asked my husband if l'd like to go and work in the retail section. My twins had just started nursery then and it was a great time because I used to love being with my children and I missed them terribly so it got me out the house and I loved it. I loved it.
Q. I think -- so there's the retail side of the Post Office. When did you start working then? Do you remember broadly the year you started working at Dines Green?

No? Don't worry?
A. At the Post Office, do you mean?
Q. I think that you started work in the retail side and were working --
A. Right yeah, sorry, sorry. So it would have been 2008.
Q. Then Linda Little took over as subpostmistress in 2013 and you started working quite closely together; is that right?
A. Yeah. Well, I met her in the retail when I was working in the retail and she was in the Post Office and we became really, really good friends, and she started to train me up in Post Office.
Q. Why did you want to work for the Post Office?
A. Well, I loved the retail side. It was brilliant.

Postmaster had got bad, and I was like opening up in 61
the mornings, doing all the papers, closing up at night, cashing up, and I loved it. I loved speaking to people, I absolutely adored it.

So being part of the Post Office was going to be great too. I'd be able to do everything. It would be -- it was fantastic. It was a dream come true.
Q. How long did you think you would work for the Post Office?
A. Oh, forever. I don't think, like -- if I'd hit retirement age, I think I would have just carried on because that was -- I loved being out and I loved being with people and talking to people and meeting people. It was great, brilliant.
Q. You mentioned that Linda trained you in the Post Office. What training did you receive from the Post Office itself?
A. None.
Q. I'm now going to ask you some questions about the alleged shortfalls and I think you mention a couple of alleged shorffalls in your statement that you noticed while you were working there. Can you just tell the Chair about some of those?
A. Okay. Do you want to cover the MoneyGram one?
Q. Yes, whatever one you would like to use --
A. Well, a customer who came in and wanted to send some 62
money but there was a problem with the MoneyGram, not
our side, of their side of sending it. So they needed a refund. They paid for it on card. Now, I refunded it back onto card. On the nighttime, we were around that figure -- I think one was for 3,000 and one was 2, I can't remember the exact amounts -- and we were that amount short in cash.

So I phoned the helpline and Linda did because we were in a right mess and $I$ said "We're short about this amount and I've refunded a MoneyGram", and they said "You must have refunded it by giving the person cash". I said "No, I did not, I refunded it back to their original payment", which, as I'm supposed to, I'm not allowed to do that. And they was adamant I'd done that.

And Linda had spoke to them as well, doing -trying to find it on paper trail, it was non-existent. There was no refund on a MoneyGram whatsoever. It was just horrendous, atrocious.

Luckily, I knew the person and their phone number was on the MoneyGram and I rang them and I said, because it would take 24 to 48 hours for it to get back into their bank, and I said "Could you tell me please how many times" -- because they were messing about on the system, as well, they were telling me to
do this, do that. And, well, I was just getting more and more worried, and so I phoned up and they came in and saw me and they said "Yes, it's been done". And she came back with a statement to show me that it had only been -- it had been processed once and once only.

But they was adamant that I'd given cash, and they said we would have to pay it back, even though the customer was happy they'd got their money, the proof was there. Nobody would listen. Not one person would listen, and it went into the suspense account but in the end, we had no choice, had to pay it back.
Q. When you say "they" is that the helpline you were speaking to were saying that?
A. Yes, yes.
Q. How helpful did you find the helpline?
A. Awful, terrible, to the point where I -- they just did not know what was going on. They were useless. They had no idea. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know how to help you. They got you into a worse mess by telling you you had to reverse this, do this. It was just horrendous.

So you don't bother in the end because what starts off as one figure of 5,000 , you're suddenly paying back double, because it -- I can't even explain it. They just -- they didn't know. They obviously
didn't know how an Horizon system worked. I think I don't know how an Horizon system work. It just worked by itself when it wanted to.
Q. I think Linda mentioned something that you tried, to work out why these alleged shortfalls were coming up and it was working separately -- is that right -- for periods of time?
A. Yes, I had the idea. I said to Lin, I said "Let's do two weeks each", and then on the big balance, because that occurred like every month, it was about four or five weeks, like, you done a big balance, as we called it. So in that time I said to Lin, I said "Okay, I'll work in the Post Office, you stay away, don't have anything to do with it whatsoever, don't come in, don't even come into the retail section", and I showed shorffalls. I was devastated because I just thought: right, it's me, so it's me who's lost the money.

When it was Linda's turn, I done the same, stayed away and, in a way, when I came and saw Linda and she said that she was showing shortfalls, it was such a relief because then I knew it just wasn't me. We knew we had a serious, serious problem. But nobody would help.
Q. I think you mention in your statement that you paid money in to make good some of the alleged shortfalls? 65
A. Yes, that's right.
Q. How much money did you pay the Post Office?
A. It was around $£ 20,000$ from loans from Shopacheck, Provident, that is, like, including the interest, because the interest was very, very high. My husband would take out payday loans -- Wonga I think one of them was. I borrowed money off my Mum, my Nan and my Grandad, who's not here today unfortunately. So, yeah, it was a case of just trying to get money where you could get money.
Q. What impact did that have on your relationship with your family?
A. Terrible, terrible. I was at work so much, I used to just try and find out -- it was awful and it had a very big impact on my family too. They were stressed because I was stressed. I mean, I'd cry and my poor children -- my three girls and my grandson -and it was such a shame for them because I regret those horrible years and what they had to see me through, because obviously I turned into an alcoholic. Have I gone ahead of myself on questioning?
Q. No, you haven't but, if I could ask the question then about balance day, which you describe in your statement, and you describe your drinking on balance day, which I think you were just about to talk about. 66

Do you want to tell the Chair about that?
A. Yeah. Me and Lin, it wasn't just on balance days, me and Lin -- it was just after she got the audit took place and suspended, we used to start going through the evidence. We used to start drinking a bottle of Bacardi, and that -- we'd get the evidence ready for Freeths and everything, and we did have a lot of evidence, but nobody ever wanted to see that.

And, as it -- over the time, because of everything what was happening, losing -- the retail shop was just going down, there was no stock, we couldn't refill and, basically, I turned into an alcoholic, and my doctor was absolutely fantastic. I got antidepressants, zopiclone, diazepam, pregabalin. And then my husband decided to take me out for the day with my children to the seaside and then I broke my knee and crushed my leg 7 to 8 cms down and I was told I might not be able to walk again. Luckily, thankfully, I have.

Being in hospital that time, the medication I was receiving stopped me from drinking, so that was a good thing.
Q. How much were you drinking when you were drinking at your most?
A. Easily, a bottle of Bacardi, four cans of cider.

I would just drink into oblivion. I didn't go home at night. I stayed at Lin's. There was one occasion I woke up, I had wet Lin's bed, from being so drunk, which is thoroughly embarrassing, but it happened. It was just -- it was a way to block it out.

But my daughter also she got very bad anxiety, wouldn't go over the shop. She still don't go over the shop to this day. She had to see mental health team, and that, and I think it was the way that -I mean, people would question her at school, like, "Oh saw the Post Office closed, what's happened, did your Mum nick the money?"

I had people coming knocking on my door because I only just live just up the alley and it's a minute's walk, not even that, to the Post Office and people used to come and knock on my door and say "Why are you closed?" And I just didn't want to see anybody. It was the most ... it was horrible. It was horrible and Post Office did not want to listen in any way, shape or form. They would not listen. They were horrible, horrible people, horrible.

Sorry.
Q. Just on that last point, just coming back to the audit that was carried out in 2017, how did you feel the auditors treated you and Linda then?
A. Terrible, absolutely terrible. There was two but the one he said to -- like, he said to me, "Who are you?" and I said, "I'm the manager" I said "with Lin".

And there was a problem over the stamp book and I was absolutely furious over the stamps. I counted them and counted them with him, every time there was different figures, and we were there until about 8.00 on the nighttime and he couldn't make head or tail of what was going on either. And when we locked up, we all right went together and outside I said to him, I said, "You've got to be honest, there's flaws in the system" and he just went ... and he looked like there was remorse in his face and he hugged me and Lin. The auditor actually hugged me and Lin, and I have got witnesses to that, Rob Taylor, my next-door neighbour who worked in the shop and -- well, he said that he said he'd see us the next day to carry on. Never turned up. Went off to meet him, never turned up.

So, yeah, we was hoping that when he hugged us and that and you could see the remorse in his face that he might listen to us, but nothing.
Q. And after the audit where Linda was suspended, what happened to you?
A. Well, they didn't suspend me or nothing and the area manager, Paul Williams, we tried and tried to get hold 69
of him. He wouldn't answer his phone or reply back to our messages, and I withheld the number the one day and he answered, surprisingly. And I said to him, "Can I take over the branch while this is being sorted?" and he said, "No, because you're too close to Linda".

I was never suspended or nothing. I was just -I didn't exist really to those. It was ... yeah, so ...
Q. I'm just going to ask you -- I think you've have already said quite a lot about this -- but just if there's anything you wanted to add about the financial impact that this has had on you.
A. Well, yeah, me and my husband we was in such a mess. It was just ... you can't describe really in words what occurred, and trying to find the money to pay them back, knocking on the door each week to come and collect the money from Shopacheck and Provident. It was just absolutely horrendous.

And can I just say that the Post Office, when we were in -- when Linda took over and we moved into the Portakabin, we were meant to have a new system. They never put it in. When we moved into the new shop, we were meant to have another system, a new one again because it had been moved, and they never done that. 70

We still had the old Horizon system from the very first one, 1999. It was never changed.

And the phone lines as well, they kept going and they had to put the booster on, a booster aerial, because we kept losing signal. And when I went to the charity shop a few months back, it was quite a smile moment for me. I was paying and I paid on card and they had to take the card machine out and go outside to get a signal, and I just thought, "Oh dear me, oh" ... yeah, so.

There's so much, there's just so much, I could sit here for a month, I think, and tell you so much what happened with the Post Office.
Q. How are you now financially?
A. Terrible. I still owe Provident, still owe Shopacheck. And because of, like, Christmases coming up, we never got any money and what we have to do we have to renew the loan so I can get some Christmas presents and obviously it just carries on from there.

So from when the Post Office -- because my husband took a loan out as well, so it's me and my husband who took loans out to cover the shorffalls and so now it just rolls over, if you know what I mean. So it's just a constant battle with debt, yeah.
Q. And I think you mentioned before that there were
people knocking on your door and asking questions. How do you feel this has damaged your reputation?
A. Terrible, absolutely awful. I know Rob Taylor, who worked in the shop, he told me that -- because I haven't got Facebook, I don't have social media or anything like that, but he told me that there was a lot of comments on Facebook about us stealing money, et cetera.

One of my children was also, like, asked at school and that and that's when I didn't go over the shop -- it affected one, as I said, a lot more one of my twins, who wants to be (unclear) problems he still has.

I forgot what the question was now, sorry. I've just started blabbering. What was the question?
Q. That leads on to the next point.
A. Oh yeah, he told people -- he messaged people to tell them that this was not our fault and it was the Post Office's. Also Worcester News was emailing me -they thought I was Linda -- and they wanted to do an interview but obviously I just ignored them. It was in the paper that it had closed down quickly and nobody knew why.
Q. You have also spoken about your family and $I$ just wanted to ask if there's anything else you wanted to
add about the impact that this has had on your family.
A. I wrote some things down. Well, basically I haven't -- I haven't wrote that down.

What it had on my family was awful and it still is. My husband's heart only works so many -- sorry, I can't think of the word it's called what he's got, and it put him under a tremendous amount of stress.

I mean, I basically had a mental break down and, again, my children had to see that Mum just drunk or just asleep, which was not very nice for them and I feel very guilty for that, absolutely terrible, and I don't like to talk about it because it plays on my mind something chronic of what happened.
Q. What would you like from the Post Office now?
A. Can I read what I wrote?
Q. Of course.
A. I would like an apology from the Post Office. However, I feel very strongly that this will not be sincere. Their words have always turned out to be lies.

I feel personally they have no feelings, no morals, but just hardened criminals with the power to destroy you who should all be held to account and face justice.

The Post Office management, auditors, area 73
a significant amount of compensation. I want to clear my debts and pay back my family what I owe them. Unfortunately, I will not be able to pay my grandad back.

I also want to treat my husband, my three beautiful daughters and my grandsons. I have also a step-son who my husband brought up and he's got cerebral palsy, so he lives with us too.

Yes, sorry. I want to treat my husband, my three beautiful daughters from the stolen years that occurred, for the lies and deceit from the Post Office. Even though no amount of money can bring back those horrendous years, I can make new memories happy ones and compensation will help this, though it will never make things go away.
Q. Is there anything else you would like to say to the Chair?
A. I think I'd just like to say if anybody is having these problems, then please get help now before it's too late or things go wrong.
MS KENNEDY: I'm now just going to turn to the Chair to see if he has any questions for you.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No. No, thank you very much. I don't have any questions, Mrs Powell, but I do want to tell you how grateful I am that you've been prepared to
managers, et cetera, that are all still working at the Post Office today should be removed from their positions and be investigated. A new team of honest individuals should take over these roles and be trained to deal with subpostmasters if any issues occur instantly and work together to resolve any issues that occur and not instantly blame, suspend and prosecute. A unit of trust and help should be maintained and not shoved under the carpet.

I would also -- I would like to say our Post Office is visible from my bedroom window. It holds very mixed emotions. Every day when I see it, I get very sad, not just for the pain and torture it holds but also the happy memories. I have seen people in there recently and they seem to be doing a refurbishment. To say be least, this hurts. I do not know what this will turn into. Example: rumour say it's a chip shop. I'm personally running the worry of it opening as a Post Office again. This will be so very, very painful to see every day as it should still be our shop and Post Office.

And there's just one more thing if I could just
say if that's okay.
Q. Yes.
A. I feel it is only right that I should receive 74
give this evidence to me. I know how difficult all these things must be and, as I say, I'm very grateful for you appearing here today.
A. Thank you, and thank you for listening to me. And thank you for David as well for being such a great person and happy birthday to him as well.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Right.
MS KENNEDY: Thank you. Chair, I think that completes the evidence for today.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right then. So we'll break off now and we'll resume again at 10.00 on Monday morning; is that right, Ms Kennedy?
MS KENNEDY: Yes. Thank you, sir.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right then. Goodbye everyone. ( 12.14 pm )
(Adjourned until 10.00 am on Monday, 21 February 2022)

|  | 19 [2] 1/24 22/5 | 54/13 | 52/16 53/1 53/17 | 59/1 |
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|  | 1996 [2] 54/15 60/16 | 50 years [2] 2/12 3/2 | 55/15 55/21 55/23 | afford [1] 36/24 |
| 1/18 2/19 2/21 | 1999 [2] 39/11 71/2 | 500 [2] 9/16 59/6 | 55/24 55/25 56/6 56/7 | afraid [1] 13/20 |
| 20/15 28/22 34/16 | 2 | 6 | 57/24 58/25 59/7 | after [15] 7/16 9 |
| 37/25 38/5 38/8 38/13 | 20 years [1] 39/14 |  |  | 35/15 38/5 |
| 39/2 | 20,000 [1] 66/3 | 6 January [3] <br> 17/20 29/11 | 62/22 63/9 63/25 | 35/15 38/5 40 |
| MR STEIN: [1] 39/4 | 20,000 [1] 66/3 | 17/20 29/11 | 65/10 66/23 66/25 | 42/10 45/3 47/6 58/13 |
| MS KENNEDY: [8] |  |  | 66/25 67/1 69/770/11 | 67/3 69/22 |
| 43/2 43/6 58/24 59/17 | 2004 | 62 [1] 51/12 | 70/12 72/7 72/24 73/1 | afternoon [1] 16/3 |
| 59/19 75/21 76/8 | $44 / 25$ | 62 [1] 51/12 | 73/12 | afterwards [1] 51/25 |
| 76/13 |  |  | absolutely [15] | again [20] 3/18 12/7 |
| SIR WYN WILLIAMS: | 2009 [6] 9/2 9/6 11/11 | 63 [1] 43/23 | 6/8 34/15 45/20 47/21 | 12/8 13/10 13/16 |
| [38] 1/3 1/6 1/15 20/5 | 13/11 $21 / 3$ 39/10 | 64 [1] 27/6 | 48/16 52/24 56/16 | 13/19 19/21 20/2 |
| 2/9 20/13 26/25 27/6 | 2010 [2] 25/2 40/16 | 65 [1] $27 / 7$ | 62/3 67/13 69/1 69/5 | 20/23 26/3 26/7 26/1 |
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|  | 2014 [2] 47/7 50/12 | 7 | accept [2] 12/19 54/9 | 67/18 70/24 73/9 |
| 28/19 34/7 34/12 37/4 | 2017 [3] 50/21 58/17 | 7,000 [1] 13/12 | pted [1] 5/10 | 74/19 76/11 |
| 37/19 38/4 38/7 38/9 38/17 43/1 57/21 58/3 | 68/24 | 70s [2] 32/25 37/16 |  |  |
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|  | 20s [1] 9/14 | 8 | accompanied [1] | ago [7] 2/12 3/2 21/1 |
|  | 21 February | $8 \mathrm{cms} \mathrm{[1]} \mathrm{67/17}$ | 20/3 | 55/15 57/22 |
|  | 76 | $8,5$ | 36/24 64/10 73/23 | agreed [1] 39/5 |
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|  | 60/2 |  | accounting [1] 16/14 | ahead [1] 66/21 |
|  | 22 January [1] 1/21 | 9 | accounts [1] 44/11 | Alan [1] 36/14 |
|  | 250,000 [1] | 9 o'clock [5] 16/2 | acting [1] 3/2 | alarm [3] 2/19 2/20 |
| 1,000 [6] 9/89/14 9/15 9/19 10/8 12/7 <br> 10 [2] 9/15 27/6 <br> 10.00 [4] 1/2 6/25 <br> 76/11 76/16 | 27 September 2017 | 30 | actual [1] 7/11 | alcohol [2] 40/23 |
|  | [1] 50/21 <br> 28,000 [1] 40/13 | 9,616.66 [1] 17/8 | actually [6] 5/13 6/5 | 54/22 |
|  | 3 | 99.9 per cent [1] $8 / 7$ | 69/14 | 67/13 |
|  | 3 o'clock [1] 21/18 | 999 [1] 3/23 | adamant [3] 7/6 | alive [1] 37/15 |
| 10.58 [1] 38/10 | $3,000[5] 11 / 811 / 11$ | A | add [3] 36/21 70/12 | all [68] 2/22 3/13 3/2 4/17 5/11 5/23 7/10 |
| 11 [2] $25 / 225 / 11$ $11.10[1] ~ 38 / 8$ | 50/25 59/7 63/5 | able [11] 16/18 36/24 | 73/1 | 7/21 9/17 9/18 11/16 |
| 11.12 [1] 38/12 | 32 years [3] 2/11 $2 / 15$ | 37/15 41/2 41/15 | address [1] 23/24 | 11/19 12/6 14/3 14/4 |
| 12 [1] 43/15 <br> 12 o'clock [1] 29/22 |  | 41/23 42/4 51/19 62/5 | adequate [1] 46/12 | 14/5 14/9 20/2 22/7 |
|  | 35,000/40,000 [1] | 67/18 75/3 | Adjourned [1] 76/16 | 22/9 23/1 24/7 26/3 |
| 12.14 pm [1] 76/15 |  | about [72] 2/5 2/21 | administer [1] 28/10 | 26/7 27/7 28/22 29/15 |
| 12.30 [1] 30/2 | 4 | 2/23 3/6 3/20 4/1 5/17 | admit [1] 28/11 | 29/19 29/20 30/3 |
| 13 years [1] 37/17 |  | 6/25 7/11 7/22 7/25 | admitted [1] 40/25 | 31/14 32/20 32/21 |
| 15 [1] 60/4 |  | 9/9 13/8 14/3 14/25 | adopting [1] 34/9 | 32/25 35/23 36/15 |
| 16 [2] 44/7 56/16 | 48 hours [1] 63/22 | 15/2 15/6 16/16 23/1 | adored [1] 62/3 | 36/21 37/3 37/7 37/8 |
|  | 48 hours [1] 63/22 | 24/6 26/22 27/9 28/2 | advice [2] 7/18 52/14 | 37/9 37/12 37/19 38/9 |
| 16 December [1] $14 / 10$ | 5 | 28/6 29/24 31/14 | advisers [1] 48/11 | 38/23 39/1 42/11 |
| ```17 [1] 60/14 18 [2] 6/10 22/5 18 February 2022 [1] 1/1``` | 5 January 2010 [1] | 31/18 32/16 33/9 36/7 | aerial [1] 71/4 | 42/18 42/18 47/14 |
|  | 40/16 | 36/19 43/22 45/18 | Affairs [1] 35/15 | 49/6 56/2 57/6 57/9 |
|  | 5,000 [1] 64/23 | 46/4 46/23 47/8 48/3 | affected [1] 72/11 | 57/13 58/19 58/20 |
|  | 50 milligrams [1] | 50/22 51/13 52/2 52/6 | affirmed [2] 43/4 | 59/10 59/13 59/14 |


| A | an |  | 53/1 53/17 58/25 |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  | 52/12 60/20 | /18 66/22 | 13/1 13/2 13/19 14/16 |
| 69/10 73/23 74/1 76/1 | an example [1] | apology [2] 56/23 |  |  |
| 76/10 76/14 | an honour [2] 36/13 | 73/17 | asked [10] 13/6 1 | 23/15 23/17 23/18 |
| alleged [17] |  | appeal [2] 19/20 | $17 / 1017 / 1317 / 16$ | 24/10 29/3 30 |
| 40/17 40/17 47/4 | an | 19/21 | 10 28/6 37/6 6 | 2 |
| 47/16 48/12 48/1 |  |  |  |  |
| 50/13 50/19 | an idea | appears [1] 1/12 | asking [5] | 64/4 64/7 64/11 64/24 |
| 50/23 51/11 52/2 | an invoi | appointment [4] | 33/11 43/21 72 | 23 70/1 70 |
| 62/19 62/20 65/5 |  |  |  | 75/2 75/4 75/13 |
| 65 | an unintended [1] |  | assistant [1] 6/12 | d [1] 2/6 |
| all |  |  | [1] |  |
| allow [1] 24/9 | Angela [3] | approximately [3] 8/2 | astronomical [1] | bad [5] 1/16 41/3 |
| allowed [3] 57/1 57/4 | 25/13 26/2 |  | atrocious [1] 63/19 | 46/25 61/25 68/6 |
| 63 |  | April [1] |  | bag [3] 9/13 9/21 |
|  | B | [22] | attend [2] 38/13 | $3]$ |
| almost [1] 40/4 | 26 | 15/19 | 41/ | 10/11 14/17 16/4 16/5 |
| Alongside [1] 5 | angry [1] | 20, | audit [12] 15/10 15 | 16/6 16/10 65/9 65 |
| already [4] 37/6 | another [9] $2 / 1510 / 8$ | 27/20 28/2 36/2 42 | 15/15 17/19 50/21 | /23 66/24 67/2 |
| 5/15 53/3 70/11 | 12/7 30/5 32/4 32/19 | 43/22 47/19 53/3 57/2 | 51/10 51/21 51 | balanced [2] 10/8 |
| also [20] 3/184/9 | 5 44/19 70/2 | 60/11 68/16 69/2 | 8/2 |  |
| 19/17 32/19 44 | answer [3] 13/23 37/8 | 7 | auditor [1] | balancing |
| 8 45/15 | 70/1 | area [4] 2/8 3 | auditors [7] 15/12 | 14/18 47/1 50/7 |
| 54/14 5 | an | 69/24 73/25 | 15/13 15/14 18/22 | 31 |
| 56/25 68/6 72/9 72 | antidepressants [2] | ar | 2 68/25 | 46/22 63/23 |
| 72/24 74/10 74/14 | 34 | ar | audits [1] 50/11 | bare [1] 5/20 |
|  | anxiety [2] 22/7 68/6 | 63/4 66/3 | August [1] 5018 | 2/9 |
| also --1 [1] 74/ | any [23] $3 / 313$ | arrived [3] 6/25 29/22 | August 2015 [1] | ically [3] 67/12 |
| alternative [1] 42/23 | 19/22 20/15 22/15 |  |  | 73/2 73/8 |
| always [6] 5/1 5/2 | 24/13 28/2 28/12 30/2 | as [71] 1/4 1/11 3/4 | Australia | Bates [1] 36/14 |
| 6 23/18 55/ | 37/3 37/17 51/20 52/6 | 3/11 3/11 4/8 5/8 6/12 | authorised [1] 57/5 | battle [1] 71/24 |
|  | 53/3 54/18 57/18 58/9 | 7/10 10/9 11/1 11/21 | aware [3] 12/4 12/6 | be [54] 3/1 3/5 4/13 |
| am [8] 1/2 28/ | 68/19 71/17 74/5 74/6 | 10 18/24 | 22/20 | 8/3 10/14 11/6 16 |
| 38/10 | 75/22 75/24 | 18/24 19/2 19/2 20/19 | away [28] 2/13 3/4 | 21/15 23/11 24/10 |
| 75/25 76/16 | anybody [4] 17/13 | 27/10 27/16 27/21 | 3/11 10/15 15/24 | 28/3 35/2 |
|  | 18/12 68/17 75/18 | 28/8 29/8 32/18 33 | 21/21 26/20 26/2 | 36/17 36/24 37/15 |
|  | anymore [4] 15/7 | 34/25 35/9 37/16 | 29/8 29/12 30/4 30/ | /15 38/1 38/20 |
|  | 32/23 54/8 56/21 | 37/21 37/21 38/ | 30/23 31/8 31/10 | 41/6 41/12 42/4 43/13 |
| 21/5 21/6 26/12 63/7 | anyone [1] 53/12 | 39/11 39/19 39/25 | 31/11 31/15 31/19 | 7/8 50/2 51/19 |
| 63/10 73/7 75/1 75/12 | anything [27] $2 / 17$ | 40/7 40/9 40/16 41 | 41/4 42/8 45/2 51/23 | 7/2 57/6 57/7 5 |
|  | 12/15 18/21 19/4 19/4 | 44/7 44/7 44/11 44/20 | 55/1 55/14 56/17 | /9 58/15 60/2 |
| an accounts [1] | 19/23 22/25 28/16 | 45/8 45/14 45/19 | 65/13 65/19 75/15 | 62/5 62/6 67/18 69/ |
|  | 29/24 32/13 34/18 | 47/21 47/21 49/6 49 | awful [12] 5/22 10/22 | 12 73/18 73 |
|  | 35/11 36/10 36/20 | 51/16 53/4 55/20 | 10/23 35/4 47/15 49/7 | 仿/23 74/2 74/3 74/4 |
| $2067 / 13$ | 49/12 54/7 54/8 55 | 56/13 57/5 59/1 | 52/24 52/24 64/ | 8 74/15 74/1 |
|  | 55/12 55/12 57/14 | 61/16 63/13 63/16 | 66/14 72/3 73/4 | 74/20 74/21 75/3 76/2 |
| $\mathrm{t}[1]$ |  |  | B |  |
| an apology [1] 56/23 an audit [1] 15/12 an awful [1] 5/22 an elongated [1] 7/4 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { anyway [4] 13/8 28/1 } \\ & 31 / 1651 / 19 \\ & \text { anywhere [2] 33/24 } \\ & 46 / 11 \end{aligned}$ | 74/19 74/20 76/2 76/5 76/6 <br> ask [14] 1/24 7/22 <br> 26/22 37/6 43/7 46/4 | Bacardi [2] 67/6 67/25 <br> back [42] 2/14 7/6 <br> 8/20 8/22 9/24 11/16 | became [3] 5/12 26/17 61/21 <br> because [69] 2/14 |

(21) all... - because

| B |  | borrow [2] 53/11 |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 5/17 7/57/7 8/9 10/3 | behalf [4] 1/12 42/25 43/7 59/20 | borrowed 53/13 66/7 | 50/22 52/22 55 | cans [1] 67/25 capacity [2] 24/12 |
| 10/23 11/2 11/5 13/9 | being [19] | b3/13 66/7 both [4] 19/23 37/10 | $\left.\begin{array}{\|l\|} 50 / 2252 / 22 \\ 57 / 24 \\ 57 / 25 \\ 58 / 1 \\ 58 / 2 \end{array} \right\rvert\,$ | capacity [2] 24/12 $24 / 22$ |
| $19 /$ | 32/22 33/19 36/2 40/7 | 40/18 49/1 | 63/1 | 5] |
| 22/7 23/19 24/4 25/9 |  |  | C |  |
| 26/8 27/19 28/9 28/16 | 62/11 62/12 67 | bottle [2] | ca | reer [2] 4/8 |
| 32/2 | 68/3 70/4 76/5 | bottom [1] 1/25 |  | arol [1] 43/9 |
|  | belief [3] 2/3 43/ | bought [2] 45/22 46/1 |  | carpet [1] 74/9 |
| 51/1 | 60/8 | brain [1] 28/13 | 12/9 12/12 15/1 | carried [4] 20/ |
| 52/5 52/19 53/21 54/6 | believed [2] | branch [5] 39/10 |  | 32/11 62/ |
| 56/8 56/18 57/10 | $10 / 24$ <br> bell [1] 28/12 | $\text { 39/23 40/2 40/8 } 70$ <br> brave [1] 37/12 | called [10] 10/11 11/5 11/14 12/11 12/16 | carries [1] 71/19 carry [6] 8/5 32/10 |
| 60/21 61/4 62/11 63/8 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { bell [1] 28/12 } \\ & \text { best [4] } 2 / 32 \end{aligned}$ | breaches [1] 40/18 | $22 / 424 / 1741 / 465 / 11$ |  |
|  | 43/19 60/8 | break [5] 17/6 38/2 | 73/6 | se [5] 35/2 36/2 |
| 65/21 66/5 66/16 | better [2] 34/13 42/23 | 38/11 73/876/10 | calls [2] $3 / 233 / 2$ | 36/16 47/2 66/9 |
| 66/18 66/20 67/9 | between [3] | breakdown [1] 40/23 |  | 20] 9/1 |
| 70/5 70/25 | 58/17 | breed [1] 32/19 | Cambridge [3] | 10/2 11/3 |
| 71/16 71/20 72/4 | big [6] 16/4 35/16 | Bridgend [1] 3/12 | 20/1 | /23 14/24 14/2 |
| $73 / 12$ | 53/7 65/9 65/11 66/15 | brilliant [2] 61/24 | desh | 22 21/7 21/10 |
| become [5] 4/23 4/25 | bigger [1] 47/24 | 62 | 2/9 3/22 | /12 21/15 |
| 5/5 5/9 45/6 | bills [1] | bring [3] | [19] 14/19 | 29/19 63 |
|  | birthday | 75 |  | 63/12 64/6 |
| bed [2] 53/22 68/3 | bit [19] 3/6 3/20 9/12 | Br | 30/6 30/6 30 | cashing [1] 62/2 |
| Bedfordshire [1] 6/25 | 13 | br |  | 1] |
| bedroom [1] 74/11 | 15/23 19/3 19/5 | broadly [1] 61/9 | 31/18 50/24 62/25 | ed [2] 35/5 4 |
| been [44] 2/14 3/7 | 19/8 19/12 22/6 22/7 | broke [3] $17 / 8$ |  | causing [1] 48/21 |
| 4/12 5/1 5/2 5/2 6/19 | 24/4 35/10 46/9 48/3 | 6 |  | ution [11] 27/1 |
| 8/2 8/12 12 | 59 | broken [1] | 1 | 7/15 27/16 27/20 |
| 14 | bit | br |  | 27/25 28/4 28/72810 |
| $17 / 1618 / 5$ 19/14 | blabbering [1] 72/15 | brought [5] |  | 8/ |
| 19/19 24/6 24/7 | BLAKE [6] 1/8 1/11 | 35/21 36/22 36/2 | 24/4 31/6 31/7 34/7 | t [1] 8/7 |
| 35/12 36/1 36/5 36/12 | 26/25 34/8 37/4 38/7 | 75/7 |  | centrally [1] 50/6 |
| 36/15 37/16 41/11 | blame [2] 36/22 74/7 | building |  | centre [4] 3/16 3/17 |
| 41/15 41/23 42/12 | blamed [1] | buildings [1] | 46/8 46/13 48/2 48/19 | 19 12/9 |
| 44/13 54/14 55/18 | bless [1] |  |  | cerebral [1] 75/8 |
| $956 / 457 / 458$ | block [2] 11/23 6 | bullying [1] 26/ |  | in [5] 8/6 14 |
| 61/15 64/3 64/5 64/5 | blocked [1] 25/9 |  |  | 8 23/17 24/1 |
| 70 | blood [1] 34/25 | s[4] 9/14 9/14 |  | Certainly [1] 38/4 |
| before [18] 3/14 4/5 | blow [1] 41/5 | 9/15 9/16 |  | ra [2] $72 / 8$ |
| 4/12 13/23 18/1 18/9 | blue [1] 16/4 | business |  | Chair [16] 1/12 |
| 24 | bluffed [1] 2 | 7 32/10 32/1 |  | 37/3 39/4 43/7 44/5 |
| 29/16 32/15 37/11 | boards [1] 3 | 32/16 32/19 56/19 | 22/23 24/17 $27 / 23$ | 55/6 57/15 57 |
| 38/17 39/4 60/18 | body [1] 19/25 | but [90] | 31/24 31/2 | /20 62/22 67/1 |
| 71/25 75/19 | Bogerd [4] 23/22 | button [2] 13/2 | 31/25 32/6 54/8 55/12 | /17 75/21 76/8 |
| beforehand [3] 21/4 24/14 25/19 beg [1] 15/11 began [1] 40/11 | 24/19 25/13 26/2 <br> book [2] 51/2 69/4 <br> booklet [2] 8/3 8/12 <br> books [1] 7/3 <br> booster [2] 71/4 71/4 | buy [1] 26/10 <br> by [33] $1 / 82 / 54 / 19$ <br> 7/23 11/1 11/5 12/20 <br> 13/8 13/11 14/10 <br> 27/13 29/21 30/2 | 63/6 64/24 70/15 73/6 <br> cancer [2] 25/25 <br> 48/23 <br> candidate [4] 4/14 <br> 4/15 4/23 33/19 | challenge [3] 42/16 51/20 51/22 changed [1] 71/2 chap [5] 20/17 24/23 29/17 30/15 31/13 |

(22) because... - chap

|  |  |  |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| charge [2] 44/12 44/14 <br> charity [1] 71/6 check [3] 12/1 54/7 54/9 <br> cheque [3] 48/2 48/6 |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | coming [11] 13/7 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { 55/5 59/3 59/22 63/23 } \\ & 66 / 1066 / 22 \text { 69/20 } \end{aligned}$ | customers [1] 55/18 <br> cut [2] 31/17 35/18 |  |
|  |  |  |  | $\begin{aligned} & \text { declare [2] } 16 / 23 \\ & 16 / 25 \end{aligned}$ |
|  | $\begin{aligned} & 29 / 1630 / 1430 / 16 \\ & 30 / 1937 / 851 / 965 / 5 \end{aligned}$ | $71 / 11$ 74/22 couldn't [24] 101 |  | $\begin{aligned} & \text { deducted [1] 50/4 } \\ & \text { deep [1] 40/1 } \end{aligned}$ |
|  | 68/13 68/23 71/16 | $11 / 2512 / 113 / 23$ |  | leep [1] 40/1 |
|  |  | 17/13 17/14 21/1 |  | delvery [2] 23/1 |
|  | comments [1] 72/7 commit [1] 34/21 | 23/2 25/8 25/14 25/15 |  |  |
|  | commit [1] 34/21 <br> Committee [1] 18/18 |  | Dad's [1] 42/10 daily [1] 42/18 damaged [1] 72/2 dark [2] 34/20 34/20 |  |
|  |  | $\begin{aligned} & 26 / 6 \text { 26/14 29/12 } \\ & 30 / 21 \text { 31/11 32/2 48/6 } \end{aligned}$ |  | demanding [2] 23/13 |
|  |  | 17 49/18 51/4 |  | $\begin{aligned} & 26 / 18 \\ & \text { den [4] } 23 / 22 \text { 24/19 } \end{aligned}$ |
|  | companies [1] 53/7 | 12 | date [2] 21/2 30/5 <br> dated [4] 1/21 40/16 |  |
|  | compare [1] 2/18 compensated [2] | council [1] 47/13 <br> counselling [2] 35/1 |  | 25/13 26/2 depression [3] 40/24 |
|  |  | counselling [2] 35/1 | 43/13 60/2 <br> daughter [9] $41 / 17$ |  |
|  | compensated [2] 41/7 57/7 | $35 / 3$ |  | 41/2 54/16 |
| Christm | 41/12 75/1 75/14 complete [1] 37/21 | counted [5] 16/22 <br> 16/22 26/13 69/5 69/6 | 55/23 57/23 60/16 | describe [7] 2/16 8/4 |
|  |  |  | 60/22 68/6 | 27/16 59/3 66/23 |
|  | complete [1] $37 / 21$ completed [2] 34/14 | 16/22 26/13 69/5 69/6 counter [5] 6/12 9/11 | daughter's [2] 41/22 |  |
|  | 51/10completely [2] $5 / 11$ |  |  | 66/24 70/15 described [2] 8/14 |
|  |  | country [2] 1/16 57/4 <br> County [4] 31/20 | daughters [2] 75/6 75/10 | 8/15 |
|  | completely [2] 5/11 $5 / 18$ |  |  |  |
|  | completes [1] 76/8 |  | $\mathrm{Da}$ | 40/6 |
|  | computer [3] 20/2424/25 54/9 | couple [4] 12/18 | day [23] 5/5 6/24 |  |
|  |  | 43/21 55/18 62/19 course [12] $2 / 73 / 2$ | $\begin{aligned} & 10 / 1014 / 214 / 155 \\ & 14 / 1717 / 2519 / 1 \end{aligned}$ | 4/2 |
|  | $24 / 2554 / 9$ <br> concentrating [1] |  | $\begin{aligned} & 14 / 1717 / 2519 / 18 \\ & 21 / 821 / 930 / 1931 / 2 \end{aligned}$ | despite [1] 40/2 destroy [1] 73/23 |
|  | 49/1 | $\text { 10/18 } 13 / 2313 / 24$ |  |  |
| clear [3] 20/14 58/4 | concerned [2] 22/6 | 16 | 31/14 42/16 57/12 | destroyed [1] 57/13 <br> detail [3] 3/20 25/3 |
|  |  | 33/15 56/7 | 66/23 66/25 67/16 68/8 69/17 70/2 74/12 <br> $74 / 20$ |  |
|  | conclusion [1] 56/12 <br> confirm [3] 2/2 43/8 |  |  |  |
|  |  | court [10] 19/2 | daylight [1] 21/20 | details [1] $28 / 2$ devastated [1] 65/16 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | confusion [1] 5911 | 2/2 32/7 35 | days [3] 23/16 39/21 | gnosed [1] 48/22 |
|  | constant [1] 71/24 | 36/1 36/16 | $67 / 2$ | diazepam [1] 67/14 |
|  | contact [1] 24/7 <br> contacted [1] 24/8 | cover [4] 53/10 59/8 62/23 71/22 |  | Dickinson [1] 31/23 did [100] |
|  |  |  | deal [3] 42/18 54/18 |  |
|  | continue [1] 51/19 | crafts [1] 6/7 $74 / 5$  <br> cras   |  |  |
|  |  | crash [1] 49/16 crashed [1] 49/20 | dearly [1] 42/15 | 18 8/22 10/4 13/5 |
|  | contract [1] 40/15 converted [1] 29/3 |  |  | 15/15 15/24 |
|  | convict [1] 36/5 |  |  |  |
|  | convicted [1] 57/6 convinced [1] 53/20 |  |  | $2120 / 14221$ |
| coffee [3] |  |  |  | 22/14 22/16 23/16 |
|  | convoluted [1] 7/8 | crime [1] 27/21 |  |  |
|  |  |  | 16/24 35/2 | 9/15 31/19 32/12 |
|  | copy [2] 43/10 |  |  | 6 33/20 35/1 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| college [2] 6/11 19/18 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { cost [2] } 5 / 2229 / 5 \\ & \text { costs [1] } 53 / 3 \end{aligned}$ could [26] 8/2 8/12 | cross [2] 33/16 33/17 <br> Crown [1] 18/4 crushed [1] 67/17 |  |  |
| come [18] 14/22 |  |  | 67/15 declaration [6] 14/23 | 55/8 $56 / 758 / 858 / 11$ |



| F | 71/20 73/14 73/17 | 68/7 71/8 72/10 75/15 | 66/17 |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| finish [1] 47/15 finished [2] 22/2 |  |  | grandsons [1] 75/6 |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | 7/23 8/11 11/9 11/18 | 38/20 75 |  |
| fire [2] 2/19 2/20 | Frost [2] | 13 | 76/2 | 55/20 57/4 57/17 |
| first [13] 1/4 3/2 8/25 | full [5] 1/9 41/12 43/8 | 15/20 15/21 16/7 | great [4] 61/4 | /2 72 |
| 16/1 21/22 26/23 | 21450 | 16 |  |  |
|  | fully [2] | 23/11 23/18 24/1 | Green [5] |  |
| $\begin{aligned} & \text { 29/10 38/3 44/8 46/7 } \\ & 50 / 1259 / 1271 / 2 \end{aligned}$ | fundamentally [ | 26/20 26/22 28/15 | 46/16 60/13 61/ | 34/9 38/21 |
| five [2] 40/2 65/11 |  | 29/2 36/23 43/2 43/21 | gr | hate [1] 30/8 |
| $\text { fix [1] } 10 / 15$ | Fu | 46/4 46/9 48/24 48/25 | groceries [1] 6/2 |  |
| flawed [1] 40/7 |  | 49/6 53/1 53/17 54/5 |  |  |
| flaws [1] 69/11 | further [5] | 56/19 57/2 57/17 5 | grow [1] 43/24 |  |
| floor [1] 5/20 | 39/22 58/9 58/1 | 58/13 59/12 60/10 | guess [2] 34/12 | 66/22 72/5 73/3 73 |
|  |  | 62/4 62/18 64/17 67/4 | 20/1 20/23 |  |
| following [6] 10/6 <br> 11/7 12/7 14/1 29/14 | future [1] 56/18 | 69/9 70 |  | 4/8 |
| /24 | G |  | [ | 45/23 75/18 |
| footings [1] $5 / 21$ <br> forever [1] 62/9 |  |  | [3] 39/3 40 | 10] |
|  | ga |  | Gus |  |
| forgot [1] 72/14 forgotten [1] 24/21 |  |  |  | 's [4] 3/9 |
|  | general [1] 4/16 | 1/15 6/19 |  | 73/6 75/7 |
| form [2] 42/6 68/20 |  | 33/5 47/1 49/2 |  | d [2] 9/25 6 |
| fortnight [1] 8/13 <br> found [3] 16/15 19/15 |  | 61/21 65/25 67/22 |  | headquarters [1] |
| $52 / 3$ <br> four [2] 65/10 67/25 |  | Goodbye [1] 76/ | 11/2 11/4 18/20 19/23 | 3/22 |
|  | get [27] | Google [1] 32/9 | 23/14 23/15 25/15 | health [6] 38/14 40/25 |
| four [2] 65/10 67/25 | 17 | gossip [2] 33/6 | 32/10 35/4 | 53/18 53/19 54/ |
| Fraser [1] 36/6 | 29/17 30/21 31/7 | gossipmongers [1] |  | 68/8 |
| Freeths [2] 52 | 38/21 46/11 48 |  |  | healthy [1] 36/11 |
| freezer [1] 9/22 | 8 49/18 5 |  | handbags [1] | [3] 17/1 38 |
| Friday [2] 1/1 14/14 | 55 | 11/1 |  |  |
| friendly [3] $2 / 253 / 1$ | 63/23 66/ | 12/13 12/25 $13 / 5$ | ders [1] | 2/25 |
|  | 66/10 67/6 69/2 | 14/20 14/21 15/6 | hands [1] 46/10 | 17 52/6 |
| friends [5] 33/5 42/14 | 71/18 74/13 75/ | 18/10 19/5 20/1 | [1] 6/ | art [2] 39/20 7 |
| $\begin{aligned} & 57 / 960 / 2561 / 21 \\ & \text { from [61] } 2 / 112 / 13 \end{aligned}$ | getting [2] 20/9 | 21/13 21/16 25/15 | happen [3] 36/2 | Id [2] 57/2 73/23 |
|  | girls [1] 66/17 | 31/3 31/21 3 | 37/15 49/16 | llo [1] 59/19 |
| $\begin{array}{\|l\|} \hline 3 / 46 / 56 / 1111 / 3 \\ 12 / 1313 / 715 / 8 ~ 19 / 7 \end{array}$ | give [7] 3/20 10 | 36/16 41/3 43/10 | pened [25] | 17] 10/9 1 |
|  | 38/19 | 2/25 | 5/7 10/6 10/ | 14/16 28/3 35/1 |
| 19/25 22/7 29/17 | 6 76/1 | 52/25 53/8 54/7 54 | 13/18 18/7 23/2 | 1/25 44/21 47/19 |
|  | given [7] 7/18 | 58/3 59/24 60/21 61/5 | 25/15 26/4 29/1 29 | 47/23 54/10 54/16 |
| 29/20 30/12 31/21 | 35/12 36/13 36 | 61/25 64/8 64/19 67/3 | 32/20 32/25 33/ | /19 65/23 74 |
| 34/8 35/3 35/20 36/14 | 38/14 64/6 | 67/14 68/6 69/11 | 36/10 41/24 44/2 | 475 |
| 38/1 38/5 39/10 39/10 | giv | 69/14 71/17 72/5 73/6 | 0 68/4 68 | ful [3] 8/16 52 |
| $\text { 39/11 40/20 } 41$ | go |  |  | 64/15 |
| 41/16 41/24 47/15 | 14/12 1 | government [1] 3/18 | ning [3] 14 | 20 |
| 50/1 50/5 52/8 52/12 | 202 |  | 18/12 67/10 | Ipline [16] 7/22 |
| 53/12 53/12 53/13 | 31/10 33/1 | d [3] 60/2 |  | 11/1 11/5 |
| 56/14 56/15 | 35/14 46 |  | [ 616 | 12/4 13/16 40/4 40 |
| 56/19 57/20 60/20 | 2/9 52/11 5 |  | 42 | 48/7 48/11 63 |
| $\begin{aligned} & \text { 62/15 66/3 66/3 67/21 } \\ & 68 / 370 / 1871 / 171 / 19 \end{aligned}$ | 53/22 55/8 55/9 5 | 3/10 37/1 42/14 | ed [1] 73 | 64 |
|  | 55 | grandson [5] 48/22 |  | Henwick [3] 44/17 |
|  | 68/ | 49/6 55/24 57/23 | [22] 3/8 11/17 | 44/23 46/17 |

(25) finish - Henwick

| H | ho | 69/14 69/19 | I close [1] 21/18 | 9/11 10/2 10/2 15/24 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| her | hoping [1] 69/19 | hung [1] 11/20 | complete [10 1113 |  |
| 14/3 14/4 16/5 16/12 | Horizon [30] 6/22 | hurts [1] 74/16 | I could [6] 10/3 11/3 | 0 |
| 16/21 18/25 22/4 | 7/13 8/5 8/21 8/23 | husband [25] 3 | 19/20 66/22 71/1 | 24/7 24/24 26/3 26/19 |
| 25/14 26/16 36/18 | 0/2 11/18 11/24 14/5 | 6/20 11/2 11/21 14/ | 74/22 | 29/7 33/7 33/1 |
| 38/19 38/20 53/15 | 14/8 15/1 16/3 16/16 | 18/11 19/9 19/16 20/4 | I couldn't [10] | $134 / 22$ 34/23 |
| 61/19 68/10 | 16/18 16/20 21/23 | 20/21 30/8 33/1 34/23 | 12/1 17/14 21/18 25/8 | 34/25 35/1 46/17 |
| here [10] 9/11 1 | 24/25 25/10 25/15 | 45/2 60/16 60/25 61/2 | 25/15 26/6 26/14 | 51/18 52/12 56/20 |
| 30/1 30/1 42/23 56/25 | 26/4 26/14 36/7 39/22 | 66/5 67/15 70/14 | 29/12 32/2 | 68/3 |
| 57/11 66/8 71/12 76/3 | 40/8 46/18 47/5 47/16 | 71/21 71/22 75/5 75/7 | I counted [1] 69/5 | I hadn't [11] 10/19 |
| Hermes [1] 56/22 | 65/1 65/2 7 | 75/9 | I decided [1] 30/24 | 11/2 11/4 18/20 19/23 |
| Hi [1] 59/21 | horrendous [4] 63 | husband's [2] 50/2 | I definitely [1] 50/1 | 4 23/15 |
| hide [2] 42/8 | 64/21 70/19 75/13 | 73/5 | I did [10] 6/1 13/3 | 10 35/4 35/4 |
| [2] 34/25 66/5 |  | I |  | 12 |
| lighted [1] 39/15 |  |  | 46/20 | $12 / 20$ |
| 34] | ho | I absolutely [3] 45/20 | I didn't [21] 4/17 6/2 | 35/18 55/18 60/1 |
| 11 10/22 10/24 |  | 56/16 62/3 | 18/20 19/2 | 7119 69/14 74114 |
| 11/2 16/24 21/7 22/24 | 46/22 | lactually [1] 48/9 | 20/14 22/14 23 | 75/6 |
| 24/9 24/10 28/5 |  | I allow [1] 24/9 | 26/20 28/16 | I haven |
| 28/14 | hours [8] 7/11 7/1 | I also [4] 3/18 32/19 | 33/20 35/11 53/21 | /17 10/18 15/6 |
|  | 9/25 30/1 54/5 54/5 | 54/14 75/5 | 54/4 55/8 56/7 58 | 73/3 73/ |
|  | 54 | 1 always [2] | 68/1 70/8 72/10 | I heard [1] 33/8 |
|  | hours/two [1] 7/11 | 23 | I do [6] 1/20 13/24 | [1] 1/15 |
| 0 69/18 70/1 70 | house [10] 18/6 24/18 | am [3] | 17/12 22/12 74/16 | gnored [3] 31/25 |
| 73/7 76/6 | 30/9 35/19 46/22 55/7 | 75/25 | 75/24 | 2/3 32/7 |
| Self [1] | 55/8 55/9 5 | 1 | 1 | d |
| his [33] 24 | houses [2] 24/16 | I ask [2] 43/7 59/20 | 19/12 24/13 25/17 | voiced [1] 30/25 |
| 38/13 38/15 | 5/16 | I balanced [2] 10/8 | 25/18 37/17 48/10 | 1/5 |
| 39/14 39/15 | Housing |  | 54/24 55 | 11/20 1 |
| 39/24 40/18 41/1 41/1 | how [57] 2/10 4/25 | \| basically [1] 73/8 | 55/11 56/5 56/21 | 36/22 53/22 65/16 |
| 41/2 41/3 41/16 41/17 | 5/20 7/6 7/8 7/15 7/25 | I beg [1] 15/11 | 57/16 62/9 65/2 72 | /17 71/9 72/2 |
| 41/18 41/18 41/21 | 8/5 10/20 11/25 12/1 | I believed [1] 10/2 | 75/23 | 72/24 |
| 41/22 42/1 42/5 42/9 | 12/22 14/22 16/5 | I blamed [1] 49/1 | I done [1] 65/18 | I kept [1] |
|  | 20/22 21/14 22/5 | I borrowed [2] 53/9 | I drive [1] 30/8 | [1] 48/25 |
| 7 42/19 42/25 | 25/10 33/3 33/9 34/21 |  | I emailed [1] 24/9 | ew [3] 51/18 |
| 481256011369120 | 36/11 37/9 37/11 | I broke [2] 17/8 67/17 | I even [1] 34/21 | 20 65/21 |
|  | 37/20 43/22 44/1 44/5 | I called [1] 10/11 | 1 expected [1] | ow [3] 18/24 |
|  | 45/18 45/25 46/12 | I came [3] 22/2 28/1 | I explained [1] 12/24 |  |
| hold [1] | 46/23 48/9 49/1 |  | Ifeel [5] 34/2 73/11 | [ |
| holds [2] 74/12 | 49/23 51/16 52/22 |  | 73/18 73/21 74/25 | [1] 35/21 |
| $[17]$ | 54/23 55/16 56/2 57 | 37/11 38/19 | I first [2] 3/2 46/7 | [1] $2 / 9$ |
| 5/8 5/13 5/14 5/19 | 59/4 60/11 60/23 62/7 | 39/5 71/18 | If forgot [1] 72/14 | looked [1] 24/25 |
| 7/10 10/10 10/10 | 63/24 64/15 64/19 |  | I found [1] 16/15 | st [1] 32/20 |
| 26/20 26/21 28/24 | 65/1 65/2 66/2 67/23 | I can't [20] $7 / 1514$ | I genuinely [1] 15 | I loved [9] 22/10 |
| 517 52/13 68/1 | 68/24 71/14 72/2 | 14/13 14/20 17/23 | I go [1] 56/12 | /20 61/6 61/6 6 |
| est [3] 5 | 75 |  | I gone [1] 66/21 | 62/2 62/11 6 |
| 74/3 | Howe [2] 25/22 41/18 | 22/5 22/21 22/23 | I got [7] 11/19 19/5 | ade [2] 21/8 22/8 |
|  |  | 24/17 31/24 31/24 | 30/12 31/3 31/21 | [1] 21/17 |
| $36 / 1336 / 18$ |  |  | 60/21 67/14 | [1] $57 / 21$ |
| Hooray [1] 23/9 | huge [1] 49/20 <br> hugged [3] 69/13 | $\begin{array}{\|l\|} 64 / 2473 / 6 \\ \text { I cannot [1] 21/14 } \end{array}$ | I guess [1] 34/12 <br> I had [32] 4/12 8/18 | I mean [8] 5/17 15/18 45/20 55/1 66/16 |

(26) her - I mean

|  | 29 | Ius | 75/18 | 28/22 33/3 41/20 53/2 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 3] 68 | 30/16 31/5 31/6 31/8 | 44/21 55/7 61/4 66/13 | I'll [4] 12/25 |  |
|  | 31/8 52/4 63/9 63/12 | I walked [2] 19/9 | 29/19 65/12 | /26/11 6 |
| I mentioned [2] 25/13 | 63/2 |  | 111 | 70/13 73/1 |
| 26/4 | 65/12 65/12 69/3 69/3 | I want [15] 20/25 | 7/22 7/23 10/13 13/20 | impacted [2] 55/16 |
| Imet [2] 18/1 61/19 | 69/10 69/11 70/3 | 23/21 24/11 24/11 | 15/19 20/9 23/10 | 56/2 |
| Imight [1] 67/18 | I say[5] 2/17 5/2 8/9 | 35/21 35/22 35/23 | 23/1 | ortant [3] |
| Imissed [1] 61/5 | 37/16 76/2 | 35/24 36/23 36/24 | 28/4 28/13 30/2 30 | 20 39/7 |
| I moved [3] 2/11 2/12 | m [1] 20/19 | 36/25 37/14 57/9 75 | 31/6 31/12 31/16 | pression [1] |
| 60/17 | I should [4] 14/21 | 75/9 | 32/ | rove [2] 42/1 42 |
| I must [1] | 16/20 37/23 74/25 | I wanted [3] 6/15 52 | 36/18 36/18 37/ | adequate [1] 39/2 |
| I never [2] | I shouted [1] 13/20 | 60/22 | 43/21 43/23 44/18 | inclination [1] 21/22 |
| 34/17 | I showed [2] 25/13 | I was [45 | 46/4 49/1 49/2 53 | luding [1] 66/4 |
| Inow [1] 41/22 | 65/15 | 3/22 3/23 3/23 4/3 | 53/9 53/17 53/20 | correctly [1] 48/2 |
| I only [2] 21/13 | I sold [3] 6/4 29/6 | 4/10 4/18 4/20 4/22 | 53/20 54/13 55/1 | credible [1] 53/8 |
| I owe [1] 75/2 | 29/6 | 5/10 6/23 8/20 9 | 55/22 56/20 57/1 | dividuals [1] 74/4 |
| I paid [1] 71/7 | I spoke | 14/16 14/18 15/17 | 60/10 60/12 62/ | flate [1] 51/18 |
| 1 phoned [2] 6 | I start [1] 56/12 | 17 | 63/13 63/14 69/3 | mation [1] |
| 64/2 | I started [3] 44/7 | 20/23 22/6 29/10 31 | 70/10 74/18 75/21 | ed [1] 30/22 |
| I presume [1] | 44/11 54/12 | $32 / 2$ | 76/2 | ally [1] 50/22 |
| I put [4] 5/9 10/1 11/4 | I stayed [1] 68/2 | 2 44/12 52/ | I've [20 | [2] $41 / 2342$ |
| 12/22 | I stepped [1] 33/20 | 54/15 60/14 6 | 12 | ocent [2] 34/2 |
| 1 | I still [2] 55/8 71/15 | 61/25 64/1 65/16 | 14/21 20/13 2 | 36/17 |
| 13/9 22/21 22/24 | I stood [1] | 66/13 66/16 67/21 | 37/6 37/19 5 | input [1] |
| 30/15 | I suppose [2] 2/24 | 70/7 70/7 71 | 53/5 54/14 | inputted [2] |
| I realised [1] 29/2 | 55/21 | 72/20 | 56/13 56/25 58/3 | Inquiry [3] 23/23 |
| I really [5] 24/22 | I taken | I wasn't [3] 12/6 14/9 | 63 | 41/10 41/25 |
| 37/18 53/5 56/16 | Ithen [3] 11/2 11/8 | 26 | I've forgotten | installed [3] |
| 57/10 | 44/17 | I went [14] 6/24 11/3 | 24/21 | /2 |
| SO | I think [42] | 14/15 14/22 15 | idea [3] | antly [2] |
|  | 6/23 11/11 13/11 | 24 18/1 24/1 | 65/8 |  |
| I received [2] 35 | 13 | 52 | if [50] 1/24 6/15 9/4 | instead [2] 9/20 |
| 35/10 | 22/1 24/22 31/17 | 53/21 55/7 71/5 | /12 10 | tion |
| I refunded [2] 6 | 37/19 38/17 43/6 | I will [3] 10/14 12/12 | 10/18 12/14 13/24 | instructions [1] 8/7 |
| 63/12 | 43/13 44/15 44/18 | 75/3 | 15/4 17/6 17/10 17/13 | intend [1] 45/25 |
| Irefuse [1] 15/12 | 44/18 44/25 45/15 | I woke [1] 68/3 | 22/10 23/14 23/15 | intended [1] 46/2 |
| I regret [1] 66/18 | 46/22 47/10 49/4 50/2 | I would [10] 17/10 | 23/16 26/19 27/2 28/1 | intentions [1] 58/18 |
| I remarried [1] 2/14 | 50/11 51/12 54/2 55/3 | 30/24 34/13 56/5 57/7 | 28/2 28/10 30/1 34/ | interest [6] 32/21 |
| emember [3] 27/2 | 59/7 61/7 62/10 62/19 | 57/11 62/10 68/1 | 38/20 38/20 38/24 | 53/7 59/4 59/7 66/4 |
|  | 63/5 65/1 66/6 66/25 | 73/17 74/10 | 41/15 46/8 46/12 | 66/5 |
| 1 retired [1] | 68/9 70/10 71/12 | I wouldn't [2] 24/2 | 49/12 50/6 51/8 51/20 | interested [2] 12/3 |
| I reversed [1] 48/4 | 71/25 75/18 76/8 | 28/18 | 55/1 55/7 56/12 | 55/11 |
| I said [51] 10/9 10/12 | I thought [9] 9/19 | I wrote [2] 73/2 73/15 | 57/21 61/2 62/9 66/22 | interrupt [1] 20/5 |
| 11/16 12/18 13/22 | 12/10 13/6 15/3 15/5 | I'd [31] 9/20 13/8 | 70/11 71/23 72/25 | ting [1] |
| 14/4 14/22 | 16/11 19/11 25/8 4 | 15/23 17/8 19/19 23 | 74/5 74/22 7 | [1] 38/2 |
|  | I told [2] 10/11 18/7 | 24/13 25/24 25/25 | 75/18 75/22 | interview [15] 5/10 |
| 25 17/2 17/12 21/7 | I took [2] 16/12 31/20 | 25/25 27/1 28/3 30/22 | ignored [4] 31/25 | 118/3 18/8 18/9 |
| 21/8 21/12 21/17 22/9 | Itried [1] 6/6 | 33/18 37/14 38/19 | 32/3 32/7 72/21 | 18/11 18/19 18/22 |
| 24 | I turned [2] 66/20 |  | 42/5 | 19/20 20/3 21/24 22 |
| 25/14 26/6 26/7 28/5 |  | 52/15 52/19 56/15 | diately | 52/12 58/13 72/21 |
| 28/14 28/14 29/20 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { I understand [1] } \\ & 27 / 10 \end{aligned}$ | 56/22 60/16 61/2 62/5 62/9 63/14 64/6 66/16 | $\begin{array}{\|l\|} 51 / 24 \\ \text { impact [13] } 26 / 22 \end{array}$ | interviewed [2] 27/1 $58 / 5$ |


|  | 32/ | 72/23 | 29/15 53/25 |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| interviews [4] 19/24 |  | /16 | [3] 9/4 12/ |  |
| 20/6 20/10 20/15 |  | 68/13 70/17 72/1 |  |  |
| intimidating [1] 26/17 | jewellery [1] 6/4 | 68/13 70/17 72/1 know [50] 1/11 6/ | letter [11] 23/8 23/12 30/12 31/21 32/1 32/3 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { live }[6] 2 / 82 / 93 / 1 \\ & 5 / 444 / 368 / 14 \end{aligned}$ |
| into [35] 4/18 9/21 | JFSA [1] 36/14 | 7/2 8/11 8/19 8/20 | 32/4 32/7 33/13 40/16 | lived [3] $2 / 103 / 8$ |
| $\begin{aligned} & 11 / 415 / 2116 / 816 / 16 \\ & 17 / 422 / 426 / 129 / 3 \end{aligned}$ | Jim [1] 18/5 | 8/22 9/22 10/12 10/2 | 58/14 | 35/16 |
| $17$ | job [4] 15/25 44/10 | 14/3 17/2 18/24 19/12 | letters [1] 23 | lives [2] |
| 33/20 35/14 39 | 45/20 56/16 | 19/25 21/20 23/9 | level [1] 4/4 | living [4] 3/14 29 |
| 40/24 44/13 47/11 | jobs [3] 4/4 | 24/12 24/13 | lies [2] 73/20 7 | 2/ |
| 47/13 48/5 49/1 | 60/18 | 25/17 25/19 25/20 | life [8] 33/23 41/3 | n [2] 71/18 |
| 56/21 63/23 64/10 | jog [1] | 29/15 29/20 29 | 41/8 41/14 42/1 | ed [1] |
| 64/19 65/15 66/20 | John's [1] 4 | 32/6 33/9 35/17 43 | 42/21 45/1 53/1 | loans [8] 40/19 |
|  | join [1] 6/16 | 45/12 48/10 53/7 | lights [2] 11/23 30 | 59/3 |
| 70/23 74/17 | joined [2] 46/6 46/7 | 54/24 55/1 55/23 56/5 | like [49] 8/14 9/22 | /6 71/22 |
| introductory [1] | jokingly [1] 5/5 | 56/10 58/9 59/19 | 14/11 15/23 17 | [6] |
| 0/10 | Jon [2] 17/23 20/16 | 64/17 64/18 6 | 19/24 21/1 | 6/7 33/4 33/25 |
| investig | Jon Longman [2] | 64/25 65/1 65/2 71/2 | 27/1 34/1 34/4 | ked [1] 69/9 |
| investigation [ | 17/23 20/16 | 72/3 74/17 76/ | 35/21 35/23 36/20 | 1] 25/4 |
| 17/19 20/16 20/17 | Judge [1] 36/6 | knowledge [4] 2/3 | 37/14 41/12 5 | logged [4] |
| 52/4 | Julian [1] 1/11 | 40/6 43/19 60/8 | 2 | 17 25/9 251 |
| investigator [1] 2 | July [2] 11/11 |  | 56/23 57/7 |  |
| investigators [3] 17/22 18/2 18/23 | July 2009 [1] June [1] 9/2 | L | 60/20 61/2 61/25 62/9 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { London [2] } 2 \\ & 24 / 16 \end{aligned}$ |
| 8/23 | June 2009 [1] 9/2 |  | 62 | long [10] $2 / 105$ |
| invoiced [1] 30/25 | just [104] |  | 66/4 68/10 69/2 69/12 | 31/17 33/18 44/5 |
| invoices [1] 31/20 | just ... you [1] 70/15 | language [1] 19/2 | 16 72/6 72/9 73/12 | /23 45/25 47 |
| invoices [1] $\mathrm{invoicing} \mathrm{[2]} \mathrm{31/12}$ | justice [3] 35/22 57/3 <br> 73/24 | laptop [3] 16/19 16/21 $17 / 4$ | $73 / 1473 / 1774 / 10$ $75 / 1675 / 18$ |  |
|  |  | largest [1] | limb [1] 35/5 | $12$ |
| involve [1] 46/19 | K | last [3] 25/1 59/7 | /8 | ng |
| [2] $4 / 95$ | kang | 23 | 7/3 69/3 69 | 2 |
|  | keep [2] 9/14 17/10 | late [1] 75/20 | 69 | $11122 / 18$ 22/2 |
|  | keeping [1] 30/25 | later [3] 30/12 31/ | Lin's [2] 68/2 68 | 27/10 |
|  | KENNEDY [4] 43/5 | 42/19 | Linda [16] 43/3 43/4 | look [3] 10/12 27/3 |
| $2 / 2$ | 43/6 59/19 76/12 | Latin [2] 32/8 32/12 | 43/9 60/23 61/1 61/16 | 51/3 |
| 8/10 9/2 | kept [6] 8/19 11/21 | laughed [1] 5/6 | 62/14 63/8 63/16 6 | looked [6] 9/10 |
| 11/6 14/14 15/4 17/6 | 49/19 51/9 71/371/5 | laughing [2] 47/19 | 68/25 69/22 | /13 24/25 32 |
| 24/17 27/6 27/6 34/12 | keyboard [1] 12/20 |  | 70/21 72/20 | 69/12 |
| 36/1 36/5 37/16 38/ | keys [3] 29/12 30/4 | law [1] 5/4 | Linda's [1] 65/18 | ing [4] 9/17 |
| 38/23 50/3 55/ |  | leads [1] 72/16 | 34/8 | 16/13 23/23 |
| 55/13 5 | kid | least [2] 127 | lines [1] 71/3 | ing [2] 67/10 7 |
|  | killer [1] 41/5 | leave [2] 44/23 45/10 | linked [1] 52/20 | loss [1] 41/14 |
|  | kind [6] 8/6 17/3 | left [5] 15/3 22/8 44/7 | listen [5] 64/9 64/ | es [1] 41/ |
| 65/17 68/14 71/21 | 46/10 47/3 48/25 | 49/20 50/1 | 20 69/21 | [7] 32/20 |
| 71/24 73/6 74/18 |  | leg [1] 6717 | listening [1] 76/4 | /15 50/1 53/5 53/ |
|  | kindly [1] 39/5 | legal [2] 19/22 24/23 | literally [2] 41/8 | 65/17 |
| $\begin{aligned} & \text { itself [4] } 15 / 342 / 5 \\ & 62 / 1665 / 3 \end{aligned}$ | kitchen [3] 9/2 | legally [3] 16/13 |  | 2267 |
| J |  |  | ittle [20] |  |
|  | knew [6] 51/18 5 | less [1] 42/15 | 15/23 19/5 | 48/19 49/9 51/2 59 |
| $17 / 2025 / 229 / 11$ | 63/20 65/21 65/22 | let [4] 17/11 25/20 | 22/6 24/4 25/25 35/10 | 59/18 59/23 |

(28) interviews - Louisa

| L |  |  | 60/15 | Ms Kennedy [1] |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  | missing [2] 11/17 | moved [10] 211211 |  |
|  | 57/24 61/12 66/16 | 23/20 | 2/13 3/2 44/15 47/1 | Little |
| 2 |  |  | 2170 | vell [1] |
| ed [12] 22/10 | meant [4] 42/13 | -men [1] | 0/25 | Ms van [1] $23 / 22$ |
| /15 45/20 45/20 | 70/22 70/24 | 34/1 34/4 35/17 44/3 | Moving [3] 8/23 17/19 | much [21] 3/4 12 |
| 56/16 61/6 61/6 61/24 |  | 55/4 55/15 57/2 | 33/3 | 21/14 28/19 |
| 2/2 62/1 | mediation [6] 23/2 | 58/24 60/24 71/7 | MP [3] 24/6 24/23 | /9 37/8 42/2 |
| loves [1] 42/14 | 24/5 25/19 25/21 | Monday [5] 15/4 16 | 25/12 | 4/23 54/24 54/24 |
| Luckily [3] 52/15 | 25/22 | 23/10 76/11 76/16 | MPs [2] | 22 59/15 6 |
| $63 / 2067 / 19$ | medication [3] | monetary [2] 26/9 | MR [37] 1/8 16/22 | /13 67/23 71 |
| lunch [1] 7/5 | 54/10 67/20 | 26/13 | 20/24 22/3 22/11 | /11 71/12 75/23 |
| lunchtime [1] 7/4 | m | money | 12 | ddeman |
| M |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | 13/19 16/7 16/10 | 38/17 38/25 39/4 39/7 | ded |
| [2] | 24/3 24/9 24/11 25/12 | 22/13 22/14 22/2 | 39/8 39/13 39/14 | must [3] 32/24 6 |
|  | 62/12 | 23/14 23/14 | 39/21 39/24 40/4 40/8 | 76/2 |
| made [12] 6/5 14/16 | meetings [1] | 23/17 23/19 23/1 | 40/11 40/12 40/1 | mute [2] 38/20 38/2 |
| 21/8 22/8 22/24 26/6 | members [2] 58/1 | 26/19 28/16 29/5 | 40/21 40/24 41/3 | my [144] |
| 30/20 31/10 37/20 | 58/2 | 29/19 48/13 49/23 | 41/10 41/16 43/1 | myself [4] 7 |
| 44/12 44/13 50/17 | memories [2] | 50/8 50/17 53/9 55/22 | Mr Blake [4] 26/25 | 55/7 66/21 |
| magazine [2] 33/14 |  |  |  | N |
|  |  | 68/12 $70 / 16$ | $20 / 2422 / 322 / 11$ |  |
| ain [1] | 40/25 42/1 42/5 | 71/17 72/7 75/12 | 22/18 22/21 27/10 |  |
| [1] | 53/19 54/10 68/8 73/8 | MoneyGram | Mr Skelton [1] 16/22 | 22/4 24/21 30 |
| ntains [1] 40/21 | mention [4] 50/4 | 62/23 63/1 63/ | Mr Stein [5] 38/1 | 35/15 43/6 43/8 59/19 |
| make [12] 13/5 20/14 | 52/17 62/19 65/2 | 63/18 63/21 | 38/15 38/17 38/25 |  |
| 21/17 22/18 30/17 | mentioned [9] 25 | month [6] 8/2 10/8 | 43 | National [1] 18/17 |
| 49/24 50/8 65/25 | 26/4 33/22 53/11 | 11/7 12/7 65/10 71/12 | Mr Vinall [15] 38 | National [1] 18/ |
| 69/8 75/13 75/15 | 55/15 57/22 62/ | months [9] 7/1 | 38/13 39/7 39/8 39/14 | nature [1] 59/3 |
| management [1] | 65/4 71/25 | /71/1 21/3 21/15 | 39/21 39/24 40/4 | by [1] 39/19 |
|  | mess [3] 63/9 64/20 | 18 36/4 71/6 | 40/11 40/12 40/1 | y [1] 50/24 |
| [2] 69/3 | 7 | morals [2] 52/25 | 21 40/24 41 | [1] 19/10 |
|  | messaged [ | 73 | 41 | need [4] 7/24 18/20 |
|  | messages [1] | more [13] | Mr Vinall's [5] | $23 / 2$ |
| manipulating | messing [1] 63 | 30/2 37/17 42/12 52 | 39/13 40/8 41/3 41/10 | needed [1] 63 |
|  | met [6] 18/1 23/22 | 20 55/20 55/2 | Mrs [14] 1/4 1/10 1/1 | [2] 17/1 |
| ions [1] | 24/15 24/16 60/16 | 72/11 74/22 | 20/5 27/4 27/22 28 | our [1] 69 |
| ual [1] | 6 | morning [14] | 31/3 34/7 37/5 38/1 | hew [2] 44/4 |
| many [6] 7/15 37/20 | might [4] 7/10 16/ | 1/15 10/3 10/5 | 38/23 43/3 75/24 | hew's [1] 56/ |
| 44/1 48/9 63/24 73/5 | 67/18 69/21 | 16/2 16/17 21/13 23/8 | Mrs Jennifer [1] 1/10 | er [15] 16/6 23/13 |
|  | milk [1] 60/2 | $831 / 2153 / 22$ | Mrs Linda [1] $43 / 3$ | /13 34/17 $42 / 4$ |
| age [1] | ms [2] |  | [2] 38/18 | 691 |
| married [1] 3/7 | 54 |  | 38/23 | 70/25 7 |
| matter [3] 28/2 34/13 |  | most [5] 24/15 |  | 71/17 75/45 |
| 38/24 | mind [2] 55/13 73/13 | 7/24 68 | 2 | 2/10 70 |
| may [6] 9/2 9/6 20/25 | Minister [1] 35/15 | most ... it | 28/20 31/3 34/7 37/5 | 23 70/24 7 |
| 27/2 42/2 57/21 |  | - | Powell [1] 75/2 |  |
| $\begin{aligned} & \text { May 2009 [1] 9/6 } \\ & \text { me [103] } \end{aligned}$ | minute's [1] 68/14 miscarriage [1] 57/3 | motivated [1] 55/12 move [3] 23/21 60/13 | Ms [6] 14/1 23/22 38/5 38/6 43/5 76/12 | News [1] 72/19 newspaper [2] 33/22 |

(29) Louisa Powell - newspaper

| N | no | O' | 49/10 49/13 57/5 |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  | 9/24 11/17 12/5 12/18 |  |  |  |
| 33/25 | 14/17 20/10 23/18 | 27/22 28/20 31/3 3417 | 59/7 59/12 62/23 | 16/17 19/9 20/15 22/2 |
| 335 | 25/3 28/15 28/22 30 | 37/5 | 62/24 63/5 63/5 6 |  |
| 10/3 10/4 10/8 16/9 | 30/2 30/16 30/16 | oath [1] 35/24 | 64/23 66/6 68/2 69 | $11126 / 16$ |
|  | 35/22 36/18 36/22 | oblivion [1] 68/1 | 70/2 70/24 71/2 72/9 | 2032 |
| 43/2 45/3 50/7 69/15 | 41/23 42/19 42 | observed [1] 39/2 | 72/11 72/11 74/22 | 33/16 34/21 35/13 |
| 69/17 72/16 | 47/6 49/1 49/3 55 | obviously [6] 49/2 | ones [2] 18/15 75/ | 35/13 38/2 |
| next-door [1] 69 | 55/15 56/24 58/9 | 58/8 64/25 66/20 | ongoing [1] 12/12 | 41/8 44/21 47/3 50 |
| NFSP [3] 18/17 52/17 | 58/19 63/1 63/12 | 71/19 72/21 | only [13] 715814 | 53/6 53/22 55/7 5 |
|  | 63/14 64/9 64/17 66/8 | occasion [1] 68/2 | 18/15 21/13 28/10 | 55/9 55/16 55/19 |
| nice [2] 55/ | 67/18 68/15 68/19 | occasions [2] 40/6 | 37/11 47/1 50/7 64 | 2059 |
| nick [1] 68/12 | 68/20 72/18 73/10 | 40/25 | 64/5 68/14 73/5 74/25 | 62/11 65/5 66/6 |
| night [7] 24/24 | 73/18 74/7 74/9 74/13 | occur [2] 7 | onto [1] 63/4 | 16 68/5 68/24 |
| 32/15 34/23 37/17 | 74/17 75 | occurred [ | $0 / 3$ | 171/22 |
| 1/2 | no | 70/16 75/11 | $2 / 8$ | outside [6] 19/9 20/4 |
|  | nothing [13] 14/6 | odd [1] 60/2 | opening [4] 15/24 | 31/4 31/22 69/10 71/8 |
| 69/8 | 14/9 17/3 17/3 17/3 | off [12] 5/6 6/15 19/8 | 51/19 61/25 74/19 | over [28] 3/13 10/6 |
|  | 49/21 52/25 58/16 | 30/7 30/9 30/10 30/22 | operation [1] 26/1 | 14/19 16/5 17/17 |
|  | 58/19 60/20 69/21 | 53/25 64/23 66/7 | opposed [1] 27/21 | $136 / 6$ 36/7 |
|  | 69/24 70/7 | 69/18 76/10 | opposite [1] | $45 / 19$ |
| 181515 18/20 | no | off-putting [1] | or [43] 4/5 5/15 7/3 | 2 47/6 49/2 |
|  | noticed [2] 47/16 | offered [2] 13/22 | 7/19 9/21 10/9 11/11 | /16 67/9 68/7 687 |
| 22/13 22/16 23/2 23/3 | 62 | 27 | 12/5 13/14 14/14 | 69/4 69/5 70/4 70/2 |
| 113 | November [3] 13/8 | offering [1] 27/20 | 5 18/22 | 23 72/10 |
|  | 13/11 21/3 | office [101] | 20/10 20/25 21/1 | overcompensate [ |
| 28/21 30/16 31/6 31/8 | November 2 | Office's [1] | 22/21 22/24 2 | 42/8 |
| 34/5 34/17 | 13/11 21/3 | officer [2] 44/12 | 24/20 27/23 33/22 | owe [3] 71/15 71/15 |
| 34/17 34/17 | now [38] 3/3 3 | 44/14 | 34/24 39/18 42/6 42/8 | 75 |
| 36/10 37/4 39/18 41/2 | 10/13 10/16 | offices [2] 25/23 | 42/19 50/13 56/22 | owing [1] 53/9 |
| 47/23 49/13 51/3 5 | $20 / 2422 / 423 / 427 / 23$ |  |  | P |
| 52/1 52/11 5 |  |  |  |  |
| 52/24 52/25 52/25 | 42/7 43/2 43/22 43/23 | oh | 72/573/9 $75 / 20$ | 3/4 |
| 16 |  | 1 |  | page [5] $1 / 2$ |
| 58/11 58/11 58/15 | 56/11 57/17 58/17 | 21/19 22/25 26/5 | order [2] 26/10 26/12 | 6 43/15 |
| 8/16 58/19 | 59/13 59/16 60/11 | 29/24 31/3 62/9 68/10 | orders [3] 26/5 | ge 10 [1] |
| 61/11 63/12 63 | 62/18 63/3 71/1 | 71/9 71/10 72/17 | 26 | ge 12 [1] 43/15 |
|  | 71/23 72/14 73/14 | okay [15] 9/5 17 | orig | page 15 [1] 60/4 |
| 67/11 70/5 73/2 | 75/19 75/21 76/10 | 24/1 28/17 29/20 34/1 | originally [1] 61/1 | ge 19 [1] |
|  | number [3] 12/19 | 34/6 34/11 36/20 | other [15] 3/24 3/2 | paid [9] 23/15 32/2 |
|  | 63 | 48/4 57/19 62/23 | 4/1 14/7 20/15 24/21 | 14 4112 48 |
| 64/9 65/22 67/8 | numbers [2] | - | 33/17 36/23 37/10 |  |
|  |  | old [7] 5/19 5/20 6/13 | 40/17 41/14 |  |
| non [1] 63/17 |  | 22/5 43/22 60/11 | 49/11 53/3 58 |  |
| non-existent [ | nursery [1] |  |  |  |
|  | 0 |  |  | $/ 17$ |
| none [6] 7/21 47/21 <br> 48/16 50/15 50/20 62/17 <br> normal [1] 42/7 | $\begin{aligned} & 21 / 1721 / 1825 / 2 \\ & 25 / 1025 / 1129 / 18 \\ & 29 / 2129 / 22 \text { 30/6 } \end{aligned}$ | 18/17 18/18 19/6 23/4 24/19 27/1 27/10 31/2 36/8 36/12 44/2 44/16 | $\begin{array}{\|l\|l\|} \hline 70 / 272 / 18 & 74 / 10 \\ 74 / 21 & \\ \text { out [61] } & 5 / 111 \\ 8 / 21 & 7 / 7 \\ 8 / 11 & 9 / 19 \\ 10 / 10 \end{array}$ | papers [1] 62/1 <br> paperwork [2] 9/17 <br> 54/6 <br> paragraphs [2] 27/6 |


| P | 62 | 2 | print [1] 2 |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| paranoid [1] 42/6 | 72/ | pm [1] 76/15 | printer [1] 26 | //816/9 16/18 |
| Pardon [1] 17/2 |  |  |  | 26/11 29/11 30/3 |
| Parliament [1] 24 | perfectly [1] | 68/23 | 21/2 24/25 24/25 | 38/24 47/13 |
| Pa | perhaps [4] 7/19 | pointed [2] 21/2 21/ | prior [2] 40/3 52/16 | 48/13 50/17 |
| 4/14 4/15 4/23 33/19 | 24/18 38/2 38 | police [4] 3/22 3 | prison [3] 4/3 10/15 |  |
|  | period [3] 42/2 |  |  | putting [2] 9/20 |
| 35/6 39/15 62/4 |  |  |  | Q |
| party [1] 4/18 |  | $\begin{aligned} & \text { poc } \\ & 66 \end{aligned}$ | problem [8] 12/13 | question [5] 58/25 |
| pass [1] 46/3 |  | Portakabin [3] 47/13 | 13/25 14/5 15/20 2 | 66/22 68/10 72/14 |
| passed [1] | persecuted [1] 35/22 | 49/18 70/22 | 63/1 65/22 69/4 |  |
| password [2] 25/3 $25 / 3$ | person [4] 63/11 | Portcullis [1] 24 | problems [5] 8/23 | questioned [8] 1/8 |
|  | 63/20 64/9 76/6 | positions [1] 74/3 | 12/17 14/8 72/12 | 43/5 55/23 55/24 |
| Paul [1] | personal [2] 26/23 | possibly [4] 22/17 | 75/19 | /25 57/2 57/2 |
| Paula [1] 57/4 | 33/3 | 23/2 25/14 31 | essed [1] 64 | 57/25 |
| Paula Vennells | persona <br> 74/18 | post [104] Post Offic | proper [5] 5/21 30/17 | 55/10 66/21 |
|  | Peterborough | Post Office's [1] | 30/20 31/9 31/10 | questions [18] 1/1 |
|  | 19/21 | 72/19 | properly [1] 49/2 | 2/5 37/3 37/6 37/9 |
|  | phase [1] | Post Office | property [2] 30/1 | 43/22 46/4 |
| $3 / 22$ | phone [6] 11/20 31/3 | 39 | 31/4 | 7 57/18 57 |
| 13/1 13/ | 53/25 63/20 70/1 71/3 | postage | prosecute [2] 36/4 | 60/11 |
| 31/19 40/19 64/7 | phoned [4] 13/1 | postal [6] 26/5 26/8 | 74 | 72/1 75/22 75/24 |
| 64/11 66/2 70/16 75/2 | 28/6 63/8 64/2 | 26/10 26/11 26/14 | prosecuted [4] 23 | ckly [2] 37/21 |
| 75 | phrase [2] 32/8 32/12 | 35/15 | 23/7 36 | 72/22 |
| payday | pic | Postmast | prosecuting [1] | quite [6] |
| paying [2] | pickle [1] 47/2 | pounds [2] 16/5 | cution |  |
| payment [2] 35/9 <br> 63/13 | piece [3] 25/1 26 $27 / 24$ | Powell [5] 38/6 45/15 | prove [3] 11/2 | R |
| 3] $41 / 23$ 41/24 | pieces [1] 29/7 | 59/18 59/23 75/24 | provide |  |
| pea/3 | pills [1] | 3/2 |  | raise [1] $11 / 3$ |
|  |  |  | $41 / 184$ | ran [1] 32/19 |
| [2] 1017 |  | pregnant [1] 60/21 |  | rang [13] 11/9 |
| penny [2] 16/7 56/20 | place [5] 2/25 20/11 | premises [2] 29/1 | 66/4 70/18 71/15 | 13/9 14/1 19/19 |
| pension [2] 33/1 | $\begin{gathered} \text { place [5] 2/25 } 20 \\ 48 / 548 / 1967 / 4 \end{gathered}$ | premises [2] 29/1 | Provisional [1] 4/ | 22 22/24 |
|  | places [2] 34/20 | pr | provisions [1] 24/11 | $532 / 840$ |
| nsions | 34 | 4/12 | prune [1] 35/1 |  |
|  | pla |  | psychological [ |  |
| people [42] $3 / 33 / 25$ | pla |  | 36 |  |
| 6/5 11/10 12/2 12/4 | plastic [1] 16/8 |  | psychologically | $21$ |
| 4/7 15/8 16/14 | played [1] 39/16 | pressure [1] 34 | $34 / 19$ | $14 / 10$ |
| 18/11 18/16 18/17 | plays [1] 73/12 | pressure [1] 34/2 | [1] 35/3 | $\text { read [10] } 38 / 15$ |
| 26/12 27/11 27/20 | please [9] 1/9 271 | ably [2] | ic [3] 37/20 5 | $41 / 1641 / 22$ |
| 5 |  |  |  | /25 43/17 |
| $835 / 1635 / 21$ | $75$ | previous [4] 3/17 | 1] | 60/6 73/15 |
| 36/2 36/4 41/11 42 | pleased [2] 15/17 |  |  | ading [3] 38/1 |
| $\begin{aligned} & 42 / 9 \text { 42/14 55/9 55/10 } \\ & 62 / 362 / 1262 / 12 \end{aligned}$ | $\begin{aligned} & \text { please } \\ & 15 / 19 \end{aligned}$ <br> pluh [4] 21/21 21 | previously [2] 18/6 46/17 | purse [1] 21/13 <br> put [28] 5/9 5/17 5/21 | $\begin{aligned} & 38 / 2543 / 1 \\ & \text { ready [1] } 67 / 6 \end{aligned}$ |


| R | relationships [2] $42 / 7$$42 / 11$ | $61 / 2061 / 2465 / 15$$67 / 10$ | $30 / 1430 / 21 ~ 30 / 25$ <br> $31 / 531 / 731 / 831 / 11$ | 66/19 67/8 68/8 68/17 69/17 69/20 73/9 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| $\begin{aligned} & \hline \text { real [1] 42/18 } \\ & \text { realised [3] } 5 / 8 \text { 11/8 } \end{aligned}$ |  |  |  |  |
|  | relatives [1] 57/22 | retinoblastom | 31/13 31/19 3 | 74/12 74/20 75/22 |
|  | $\begin{array}{\|l\|l\|} \text { rel } \\ \text { rer } \end{array}$ |  |  |  |
| reality [1] really [30] | remain [1] | retirement [2] 5 | salary [1] 50/5 | seemed [1] 14/3 |
| $6 / 18 \text { 12/18 15/19 19/3 }$ | remains [1] | 62/10 | same [3] 17/25 | seen [6] 37/5 42 |
| 19/15 21/22 21/23 |  |  |  | 518 |
| 37 | remember [27] | re | [1] | 74/14 |
| 47/2 47/6 51/22 52/ |  |  |  | cted [1] |
| 53/5 54/8 54/8 54/25 | 0 17/24 1 | right [51] | 24/20 | [1] |
| 55/ | 21/1 21/12 21/14 22/3 | 12/13 13/12 14/13 | Sa | Il [2] 6/3 |
| 57/10 60/20 61 | 22/6 22/21 2 | 20/12 20 |  | 13/3 |
| 61/21 70/8 70/15 | 24/17 27/23 | 23/6 | 64/3 65/19 | 62/25 |
| reas | 27/24 28/1 28/4 46 | 28/17 31/5 37/19 38/9 | say [41] 2/17 5/2 8 | sending [3] |
| 50/24 | 46/13 51/6 51/8 6 | 38/23 39/1 44/20 | 10/22 10/23 | $3 / 2$ |
|  | 63/6 | 45/9 45/16 45/17 4 | 12/23 17/2 19/4 20/25 | sent [6] 8/3 |
|  | remorse [2] 69/13 | 48/5 49/10 50/5 50 | 24/14 32/18 32 | 16/12 31/1 32/4 |
| receive [7] 6/21 35/9 | 69 | 50/20 51/5 51/14 | 34/7 35/23 35/24 | ly |
| 1 46/15 47/20 | remotely [1] | 52/5 52/5 | 37/11 37/16 45 | September [3] $47 / 7$ |
| 125 | remove [1] 48/12 | 58/3 58/20 59/10 | 47/11 49/4 49/8 49/17 | 50/12 50/21 |
| 6 | removed [2] | 59/14 61/15 61/18 | 50/12 51 | mber 201 |
| 35/10 35/10 | 74/2 | /6 | 52/2 55/3 57/5 57/14 | 50/12 |
| 46/5 46/23 | renew [1] 71/18 | 69/10 74/25 76/7 | 64/12 68/16 70/2 | rious [2] 65/22 |
|  | reopen [1] | 76/10 76/12 76/14 | 167 | 65/22 |
| recently [3] 43/17 | rep [1] 19/10 | ring [6] | 23 75/16 75/ | ously [1] |
| 60/6 74/15 | re | 13/1 28/12 32/2 32 |  | sertraline [1] 54/12 |
|  | replac | rpped [1] | saying [1 | sevan [1] 317 |
| sed [1] $36 / 15$ | 40/10 | road [1] 33/18 | 8/21 11/21 23/18 24/8 | Service [2] 4/1 4 |
| nvened [1] 30/5 | replied | 17 | 30/1 | settled [2] 32/15 |
| [1] 39/6 | reply [1] | role [3] 4/1 17/17 19 | 33/7 33/12 37/20 | [1] 23 |
| rding [1] 2 | repres |  |  | /25 40/25 |
| ounting [2] |  |  | $2 / 2$ |  |
|  | represe | [5] 5/7 5 | 41/8 54/9 | me [1] 66/18 |
| refill [1] | 39 | 5/14 5/18 22/4 | scandal [1] 42/ | ape [1] 68/19 |
|  | repres | roughly [3] | e [1] 25/25 | hare [1] |
| ded [4] 63/3 | 19 | 14/20 20/25 | school [4] 44/7 55/25 | she [38] $6 / 14$ |
| 0 63/11 63/12 | represented [3] | 15 | 68/10 72/10 | 11/19 12/24 |
| refurbish [1] 5/23 | 21/24 25/22 | 29/14 29/17 | tching [1] | 16/1 16/3 16 |
| refurbished [2] 5/ | reputation [2] 55 | route [1] 6/3 | screen [8] 1/13 7/2 | /14 16/17 16 |
|  | 72/2 | rumour [1] 74/ | 7/20 12/5 12/19 12/21 | /19 16/22 22 |
|  | resigned | run [3] 39/13 45/2 | 29/6 45/16 | /14 24/20 25/18 |
| $\begin{aligned} & \text { refurbisnm } \\ & 5 / 1674 / 16 \end{aligned}$ |  |  | seaside [1] 67/1 | 26/16 26 |
|  | resolve [1] 74/6 |  | seat [1] 36/8 | 38/20 38/20 |
| $\begin{gathered} \text { refuse } \\ 15 / 14 \end{gathered}$ | response [2] 11/1 | ning [1] | second [5] 12/1 | /15 53/ |
|  | 22/20 | Ruth [2] 43/6 59/19 | 20/3 20/6 | 57/5 61/20 61/21 64 |
| $\text { rces [1] } 37 / 2$ | $\begin{aligned} & \text { res } \\ & \text { res } \end{aligned}$ |  | ser | 65/20 67/3 |
| [1] 50/23 | $53$ |  | $/ 17$ | [5] 13/6 16/1 |
|  |  | safe [21] 9/11 9/14 | 19/22 | /11 20/1 36/10 |
|  | retail [10] 5/24 32/16 | 16/9 21/6 21/10 21/ | 38/19 38 | et [1] 16/4 |
|  | 61/2 61/7 61/13 61/19 | 29/8 29/12 29/20 | 49/12 55/10 57/17 | shop [11] 39/16 67 |


| S | 71/9 |  |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| shop... [9] 68/7 68/8 60116 701237167214 | $32 / 543 / 1560 / 4$ | $\begin{gathered} \text { son } \\ 241 \end{gathered}$ | stage [3] 6/16 10/20 | $30$ |
| 72/11 74/18 74/21 | sign | someone [1] 28/10 |  | Stid |
| Shopacheck [3] 66/3 | sig | so | st | stopped [3] 6/25 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| shoppin |  |  |  | ge [2] 30 |
| 31/2 |  |  |  |  |
| shops [2] 3/3 39/18 |  |  |  |  |
| hort [5] 31/17 38/11 |  | 56 | start [9] 2/5 7/1 | storing [1] |
| 50/25 63/7 63/9 | 36 | sometimes [4] | 47/15 56/12 60/10 | story [1] 3 |
| 5012 |  |  |  | straight [2] 50/17 |
| shortfall [12] 8/18 9/8 | sin | S | started [13] 33/ | 51/23 |
| 10/6 11/11 13/11 40/5 |  |  |  | strained [1] 10/23 |
| 40/14 45/13 49/21 | 38/14 42/24 57/20 | son [17] 6/10 6/ | 54/12 59/6 60/18 61/3 | st |
| 50/23 51/11 52/3 | 76/ | 10/9 10/21 14/13 | /9 61/13 61/17 | 19/ |
| shortfalls [23] |  |  |  | stress [2] 41/13 73/7 |
| 40/12 40/17 40/19 |  | 22/1 22/4 22/5 2 | ng [2] 9/6 | ed [2] 66 |
| 16 | sister [2] | 22/11 22/15 22/2 | starts [1] 64/2 | 66/16 |
| 48/ | sit [1] 71/1 | 31/2 75/7 | state [3] 1/9 42/1 | strongly [1] |
| 49/24 50/5 50/13 | si | so | ement [29] | struggles [1] 42/6 |
| 0/13 50/19 53/10 | six [4] $3 / 1021 / 3$ | sorry [26] 2/19 2/2 | 1/2 | [ |
| 62/20 65/5 | 1/14 31/18 | /17 17/5 | 39/3 39/4 39/6 3911 | ected [1] |
| $165 / 20$ 65/2 | six/eight [1] 31 | 23/15 25/4 28/4 | 42/25 43/10 4311 | postmaster |
|  | sized [1] 2/24 | 33/25 35/25 36/1 | 45/6 47/7 47/11 4 | /18 39/8 39/1 |
|  | Skelton [1] 16/22 | 44/18 52/9 52/10 54/1 | 48/17 49/8 49/15 | /10 60/25 |
| hould [14] | skipped [1] $47 /$ | 56/24 57/5 59/1 | 50/10 51/13 55/3 | subpostmast |
| 16/20 19/13 | slap [1] 36/14 | 61/15 61/15 68/2 | 59/24 60/4 60/6 62/20 | 41/14 52/20 57/6 |
| 36/17 37/23 | sleep [4] 53/23 | 72 | 64/4 65/24 66/24 | subpostm |
| $3 / 2374 / 274 /$ | 54/4 54/4 | sort [13] 3/19 4/5 | statements [2] 37/20 | 3/15 4/8 4/25 5/6 |
| 74/8 74/20 74/25 | sleeping [1] 3 | 5/25 10/16 12/14 | 41/17 | 12 23/4 45/7 45/4 |
|  | small [2] $2 / 92 / 7$ | 4/1815/3 | stay [1] | 19 50/11 61/1 |
|  | smile [1] 71/6 | 20 47/1 54/25 59/6 | stayed [5] 19/10 20/4 | substances [2] 54 |
|  | Smith [1] 30/15 | 59 | 6 65/19 68/2 | 54 |
|  | so [160] | sorted [2] 59/12 70/5 | stealing [1] $72 /$ | successful |
|  | social [1] 72/5 | sorts [1] 6/1 | in [5] 38/1 38/1 | [7] 39/19 56 |
|  | sold [4] 6/2 6/4 29/6 | South [1] 3/12 | 17 38/25 43/1 | 65/21 66/18 |
|  |  | South Wales [1] 3/12 | step [1] 75/7 | 76/5 |
| $+201$ | solicito | sown [1] 5/7 | stepped [1] 33/20 | suddenly [1] 64/23 |
| \|65/ | solicitors [2] 31/22 | spare [2] 5/7 | steps [3] 22/15 48/18 | suffered [2] 35/3 5 |
| showin | 41 | speak [2] 38/22 52/1 |  | [1] 22 |
| $65 / 20$ | som | speaking [2] 62/2 |  | stion [2] 22 |
| shut [3] 1 | 3/12 4/4 4/5 5/8 5/2 |  | still [22] 10/24 13 |  |
|  | 5/25 6/4 6/4 7/16 | special [2] 23/12 32/5 | 29/22 31/11 31/12 | 2/17 |
| side [7] 33/18 47/1 | 14/23 25/8 29 | specific [2] 7/24 7/2 | 36/2 | suicide [2] 34/21 |
| $61 / 7^{\circ} 61 / 1361 / 2463$ | 34/20 48/19 50/4 | specifics [1] 23/2 | 42/17 42/18 42/22 |  |
|  | 50 | speech [1] 8/14 | 55/8 68 | summary [3] 38 |
| sign [9] 15/5 22/22 | 53/17 55/21 62 | spend [2] 54/5 60/2 | 71/1 71/15 71/15 | 39/3 39/6 |
| $23 / 325 / 526 / 18$ | 62/22 62/25 65/2 | ing [1] 30/2 | 73/4 74/1 74/2 | [ |
| $\begin{array}{\|l\|} \hline 28 / 928 / 1528 / 18 \\ \text { signal [3] 49/19 } 71 / 5 \end{array}$ | 71/18 73/2 somebody [6] 11/22 17/11 17/14 17/17 | spoil [1] 37/1 <br> spoke [2] 48/7 63/16 | stock [3] 9/18 29/11 67/11 stolen [4] 17/8 26/1 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { summons [2] } 23 / 12 \\ & 31 / 20 \\ & \text { sums [1] } 41 / 19 \end{aligned}$ |


| S | 66 | 75/23 76/4 76/4 76/5 | $18$ | think [69] 4/8 6/16 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  |  |  | 6/19 6/23 11/11 13/11 |
| supervisors [1] 12/10 | taken [14] 9/19 9/2 | thankfully [1] 67/19 | 56/13 58/5 60/17 6 | 14/7 14/10 14/1 |
|  | 10/13 10/14 10/17 | thanks [4] 58/3 58/22 | 61/8 61/16 65/9 65/21 | 20/19 20/20 22/1 |
| 57/10 | 10/18 10/19 22/23 | 59/10 59/15 | 66/22 67/15 67/17 | 22/13 23/9 24/2 24/2 |
|  | 24/2 39/11 41/4 47/6 | that [336] | 68/25 75/19 76/10 | 31/1 |
|  | 55/22 58/10 | that's [35] 2/22 4/15 | 76/14 | 36/12 37/19 38/17 |
| 55/21 | taking [3] 3/23 2 | 5/20 8/3 10/14 10/14 | there [74] 2/10 2/14 | 43/6 43/13 44/15 |
| suppos |  | 11/9 11/16 11/19 | 3/2 3/2 3/3 5/20 6/1 | 4/18 44/ |
| 63/13 | talk [6] $7 / 2523 / 1$ | 11/25 12/1 13/6 19/12 | 6/12 6/25 7/5 9/11 | 46/22 47/7 |
| 63/3 | 56/6 66/25 73/12 | 20/ | 9/12 9/12 9/13 9/13 | 47/10 4 |
|  | talking [3] 19/11 | 24/19 25/7 28/6 28/18 | 9/24 10/24 11/8 11/9 | 49/8 49/23 50/2 50/4 |
| urprisingly [1] 70 | 19/14 62/12 | 28/19 30/2 30/10 34 | 11/22 12/14 12/20 | 10 50/11 51/12 |
| surrounding [1] | Taylor [2] 69/15 72/3 | 35/22 36/20 36/23 | 12/21 14/22 19/1 19 | 52/17 53/24 54/2 5 |
| 39/16 | tea [1] 7/9 | 45/9 45/17 51/13 | 19/10 19/16 19/17 | 57/11 57/16 597 |
| survive | tea | 59/ | 20/15 21/22 22/3 | 136217 |
| 2/20 | telephone [1] $28 / 5$ | 74/23 | 23/11 24/10 24/20 | 62/10 62/19 63 |
|  | tell [21] 3/6 6/18 | their [16] 4/23 11/14 | 25/16 26/2 26/13 28/2 | 65/4 65/24 66/6 66/2 |
|  | 10/13 10/15 10/16 | 25/23 32/10 32/11 | 29/9 29/11 29/18 | 68/9 70/10 71/12 |
| \| 74/7 | 24/2 25/19 29/24 | 32/13 57/1 57/9 58/18 | 29/21 36/20 3 | 71/25 73/6 75/18 76/8 |
| susp | 35/24 36/8 44/5 48/2 | 63/2 63/13 63/20 | 43/10 45/13 45/23 | third [1] 50/21 |
| 17/10 17/16 29/10 | 48/11 58/12 62/21 | 63/23 64/8 73/19 74/2 | 47/23 48/6 49/5 50/10 | this [71] 1/4 1/2 |
| 5/11 51/23 51/24 | 63/23 67/1 71/12 | them [57] 8/14 8/15 | 53/3 55/13 57/14 | 8/10 10/13 12/12 |
| $2 / 1$ 67/4 69/2 | 72/17 75/24 | 8/21 11/16 12/8 12/13 | 59/11 59/24 60/15 | 13/20 13/22 13/24 |
| suspense [1] 64/10 | telling [5] 7/6 | 12/16 13/9 13/20 | 62/21 63/1 63/18 64/9 | 15/20 17/4 18/12 |
| suspension [1] | 37/12 63/25 64/20 | 15/13 15/14 15/17 | 67/11 68/2 69/1 69/4 | 18/17 20/24 21/2 |
| Sussex [1] 39/9 | temporary [2] 42/2 | 15/19 16/15 16/25 | 69/6 69/7 69/12 71/ | 21/13 22/7 23/10 |
| swear [1] 24/23 | 47/1 | 18/7 19/6 19/11 19/13 | 71/25 72/6 74/15 | 23/16 23/23 25/12 |
| swipe [2] 12/20 12 | ten [1] | 19/25 25/19 27/21 | 75/16 | 25/13 25/20 26 |
| swiping [1] 12/21 |  | 29/25 30/23 30/24 | the | /22 28/8 31/3 32/20 |
|  | terminal [2] 1 | 31/25 32/2 35/22 | 5/2 11/17 11/18 14 | 36/19 37/10 |
| system [25] | 4 | 35/23 35/24 36/5 36/5 | 26/25 54/7 61/7 69/11 | 39/5 39/6 40/3 41/5 |
| 10/1 10/2 16/3 16/16 | terminated [1] 40/15 | 36/5 36/13 36/22 | 70/12 71/11 71/11 | 41/24 41/24 42/4 |
| 6/18 16/20 21/23 | terminology [1] 28/5 | 36/23 47/15 47/20 | 72/25 74/22 | 42/21 43/1 |
| 5/10 25/16 26/14 | terms [4] 6/21 7/18 | 47/23 52/18 53/9 | thereabouts [2] 11/12 | 53/3 53/4 53/18 53 |
| 6/7 39/22 46/18 | 8/17 26/24 | 55/22 56/5 57/9 57/10 | 13/14 | 54/16 55/4 55/16 57/3 |
| 9/15 49/19 52/5 | terrible [10] 49/5 49/5 | 61/5 63/16 63/21 66/7 | these [12] 16/14 | 57/4 57/24 60/6 63/10 |
|  | 64/16 66/13 66/13 | 66/18 69/6 69/6 70/17 | 18/11 20/6 41/20 42/2 | 64/1 64/20 64/21 6 |
| 70/22 70/24 71/1 | /1 69/1 71/15 72/3 | 72/18 72/21 73/10 | 42/19 48/18 57/6 65 | /13 |
|  |  | 75 | 5/19 76/2 | 18 73/1 |
| T |  |  |  | 74/16 74/17 74/19 |
|  | terrors [2] 34/23 | 3/18 7/1 7/4 7/9 7/9 | d [4] |  |
| [37] | 37 | 9/13 9/23 10/3 10/4 | 52/15 64/8 | oroughly [1] 68/4 |
| $6 / 7$ 16/10 17/6 17/17 | test [1] 2/20 | 11/5 11/8 12/6 | they're [2] 3/12 30 | those [18] 3/24 4/4 |
| 22/14 22/15 26/20 | than [3] 14/21 | 12/9 12/23 13/8 14/12 | they've [7] 28/11 | 6/5 8/7 11/1 18/16 |
| 26/21 26/21 27 | 47/24 | 15/8 16/10 17/9 19/19 | 52/24 52/25 52/25 | 25/1 |
| 29/19 30/4 | thank [25] 1/17 28/19 | 25/8 26/17 26/23 | $955 / 21$ 58/17 | /11 35/21 36/4 37 |
| 30/14 31/7 31/11 | 37/2 37/4 37 | 30/20 31/2 31/15 32 | thing [4] 14/18 | 2266 |
| 31/25 32/2 32/6 | 37/14 37/24 37/25 | 32/24 33/15 38/5 | 67/22 74/22 | 75/13 |
| 5/8 51/20 | 38/7 39/2 42/24 43 | 44/11 44/1 | things [8] 7/2 8/5 8/6 |  |
| $53 / 65$ | 57/16 58/20 58/21 59/9 59/16 59/16 | 44/17 44/25 45/6 46/2 46/15 46/24 47/10 | $\begin{aligned} & 48 / 2073 / 275 \\ & 75 / 2076 / 2 \end{aligned}$ | 64/7 75/12 75/14 thought [17] 9/19 |

(34) supervisor - thought

| T | 24/6 48/8 50/22 51/10 | 36/9 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| thought... [16] 11/5 | 67/18 72/4 72/6 72/17 | try [7] 33 |
| 12/10 13/6 15/3 15/5 |  |  |
| 15/18 16/11 19/11 | 50/20 54/24 54 | 49/10 66/14 |
| 23/11 25/8 33/14 49/1 | 62/5 66/15 70/5 | trying [4] |
| 55/22 65/16 71/9 | 75/20 | 66/9 70/16 |
| 72/20 | took [24] | Tuesday |
| thoughts [1] 4 | 16/19 22/13 29/12 | turn [7] 1/24 |
| threatened [1] 40/12 | 29/16 30/6 31/14 $31 / 14$ 31/19 31/20 | 53/25 57/17 65/18 |
| three [6] 30/1 34/25 | 31/14 31/19 31/20 <br> 45/14 45/19 46/15 | 74/17 75/21 turned [9] 6/10 |
| 50/11 66/17 75/5 | 45/14 45/19 46/15 <br> 48/18 56/14 56/17 | turned [9] 6/10 19 30/22 40/23 66/20 |
| 75/10 | 48/18 56/14 56/17 | 30/22 40/23 66/20 |
| thriving [1] 42/20 | 56/19 59/1 61/16 67/3 | 67/12 69/18 69/18 |
| through [17] 7/8 9/4 | torture [1] 74/13 | turning [3] 30/7 30 |
| 9/17 20/1 24/7 26/3 | $\text { totally [3] } 40 / 156$ | $30 / 10$ |
| 26/7 31/13 43/17 |  |  |
| 48/24 51/2 54/5 56/12 | touched [1] 53/2 | twins [2] 61/3 72/ |
| 57/8 60/6 66/20 67/4 | towards [5] 6/10 6/11 | two [27] 3/8 6/24 7/11 |
|  | 19/5 20/23 26/18 | 7/11 13/21 14/1 15/8 |
| Thursday [2] 14/14 $30 / 14$ | town [1] 31/3 | 15/25 16/14 18/5 |
|  | trail [2] 54/8 63/ | 18/11 25/16 34/24 |
| till [1] 11/4 | train [3] 15/25 16/12 | 36/1 36/2 36/6 36/7 |
|  | 61/22 | 36/11 39/21 39/22 |
|  | trained [5] 6/14 45/15 | 49/9 49/10 |
| 7/13 8/7 12/12 | 46/9 62/14 74/5 | 52/16 57/21 65/9 69/ |
| 12/16 13/20 14/7 17/6 | training [23] 6/21 | two-day [1] 6/2 |
| 21/16 21/16 | 6/21 6/24 7/5 7/12 | type [1] 41/25 |
| 21/19 21/20 21/21 | 7 | U |
| 23/17 25/16 26/9 | $46 / 546 / 546 / 1046 / 11$ | unable [1] 38/13 |
| 26/15 30/2 33/18 40/4 | $46 / 1246 / 1546 / 17$ | unclear [1] 72/12 |
| 42/3 44/20 45/22 | 46/12 46/15 46/17 | uncomfortable [1] |
| 45/23 48/15 48/22 | 46/20 46/23 46/25 | 19/13 |
| 48/24 49/5 49/20 | transactions [2] 7/24 | under [6] 27/11 52/12 |
| 50/14 52/18 52/23 | $7 / 25$ | 58/5 58/13 73/7 74/9 |
| 60/22 61/4 65/7 65/12 | treat [3] 57/9 75/5 | understand [4] 27/10 |
| 67/9 67/20 69/6 | 75/9 | 27/18 48/18 48/20 |
| times [5] 12/18 34/25 | treated [3] 33/3 52/22 | understanding [2] |
| 42/12 48/9 63/24 | $68 / 25$ | 53/16 55/19 |
|  | treatme | understood [1] 19 |
| essly [1] 36/15 | trees [1] 35/18 | undoubtedly [1] |
|  | tremendous [1] 73/7 | 42/13 |
|  | tried [10] 6/6 41/25 | unexplained [1] |
|  | 48/17 48/20 49/12 | 40/14 |
| $\begin{aligned} & 76 / 3 \\ & 23 / 5 \end{aligned}$ | 56/6 56/6 65/4 69/25 | unfortunately [3] |
| jether [3] 61/17 | 69/25 | 45/11 66/8 75/3 |
|  | true [6] 2/2 42/3 | 1815 |
| told [18] 1 | 43/19 45/21 60/8 62/6 | [4] 18/5 |
| $13 / 2 \text { 14/2 14/9 }$ | truly [1] 42/4 | 9/10 |
| 17/9 18/7 23/7 23/13 | trust [1] 74/8 |  |
|  | truth [3] 6/18 35/24 | unsuccessful [1] |

19/19
until [4] 46/2 50/7
69/7 76/16
unwavering [1] 57/10
up [41] $2 / 115 / 207 / 20$
8/8 11/20 12/1 12/8
12/11 13/10 16/24
18/10 19/19 23/8 23/9
23/11 27/1 29/23
30/15 32/9 34/23
41/19 43/24 46/10
50/7 50/24 51/9 52/15
56/7 61/22 61/25 62/1
62/2 64/2 65/5 68/3
68/14 69/9 69/18
69/18 71/17 75/7
update [2] $8 / 48 / 6$
upon [1] 3/24
upset [1] 19/5
us [26] $2 / 163 / 63 / 9$
3/10 3/11 3/20 5/4 8/4
24/2 32/2 32/5 32/6
35/13 36/14 36/16
36/16 42/12 42/24
49/13 49/14 57/13
69/17 69/19 69/21
72/7 75/8
use [6] 25/15 31/23
54/18 54/21 56/22
62/24
used [28] $3 / 13 / 55 / 4$
5/18 6/3 6/13 6/14 8/3
8/4 9/14 10/9 14/24
31/23 32/8 32/19
44/21 49/8 49/9 50/6
50/8 53/6 54/4 55/7
61/4 66/13 67/4 67/5
68/16
useless [1] 64/17
username [3] 25/6
25/7 25/7
using [1] 14/24

## V

vague [1] 6/23
value [2] 26/9 26/13
van [9] 23/22 24/19
25/13 26/2 29/13
29/16 29/18 29/22
30/6
van den Bogerd [1]
24/19
various [1] 48/17
Vennells [1] 57/4
very [33] $1 / 63 / 13 / 9$
5/19 20/14 25/1 28/19 33/5 34/20 37/8 37/8 40/11 42/17 42/24 47/1 52/19 53/16 58/22 59/15 66/5 66/5
66/15 68/6 71/1 73/10
73/11 73/18 74/12
74/13 74/20 74/20
75/23 76/2
vetting [1] $4 / 5$
view [1] 37/22
village [17] 2/9 2/12
2/13 2/16 2/23 2/24
5/3 6/2 6/5 6/13 17/12
33/6 33/9 33/14 33/22
39/16 39/20
villager [1] 33/10
villages [1] 39/17
Vinall [17] 38/2 38/13
39/3 39/7 39/8 39/14
39/21 39/24 40/4
40/11 40/12 40/18
40/21 40/24 41/4 41/6
41/16
Vinall's [6] 39/4 39/13
40/8 40/15 41/3 41/10
visible [1] 74/11
vital [1] 39/15
w
wages [1] 50/9
wake [3] 23/8 23/9 34/23
Wales [1] 3/12
walk [4] 33/17 35/13
67/18 68/15
walked [6] 15/9 15/17
15/21 16/14 19/9 19/25
want [44] 4/176/2
8/18 8/22 13/21 20/25
23/21 24/10 24/11
24/11 24/13 25/19 27/18 30/17 33/20 35/21 35/22 35/23 35/24 36/22 36/23 36/24 36/25 37/6 37/14 37/17 53/21 55/8 55/8 55/9 55/10
(35) thought... - want

| W | w | w | 36/3 44/13 |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| want... [13] 55/1 | went [30] 5/9 6/24 7/8 | 13/3 13/4 16/15 20/10 | without [3] 42/ |  |
| /23 | 11/1 11/3 14/15 14/22 | 21/13 27/16 30/22 | 57/10 | 39/1 47/8 49 |
| 62/23 67/1 68/17 | 15/4 16/24 18/1 20/21 | 40/5 41/19 43/3 44/15 | witness [9] 1/5 1/18 | 6 49/16 5 |
| 68/19 75/1 75/5 75/9 | 24/15 25/23 26/1 26/7 | 45/3 48/4 48/23 55/1 | 1/21 27/2 27/3 39/3 | 56/23 |
| 75/24 | 31/15 34/20 44/17 | 59/11 63/13 66/23 | 43/2 43/10 59/24 | 57/7 57/11 57/14 |
| ted [18] | 45/6 5 | 66/25 68/4 73/10 | witnesses [2] 37/ |  |
| /20 12/22 2 | 52/17 53/21 55/7 | while [5] 35/11 38/25 | 69/15 | 106 |
| 24/8 26/12 | 69/10 69/12 | 45/7 62/21 70/4 | woke [2] 23/11 68/3 | 7 64/9 64/1 |
| 60/22 62/25 65/3 67/8 | 69/1 | who [36] 5/4 6/2 6/9 | woman [4] 6/12 12/1 | 66/6 68/1 68/10 68/20 |
| 70/12 72/20 72/25 | were [80] | 6/13 18/5 18/22 20/3 | 22/3 | 73/14 73/17 74/10 |
| 72/25 | weren't [7] $8 / 1$ | 23/4 24/6 24/12 27/10 | Womble [1] 31/23 | 1075 |
| wanting [2] 7/3 55/15 | 23/7 29/2 30/3 32/22 | 27/11 27/20 35/12 | won't [2] 12/19 38/2 | wouldn't [5] 24 |
| [2] 713515 | 52/19 | 35/13 35/16 37/10 | Wonga [1] 66/6 | 28/9 28/18 68/7 70 |
| [1] 35/4 | West [1] | 38/18 44/3 45/15 52/7 | Worcester [3] 43/25 | cking [1] 28/13 |
| warm [1] 35/18 | we | 52/14 53/11 56/25 | 44/9 72/19 | [2] 22/17 30 |
| was [330] | what [110] | 57/5 60/15 60/23 61/1 | word [3] 16/12 25/7 | [4] |
| was ... yeah | what's [2] | 69 |  | 33/12 56/13 56/25 |
| Wasnt[19] 81012 | 6 | 71/22 72/3 72/1 | ds [6] 16/6 41 | g [9] 8/8 |
| 12/6 12/14 14/9 15/11 | whatever [3] |  | 41/22 70/15 | 812 |
| 16/2 17/23 19/18 23/4 | $8 / 762$ | who's [3] 5 | 73/19 | 17 28/11 49/2 |
| 26/1 34/17 34/24 | wh | 66/8 | work [15] 6/13 10/5 | 75/20 |
| 547115 | 47/21 47/24 | whoever | 37/21 39/24 | wrote |
| 65/21 67/2 | 65/ | whole [2] 23/23 36/9 | 45/3 61/2 61/13 61/23 | 41/19 73/2 73 |
| [1] | when [65] | wholly [1] 39/25 | 65/2 65/5 65 | Wyn [3] 37/15 42/2 |
| way [10] $8 / 481$ | 7 | why [22] $5 / 58 / 14$ | 66/13 |  |
| 9/10 24/7 26/16 41/25 | 9/24 10/8 10 | /14 | worked [19] 3/ | $Y$ |
| 68/5 68/9 68/19 | 11/9 14/4 15/1 15/4 | 16/23 23/7 28/9 28/ | 6/12 12/8 14/13 14 |  |
|  | 15/23 16/14 17/22 | 33/11 44/23 45/10 | 34/21 36/15 39/10 |  |
|  | 21/1 22/2 22/9 | 45/12 45/22 47/19 | 44/5 44/8 | 61/19 66/9 67/2 69 |
|  | 26/9 26/10 28/5 29/2 | 48/18 50/16 56/25 | 45/8 45/23 65/1 | 70/8 70/14 71/10 |
|  | 29/10 29/10 32/20 | 61/23 65/5 68/16 | 69/16 $72 / 4$ | 71/24 $72 / 17$ |
| 76/10 76/11 | 32/25 33/16 34 | 72 | working [12] 3/3 33/2 | year [4] 1/22 8/2 |
| we're [7] 8 | 44/7 45/14 45/19 46/6 | Wickfield's [1] 44/22 | 45/18 60/19 61/8 61/9 | 45/2 |
| 16/7 16/8 31/4 43/2 | 46/7 46/15 47/4 47/16 | wife [1] 41/2 | 61/14 61/17 61/20 | ] |
| 63/9 | 50/11 51/1 51/10 | will [21] 10/14 12/1 | 62/21 65/674 | 2/13 2/15 3/2 3/8 36/1 |
|  | 52/12 54/15 55/18 | 12/12 15/2 16/6 | works [1] 73/5 | 36/2 36/6 36/7 37/17 |
|  | 57/2 58/5 60/13 60/14 | 28/9 29/18 37/5 38/1 | world [1] 3/13 | 9/14 40/2 42/19 |
|  | 61/8 61/19 64/12 65/3 | 38/2 38/5 38/15 41/10 | worried [1] 64/2 | /25 66/19 75/10 |
|  | 65/18 65/19 67/23 | /4 73/18 74/17 | Worries [1] 14/19 | 75/13 |
|  | 69/9 69/19 70/20 | 74/19 75/3 75/1 | worry [6] 14/25 15 | s [114] |
| Wednesday [4] 16/3 <br> 25/1 29/14 30/13 | 70/21 70/23 71/5 | /15 | 15/6 20/18 61/11 | sterday [1] 41/19 |
|  | 71/20 72/10 74 | WILLIAMS [2] 57/20 | 74 |  |
| 5 46/20 70/17 | where [14] 18/3 19 |  | se [3] 53/8 | [3] 8 |
| 's [1] 8/11 | 20/18 36/17 39/23 | window [2] 22/1 |  |  |
| ekends [1] 44/19 | 44/8 45/3 46/21 |  |  |  |
| ks [9] $25 / 23$ | 54/1 56/12 64/16 66/9 | wi | d [58] |  |
| 9/9 | 69/22 | wished [1] 41/16 | 12/23 17/10 17/10 |  |
| 49/10 49/11 52/16 |  |  |  |  |
| 6/9 65/11 | whether [7] 12/4 | withdraw [1] 12/2 | 25/17 26/10 26/11 |  |
| well [95] | 14/14 17/16 20/10 | withheld [1] 70/2 | 26/21 27/3 29/13 | 2/25 21/16 37/22 |
|  | 22/21 22/23 58/9 | within [4] 23/16 23/17 | 29/15 30/24 33/16 | 54/9 69/11 70/10 |

(36) want... - you've

| Y <br> you've... [1] 75/25 <br> youngest [1] 44/13 <br> your [84] <br> yourself [3] 38/24 <br> 47/3 55/5 <br> $\mathbf{Z}$ <br> zopiclone [1] 67/14 |  |  |  |  |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |

