

Witness Name: Ms Janice Adams

Statement No. WITN0240_01

Exhibits: None

Dated: 7 January 2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS JANICE ADAMS

I, MS JANICE ADAMS WILL STATE as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. I am grateful to the Chair to be invited to provide a “human impact” statement, concerning the physical, psychological, emotional, reputational and financial consequences to me and my family of being held responsible for shortfalls shown by the Horizon IT system and Post Office Limited’s actions toward me and my family. The initial paragraphs below provide a brief summary of my background, and provide context to the detail of the human impact of the Horizon scandal on me and my family. This statement does not reflect a full account of my experiences or those of my family and if necessary or required I will provide further witness statement evidence.

BACKGROUND

2. I still live in Hawthorne behind the post office I previously ran. I now rent the old shop area to hairdressers. My ex-partner still lives in the property but we have been completely separated for the past 6 years.
3. I have one daughter and two sons who have all grown up and moved out. My children, grandchildren, parents and sisters all live locally.

4. Before becoming a subpostmaster, I worked at the Inland Revenue for 24 years from 1976. I enjoyed working at Inland Revenue.
5. When I was a child my dad would buy me post office play sets and so I had always fancied owning my own Post Office since a child.
6. My partner at the time had also wanted us to run the post office and retail business and so when the opportunity to own a post office came up we looked at it and went through the motions.
7. I became a subpostmistress because I wanted to own my own business. My children were young at the time and I thought that the post office was near their school and that I wouldn't have to get a child minder as the post office could work around my lifestyle.
8. I was a Subpostmistress of Hawthorn Post Office, **GRO**
GRO from 1 June 2000 to 9 May 2014. I lived in the attached property, which was big, as it was two cottages which had been knocked into one and we built extensions around the back.
9. The post office was separate and at the front of the premises. I liked the property and it was a nice place to raise family.
10. I operated a retail business from the premises which sold (amongst other things) stationery, confectionary and refreshments.
11. In 2014, the Post Office offered to move our post office to the shop across the road and I took redundancy from my position as Subpostmistress. Prior to our post office moving I employed two part time assistants.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

12. When I was appointed as subpostmistress on 1 June 2000, the branch operated a paper based accounting system. A Post Office worker came to my branch on the accounting days and did the accounts on the first 2 weeks.
13. Horizon was installed at my branch approximately 2 weeks after my appointment. Shortly thereafter, a trainer named Paul Jones attended my branch for around 2 weeks in order to train me to use the system.
14. Mr Jones stayed at my branch for the first week and showed me how to process a number of transactions on Horizon that I would be required to carry out on a daily basis. During the second week of my training, Mr Jones was only at the Branch intermittently, and he told me that he thought I was confident enough with Horizon to be left alone in the branch.
15. At the time, I was confident as Horizon seemed like it was an easy system and because I had worked with the Inland Revenue computer system, I thought the post office would be easier.
16. Mr Jones also came to my branch on the balancing days for the following 2 weeks.
17. I attended a classroom training session in relation to stamps prior to my appointment at the Branch. However, this training did not cover the Horizon system at all. My niece came with me as at the time she was going to work for me. The training was more like a maths class, and it was pathetic and laughable, as it didn't teach us anything.
18. I did not attend any further training on Horizon. The Horizon system was learnt on the job.
19. I received booklets from Post Office Limited but no further training.

HELPLINE

20. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline around once a week with regard to problems relating to alleged shortfalls and or balancing issues. I reported unexplained shortfalls to the Helpline, and I was usually just told that it was my responsibility to make good the losses.
21. Shortly after my appointment, a large unexplained shortfall occurred at the Branch. I believe that this was approximately £5,000. I reported this to the helpline and Paul Jones was sent to the Branch to try to resolve the issue.
22. Mr Jones Paul was really helpful, but he could not find any mistakes within the transaction logs and eventually, concluded that it may have occurred due to my inexperience in operating the system.
23. I did not think that this conclusion was fair at all and there was no evidence to suggest that any mistakes had been made. It was awful because we went over and over the discrepancy trying to find the mistake and in the end all the Post Office said was that I had to pay it back. It was a lot of money to pay back, I was struggling with expenses for my children and my partner was not contributing to finances.
24. When other shortfalls kept happening I was putting the money in every week, it wasn't worth ringing the Helpline as all they would say is pay the money.
25. It was annoying because if it was a mistake I would find it but being told to pay for a mistake I couldn't find was frustrating.
26. The helpline were not very helpful. They would only give very general answers and say that they would look into the issue but I would always have to sort out the problem myself. It felt like Helpline operators were reading from a script and it didn't seem like they were talking to you. There was no empathy from the Helpline operators and they were very matter of fact.

27. After the large shortfall of £5,000, a Post Office representative said he was going to come and sit behind my counter all night to see if anyone was sneaking in to my post office, or that he would install a security camera to see if staff were stealing money; but in the end he did nothing and the Post Office took money out of my pay.

SHORTFALLS

28. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon IT System, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, in order to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.
29. I would estimate that throughout my position in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) well in excess of £5,000. It was easy to forget about the smaller shortfalls as I would just automatically be putting money in.
30. The branch accounts never seemed to balance and shortfalls occurred on a weekly basis. The weekly deficit was usually around £50 but it was higher on occasions. I used to put these amounts in to the system in cash in order to continue to trade the next day.
31. I had a shortfall of approximately £5,000 in or around August/September 2000. The Post Office deducted this amount by way of monthly instalments from my salary. I settled the £5,000 centrally so that I could continue to trade the following day.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

32. During my appointment at the Branch, I believe that 4 audits were carried out. The auditors were very stern, they just turned up without notice and told me to shut up my post office because they were doing an audit. I would have to get out of the auditors way and I was not able to see what they were doing.

33. It wasn't the best of days when the auditors turned up. They turned up like police conducting searches. The auditors were very intrusive and the audits were not good for customers as they would be queuing up outside wondering what was happening but having the post office closed made it look like I were being investigated.
34. The final audit took place in or around May 2014 when the Branch was closed. The auditors were not very friendly towards me and it seemed as though they were expecting to find problems in the accounts before they even began the audit process. After each audit, I had to pay back alleged shortfalls, although the auditors did not offer any explanation as to why or how these had occurred. If there was a shortage I would draw money out of my personal account and put it into the post office.
35. At the time I believed that an investigation was being conducted as I was told by my area manager there would be an investigation. I felt that they were investigating me and my staff and pointing the finger at my staff.
36. I was asked by the Post Office whether anybody had been left on their own or if somebody had taken their chance and taken the money. The Post Office said that they had discussed lots of ideas, but in end put it down to my lack of experience and told me to pay the shortfall back and that I had made a mistake that wasn't showing up.
37. I found this deeply unfair, as I would realise a mistake relating to such a large amount of money.
38. For example, I remember one mistake where a man was withdrawing £1,000 and I had pressed wrong button resulting in a £2,000 shortfall. Straight away I realised what I had done and so I called the man and he came back and we made it right.
39. I was and am a careful person, with a great deal of experience having worked at the Inland Revenue for so many years. I am meticulous and do not make casual mistakes.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

40. I was not suspended by the Post Office. I was made redundant by the Post Office as part of the Network Transformation scheme.
41. By this point I was more than willing to go as I had had enough. My children had grown up they were all employed. The last 4 years were difficult and the wages weren't the same as Post Office Limited had cut down work and taken away things that that earned more money, and replaced them with little jobs that took more time but resulted in less money.
42. I was also always having to pay shortfalls, which was a constant drain. The cost of living going up but wages weren't. I felt like it was time to move on.

LOSSES

43. I was led to believe that I had no alternative but to pay the shortfalls and I believed that a thorough and fair investigation had determined that payment was due. I paid the Post Office well in excess £5,000.
44. It was a stressful job and I would be upset and worried about paying bills but I try to deal with things and get on.

HUMAN IMPACT

45. I suffered serious problems with the Horizon system including shortfalls. I was not threatened with prosecution as I agreed to pay the alleged shortfalls to the Post Office, which I did from my own funds.
46. I was involved in the mediation scheme in 2013 and received £5,000. I was a party to the group litigation against Post Office Ltd and as a result I am excluded from the Historic Shortfall Scheme.

47. My problems with the Horizon system started straightaway, the Post Office put the idea in my mind that the discrepancies were down to my not understanding the computer system.
48. When I reported the discrepancies to the Post Office they made me feel like I was stupid and that I had made mistakes. It made me feel incompetent even though I knew I wasn't. I could sort out mistakes, I just couldn't find them.
49. If you had made mistakes you would spot it. I thought I was doing quite well but there were always niggles in my mind about shortfalls, and when I contact the Post Office they would say the shortfalls are my responsibility. I got on with it until I had a large shortfall and the auditors came to my branch, this was frightening.
50. The Post Office made me feel like it had to be my fault some way.
51. As a result of being required to make good the shortfalls, I was always struggling and I got into a serious amount of debt, which has taken me 20 years to pay back.
52. I would use money from my retail business and my personal account to pay the shortfalls.
53. The lack of income made it hard for me to pay my staff. It was a struggle and put a lot of stress on me.
54. I found it very hard when I was alleged to responsible for the shortfalls, I would very often spend all night on balance day trying to work out how the errors had occurred. I would still be checking and hoping that the alleged shortfall amount would show up by the next balance.
55. I would be crying every Wednesday night when I was balancing.

56. Because the post office was at the front of my home I would be spending long hours there, which took away from my family time.
57. As a result of being held responsible for the shortfalls I lost sleep regularly, as I would stay up at night wondering what I personally was doing wrong.
58. I often suffered with migraines due to stress. I tried medication for my migraines but they didn't work. Since the post office has been gone I no longer have migraines, I haven't had them in years, not like I used.
59. I'm in quite a stressful job now as a carer, but I don't feel stressed because whilst I think being a carer is a responsible and hard job, it is not my problem when I leave work at the end of the day. This is a big difference from the post office as the post office was my problem when I left at the end of the day and it would be my problem when I went anywhere. I would never do anything like the post office again.
60. I had added stress, as people would knock my door and shout up at bedroom windows when they had issues with the card machines. I was the post master and I was the postmaster 24/7. It stressful in and out of work.
61. My experience was that the Post Office viewed the shortfalls as my fault and that I was a new postmaster, and the Post Office were treating the discrepancies as errors made due to the fact that I was new.
62. I had to make an agreement with the Post Office for me to pay back the money over two years through my pay, as they said that it was my responsibility. This meant that I had less money each month but there was nothing I could do about it. This in turn caused hardship.
63. A subpostmistress nearby was sacked and because there was talk all around us about postmasters I thought people were stealing. It was surreal and didn't link it all up for a long time

64. The girls who worked for me got stressed by the shortfalls, as they felt that the shortfalls were their fault and that they had made a mistake. They worried about it as much as I did.
65. My family and friends were supportive of me. My children were young at the time and were not really aware of the issues. My daughter who was 13/14 years old at the time would look after the boys make them food.
66. My neighbour owned the post office before me, and was sympathetic towards my situation. She said when she ran the post office she operated on the paper ledger system, and would be able to find mistakes. She would come and help me when I was balancing and she would say that the discrepancies didn't make sense as couldn't find any mistake.
67. The local Community were not aware of the issues at the time.
68. As a result of the issues with the Horizon system, I spent less time at home with my three young children, and it affected the whole family as I would not being there at home with them. My family was not able to go on holidays as we were short of money.
69. The issues with the post office put a strain on relationship, my partner at the time never helped and he would blame me for the shortfalls and say that it was my fault and I needed to pay the money. He would get angry and upset over the shortages and would get in a mood and speak to nobody. This in turn added to my stress.
70. I kept things to myself as I don't like upsetting other people if I can help it.
71. My mum is a bit of worrier and so she would have been upset if I told her about the problems I was having with the Post Office. I would have liked to talk to her and share my stress but she worries about us having problems and It was easier if I didn't say anything.

CONCLUSION

72. I had loved the post office in the beginning, but things got harder and harder and I was glad to get out in the end.
73. My life is better now. I have a lovely family and I am now enjoying life which I wasn't when all problems with Horizon started.
74. The post office was my dream, and everything was going wrong, it spoilt the experience and made it hard.
75. Every time I go to my local post office people say to me that I never told them how bad it was.
76. I try to get on with my life and not think about the Post Office but I think a lot of subpostmaster's are struggling.
77. I think Post Office Limited are disgusting for what they have hidden. I feel for subpostmaster's involved, those who went to prison or have criminal records and and for their families. Post Office can never give that back.
78. What Post Office Limited has done is horrendous and Post Office Limited still don't want to do anything about it.
79. I want to help others and for the public to know all about the Horizon scandal so something can happen for these people who need it.
80. I would like those responsible to be held to account. The people who knew and hid the problems with Horizon definitely have to be held to account.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this Statement to be true.

Signed.....

GRO

Dated.....

7th January 2022