chemists shops, so the pharmacy was bought by a new chap and he had about four of five different shops, one of which was Summerhill Post Office which was about half a mile from where I eventually ended up.

So he wanted to get that Post Office out of his pharmacy. He had previously arranged for another chap to take it on and move the entire thing to a small set of shops about a quarter of a mile away. That deal fell through and then in the ensuing months he offered it to me.

Now, as a single parent with two young girls I didn't really have the finances or anything to go into it but he assured me that he had enough money put aside to help set me up in it and then l'd take it on from there. So after much contemplation I decided I would go for it and got a small business loan and then moved into the new shop, which was just an empty shell when I started, so I created the entire business by myself. That was in 2009 we opened our doors and I was there until being unceremoniously thrown out of it 2016.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay. So a fair bit of time then. Thank you, Kathryn. That's good to know.

Do you want to tell Sir Wyn why you wanted to join this focus group this afternoon.

KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Well, really just to be seen, to be heard, and most of all to be believed, and a chance to tell my story ahead of the -- hopefully -- eventual compensation that comes my way.
FACILITATOR: Right. Thank you, Kathryn. Thanks for joining us today.

So, Pam, could I come to you next if that's okay, just to tell us about yourself and what's made you want to join us today.
PAM CAVANAGH: Yes, Pam Cavanagh. I was postmaster at Woodhall Way branch in Beverly, East Yorkshire, from November 2014 to December 2020. It was a newsagents and a mains branch with three counters.

My daughter and I embarked on the venture together because I was just winding down a previous business and wanted one last challenge before I retired, and the idea was that after a few years then my daughter would take the business forward and I would hand over the role of postmaster to her. I thought that would have been an easy thing to do at the time.

Why am I here? Well, the impact on me hasn't been in any way as significant as many, many other people but I do have quite a few stories to tell and I feel that I've been very lucky. So maybe I just
wanted you to see what a good luck story looked like.
FACILITATOR: Thank you. That's interesting.
Well, that's certainly, Sir Wyn, part of his remit is to hear the whole range of experiences so please do feel, you know, you can share as much as you want to on that. So thanks, that's helpful. Thank you, Pam.

Finally, Michael, do you want to tell us a little bit about yourself and why you've joined us this afternoon?

MICHAEL BROWN: Yes, certainly. I am now 77. I joined -I acquired, purchased, a sub-post office in 1997 and it was a newsagents/tobacconist/greetings' card vending operation. It had three tills on the Post Office counter.

I had some extensive banking experience. I knew what to -- or thought I knew what to expect from a computer system dealing with financial matters. My experience of Horizon was unfortunate, both for people who were using it and the customers who came expecting a first class service.

I didn't have much training. I think we had a training session away from the Post Office for one day and the two senior members of the Post Office staff were given a similar one-day experience. 5

FACILITATOR: We'll come on to talk about those processes very shortly. So that's good to know that you have got that.
MICHAEL BROWN: What's brought me today has been listening and researching what has occurred in the court cases that subpostmasters have brought. I was influenced by the podcast that Nick Wallis produced. This was originally broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Also a video I had from June last year of a seminar that the UCL organised, and they had as one of their speakers Mr lan Henderson who was with the Second Sight team that took on the task of finding out more about the Horizon System and the sad loss of that service because simply the Post Office kicked them out, which was really unheard of. The interview that Paula Vennells and her assistant gave at the House of Commons Select Committee was absolutely shocking.
FACILITATOR: Okay. So that's really helpful to know.
I think for the time that we have available today we'll want to focus on your own personal experiences and feelings and the impact of that, which isn't to say that all of this, the coverage has been very motivating to many people and obviously of great public interest. So thank you for sharing that. It's good to know where your starting point is, so thanks 6
very much. We'll certainly touch on some of these issues that you raised there and that's true of all of you.

So I would just like to take you right back to the start of when you were becoming a postmaster and I'm just interested to take us into, you know, what you were like at that time, what you were thinking, what your expectations were of the role and the choices you were making.

I wonder, Pam, if I could start with you, just to tell us a bit about, you know, the person you were, what you were hoping to get from it, just a few sentences about that.
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, as I mentioned, I was just winding up a previous business and that business was a recruitment, training, and business support company delivering public sector contracts. So we'd worked with DWP, Government Office, Learning Skills Council as it was then, various regeneration bodies, New Deal for Communities, all those sorts of -- so I'd held contracts with them and I kind of thought, well, this is just another public service contract and the relationship that you develop with those contract holders, I just assumed the Post Office contract would be the same.

I always had positive relationships with those other Government bodies, so I kind of assumed that that would be the same, so I assumed that I would have some sort of relationship manager, if that's the right word, or contract manager who would support me, who I could go to, who would maybe work together.

And I wanted to develop the Post Office side of the business. So it was a newsagent and sort of very small retailer as well as Post Office, obviously, but my interest was more in developing the Post Office side of the business and hope that we could increase sales, certainly on the travel products and the financial products, et cetera.
FACILITATOR: So in a quick word or phrase how would you describe your personal outlook on it then at that point?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, positive. Obviously, yeah, I wouldn't have sort of entered it if I wasn't sort of positive about the future and, as I say, because I wanted it long-term because, you know, I wanted it to be my daughter's business.

I mean, in the six years that we had it, I wasn't involved -- I only did a few shifts a week. I did all that back office stuff, the accounts, et cetera, and she was the officer in charge with 8
another member of staff. They sort of shared that role. So, yes, so it was meant to be a long-term venture.

FACILITATOR: Right, lovely. Thank you that's really helpful.

Kathryn, you talked a little bit about, you know, your start. Do you want to just tell us your frame of mind and your outlook when you started at the Post Office, as the subpostmaster specifically.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yes, well, I successfully managed a small branch about a mile away, Lewis Road Post Office, for about -- that was like a two-counter Post Office, the same size as mine eventually would be. So I'd successfully managed that for, you know, five years or so when the new owner took over and he had assumed the pharmacy up the road, which was Summerhill. So, as I say, I mean, he sort of first involved me in that branch because it was being run so badly by the staff that they had there. He sort of sent me up there and said, "Can you kind of go in there and sort it out", so I went up --
FACILITATOR: At the Lewis Road branch then were you working on the accounts and all that sort of thing as well as the -- (unclear: multiple speakers).
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yes. I was managing all that. The 9
pharmacist herself, she really didn't have any input into the Post Office so ...
FACILITATOR: Okay.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: So basically l'd gone up there and sort of got that branch on an even keel again and it was sort of a few months after that that he offered it to me and, you know, I mean, I was in a very comfortable place of life at the time so I was sort of thinking, "Well, my life's not broken really. Do I need to fix it? Should I do this?" I mean, it was a big commitment to take on with two children as well, but eventually I decided, "Yeah, yeah, I'll go for this, because I'll work this until my retirement and then I'll be able to either sell the branch or pass it on to one of my girls". So that was my intention, you know, and was sort of -- because I'm 59 now so that was -- I was probably just over 50 at the time, I thought, well, you know a good 10/12 years or so and I'll be able to retire and at least have enough for a bit going forward.
FACILITATOR: So how would you describe the attitude of that person that you were as you opened up on your first day?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Oh, I was fired up ready to go. I mean, I'd spent, you know, the previous few months 10
a reorganisation and after two very happy years working in Cardiff at the University Hospital of Wales, I was told that there was a consolidation going on and things were changing and, unfortunately, my post was being dispensed with. So I was made redundant.

I then secured a job as a business manager for a GP practice in Melksham in Wiltshire and, unfortunately, it was like a Civil War was going on amongst the partners. They didn't like women and, of course, the whole practice depended on about three nurses and a secretary and a receptionist who were all women. And the atmosphere was horrendous.
FACILITATOR: It looks like you've gone through substantial change in (unclear: multiple speakers).
MICHAEL BROWN: So I wanted something where I was -- well, I wanted to be needed I suppose and I felt I had the skills and personality that would make a success of a sub-post office. But, of course, various events turned the business into a difficult situation where suddenly the arrangements for paying pensions and child allowance was altered. They no longer came in with allowance books and you had to --
FACILITATOR: Can we come on to this in a sec then, the running of the branch in a moment, if that's all

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| 1 | right. | 1 | So it was very exciting. It was like I'd gone |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 2 | MICHAEL BROWN: Sure. | 2 | from just being an employee all of a sudden to owning |
| 3 | FACILITATOR: Thank you. So you said you sort of felt you | 3 | a post office and it was like, wow, so many plans. |
| 4 | had the skills and things. If you could sort of say | 4 | I was a florist. I thought I could open -- change it |
| 5 | one key factor that drew you to the Post Office what | 5 | to have the florist side of it and everything, but |
| 6 | would you say was the main thing, Michael? | 6 | actually running it, it just never -- it never ever |
| 7 | MICHAEL BROWN: It had a reputation at that time of being | 7 | happened because there was just -- I never got any |
| 8 | a substantial, honest, reliable institution. | 8 | help from the Post Office at all or basically it was |
| 9 | FACILITATOR: Okay, thank you. | 9 | just running the Post Office just took all the time. |
| 10 | MICHAEL BROWN: I felt warmed to that. | 10 | FACILITATOR: Right. |
| 11 | FACILITATOR: Yes, I can imagine. Right, thank you. | 11 | STEPHANIE COLE: So basically that never developed. |
| 12 | So, Stephanie, tell us a little bit about your | 12 | FACILITATOR: That leads us nicely on to what I was going |
| 13 | sort frame of mind when you started as | 13 | to ask you all next really is about those early days |
| 14 | a subpostmaster. | 14 | of running and what the experience of running it was |
| 15 | STEPHANIE COLE: Well, I kind of fell into it because the | 15 | like compared with what you were expecting. So just |
| 16 | previous subpostmaster had a heart attack. So | 16 | carry on telling us a little bit about that transition |
| 17 | basically they had to put the Post Office up for sale | 17 | then. |
| 18 | and she was training me up at the time to run the | 18 | STEPHANIE COLE: Well, basically, I was actually fully |
| 19 | Post Office without her and she, basically, said, "Do | 19 | trained by the time I took it on. I got two weeks' |
| 20 | you want it? I have to sell it", and I hadn't even | 20 | training up at Leeds and, basically, I sat in those |
| 21 | considered it then. I didn't even think anything of | 21 | two weeks and the bloke -- I can't remember the name |
| 22 | owning my own Post Office and the thought of actually | 22 | of the chap -- he just said to me, "You actually know |
| 23 | having my own business at the time, I just thought | 23 | all -- you don't need to be here. I don't know why |
| 24 | wow, and we literally scraped every cent we could | 24 | you have to be here. You may as well just go back to |
| 25 | together and got a loan and bought it off her. $13$ | 25 | work", so I just went back to work and, basically, all 14 |
| 1 | I can say is never once, did I get a Post person ring | 1 | questions and I helped answer questions that the |
| 2 | me. The account manager turned up the day that I got | 2 | people who were there didn't know, and there were |
| 3 | my date that I was leaving and introduced himself and | 3 | people that didn't know anything. |
| 4 | said, "l'm going to be your area manager. I'm sorry | 4 | FACILITATOR: Right, thank you. That's helpful to know. |
| 5 | I haven't got round to see you", and I just went, | 5 | So, Michael, just thinking briefly about your |
| 6 | "It's a bit late now", and that was -- | 6 | starting, what were your early experiences, including |
| 7 | FACILITATOR: (unclear: multiple speakers) | 7 | the training and getting to know Horizon? You started |
| 8 | STEPHANIE COLE: -- you know. And the only time I got | 8 | presumably at a paper-based time, Michael, did you? |
| 9 | a phone call from the Post Office was either to do | 9 | MICHAEL BROWN: Yes, it was. Horizon was introduced into |
| 10 | with Camelot or, basically, l'd put, in the fact of | 10 | our office in 2001. |
| 11 | the whole 11 years, l'd put two items in the wrong | 11 | FACILITATOR: So how would you describe the changes of |
| 12 | bags and I got told off for that and that was it. | 12 | that transition when Horizon -- |
| 13 | I had never had anything else from the Post Office. | 13 | MICHAEL BROWN: Well, I was looking forward to it because |
| 14 | FACILITATOR: So when was that that you started again, | 14 | I categorised the old system as very paper-based and |
| 15 | that training, going back to that, what year was that | 15 | you had a tonne of paper, absolute mountains of the |
| 16 | again, sorry? | 16 | stuff, and your ability to balance was -- well, it was |
| 17 | STEPHANIE COLE: That was 2009. | 17 | horrendous, you know. |
| 18 | FACILITATOR: Okay. Of those two weeks' training, how | 18 | FACILITATOR: How much training did you get in the |
| 19 | much of that was to do with Horizon and the accounts | 19 | preparations for Horizon arriving? |
| 20 | and that side of the operation. | 20 | MICHAEL BROWN: Well, I was very fortunate that the staff |
| 21 | STEPHANIE COLE: It was -- I have to say the training was | 21 | who were already at the Post Office when I acquired it |
| 22 | very good but he just -- he was just telling me stuff | 22 | were very experienced. They'd been there for |
| 23 | that I knew. | 23 | 10/20 years, very knowledgeable, very hard working and |
| 24 | FACILITATOR: Right. | 24 | when they suddenly left, I got terribly concerned. It |
| 25 | STEPHANIE COLE: And, basically, and he actually asked me 15 | 25 | was fortunate that when we put an advert in the shop 16 |

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window, you know, staff wanted, I got two outstanding, experienced ladies who came along and said, "Yes, we would like to work here".

FACILITATOR: Was that before Horizon arrived?
MICHAEL BROWN: That was before Horizon.
FACILITATOR: Okay.
MICHAEL BROWN: And the anxiety I felt when the original staff decided to move on up the road to another rival Post Office, it was swiftly overcome by how grateful I felt to the ladies who had come forward and applied for a job.

FACILITATOR: Okay.
MICHAEL BROWN: And worked very well for us.
FACILITATOR: Right.
So, Pam, when you started with the Post Office how much training and preparation did you feel you had, given where you'd come from?

PAM CAVANAGH: To be fair, the training, the initial training was quite good. My daughter and I went over to Leeds. I think it was five or even six days' training, off-site training, and then we obviously had the business transfer where the trainer auditor was with us for a week. So to be fair that was probably the best experience of the six years.

So -- and we had staff already working in there, 17
you know, experienced staff working in the business. The person that I bought the business from was very, very helpful. So we had a whole range of support and were quite comfortable that we had the training and the skills obviously that were required to get off the ground, yes. So that was initial, yes.
FACILITATOR: When Stephanie was mentioning, you know, that she saw virtually nothing of her area manager or anyone outside her office, how was that for the rest of you? What kind of support or resource did you have from the wider organisation of Post Office Limited?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, I think from my perspective, as I said, I kind of assumed that you would have this like -- you would build a relationship with somebody in the Post Office. But as Stephanie said, exactly the same. The only time I had a contact direct from the Post Office, initiated by the Post Office, was when I'd done something wrong and I think it was three occasions, once when we had a customer complaint, once -- I think probably the same as Stephanie when we'd put something in the wrong bag. I'd forgotten about that one. Once when I settled centrally and -settled a cash loss centrally, and once when we had a break in.
FACILITATOR: Right.

PAM CAVANAGH: And that was it. Nothing else -- nothing at all.
FACILITATOR: Right, thank you.
Kathryn, were your experiences of the wider organisation different to what Stephanie and Pam have described?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Well, a little bit. Because I'd managed the other post offices, I had had contact with our area manager, Frances, and she was very good. So she oversaw the, you know, the translocation from this branch, from the pharmacy down to the shop that I eventually had. So Frances was -- yeah, she was involved and, you know, if I had any major issues I could get a hold of her but again I'd had that relationship with her for a number of years. So that was quite good.

Then unbeknownst to me the Network Transformation Programme was about to be launched and I think that was when Frances retired. So she perhaps saw the writing on the wall and thought, "I don't want to be part of this", and so she retired at that stage and then any contact with any, you know, Post Office sales managers was then either over the phone or via the internet but I think I had maybe one conversation in the ensuing three or four years with that sales
manager. That was it, really.
It just got passed on and, "Here's a list of numbers. You come under this area. Any problems ring this person", if you can get hold of them of course, and that was it really. I mean, once the Network Transformation system kicked in, you know, they all seemed to hide their heads below the parapet and there wasn't much going on.
STEPHANIE COLE: (unclear: multiple speakers) as well. Sorry to interrupt. NFSP.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yeah.
STEPHANIE COLE: They were the better people to actually know because you got the little -- when you were a member you got the little brochure and you were invited to the monthly things and so basically you learnt more there and met more people and found out things that you didn't know.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yeah. They were essentially just sales classes really, a lot of those. I didn't go to the NFSP ones, whenever the Post Office managed -- they had little sales classes on new products coming out, like telephones and stuff like that and ...
FACILITATOR: So obviously Sir Wyn and I have never run a post office branch. So when things started to unravel or you had a problem or, you know, however big 20
or small, what was your kind of support system to resolve things?
STEPHANIE COLE: Each other. You rang another Post Office and went help, and you just rallied round and they just said, "We did it this way", and you followed suit. That's it. That's all we had. We had literally other postmasters, subpostmasters.
FACILITATOR: What should you have been doing, assuming that you weren't told to call somebody else? So what was the official route to get support, Stephanie?
STEPHANIE COLE: Go down the telephone and ring the helpline, but the helpline, you never got any answers, and you put customer waiting because there was a customer waiting it was like, oh yeah, there's a ten minute wait on the phone line. By that time you have already texted another Post Office and they have told you the answer, so basically -- and then by the time you got round to the telephone call it was like, "Well, the customer's gone now. I've sorted it", you know.
FACILITATOR: Okay. We'll come back to the helpline in a moment then. So l'd just like to think about the actual events that happened just so that Sir Wyn can get in his head of what happened when. Do you want to start telling us when things -- you started to notice 21

PAM CAVANAGH: That was, you know, standard practice, you know. I actually did contact -- I don't know whether it was the helpline or my contract manager and said, you know, "Is this the right thing to do? I just take this cash out and stash it at home and wait for the next time?"
"Oh yeah, yeah, that's absolutely the right
thing to do." So it was common knowledge that everybody was doing the same and I was just lucky that, apart from one particular instance that, you know, generally it kind of balanced out.
FACILITATOR: How often was it happening then that you were getting either an up or a down?
PAM CAVANAGH: How often, did you say?
FACILITATOR: How often would those discrepancies appear in either direction?
PAM CAVANAGH: Oh, well, monthly. Yeah, monthly.
FACILITATOR: Every trading period?
PAM CAVANAGH: Oh God, yeah. Yeah, yeah. I remember the first significant one was actually a $£ 600$ gain and $£ 600$ was the amount of money that our senior citizens tended to draw out from their Post Office card account and it was exactly $£ 600$ gain, which suggested that we'd not -- we'd done the transaction but not handed over $£ 600$. Well, it's just like -- no, it's, just not
things going wrong and l'm particularly thinking about the accounting side of did, you know. Obviously, I understand the network changes and all that. But thinking about when the accounting started to feel like something was going wrong, do you want to tell us about some of those events. Anybody sort of shout out what started to go wrong.

Don't worry about the dog, Michael.
MICHAEL BROWN: I'll just nip out and let her out into the garden.
FACILITATOR: Don't worry about it. So we won't start with Michael.

Pam, when did you start to notice things going wrong accounts-wise and Horizon-wise?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, to be honest, I mean, really from day 1. Our balance was always -- it was up and down like a yoyo. We got gains, we got losses, and that's why I said, you know, l've not been impacted half as much as anybody else because a lot of the time you would have a gain at the end of the month. I'd take the cash out and I'd take it home with me and I'd have it in a little stash here ready for the next time we had a loss and sure as eggs is eggs we had a loss, and that was --
FACILITATOR: You'd take the physical money, you mean? 22
possible that that -- that somebody would walk away without taking any money. So yeah, yeah.

So it was, oh, every month. If the cash was
okay -- I mean, the stock certainly was up and down again, maybe to a lesser extent, but the cash was up and down.
FACILITATOR: Can I just clarify something you said, that when you spoke to the contract manager or the helpline they specifically said to take the Post Office cash home with you --
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, yeah, to -- (unclear: multiple speakers)
FACILITATOR: -- in order to reimburse the --
PAM CAVANAGH: To keep it to one side, yeah, yeah, I just decided take I'd home. I was like, it's in a separate place and yeah. Yeah, I was told that was -- yes, that was normal practice.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay, thank you.
So, Kathryn, you were nodding there when Pam was talking. Do you want to tell us a bit about the events that happened when things financially started to appear wrong?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Well, I mean, there was really -- when I started managing the other post offices, I mean, they would have problems, again that $£ 600$ amount, you 24
see, that's the maximum withdrawal on a card account, so whether a clerk had made a mistake or whatever, that would come up even with the prior post offices that I was running, and then the pharmacist who was listed as postmaster would have to pay that money in, and so I witnessed that a few times.

Then when I took over my branch, I would say consistently, nearly every single trading period I was somewhere between $£ 100$ and $£ 250$ out, and usually it was a discrepancy.

Now, over the years I was sort of trying to figure out why is this happening every month? Every month? I thought maybe it was something to do with the special stamps that we -- because there would be an issue that would be put out and then they would be put back into regular stock after a certain amount of time and maybe that transfer process was wrong or something and so, you know, consistently over those years, I mean, there was nearly $£ 200$ a month that was going into the Post Office that I had to pay from my shop side.
FACILITATOR: Right, and over what period of time was that happening?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Oh, that was from the moment I opened.
FACILITATOR: Until ...?
balance figures did you have a different person to call on that versus a standard Horizon stock or cash query?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Kind of, as I recall. There was like a training person that they'd sent over. So she'd come to the office for a few days and then we'd work through the process together. But basically, I mean, it was -- we sort of got it under control and then it was another couple of years down the track after an armed robbery attempt that had happened at my shop as well. It was about three or four months or two or three months after the robbery attempt I think that they sent the audit team in.
FACILITATOR: We'll come on to the audit in a moment, if that's okay. Just so l've got the events clear then, this sounds, if I have understood you right, as a fairly prolonged period where you were having discrepancies in either direction, a bit like Pam just mentioned.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yes and most --
FACILITATOR: (unclear: multiple speakers)
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Most times were, you know, rather than ring the helpline, "To hell with it, just put the money in. That's all they're going to tell me". You know, so nearly every month it was 200 out of my shop 27

KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Until 2016. So that was over a six/seven year period.
FACILITATOR: Right.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: And then in the last probably six months of my trading was when the bigger problems started happening.

It was maybe a couple of years before I was closed that I had built the business up enough -there's a bit of a story going on in there as well but I had an ATM installed at the front of my shop and so I'd had massive problems balancing this ATM because when it was installed, the engineer and the workmen who helped install it, well, that engineer handed me over a notebook or a manual of some sort and said, "Right, there you go", and that was basically all the training that I'd had on this ATM.

So, you know, consequently as the months went on I would do a process wrong because I didn't know what I was doing and we would be out on the ATM and so eventually I requested from the Post Office and they did send somebody down to give me a training session on how to do the ATM and how to run the separate stock unit and all the rest of that, so we sort of got that on board once I understood the process a lot better.
FACILITATOR: So if there was a problem with an ATM 26
till that would go into the Post Office till.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay. Thank you.
So, Michael, how do these experiences compare with what happened to you when things started going wrong for you?
MICHAEL BROWN: Well, as I say, Horizon was installed at my office in 2001 and immediately we started noticing discrepancies, and the bug bear of the Horizon System was that there was no audit trail that you could follow through to the end. It was all hidden. Discrepancies of the order of $£ 50$ were common. Discrepancies got larger and I can't remember precisely the dates but we had a discrepancy over $£ 2,000$ which was identified in the foreign currency stocks we had.

When I look back, we only had a stock of about $£ 5,000$, so to lose $£ 2,000$ of $£ 5,000$ was just out of order. It couldn't have happened. We rang the helpline. They gave us all sorts of advice which didn't result in a conclusion. We phoned the area manager and got her to come down and discuss what had gone on and how we were trying to trace it and she said, "Oh right, I'll take away all your paperwork and I'll get back to you."

Well, she just didn't get back. We tried 28
reaching her and she was never available to take our calls. It was hide and seek.

FACILITATOR: Can you remember when that was, Michael, roughly speaking?
MICHAEL BROWN: It was about six/seven years into the Horizon System. So it would be 2009 or thereabouts.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay, thank you.
So, Stephanie, to what extent do you recognise these experiences? Is it --
STEPHANIE COLE: To be honest with you, my discrepancies weren't -- I didn't have a lot of discrepancies. I just noticed, I don't know if it's got any relevance or anything, but if I took a new member of staff on to cover me I basically had a discrepancy like a month later and I took two members of staff on and I had two discrepancies and there was no way I could find that they'd done anything wrong in that at all. There was no way it could have been -- it was a small Post Office. I don't handle a lot of money, you know exactly what's coming in and going out, and when I asked the previous subpostmaster, she said the same thing to me. She said she'd taken somebody on, and that was me, and she'd had a small discrepancy, roughly about the same kind of money that I had. So I kind of thought is that something to look 29

FACILITATOR: What possible routes did you have to find out what had happened, where the money was, why it had happened? This is question to all of you really. What could you have done to have unravelled it?
STEPHANIE COLE: You just went through everything. You just went through how you've been taught to, you know -- you'd go through the reams and reams of paper and tally up what you'd done and cross-reference everything and count all the currency and count -- you know what I mean? It just -- it wasn't there. It was like it's -- everything's right. Where is that money gone, you know.
FACILITATOR: How about the rest of you then? How does Stephanie's experience chime with the rest of you or is it different?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Oh my goodness, just, you know, the reams and sheets of paper. You would get a report from the printer, basically, and I would run off transaction logs for every single transaction of that day and I would sit and go through every transaction. I mean, the last sort of 18 months of my business I was in sole charge because I couldn't afford to hire anybody really, so I would be able to go through and go, "Right, well, I remember that transaction, I remember that transaction".
into? Is that perhaps where a glitch is in the system, because if you can't -- if you couldn't find anything -- that you'd done anything wrong or you'd not given any money out extra or anything like that, where's it gone or where's it -- you know, electronically-wise. And I thought, well, maybe that's somewhere hidden in the program that that's what they do, but it could be in any of the program, you know what I mean.

So, kind of, I never really had at the end of the month any issues with the money side of things. My money was always right, because I'm so small a Post Office. But that bit of -- the time it panicked me totally. It was like, "What have I done? What have I done?" The helpline didn't give me -they just, like you said, they just said, "Well, if you can't find it you'll have to stay", and I stayed until like 11 o'clock at night going over and over and over and there was no way I could have done it wrong and all they just said was put the money in, like you say.
FACILITATOR: So what are describing there echoes a bit what Michael was saying about it sort of being hidden and no audit trail.
STEPHANIE COLE: Yes. 30

STEPHANIE COLE: That's it, yes.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: You know, there were other things. We had problems with the telephone line. Every time the computer went down it seemed that there would be a discrepancy as well. So, you know, we were told that whatever was in the stack would be saved but, hello, a discrepancy would come up almost to the penny, you know, and you'd have to ring the helpline, reboot, do everything that they told you and it seems that like some of those transactions just maybe disappeared off into electronic lala land and were never seen again, you know.
PAM CAVANAGH: (Unclear)
FACILITATOR: Sorry, Pam, what was ...?
PAM CAVANAGH: Sorry, I was going to just say about outages. I remember one really weird experience where my colleague was in the fortress and I was on the open counter and her screen went off. She was in the middle of serving somebody. Her screen went off and let's say the total transaction was $£ 17$-something, £17, let's just round it up. I'd just finished a transaction so she shouted, "Is your screen off?"
"No, no, mine's fine". Anyway, then it went off. Then they both came back on and she thought she'd finished the transaction off. At the end of the 32
night when we cashed up she was $£ 17$ down. So she was like, "Oh, this transaction mustn't have gone through. I don't understand". I was $£ 17$ up.

So somehow this transaction had moved from one stock unit to another. It was just -- so that was just one weird moment.
FACILITATOR: So how did it actually feel at that time then? How did you all feel when these discrepancies in any direction were happening? What was your overriding feeling?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, I suppose it's frustration and -just frustration. You can't find it, can you. It's like there is no way to find something that probably doesn't exist because it's been wiped off by the system. I don't know. It's just frustration and we got to the point like everybody else has described where you just really, you almost accept it and you just put the money in or you take it out or ... yeah.
STEPHANIE COLE: Well, I couldn't afford to pay for one of mine. I had to arrange with the Post Office to take it off my wages, you know, over four months.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Been there done that.
FACILITATOR: Can you tell me about that process, Stephanie, of how it got to that point from the day that you found the discrepancy to being -- having it 33
deducted from your remuneration.
STEPHANIE COLE: Well, basically --
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Can I just interrupt a sec. Just before you go on to that, there's a thought niggling in my head which is for you, Mrs Cole, so can I just ask you to deal with my niggle first. My niggle is that you, I think I have understood you, you seemed to be thinking that somehow Horizon in your branch was less unreliable -- those are my words not yours but it's a summary -- because you were a small branch with a comparatively small turnover.

First of all, is that what you are trying to tell me and, if so, why do you think that is?
STEPHANIE COLE: No, I think what I'm trying to say is because I didn't have -- the customer base wasn't high. So basically I knew all my customers and I knew what they took out every week and I knew what they did. I didn't get somebody just off the road coming in, if you know what I mean. I knew what my takings were and I knew all, you know, that was coming and going and the kind of monies that I was dealing with. So basically if I was wrong, it was like I know what I've been dealt with that daytime so how can that be? That's what I mean by the small Post Office side of things.

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$£ 1,000$.
FACILITATOR: In that process between that discovery and that being deducted what was done to try and unravel what had happened or what efforts did they make to help?
STEPHANIE COLE: Nothing. All I did was I just went through and through -- in fact, I even got a colleague who covered for me to come in and see if she could help me because I was just at a wit's end with it and, basically, she couldn't find it either. She says, "I don't know what's happened", and basically we didn't -- that was it. There was nothing. I just sat with reams of paper going through everything and thinking, "Have I paid too much money out to somebody? Has somebody fiddled something with me?" You know, and that kind of thing, and there was nothing. I knew there was nothing I'd done.
PAM CAVANAGH: That was one of the problems that you actually got suspicious of staff.
FACILITATOR: Pam, do you want to tell us your process from discovering the discrepancies to whatever happened to resolve them or recover the money or whatever?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, maybe the only time that I actually pressed "settle centrally", maybe that's the best 36
example because as I say we -- you know, you phone the helpline for small discrepancies and usually you couldn't find it because, as everybody else said, well, you know, you went through the transaction logs, but there was, as Michael said, there is no audit process, is there, behind -- on Horizon. So we're never going to find it.

But when I settled centrally, it was -- it's kind of a bit -- it's a long story really because it was on the combi counter so, you know, on the retail, next to our retail counter was the combi counter, which had a very small amount of cash in it and for some reason one of the staff had done what I would call a double declaration. So at the end of the day when you cash up you have to override the last day but there's a button that creates a second declaration.

So she'd done this and then the next couple of days she tried to rectify it by -- not by clearing it out, which we realised ultimately we should have done, but by trying to make it balance on the two declarations. So you have got two declarations add up to the total amount that was in the till.
FACILITATOR: So if l've got things straight did that make it look like one day it happened twice kind of thing?
PAM CAVANAGH: I'm not quite sure to be honest now. 37

FACILITATOR: Anyway, carry on.
PAM CAVANAGH: So then at the trading -- the trading period was the end of this week and she rolled over this till at the end of the week, which we always did that first because it was a small amount of money. When I came in to do the balance on the other, you know, on everything, the whole branch, it had already been rolled over.

For some reason, I have no idea why, it resulted in a $£ 1,500$ loss because it's almost like if you double declared -- I honestly don't know how it resulted in a $£ 1,500$ loss. I spoke to the helpline and I argued that this -- you know, this is basically a transaction. We know we've done something wrong, but it's about transaction not cash, and as Michael said there was maybe $£ 2,000$ in that till and the discrepancy was $£ 1,500$. Well, again, how can that be?

So to try and cut a very long story short, I settled centrally. Helpline said, "Oh, it will probably rectify itself next month", which was a standard phrase that they seemed to use. It obviously didn't.

I got my letter asking me to pay the money back. I got a phone call from a very obnoxious man asking me how I was going to pay the money back and I said 38
no evidence that cash had gone missing.
This went on for ages, by email and ... so then I was called to a meeting in Chesterfield and they come up with -- let's say the period was a period of two trading period ends that I'd looked at, let's say until the end of August I think it was, they came up with some further transaction log information following that period end which seemed to suggest that there was -- that the discrepancy had occurred then. So it's almost like, I don't know, two months later that ...

To be honest, I'd lost the will to live really by that time and I couldn't do anything but accept what they were saying.
FACILITATOR: Did they tell you where they'd got this data from about the later --
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, they said it was obviously from my Horizon records but I still don't believe what they were saying. But I was on the back foot and I just couldn't -- I couldn't argue it at that point. By the time I got home I'd just lost the will to live and I just coughed up the money really.
FACILITATOR: What opportunity did you have to scrutinise the records that they were referencing?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, I didn't. I didn't. I suppose to be 40
(10) Pages 37-40
fair I could have. I could have said, "Let me take these records home and have a look at them", because I'd not gone -- they said l'd not gone far enough in terms of what I and my accountants were looking at.

So to be fair I could have said again, "No, I'm not happy with that", but to be honest I was just by that time ...
FACILITATOR: You'd lost the will to fight about it.
PAM CAVANAGH: Just give them the $£ 1,500$. I have to say the contract manager was like, "So are you going to pay it back?"
"Yeah, yeah."
"Right. How are you going to pay it back?"
"l'll send you a cheque", and it was like, "Ah, thank goodness for that. That's off my list", that was the sort of attitude that he had.
FACILITATOR: Roughly speaking, how long was it between the first, when that first emerged, and you sending the cheque off for $£ 1,500$.

PAM CAVANAGH: Oh, it was 16 or 17 months. They did apologise for the amount of time it had taken.
FACILITATOR: Okay. How would you sum up their kind of communication and handling of that from their side of the fence in that time?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, when I asked for information it took 41
so long to get it. I had to deal with -- (unclear)
There were no clear lines of communication anywhere in the Post Office at all on any issue and you seemed to be passed from one person to another.

So I think there were probably about, well, four or five people that I spoke to within that process and I don't really know who they were or which department they were from because I never understood the structure of the Post Office.
FACILITATOR: Thank you. That's very helpful to get that.
Sir Wyn, I wonder do you have any questions on Pam's specific events before we move on?
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Well, only really to ask if you can try and pinpoint when the 17 months were. I know that you were at Beverley between 2014 and 2020, so can you give me some idea when this was?
PAM CAVANAGH: I think it was 2016 to -- I remember it happening in a July/August period so I think that's 2016.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: So the event was July/August and then it took about 17 months to resolve?
PAM CAVANAGH: Yeah, yeah.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: And if I said 2016/2017 that would be okay, would it?
PAM CAVANAGH: Yeah, yeah. 42

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Lovely. Thank you.
FACILITATOR: Thank you, Pam. A bit arduous for you to have to describe but I think we got a --
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, it's difficult to describe.
FACILITATOR: Thank you.
So, Kathryn, I don't think we've heard about your experiences with shorffalls or discrepancies.

Do you want to tell us a bit about what happened to you between discovering them and any resolution or otherwise, any end point?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Right, okay. Well, it's a bit of a story. So I took the shop over in 2009 and the first sort of -- I mean, my first real trading was 2010 so it was December 2009 I took it on, so from 2010 to 2013 I had had two part-time staff members and had run this little business by myself, basically. Discrepancies, like I say, going forward were around about 200 a month for some reason I couldn't fathom. I mean, every month I went into it and every month I decided, "No, I can't do this anymore", and I'll just roll over and pay the money.
FACILITATOR: Sorry to interrupt, was that normally $£ 200$ shortfall?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yeah, roughly that. Yeah, round about that. So, you know, for the years that I had been in 43
this business I just never found out why and when that was going on.

Right, so about December of 2013, so we're about three years into running this business quite successfully. We'd built up the trade quite a lot. It had been a -- the first year had been a bit difficult because we had relocated from the Post Office down into a very small group of five shops about quarter of a mile away.

The locals kind of knew where it was but then some of them went, oh, l'll go to the other Post Office or l'll go to that one. So it took a while and local advertising and stuff to build up my trade and kind of get that custom back again.

Over that three-year period we had done that and then it was I think about -- must have been about December 2013, I remember it was the day that Nelson Mandela died, right. But I had first heard of the Post Office opening up another branch within quarter of a mile of my shop, which was next to a large Tesco supermarket, which effectively was going to break my business in half because most people would go to Tesco and then pop across the street to that new local branch and do their Post Office work there rather than coming (unclear) to my branch.

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## So at that --

FACILITATOR: Is this a kind of a suburban area or what type of area?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Very suburban area, yeah.
FACILITATOR: Sorry to interrupt. Right, carry on.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: So in September 2013, now, I had heard the first heard of this, just a little side track, I had and was still in recovery from a nervous breakdown that I had had in the October previous. So October 2013 I had a complete nervous breakdown and was hospitalised for three weeks, basically due to stress. I hadn't slept in about 12 months. Everything got on top of me. I remember sitting and crying on the Post Office floor with reams and reams of paper round me trying to find out where the hell this money had gone. There was some discrepancy at the time. Eventually my brain broke. I couldn't take anymore.
FACILITATOR: Can I just -- sorry to interrupt again. So you mentioned about getting $£ 200$. So was this a cumulatively growing debt or shortfall?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: No, that $£ 200$ would have been paid monthly by me.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay, so what sorts of figures are we talking about when you --

KATHRYN ABERDEIN: I think we must have been talking around about anywhere over $£ 1,000$. I mean, I was basically running hand to mouth by that stage and so like I say, I mean, over a period of time, so I recovered from the breakdown, got back into the business and then it was, you know, a couple of months after that that I heard that they were opening another branch within quarter of a mile of me which was going to effectively kill my business.

Now, that branch did go ahead and open -- well, when I heard word of that from the locals, not from the Post Office, I tried for two or three days to get a hold of somebody. I think Frances the area manager had retired by that stage and I tried frantically to get a hold of somebody in management to say, "What the hell are you going? You're going to kill my branch. I can't cope with that kind of losses", you know. I didn't receive -- you know, whoever is not available or on holiday or whatever, so I couldn't get a hold of anybody.

Two days or three days later I received a letter from the Post Office offering me Network Transformation and we will give you $£ 83,000$ if you sell your business on but you must become a local. You're not big enough to become a main. You have to 46
later, I had been approached by the Post Office to install an ATM in my branch which would have given me perhaps another $£ 300 / £ 400$ remuneration a month but it more or less meant it was cutting the footfall into my branch because people would go to the machine instead of coming to the counter.

So I had to cut my staff back. I eventually ended up running the place virtually by myself and -let me think. So that must have been -- I actually launched a Go Fund Me to try and save my branch in October of 2014 because I was getting, you know, word from the bank that if I couldn't keep up my payments on the loan, et cetera, et cetera, that they were going to shut down my bank accounts. So I launched a Go Fund Me which eventually didn't end up having enough people sort of join it but what I did do was I put out a donation bucket in my Post Office for the regulars that came and bless them, I mean, over the period of two or three months I raised $£ 1,400$ in this donation bucket which was enough for me to buy some Christmas stock which I had to hang on until Christmas to get enough remuneration, you know, enough finances to go forward.

So we kind of held on there just by the skin of our teeth.

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| 1 | FACILITATOR: Yes. | 1 | I tried everything I could to get a loan but because |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 2 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: And built the branch up and then it was | 2 | I didn't own any property I couldn't get any |
| 3 | 2016 when the attempted robbery happened and then | 3 | financing. I was going to just try and put that money |
| 4 | a few months after that they came in with an audit. | 4 | in and keep trading. |
| 5 | Now, the losses that I'd accumulated or started | 5 | FACILITATOR: Okay, so aside from putting the money in to |
| 6 | accumulating were in the last six months of the | 6 | make good the apparent losses, what sort of steps and |
| 7 | business and they built up to around $£ 11,000$. | 7 | processes and support did you get to understand what |
| 8 | FACILITATOR: Right, okay. So what was the trigger for | 8 | was happening or to resolve it before the audit was |
| 9 | the audit? Was that -- | 9 | activated? |
| 10 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: It would have been the robbery I think | 10 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Well, nothing really. I mean, you |
| 11 | but, you know, that was still two or three months | 11 | know, I 'd had -- I think over the years, once the ATM |
| 12 | after the robbery. I mean, you'd think they would | 12 | went in, I think there was maybe a $£ 2,500$ loss that |
| 13 | have done an audit the very next day. | 13 | I had to declare centrally and that was being removed |
| 14 | FACILITATOR: So the 11,000 that you mentioned, that | 14 | from my wages on a regular basis and stuff like that. |
| 15 | figure, and obviously I think anyone listening to you | 15 | FACILITATOR: Right, okay. Then the audit happened. Do |
| 16 | can hear how challenging this period was, so you find | 16 | you want to tell us a bit about that? |
| 17 | you've got an 11,000 -- sorry, what is the status of | 17 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yeah, well, I kind of arrived -- well, |
| 18 | that 11 , is that all shortfall or is it -- | 18 | I think I got a phone call from -- I had a part-time |
| 19 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: That's all shorffall, yeah, yeah. | 19 | worker, Doreen, who had been with me for many years |
| 20 | Yeah, that's accumulated over a period of about six | 20 | who rang up and said, "Well, I went to open up this |
| 21 | months, 1,000 here, 2,500 there, you know and -- | 21 | morning and the auditors were here and they are here, |
| 22 | FACILITATOR: Horizon shortfalls? | 22 | and you had better come in". And that's when |
| 23 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Horizon shortfalls, yeah, which | 23 | I thought, right, okay, the gig's up. They are going |
| 24 | I couldn't cover unfortunately, unlike some of the | 24 | to find this 11 grand. There's nothing I can do. |
| 25 | postmasters I've heard. I tried to hide those losses. $49$ | 25 | I've been trying to find and I've been trying to come 50 |
| 1 | up with financing to cover it and I couldn't come up | 1 | money go and that kind of thing. |
| 2 | with anything and so I thought, well, the gig's up | 2 | So we both went in there together. Now, because |
| 3 | really. | 3 | Elaine had worked in the branch with me, I mean, she |
| 4 | So as I walked in there they sort of said, okay, | 4 | had been the one that kept the branch going when I had |
| 5 | we're in the process of -- and I said, "Okay, well, | 5 | my breakdown so she knew the process quite intimately |
| 6 | I'll tell you now you'll be looking for about 11 | 6 | as well. And as we sat down and before he started |
| 7 | grand. I can't find it. I don't know where it is. | 7 | recording for this interview, he said to me, "First of |
| 8 | I've tried everything in my process to try and find | 8 | all, did you take the money?" And I said, "No, I'm |
| 9 | it". | 9 | not a thief. I didn't take the money. I don't know |
| 10 | So they finished their audit and came up with | 10 | where the hell the money's gone. I've been looking |
| 11 | a figure of something like about 13 or 14 grand, which | 11 | for it for months and I can't figure out what's going |
| 12 | is all of a sudden (unclear) they whacked more on me | 12 | on". He said, "Right, okay. Well, I'm just going to |
| 13 | there and I don't know where they're claiming that | 13 | give you an offer now. If you can say that you will |
| 14 | from. | 14 | pay this 11,00 or this 14,000 or whatever figure they |
| 15 | So then the branch was closed. I was told | 15 | had at the time "then that will be the end of this |
| 16 | I would have an interview with the contracts manager | 16 | process and we'll just call it quits from there. Can |
| 17 | at Altons, which was the local mail centre, that would | 17 | you pay the money back?" |
| 18 | be coming up in the next fortnight. | 18 | FACILITATOR: Who specifically was this conversation with |
| 19 | I don't think I bothered with the Federation at | 19 | then? |
| 20 | that point because I kind of knew how useless they | 20 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: I don't remember his name. |
| 21 | were I think by that stage. But what I had done when | 21 | FACILITATOR: An investigator team person. |
| 22 | the interview was going ahead I took one of my | 22 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: He was a contracts manager for |
| 23 | part-time workers, a friend of mine that worked with | 23 | Post Office Limited. |
| 24 | me, Elaine, with me to this meeting to discuss this | 24 | FACILITATOR: Okay. |
| 25 | shorffall and what was I going to do and where did the 51 | 25 | KATHRYN ABERDEIN: But, yeah, before he even started 52 |

recording the interview, I mean, he sort of said, "Right, if you can pay the money back this process stops right here". And I said, "No and besides I'm not a thief. I'm not going to admit to having taken this money. I haven't taken the damn money and go ahead with your process and we'll just see what happens", right.

So we went on and, you know, it was basically just trying to explain my side of things and how my processes had got to that and he said, "Well, you know, as it stands there's a shortfall here. Your branch will be closed."

They had actually -- most other post offices had arranged for another postmaster to take this on Basically, they took my branch and they handed it to another chap and that was it. And then I slid on to depression after that. Really I spent the next year in bed. I was totally depressed.
FACILITATOR: So when -- I can understand that. So that day they said they'd shut your branch, gave it to another chap --
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yes.
FACILITATOR: -- what was the status then of the $£ 11,000$ to $£ 14,000$ that you --
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: That was to be added on to my -53

Now, it was a few years later that I found out that Post Office had actually intervened and had told them they were not to hire me because I had joined the JFSA and I was part of the 555 going forward.
FACILITATOR: Right
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: So they'd intervened there. So luckily for me, I applied for the other Post Office which was a new Co-op which had been installed the year before. And all cards on the table, I told the guy at the interview, "Well, I'm part of this postmasters' sort of 555 and part of this trial going ahead, I never stole the money, l've never stolen anything in my life and I need work and I really want to work here and I know the town" and all the rest of it and luckily they took me on. And now I find myself working for the most ethical businesses, you know, in Britain, the Co-op. They're great.
FACILITATOR: Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that because it's obviously a painful experience. Can I just take you back to the meeting with the contracts manager just for a moment.

## KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yes.

FACILITATOR: Obviously, you were disputing it. You had your friend there with you to support you. What opportunity was there to kind of resolve that other

I still owed them that money. I still had to pay them that money. So effectively as the year went on, I mean, I was forced into bankruptcy. I had no way of repaying any money. I had no income. I had no house or anything. I tapped out any friends and relatives I had and I had nowhere to go.
FACILITATOR: So when was that that -- when would that meeting with the contracts manager have been?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Now, that would have been probably around -- let me think. It must have been a couple of weeks after the closure. So it would be some time in June, mid-June of 2016.

FACILITATOR: Okay.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: So it was 2017 that I started coming out of my depression and joined the JFSA just a week before they had the closure of the income, as you know, and so it was another four or five months after that that I sort of recovered myself enough that I started looking for work. We have a couple of small supermarkets here in my local home town. I went to apply to the local Spa perhaps for a job because they had taken on a local Post Office there as well as being a supermarket. I went to the interview, I thought everything was going fine and then I was told no, I was not successful.

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than you took it, if you know what I mean? What information did you have to support your case? I'm just interested in was there an appeal or what opportunity --
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: I think because, you know, local Post Office management knew me through dealings that they'd had. Frances I had a good relationship with and things like that. My history with the Post Office -- I mean, I had been through two previous audits which had been a few pounds out, always fine. They'd always found my practices to be fine and so, you know, he didn't really -- I mean, I hadn't joined the JFSA by that stage but it appeared to me that they weren't pressing for any kind of charges against me. I mean, they seemed to be wanting to sort of kind of sweep us under the carpet somewhat.
FACILITATOR: Sorry, I'm going to move on to Michael in a moment, give you a rest. Just before I do, I'm just interested in the kind of what you could and couldn't have done and so on. But how much of the 11,000 to 14,000 would you say was attributable to Horizon error?

KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Oh, pretty much all of it. I mean, because, you know, for six years I'd been running that branch. You know, the biggest loss that I'd had --

I mean, occasionally there was that sort of 2,500 one but I think that was tied up with that ATM confusion that I had had.
FACILITATOR: Okay. Was there anything that happened either technologically or anything at all that changed that you, on reflection, think might have accelerated --
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: I think definitely, you know, we had telephone line issues. I had put in a separate distinct telephone line for my shop. It was like the broadband couldn't handle the whatever, you know. We'd had several -- I mean, the screens would freeze probably once a fortnight. So you would have to reboot the system and, again, you stopped ringing the laughingly called "helpline" because they were no help. You know, eventually you get someone out to look at the system, you know.
FACILITATOR: Okay. So to what extent at that time did you make a link between technical problems and Horizon shortfalls overtly or to the Post Office? So if you had an engineer in, for example.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Well, I hadn't really made the link until I started hearing about the JFSA case. I really put all losses down to my mistakes because I was told it was me, I must have done it or one of my staff 57

And then I later discover that Fujitsu have the
ability to remotely access the branch accounts and
they can adjust transactions without any knowledge of the postmasters.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay. That's certainly been spoken of quite widely now, I think. So at that time, just take yourself back into this situation. So you have got the foreign currency. You said the Post Office is always right.
MICHAEL BROWN: Yes.
FACILITATOR: What communications did you have -- saying it was you effectively or, you know (unclear: multiple speakers).
MICHAEL BROWN: "You must have taken it. If it's not there, then you must have it" and there's -- you know, there was no budging from that arrangement. And they even claimed when they came to discuss it with me that this was unique. No-one else in the network --
FACILITATOR: Who came to see you and when was this?
MICHAEL BROWN: We had auditors came to check the branch and they said, "Well, no, this is the figure that we want from you".
FACILITATOR: Right. When was this, sorry, roughly?
MICHAEL BROWN: 2009, I guess.
FACILITATOR: Okay. So did you request the audit or did 59
members had put a transaction through twice by accident or something.
FACILITATOR: Thank you. That really helped. I know it is a bit of an extended piece of conversation but that's very helpful. Sir Wyn, is there anything you would like to ask about those events specifically? No.

So michael, can we come to you? I'd be interested to hear a bit your process and the communications and the events between discovering shortfalls to any resolution or outcome a bit like the others have said, so do you want to just sort of trace some of that story for us, Michael, if that's okay.
MICHAEL BROWN: There was never any resolution. The Post Office were always right. You came up with an explanation that you thought was valid and they refused to accept it.

The line was: if the money isn't there, then you must have taken it.
FACILITATOR: So what sorts of discrepancies were occurring?
MICHAEL BROWN: Well, as I say, the main trigger point of the discrepancies was this 2,000 shortage in foreign currency. We never got to the bottom of it. We tried every option that we had available to us to take it. 58
they --
MICHAEL BROWN: No, they just arrived. They got sick and tired of listening to people shouting at them.
FACILITATOR: Okay. What was the outcome from that audit meeting then?
MICHAEL BROWN: Well, I eventually had an audit and an investigation and I was suspended and a police car arrived to take me to the local station.
FACILITATOR: What was the process to get to the investigation then? What was going on that made that occur?
MICHAEL BROWN: I think they were looking at certain transactions that they weren't happy with and they came to me and said, "Look, you know, we believe there's something wrong going on" and that was how it resulted in my suspension and eventually I was taken to court.
FACILITATOR: And this was all solely over the foreign currency --
MICHAEL BROWN: No, there were other transactions that --
FACILITATOR: Do you want to just tell us about what accumulated or what occurred then, please.
MICHAEL BROWN: Well, I had installed a cash machine, an internal -- not a hole-in-the-wall arrangement. It was a stand-alone, inside the branch, cash machine.

FACILITATOR: Okay.
MICHAEL BROWN: Initially I was told that any withdrawals would be refunded within two days, two working days, but this was an inaccurate description of how the machine operated. In fact, if we took account of bank holidays and weekends, it could be six to seven days before the refunding of what withdrawals had been made. So it meant that I was constantly chasing the cash, and I stupidly borrowed some of the Post Office cash with no intention of retaining it but always the intention of repaying it.
FACILITATOR: Can l just pause you there just one sec. So just so I understand, it was a freestanding cash machine, so were you doing remittance stuff in the same way that somebody else would via a hole in the wall ATM or was is it all so totally --
MICHAEL BROWN: It was what was described as a self-filling machine.
FACILITATOR: Right.
MICHAEL BROWN: In other words, when it was empty I had to restock it.
FACILITATOR: From your -- so self-filling as in you filled it?
MICHAEL BROWN: Yes, that is right (unclear: overspeaking). It was one that I'd arranged to have 61
installed. I tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Post Office to put a machine into my branch, one of their own, but they said that I was too close to other cash machines. Well, at the time cash machines were very popular and they were everywhere.
FACILITATOR: Okay. So just so l'm clear on the kind of financial processes, was that supposed to be discrete cash that had nothing to do with the Post Office cash?
MICHAEL BROWN: That's right.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay. Sorry, forgive my ignorance. I just -- I haven't spoken to somebody who's had a freestanding one.

Okay, so you were saying that then you erroneously -- well, you chose to put it in from the Post Office. So tell us a bit about that, you know, the thought process and the actual outcomes of that.
MICHAEL BROWN: The thought processes were to try and generate more income for branch.
FACILITATOR: Yes, sorry. I meant the thought process of refilling it when you hadn't been reimbursed quickly enough.
MICHAEL BROWN: Yes, I falsely decided that the way to obtain the benefits of this machine was to obviously keep it filled, so that customers can come along and withdraw cash from their accounts. But as time went 62

MICHAEL BROWN: The reaction was that they didn't think -they described it as theft and I thought theft was permanently depriving someone of the benefits of the in this case cash. But I understand that that law is no longer applicable, that you can't plead that you had no intention to retain the cash. But I would say it was never my intention to deprive the Post Office of that cash. There was always arrangements in place to replenish them.
FACILITATOR: Okay. So tell us about the process from that to them coming to visit you and the investigation and everything.
MICHAEL BROWN: They didn't think that the staff -- the declaration of cash was an accurate reflection of what should be there and they were perfectly right. That part of the Post Office worked very efficiently. They pinpointed that what I was saying should be there, which included the money that I'd taken away from the Post Office unit and put in the cash machine, was not right.
FACILITATOR: If I understood you correctly, I think what you were saying was that the problem with the delay and reimbursing the cash was compounded by the fact Horizon shortfalls were occurring.
MICHAEL BROWN: Yes.
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FACILITATOR: The Post Office --
MICHAEL BROWN: I calculate that there was probably about $£ 11,000$, including the discrepancy in the foreign currency, that were Horizon errors and what Horizon owe me.

FACILITATOR: Right, okay.
MICHAEL BROWN: My chances of getting that back are pretty remote because I understand that the head of security in Post Office has now destroyed all records that might be awkward.
FACILITATOR: Yes, okay. Yeah. Well, it's not for me to comment on that.

So as I understand it then, you've got this amount, the shortfall, the Horizon shortfall including the foreign currency, which the Post Office says you're responsible for in addition to an amount which you via'd from till in the Post Office to cash machine; is that -- so did they treat those as two separate issues or was it all done in one recovery?
MICHAEL BROWN: This is what the audit tells us is short and this is how much you owe us.
FACILITATOR: So the audit -- yeah, of course, right. Okay.

Then what? So what happened then? So they said --

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And the outcome of those charges, what happened then?
MICHAEL BROWN: I went to the Magistrates' Court in Bridgend and then on to the court, the Crown Court, in Newport. My solicitors advised me to plead guilty as that would mitigate the sentence that could possibly be applied to me.
FACILITATOR: Guilty to all charges?
MICHAEL BROWN: Yes.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay. Carry on, yes.
MICHAEL BROWN: I pleaded guilty at Newport and they transferred me to Cardiff Crown Court as a sentencing hearing. And I went there and the judge said that he took account of my previous good character and no previous offences had occurred, and that I would be given a suspended two year sentence and had to pay I think it was $£ 5,000$ in costs added to all the other financial arrangements that had to be put right.
FACILITATOR: Okay. Thank you. Well, thank you to all of you for reliving those experiences because clearly they're not easy to talk through and to relive. So thank you very much.

Sir Wyn, do you have any questions for Michael around the events that we've just specifically been discussing?

MICHAEL BROWN: I was taken down, as I said, to the police station. I was held in a cell for about six/seven hours. In the meantime, two investigating officers, former policemen, came along to interview me. They'd been to my house and searched everywhere in the house and the only person available to meet them was my youngest son, who was then 17, I guess. Rather surprised because we hadn't discussed it with him and, unfortunately, he was at a loss to understand why these officers, who were accompanied by up-to-date policemen, not retired officers who joined the Post Office investigation team.
FACILITATOR: So what was the outcome of all of these events then, Michael?
MICHAEL BROWN: The outcome was that I was charged with theft, fraud and incorrect records or falsifying records.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay. And did those charges differentiate between the money that went into the cash machine and Horizon?
MICHAEL BROWN: No differentiation was made.
FACILITATOR: Okay. Again, forgive my legal ignorance. Probably Sir Wyn's shaking his head wondering why is he asking such stupid questions, but just so I'm clear.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Well, just to bring it to its conclusion, Mr Brown, you pleaded guilty. Have you tried to have your conviction quashed?
MICHAEL BROWN: No, no.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right then. Let's move on, Jerome.
FACILITATOR: Thank you. So we've got about half-an-hour left and I'd like to cover a bit of detail about the impact it's had. I know some of you said less so than others but, before we get on to the impact of all of this, I just wonder if you could -- I'm just interested in how you now feel about what the Post Office did. You know, were there occasions where they handled things well? Were their communications -- just generally your overview of the Post Office and their role during this process of Post Office Limited.

So perhaps start with you, Pam. I just wondered how you reflect on that -- just briefly. I don't need to be too long on other but just to sort of tell me your feelings.
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, there was nothing really positive about the relationship with the Post Office. It wasn't just the Horizon System. Well, it was very -the culture of the Post Office, there was no emphasis on people, it was all on procedures. And it wasn't just the Horizon procedures that didn't quite work -68
or they perhaps worked to the benefit of the Post Office, not to the postmaster -- it was all the procedures. They just -- they just weren't helpful and the way that the people applied those procedures is what's caused all this mess, isn't it? It's not really about Horizon, it's about the culture of Post Office and how they applied the procedures.

So, yeah, I mean, there's kind of -- there was no clear lines of communication. You could be passed from pillar to post and, as I say, I'm not just really talking about Horizon. It took me three years to get our pay station reinstalled after Network Transformation. Just nothing seemed to work. Nobody seemed to take responsibility. It was almost like you go up to one person and they threw the ball to the next person and you could just go round in circles.
FACILITATOR: So if you tried to be generous to the Post Office or sympathetic or whatever word, to what extent could you understand why the culture was like that? What do you think was going on? Were there some people who wanted to help but couldn't? I was just wondering if there was any more on that side of it?
PAM CAVANAGH: I just think the culture was that nobody was allowed to use their common sense, to use 69
your experiences with others, other organisations?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, the difference was that nobody took responsibility. Nobody wanted -- it wasn't
a relationship where you worked together. It was all one-sided. There was a lack of communication and a lack of support.
FACILITATOR: Right, okay.
PAM CAVANAGH: In previous contracts that my previous business delivered you always had -- if you had a problem or if something wasn't quite going to plan, then there was always a review meeting and you would work out a solution together.
FACILITATOR: Thank you. That's very clear. Thank you, Pam.

So Stephanie, similar questions to you, really, about your feelings about the Post Office, how they -and I guess how their treatment of you and treatment of the issues compared with what you would have expected from them.
STEPHANIE COLE: To be honest with you, the few times I did ring Horizon occasionally you got somebody that was an ex-subpostmaster and knew what he was talking about. I bring to mind a lady once and a gentleman and they would talk to me and say, "Have you tried this? Have you done this?" But the powers that be
initiative. It was very -- the procedures were set and they were very narrow and nobody could deviate and it wasn't about working with -- I think not even working with each other within Post Office Limited, but certainly not working with postmasters. There was no working with. And almost when a procedure was shown to have a shortfall, it didn't appear that they -- that anybody changed it. It was almost like, no, it's set in stone and this is how it is, and this is how you, the staff of Post Office Limited, apply it.

So there just didn't seem to be any scope for change.
FACILITATOR: I got the feeling from when you were talking that that was, if I've understood you, that that applied throughout your time dealing with Post Office --
PAM CAVANAGH: Yes. I mean, there's loads of examples of that. Sorry.
FACILITATOR: So just before I move to someone else in a sec, but you mentioned at the beginning that you dealt with lots of other organisations, you know, national organisations and so on. To what extent did -- or how would you characterise the difference between the Post Office and what you expected from 70
above them -- so basically if you -- when it got more serious like it was the Settle Central Team, they wouldn't budge an inch. So basically they -- you just, like, got the letter and then you just got, "We're going to look into it" and that was it. It was no -- there was nothing like when you rang Horizon help in the first place.

So I have to say that there was occasion on times they did try and help you on the helpline but any further up the ladder, they were stuck. They couldn't do anymore. It was passed on -- like you say, passed on to somebody and then you got nowhere.

So in the end, as l've said, it would be you'd got other postmasters involved and we had a WhatsApp group that we like contacted each other and like you did with the security, the grapevine, you had like that, "Oh, we've just had somebody. In he's on his way to your Post Office". It was like that with the Horizon System. "Has your Horizon gone down?" "Yes. "Has this gone down?" "Yes". You know what I mean? It was like that. We communicated, so we knew what was happening with everything locally. But there was no help from anybody higher up.
FACILITATOR: Did you mention before -- forgive me, was it you who said the Federation you didn't bother with the 72

Federation? Was that you who said that or was that Kathryn?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: That was me.
FACILITATOR: Thank you, Stephanie. So I need to move on in time a little bit.

So, Kathryn, in terms of -- I mean, clearly what you went through -- just very briefly on the Federation, why did you decide not to bother with them did you say?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Basically, I had talked I think to the local representative once or twice and I thought, "Well, this guy's obviously working for the Post Office. He's not working for me. I'm not going to get much help here". I mean, you know --
FACILITATOR: What gave you that impression at that time?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Well, I mean, as a conduit they were supposed to be our union. They were supposed to be there to protect us. But their main thing was getting subscriptions from us and it was getting the funding from the Post Office and I think -- you know, I sort of figured out early on that the Federation was just another branch of the Post Office. They weren't really there for me. I mean, it seemed like -Post Office, again, the culture that was there, I mean, you had to remember like 2009 when I took this 73

MICHAEL BROWN: I think over the time I worked as a subpostmaster I think it got sourer and sourer. The lack of -- the lack of clarity in what was going on, the lack of information, the attack I received when I was being questioned was, "Look, we're always right, you're wrong, you've taken this money. We want it back".
FACILITATOR: Okay. Just a quick question then. Do you know sometimes when you deal with an organisation you'll get somebody who's sort of a bit candid or off the record will say, "Well, this is why", you know. Did you ever get the feeling that -- did you ever have those kind of conversations to try and explain what was going on even if it was off the record?
MICHAEL BROWN: I never had any off-the-record conversations. There wasn't --
FACILITATOR: I just wondered, because I know sometimes that happens, and l've heard people sort of, you know, that have a sympathetic ear or something.

So I'm not here to condemn or defend the Post Office. You know, as I said at the beginning, I'm independent. So you're describing a relationship which got more and more sour. To what extent was that attributable to the losses and everything or was it the culture that the others have described, in your
on there was already a closure underway of over 6,500 sub-post offices. So a lot of people had been offered redundancies and small sub-post offices had been closed.

So by the time the Network Transformation kicked in about 2013, the culture going forward was "we need less post offices, not more". So it seemed to me that I was, like, sabotaged at every turn. They wanted rid of my branch. It would be another tick on the transformation thing, you know.

You know, it seemed definitely a small Post Office of two -- you know, two counters like mine, you know, I didn't fit the Post Office agenda going forward. They had one of two models: there was local and there was main, and if you fell in between that to hell with you.
FACILITATOR: Okay. So if you were to sum up in just a quick word or phrase the relationship with the Post Office over the years, how would you describe it?
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Well, sabotaging.
FACILITATOR: Okay, thank you very much.
So, Michael, if we come back to you just quickly then to think about how their approach to you, their attitude to you, how would you sum up your relationship with the Post Office? 74
view?
MICHAEL BROWN: Well, it was the build-up of circumstance. I was running a shop which sold cigarettes and over the decade I had that facility, more and more people were giving up smoking -- not that l've ever smoked -and my father died of lung cancer due to the fact that he'd smoked. So I was in a dilemma engaging in cigarette sales. But that reduced income levels.

The other aspect was the closure of post offices and that meant that the resaleable asset that I'd acquired having remortgaged my home and invested some of my private pension fund in was diminished. I was pretty sick.
FACILITATOR: I can see that. So we've got about 15 minutes left and I'd like to give yourself and Kathryn, in particular, time to talk about the impact. Briefly, Pam and Stephanie, you mentioned before that you don't feel you've had an intense impact, I think, or, you know, but l'd just like you to have a chance to talk about what impact Horizon failings did have on you of any type. Can I start with you, Stephanie, just to describe --
STEPHANIE COLE: Just basically that it put me off employing anybody else, so I never had any time off. I never dared to close my Post Office for any reason 76
because Post Office would insist that I have somebody to cover me, et cetera. It was only until I actually sold it that I had two weeks' holiday off in all those years and basically my -- I would have to say my mental health did struggle with that because if I had a day off, l'd get from customers, "You're always off" and it's like it wears you down. It just wore me down. So I was glad to leave the Post Office. And I loved my job.
FACILITATOR: Looking back, was there any lasting impact that you feel now from these events?
STEPHANIE COLE: Basically that if I'd have known what I know now, I wouldn't have took it on.
FACILITATOR: Right.
STEPHANIE COLE: I wouldn't have done it.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Am I right in thinking that you actually took it on -- well, I use that phrase because you do -- as a subpostmistress in 2009 and sold it about 2020; is that right?
STEPHANIE COLE: Yes, November 9, 2019 I closed.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Was the reason for selling simply that you had had enough or were there more complex reasons than that?
STEPHANIE COLE: Basically they didn't allow me to become a community -- I wanted to become a community 77

STEPHANIE COLE: No, he was for the Post Office. But he was very good. He came and he went through all the financial side of it, what we could do with the shop, et cetera, was there any movement forward, and basically he declared that there wasn't and said that my only option was to put it up for sale because it wouldn't work as a local.

But they wouldn't change me to a community Post Office either, which is what I wanted, and I would have stayed on the old contract and got my remuneration. So that was --
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Well, thank you. You've explained in quite some detail why you did what you did. And while I'm asking a question, Jerome, can I ask Mrs Cavanagh the same question.

You decided to dispose of your Post Office at around about the same period of time. So what was it that motivated you to do it?
PAM CAVANAGH: Well, my daughter and I found that we were -- when we met outside of work, which was quite frequently, all we were talking about was what was happening at work and that was not just the Post Office, that was the whole business, but predominantly. Oh, what's happened now with the Post Office? You know, what issue have we got to deal 79

Post Office but there was a shop up the road that they said it could go into and I'd got to go up for sale and they badgered and badgered and badgered me and basically I signed the leaving -- that I was happy to leave and you know to go for sale because I got hassle from the Post Office. They just never stopped ringing me to say, "Have you made a decision? What are you going to do?" et cetera. So basically what I had to do was I put the Post Office up for sale and the local shop they persuaded the local shop to have it.

Now I have to say lan Johnston, who was the guy who dealt with my selling, et cetera, was very, very good. He was -- he pushed that sale for me so I could go, because I could not make the -- I was such a small Post Office, I could not make it pay as a shop with a counter. It wouldn't work. I was just a post office with a counter in it. There was no room for anything. There was no room to develop the building, et cetera, so I could not go to a local model and make any money, and I was going to lose half my remuneration. So basically it was just I was in a difficult position (unclear: interruption).
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Was Mr Johnson or is Mr Johnson a post office employee or was he someone independent or what?

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with? We realised that (a) I didn't want or need that and that really, going forward, she was looking to have a family, that it really wasn't the business that somebody with a young family could take forward, and I would then be getting involved -- you know, back involved with it.

So it was really the fact that it was kind of a business that's always in your head 24 hours a day, including overnight when you had to have your phone by the side in case you got a call-out. We did get quite a lot of call-outs. Obviously, there was only one where we had a break-in but, you know, where the alarm went off. So it was always in your head really $24 / 7$ and, as I say, I didn't need that and she didn't want me to have that and we decided that really she didn't want that going forward if she was going to have a family.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: And I've heard a number of different accounts about what happens when you try to sell a business like this, and obviously much depends upon the particular circumstances at the time. But Mrs Cole has just told me that Mr Johnson was quite helpful to her. How was it so far as you were concerned? Were the Post Office -- did they assist you to sell the business?

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PAM CAVANAGH: No, no, I just decided to sell it. I put it up with an agent.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Fine.
PAM CAVANAGH: I obviously got a lot less than I paid for it six years previously because the value of post offices has decreased, but I have to say also because we were in a parade of seven shops and a convenience store opened up next door to us which did have some impact on the value of the business.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right.
PAM CAVANAGH: But the Post Office obviously had an impact on the value of the business as well.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Fine, thanks. Sorry, back to you Jerome.
FACILITATOR: Thank you. I'd just like to request if it's okay for all just to hang on a bit after 4.00, if that's okay, because I don't want to rush the end if that's all right.

> So Pam, coming back to you then, how would you -- one of Sir Wyn's objectives is to understand the impact of the Horizon failings. How would you sum up the impact the Horizon failings had on you?
PAM CAVANAGH: To be honest, I can't actually say that -at the time, it -- you had a heightened sense of awareness almost and some anxiety. But long-term 81
let my family down by the decisions I've made and joining as a subpostmaster was one of them.
FACILITATOR: Excluded in the sense of what --
MICHAEL BROWN: Psychologically I feel that I am no longer a suitable person to join other organisations. I mean, there's an active life in the village where I currently live where they're looking for supporters of the village hall and I'm loath to engage in that, which previously I wouldn't have. I mean, I got involved with lots of things in my previous neighbourhood.
FACILITATOR: Sorry, just so I understand then, so is that because of just the way you feel inside or the way that other people feel about you?
MICHAEL BROWN: No, I think l've been very fortunate that people haven't sort of -- there's been one or two memories I have of people accusing me of stealing from pensioners and the like, which is totally wrong. The general view within the family circle has been very supportive.
FACILITATOR: All right, okay. Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to say to Sir Wyn about the impact of all of this?
MICHAEL BROWN: Well, I hope that we get back to a stage where we're proud of our institutions and we don't 83

I have to say, no, it hasn't had any impact on myself or my daughter. However, you know everybody -- people have come up to me and said, "Oh, do you miss the Post Office?" No, no.
FACILITATOR: Okay.
PAM CAVANAGH: It was -- l've never dealt with -- I've not had dealings with a more difficult organisation where basically you felt as though most of the time you were banging your head against a brick wall and you were actually -- you were on your own. You didn't have any -- you were on your own.
FACILITATOR: Okay. Thank you, Pam. That was clear. So Michael, how would you sum up the impact the Horizon failings have had on you, would you say, looking back?
MICHAEL BROWN: Well, it had severe financial pain to endure. It meant that I've not had a holiday now for about five years. It meant that we had to move house, to downsize. It meant that I'm no longer driving a car. Yes, quite considerable life changes.
FACILITATOR: So do you want to explain to Sir Wyn how all this feels then, you know, the prevailing feeling in your mind as of today?
MICHAEL BROWN: I feel that I'm excluded. Internally I'm unable to engage with other groups. I feel that I've 82
have to castigate the Post Office as a national scandal, that there's an infusion of pride in what institutions are available. I mean, what we're doing for the Ukraine is an example of the underlying good will that the general public have towards any good causes. But our inability to deal with set-backs is, you know, upsetting.
FACILITATOR: Okay, thank you. Thank you for that. So Kathryn, I think if we could finish, roughly speaking finish, the session with you just to reflect on the impacts that the Horizon failings have had on you, if that's okay, and just take your time to describe that to Sir Wyn.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: Yeah. Well, it's been a hell of a journey. I know that. When I very first started the idea of taking on a business for myself, I had no idea, you know, how it would impact me down the line. Now, I myself had never suffered from any mental health issues. I didn't -- again, you know, I was a happy, positive, forward-looking person. I'd managed to cope with my divorce and we had an amicable agreement with the children, we shared custody, we'd moved forward. I mean, I saw the Post Office as perhaps a good financial foothold for me, for me and my girls, and I could buy a house with the money once 84

I sold the business or -- you know, we moved on and stuff like that.

But it really ended up -- financially it destroyed me. Emotionally it destroyed me as well. I mean, I'm probably about half the person that I used to be. I mean, prior to taking on all of that -- I'd been a working musician for 25/30 years. When I took on the Post Office, I let the music go to the side because I just didn't have time for it anymore. I was consumed by running this business and trying to do it successfully.

You know, so again, you come at it with the best of intentions but when you have an organisation that's as broken from the top down, I see it as an agenda that, you know, the CEOs would take on the business and say, "Right, well, we have to take it from this 12 and a half thousand branches" or how many they had at that time, the 20,000 branches, and "we need to make this a smaller institution" and so the casualties that came from that are just phenomenal.

You know, I mean, just to look at the Horizon shortfalls scheme that's come forward, I mean, there's over 2,500 people who applied, I think, that over the years this money had been taken from them.

For me, you know, l've spent -- well, so it's 85

Inquiry is going to give us back our former lives or formal selves. Nothing can return those lost years and the broken dreams at the seemingly endless nightmare of financial and emotional consequences that we all still endure to this day.

You know, I'm so sick of being broke, both financially and in spirit. Now, it's taken me years to rebuild myself, years to heal the broken parts of me that were destroyed by this experience. And l've still a ways to go but, unlike many of my former colleagues, I have at least healed enough to be able address this Inquiry today. You know, I have real concerns for all people involved, including the barristers and the clerks, and even you, Sir Wyn. And, you know, I can only mention how you feel at the end of yet another day of harrowing testimonies that, you know, it must be like swimming in a sea of misery and depression for hours and then rinse and repeat and we'll do it again tomorrow.

So l'd like to thank you all for your empathy and your concern for us. You know, as part of the 555 also we've just heard that we are now to be included in the compensation scheme. Well, that was an amazing day. I actually went kayaking that day with a friend of mine, a lady who used to work with me, and we just 87

2016 that my business was forfeited and so l've been rebuilding myself from then. I mean, luckily I work for an institution, in the Co-op now, that cares about your mental health, it cares about how you move forward, there's great community support that I've been getting once the Inquiry has started here. I do have one piece that I'd like to read out, maybe just to --

FACILITATOR: Yes.
KATHRYN ABERDEIN: A final word here.
So it says: to the Post Office Inquiry. To be seen, to be heard, to be able to give witness to what we've been through, to be supported and to be believed, I think above all else, is the ultimate motivation for all who have participated in this Inquiry. None of our testimony given has been a lie or a deception or an attempt at obfuscation or indeed a cover-up, which we can't say from the other side. Well, we've yet to see as the Inquiry goes on. All the testimonies have been given in nearly all of the individual witness cases have been given painfully. I've never seen such a collection of broken people, people whose lives have been utterly destroyed by this formerly respected institution known as the Post Office Limited. Well, nothing that comes out of this 86
thought, "My god, finally. We're heard. We're heard".

I've watched nearly all the individual witnesses daily on YouTube and it's had very large impacts on my level of anger towards the nameless and, so far, blameless bureaucracy within the Post Office and Fujitsu, and successive Westminster governments who, either by design or incompetence, have allowed this absolute miscarriage of justice to have happened at all. From the horror that is the Horizon System to the intentional cover-ups that ensued, and also the shame that the legal world brings upon itself, you know, to the dragging out of the trial for the 555 . The Post Office is entirely culpable in the destruction of thousands of lives of these former subpostmasters and indeed their families as well.

So how do we fix this for the victims? You know, for us who still suffer, it's us who have no future, either emotional or financially. For the 555 I say at least give us enough of a settlement that we can all restart our lives or perhaps cushion what little time we have left. You know, for myself, I'd kind of like double the compensation due, double because of the added vindictiveness that the Post Office pursued each and every one of us, charged 88
us with theft and false accounting. And double because some of us were never actually charged with an offence but we were casually financially slaughtered and then tossed aside like dead rotten meat no longer fit to eat.

Now I know that I probably speak for all of the victims when I say now if the present Government can hand out billions to their rich pals for Covid PPE, and the likes of that, or pay Iran the 400 million that they were owed, then we must at least be paid our dues: full and proper compensation for the 555, and proper redress for all the stolen money and lives that was taken from everyone else.

Thank you.
SIR WYN WILLIAMS: All right. Well, I think that brings this session to an end. I'm very grateful to the four of you for participating and, as with all the other focus group sessions, each of you has thrown up things which is bound to go around in my head for some time to come. So thank you to the four of you.

Just for the members of the public who may be watching to know, this is the last of the focus group sessions. It's not quite the end of me hearing about what we've called "Human Impact" because I will be hearing from people based in Scotland and Northern

Ireland probably in some weeks' time.
But we are coming to the end of this phase of the Inquiry and I will be focusing in the future on seeking to get answers from the institutions who have been involved in this evolving story.

So thank you to the four of you again and I'll sign off, if I may. And thank you very much, Mr Norris, as I will call you formally, for your considerable efforts and skill in helping all these people tell their story. Thank you very much.
( 4.07 pm )
(The Focus Group concluded)

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