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1 Monday, 14 February 2022 2 (11.00 am) 3 (Proceedings delayed) 4 (11.25 am) 5 Opening statement by SIR WYN WILLIAMS 6 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Well, perhaps I should have foreseen 7 it, but the one thing I didn't foresee was that 8 I would be apologising to you for a late start. 9 However, if we were going to be having a technological 10 glitch, much better that we had it on Day 1 so that we 11 can repair it and go forward efficiently, I hope. 12 So a very good morning to all of you who are 13 present in the room and also those who are following 14 today's proceedings either by live feed or on YouTube. 15 This is the first of many days in the coming weeks in 16 which I will be taking oral evidence from persons who 17 have been, or in many instances continue to be 18 adversely effected by the Horizon IT system and by the 19 decisions that were taken as a consequence of 20 information which was generated by that system. 21 You will see that I am flanked by my two 22 assessors, Ms Erika Eliasson-Norris and Mr David Page. 23 As you are no doubt aware, Mr Page and I have been 24 working together now for very many months, 25 Ms Eliasson-Norris is a more recent arrival, but the

three of us have quickly developed good, efficient and professional working practices.

I would like to say at the outset how grateful I am that many people have taken the trouble to make signed witness statements which detail their adverse experiences. The Inquiry have received such statements from well over 100 people. The making of a detailed witness statement in which very personal details about the author are disclosed is no doubt a daunting prospect. Making such a statement knowing that it will then be made public and scrutinised by many different sets of eyes, often line by line, requires courage and determination.

Let me assure all those who have supplied the Inquiry with signed statements that I regard the statements as an invaluable source of evidence, which will allow me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature and extent of the suffering and hardship endured by so many people.

Those who will give oral evidence to me over the coming weeks have all made written statements. In an ideal world, every single person who has made a written witness statement would have been afforded the opportunity to give oral evidence. However, that is simply not possible if I am to have any hope of

completing the work of the Inquiry within the sort of timescale I've indicated previously.

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Accordingly, I have decided to take oral evidence from between 50 and 60 people. You will note that I have not provided you with a precise number of witnesses. That is because witness statements have been coming in right up until last week and, for all I know, may continue to be presented to the Inquiry and, in these circumstances, I wish to retain a degree of flexibility.

The particular circumstances of each individual affected by Horizon and the adverse consequences suffered by that individual are, of course, unique to that person. In making decisions about which of the persons who had made witness statements should be asked to give oral evidence the Inquiry's legal team and I have sought to ensure that an appropriate number of witnesses speak to themes which are common to all or at least many of those affected by Horizon, and that the remaining witnesses are able to provide evidence of some of the more unusual adverse impacts which have occurred.

I cannot stress enough the importance of me understanding the scale and nature of the harm which has been caused to so very many individuals. Of

course, much has been written and spoken about this already. However, my belief is that the written statements to which I have referred, and the oral evidence which will be adduced over the coming month or so, will produce a detailed and coherent body of evidence, from which it will be possible for me to draw clear and considered conclusions about the scale and nature of the harm caused by information generated by Horizon and the decisions made by those who seem to have treated that information as infallible.

Let me now explain how I see the next weeks unfolding. This week and next, the Inquiry will be based here in London. There will be hearings every day and many of the persons who have accepted invitations to give evidence orally will be heard.

In the week commencing 28 February, there will be hearings in Cardiff. The following week, that is the week commencing 7 March, there will be hearings in Leeds. The numbers of witnesses who have elected to give evidence in Leeds and Cardiff are fewer and so it is likely that we will hear evidence at each of those centres over two days. If necessary, the Inquiry will return to London in the week commencing 14 March to hear from any witnesses whose oral evidence remains outstanding.

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Those of you who follow my public statements will know that I was most anxious that witnesses had a choice about whether to give evidence in person at a hearing centre or remotely, either from their own home or at some other suitable location. A majority of the witnesses have opted to give evidence at a hearing centre. However, a significant minority will give evidence remotely. I am very pleased that the Inquiry has been able to accommodate the wishes of those witnesses in that way.

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I am sitting today in the same location as the persons who will give their oral evidence. More often than not, however, in the next two weeks I will not be present here in London but will be visible on a screen but sitting in my home in Wales. That way of working is, I fear, dictated by personal circumstances but I'm satisfied that my being remote from London will not interfere in any way with my understanding of the evidence. That is a way of working with which I have become very familiar.

When the Inquiry moves to Cardiff, perhaps not surprisingly, I will be present but I will also be present in Leeds because I want everybody to know that I am prepared to go to every part of the country in order to hear what they have to say. Some of the

subpostmasters and subpostmistresses who are Core Participants and who have provided witness statements to the Inquiry live in Scotland and Northern Ireland. I have not invited any of those persons to give oral evidence in the coming weeks. That is because it is very important that this Inquiry goes to them in order to receive their oral evidence. I will issue a public statement in due course explaining arrangements for visits to Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Everyone should also know that I have kept well in mind the possibility that some of those who had been adversely affected would have been very reluctant to provide witness statements or give oral evidence and, at the same time, reveal their identity. For that reason, I issued a protocol explaining the circumstances in which I would consider a restriction order. To date, I have made restriction orders in respect of 12 persons who have provided witness statements to the Inquiry. At least two of those persons are due to provide oral evidence and, whenever a witness who is the subject of a restriction order gives oral evidence, appropriate measures will be in place to conceal the identities of those individuals. Let me conclude these brief opening remarks as

I began, with thanks. It has been no mean feat to

start these hearings on time. We would not have achieved our aim of a start to this phase of the Inquiry today without the very considerable efforts of the Inquiry secretariat, the Inquiry's legal team, and all the lawyers and their support staff who have assisted those who have made witness statements and agreed to give oral evidence. I would like to record publicly my thanks to them all.

However, I cannot emphasise too strongly what is, of course, obvious, namely that these hearings would not be taking place at all were it not for the witnesses who have agreed to give up their valuable time and publicly relive what must be very distressing memories and events. My heart-felt thanks goes out to them for all their willingness to co-operate with the Inquiry and to make a very significant contribution to the Inquiry's work.

That's as much as I have to say in opening and it's very likely that you won't hear me speak again today, other than to say it's time for a break or something like that.

Counsel to the Inquiry, to make his opening statement. Thank you, Mr Beer.

I'm now going to ask Mr Beer, Queen's Counsel,

Opening statement by MR BEER, QC

MR BEER: On Friday, 23 April last year, the Court of Appeal (Criminal Division) quashed the convictions of 39 men and women who had worked for the Post Office Limited or its predecessors, which I'm going to call POL today, as subpostmasters, subpostmistresses, managers and counter assistants. All of the appellants had been charged with offences of theft, fraud, false accounting and were prosecuted by the publicly owned company POL on which they relied for their livelihoods.

They had all been convicted of crimes allegedly committed during the period 2000 to 2012. Those who pleaded guilty or who were convicted following a trial had grim punishments imposed upon them, including, in some cases, immediate sentences of imprisonment. Lives were ruined, families were torn apart, families were made homeless and destitute, reputations were destroyed, not least because the crimes of which the men and women were convicted, theft, fraud and false accounting, all involved acting dishonestly.

People who were an important, respected and integral part of the local communities that they served were, in some cases, shunned. A number of men and women sadly died before the state publicly

recognised that they were wrongly convicted. Their prosecutions were founded upon an assertion that the computerised accounting system, Horizon, which was used in branch Post Offices and operated by Fujitsu was reliable when, in fact, it was not. What's more, the publicly-owned company responsible for bringing the prosecutions, POL, knew that it was not.

In what you may, in due course, conclude is the worst miscarriage of justice in recent British legal history, these convictions were based on failures of investigation and failures of disclosure. The Court of Appeal described these as:

"... so egregious as to make the prosecution an affront to the conscience of the court."

Since then, other convictions which relied upon the integrity of Horizon have been quashed and continue to be quashed. This Inquiry has been established to understand and to acknowledge what went wrong in relation to Horizon. It will build upon the findings that have already been made by the courts, in particular by seeking to establish who knew what and when. It will assess whether the commitments made by POL within the subsequent mediation settlement have been properly delivered and assess whether the processes and information provided by POL to

postmasters are sufficient. It will examine the historic and current governance and whistle-blowing controls.

Along with Julian Blake, Catriona Hodge and Ruth Kennedy, I act as Counsel to the Inquiry. As you may know but others may not, our role is to assist you in the conduct of your investigation. We are entirely independent and impartial and do not represent the interests of any of the Core Participants in the Inquiry or, indeed, of any other person. Also appearing today are the following representatives of Core Participants: Chris Jacobs, instructed by Howe & Co, for a large number of subpostmasters and mistresses; and Angela Patrick, instructed by Hudgell Solicitors, also for a large number of subpostmasters and subpostmistresses.

The representatives of other Core Participants have been provided with a live link to these proceedings to enable them to follow them, including: the legal representatives of POL; Fujitsu; the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy; UK Government Investments; the Metropolitan Police Service; and Paula Vennells, the former CEO of POL; and the representatives of the National Federation of SubPostmasters and the Communication Workers Union, at

the current hearings.

In this first phase of the Inquiry, we are focusing on the human impact of the adoption, implementation, operation and continued use of the Horizon system and the human impact of the approach taken by POL to subpostmasters and mistresses when the system showed shortfalls, including their suspension, the termination of their contracts, the closure of branches, proceedings for the recovery of the so-called shortfalls, bankruptcy proceedings, criminal investigations and, ultimately, criminal proceedings.

As you know, the Inquiry has published a detailed List of Issues setting out how it proposes to carry its Terms of Reference into effect. There are 218 issues on that list. In this phase of the Inquiry, we are addressing issues 215 to 218, which read as follows: human impact.

What impact, past and present, have the failings of the Horizon IT system had upon affected SPMs, managers and assistants? What physical, psychological, emotional, financial and reputational consequences have resulted from SPMs, managers and assistants being: required to make good apparent shortfalls, as shown by the Horizon IT system; alleged to be responsible for shortfalls and discrepancies

shown by the Horizon IT system; accused of committing criminal offences, as a result of shortfalls and discrepancies shown by the Horizon IT system; convicted of criminal offences as a result of shortfalls and discrepancies shown by the Horizon IT system?

What impact, both past and present, have the failings of the Horizon IT system had upon the families of affected SPMs, managers and assistants?

How have POL, its predecessors, Fujitsu, the National Federation of SubPostmasters, the Communication Workers Union, UK Government Investments, and the Government, responded to that human impact?

The reason why we have commenced the hearings of the Inquiry by listening to the accounts of those who were and continue to be affected by the flaws in Horizon and the flaws in POL's approach to it is that they must be front and centre of this Inquiry.

Although the underlying subject matter of the Inquiry is information technology, this Inquiry is not and will not become a dry, technical investigation into an IT project gone wrong. That is because it is an Inquiry that is actually about people. It's about people whose mental and physical health has been

impacted, about people whose marriages and partnerships have deteriorated or failed, about people who thought about taking their own lives and, in some cases, who took their own lives. Everyone listening to this opening should be aware that the evidence we're about to hear is the tip of a very large iceberg but it is a representative tip. The Inquiry has amassed a large volume of witnesses and other evidence from affected subpostmasters and mistresses, and their families, and has sought to bring before you and the public a range of witnesses that cover the following classes: First, SPMs whose convictions were quashed, who had been convicted of theft following a trial and sentenced to a term of imprisonment. SPMs whose convictions were guashed who had accepted a plea bargain in the hope of avoiding an immediate prison sentence. SPMs who were prosecuted but acquitted at either the Crown Court or the Magistrates' Court, especially those who had been offered plea deals and who had rejected them. Acquitted SPMs who were subsequently made bankrupt.

but not prosecuted, especially where the shortfalls were large, ie £10,000 or more.

SPMs who were not prosecuted but were dismissed and were made bankrupt.

SPMs who were dismissed, not prosecuted, but against whom successful claims were made in civil proceedings.

SPMs who are currently in a contractual relationship with POL and who have suffered shortfalls in the recent past, ie since the litigation was settled.

SPMs who have made a claim under the Historic Shortfall Scheme, known as the HSS.

SPMs who have received compensation, either by virtue of the group litigation that I will describe in a moment or by reason of any other scheme, ie the Second Sight scheme, the HSS or a Government-backed interim payment scheme.

SPMs, lastly, who suffered extreme or unusual consequences or who come from a particular ethnic or religious background.

Reflecting the personal and sensitive nature of the evidence that is going to be given and the purpose of hearing directly from those who have suffered most, only Counsel to the Inquiry will ask questions of the

witnesses in the human impact phase of the Inquiry. They will not be asked questions, less still cross-examined, by the legal representatives of other Core Participants.

SPMs who suffered shortfalls, who were dismissed

In due course, we, as your counsel, will open the issues and the evidence going to the other 214 issues on the List of Issues. That's very likely to be a much more substantial opening than this short one, explaining in great detail the operation of the Horizon system, the knowledge that POL and others had as to the existence of errors, bugs, and defects in Horizon and the propriety of basing investigations, suspensions, terminations and prosecutions on the axiom that Horizon was reliable, and also opening the conduct of POL and others in the criminal and civil litigation that followed.

At that time, you will hear all of the Core Participants address not only the other 214 issues on the list but also the central themes that we will be looking at over the next four weeks. They are not making opening statements at this stage of the Inquiry.

It's necessary, however, that I should introduce, in very outline terms, a short history of the key events in this dreadful tragedy and also

introduce the individuals from whom you will be hearing evidence over the next few weeks.

So a short history of key events and concepts.

Horizon: as you explained in your progress
update of September 2021, the Inquiry has adopted, as
a working definition for use in this Inquiry, the

definition that the parties used in the group litigation to explain what they meant by the Horizon system; namely:

"The Horizon computer system hardware and software, communications equipment in branch, and central data centres where records of transactions made in branch were processed."

Following a pilot that appears to have been run from 1996, in 2000 POL introduced Horizon across all of its branches. It communicated initially via a telephone line. That was changed in 2010 to an online version called Horizon Online or HNG-X. The former version is commonly referred to as Legacy Horizon.

That second version was itself replaced in 2017 by a third version, known as HNG-A, also an online system. Horizon was used in over 11,000 branches and processed millions of transactions on a daily basis, as it does to this day.

Although Horizon is an electronic point of sale system, or EPOS system, it is much more than that, most particularly it is also an accounting system. In respect of its first use as an EPOS it was utilised to conduct retail transactions, for example buying a book of first class stamps. In this respect, Horizon allowed the SPM to record that goods have been provided to a customer, compute the price of those goods and allow the customer to pay the money required for all of their purchased goods, using either cash or a credit or debit card.

Often, as you will hear later today, a branch will be a retail outlet too, selling non-Post Office goods like food, drink, sweets or newspapers. If a customer wished to buy goods of those kinds and Post Office goods, like stamps, the customer would have to settle their payment in two parts.

The second way in which Horizon was used was in order to conduct and reconcile transactions undertaken by POL with a customer on behalf of a third party supplier of goods or services, such as a Vehicle Excise Licence provided by the DVLA, services from a gas or electricity company, a utility company or the DWP, in respect of benefit payments.

Horizon records all transactions relating to POL

activities undertaken at each branch and maintains a balance of the value of POL cash and stock that is held at a branch. Once Horizon was installed at a branch, the SPM in charge of the branch became contractually obliged to use it for all transactions as I have described. Further, the SPM was obliged to make declarations as to the amount of cash held at a branch over a trading period. From 2005, the SPM was obliged to complete a branch trading statement at the end of a trading period. Until such a statement was completed, the branch could not roll over into a new period.

Data about branch transactions relating to POL was transmitted by Horizon and stored so that employees of POL may use the data to review branch accounts and to check for discrepancies.

Concerns about Horizon.

Prior to 2005 it appears that SPMs had the facility to place disputed shortfalls into a local suspense account and to carry these losses into the next trading period. However, the SPMs' use of the local suspense account was subject to the approval of their retail network manager. Moreover, it appears that this facility was withdrawn in 2005 upon the introduction of the branch trading statement.

Thereafter, SPMs had no facility within Horizon to dispute the figures that it produced. They were required, instead, to contact the helpline. If at tend of a trading period there was a discrepancy or shortfall between the cash on hand and the figures generated by Horizon, the SPM was required to make good any shortfall, either by putting in his or her own money, known as settling in branch, or by asking for the sum to be deducted from his or her future income, known as settling centrally.

POL had a contractual right to seek recovery from SPMs for losses relating to branch accounts. The approach adopted in practice by POL was that if Horizon showed a shortfall, however inexplicable to the SPM, the SPM was required to make it good at the end of the trading period. Some SPMs did so using their own funds or borrowing to make good a loss for which they did not, in fact, accept responsibility.

Fujitsu held audit data known as ARQ data, which contained a complete and accurate record of all transactions and events which had occurred on the branch counter. It was, therefore, possible to refer to this audit data to track every transaction recorded on Horizon. In the civil proceedings which followed, it emerged that Fujitsu also had the ability to amend

Horizon data in relation to a branch, without the knowledge of the SPM concerned. Fujitsu recorded bugs, errors and defects in two types of document. If an SPM phoned the helpline and was referred to the section of Fujitsu which investigated such matters, a document known as a "PEAK" would be created. Those PEAKs would be fed into a higher level document, known as a Known Error Log or KEL.

Criminal prosecutions.

From the first roll out of Horizon -- and, by that, I mean within weeks of it first being installed -- SPMs began to notice errors in the accounts generated by Horizon, errors which the SPMs attributed to the operation of Horizon.

In particular, it was suggested that the system had overstated the amount of cash or stock which should be held at a particular time, thereby causing an apparent and unexplained shortfall in branch accounts. These problems were reported via the helpline the SPMs were instructed to use.

POL resisted the SPMs' claims that there were faults in the system and insisted instead that SPMs made up any shortfall and, when asked, denied that other SPMs had reported the same or similar problems. In short, POL maintained that Horizon was reliable and

that it established that money was missing, ie that there was an actual shortfall of cash held in the branch, not merely an apparent shortfall generated by Horizon itself.

POL treated the shortfall as having been caused by dishonesty or, at best, carelessness on the part of the SPM and demanded repayment by the SPM. POL's stance was that it was up to an individual SPM to prove that a shortfall was not his or her responsibility. If the SPM could not do so, he or she would have to make good the shortfall.

Acting as a private prosecutor, POL commenced criminal proceedings against many SPMs for theft, fraud and false accounting. Data available to the Inquiry suggests that, before the Crown Prosecution Service, the CPS, took over prosecutorial functions from POL in 2015, POL brought a total of 844 prosecutions between 2000 and 2015 that were based, entirely or in part, on the evidence from Horizon.

This resulted in 705 criminal convictions. Once POL had secured a criminal conviction, it would sometimes attempt to secure a Proceeds of Crime Act order against the convicted SPM, allowing it to seize their assets and to bankrupt them.

In the middle of this period in 2009, Computer Weekly published a report referring to the problems with the Horizon system and, in the same year, two MPs reported their constituents' concerns about Horizon to the then Minister of Postal Affairs and Employment Relations, who, in turn, forwarded the letters to the managing director of POL.

The next year, POL produced an internal report in response to the questions that had been raised. This report concluded that money recorded as missing on Horizon was due to theft in the relevant branch office and it, the report, recommended that no independent review be conducted of either the system or the prosecutions which had been founded upon it.

However, in July 2012, POL appointed Second Sight Support Services Limited, Second Sight, to conduct a review into problems with Horizon. Second Sight concluded that, in some circumstances, Horizon could be systemically flawed from a user's perspective and that POL had not necessarily provided an appropriate level of support.

From about March 2015 onwards, convicted SPMs began to make applications to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, the CCRC, arguing that evidence was available concerning both failings in Horizon and

POL's response to those failings, each of which was relevant to the safety of their convictions.

A Group Litigation.

Proceedings were commenced in April 2016 against POL by a group of SPMs in the High Court, alleging that Horizon changed the way that they could both account for and interrogate and investigate the numerous financial transactions that were made in the relevant branches every working day and that the Horizon system had a large number of software coding errors, bugs and defects.

POL disputed the entire basis of the SPMs' civil claim, arguing that there were large numbers of subpostmasters who knowingly submitted false accounts under the previous system and maintaining that Horizon worked perfectly adequately. On 22 March 2017, a Group Litigation order was made. The trial judge, Mr Justice Fraser, was subsequently to describe the Group Litigation as "bitterly fought".

Indeed, before the litigation was conducted, he delivered six written judgments on procedural and substantive issues, the two main judgments being numbers 3 and 6, the common issues judgment and the Horizon Issues judgment. These analysed in very considerable detail a series of contractual issues

between SPMs and POL in judgment number 3, and very many technical issues relating to Horizon in judgment number 6.

These claims were settled at a mediation in December 2019. POL accepting that it had:

"... got things wrong in its dealings with a number of postmasters and agreeing to pay £57.75 million in damages."

The Group Litigation Claimants each received a share of some £12 million after legal fees were paid from the balance.

The Court of Appeal (Criminal Division).

As I've said, on 23 April 2021, the Criminal Division of the Court of Appeal quashed the convictions of 39 SPMs. They had all been convicted in Crown Courts in England and Wales between 2001 and 2013 for offences that were said to have been committed during the course of their work in branch offices in England and Wales. There were two principal grounds of appeal:

Ground 1 was that the reliability of the Horizon data was essential to the prosecution and, in the light of all the evidence, including the High Court judge Mr Justice Fraser's findings in judgments 3 and 6, it was not possible for the criminal trial process

to have been fair.

Ground 2 was that the evidence, together with Mr Justice Fraser's findings, showed that it was an affront to the public conscience for the appellants to have faced prosecution.

For its part in those appeal proceedings, POL accepted Mr Justice Fraser's findings that there are about 30 bugs, errors and defects in the Horizon system which did not operate simultaneously and which affected both Legacy Horizon and Horizon Online; that there was a significant and material risk on occasions of branch accounts being affected in the way alleged by the appellants by bugs, errors and defects; that POL had failed to disclose to SPMs and to the courts the full and accurate position in relation to the reliability of Horizon; and that, in cases where the reliability of the ARQ data was essential to the prosecution, it had a duty to assess that data.

It accepted that, in view of the limitations on the extent to which SPMs could investigate discrepancies in Horizon, POL had a duty to investigate, to ensure that the evidence was accurate and to pursue reasonable lines of enquiry raised by SPMs; and it accepted that Fujitsu had the ability to insert, inject, edit or delete transaction data or

data in branch accounts, and had the ability to implement fixes in Horizon that had the potential to affect transaction data or data in branch accounts, and that it had the ability to rebuild branch data.

POL, therefore, accepted that, in cases where the reliability of Horizon data was essential to the prosecution and conviction of an appellant and where Mr Justice Fraser's findings showed that there was an inadequate investigation and/or full and accurate disclosure had not been made, the conviction could be held by the Court of Appeal to be unsafe. In such cases, POL did not, therefore, resist the appeals on ground 1.

POL did not, however, accept that these same failures of investigation and disclosure were sufficient to justify a finding that it was an affront to the public conscience for the appellants to face prosecution. The Court of Appeal disagreed and allowed the appeals on ground 2 also, holding in summary that POL's failures of investigation and disclosure were so egregious as to make the prosecution of any of the Horizon cases an affront to the conscience of the court, saying at paragraph 137 of its judgment:

"By representing Horizon as reliable and 26

refusing to countenance any suggestion to the contrary, POL effectively sought to reverse the burden of proof. It treated what was no more than a shortfall, shown by an unreliable accounting system, as an incontrovertible loss and proceeded as if it were for the accused to prove that no such loss had occurred. Denied any disclosure of material capable of undermining the prosecution case, defendants were inevitably unable to discharge that improper burden. As each prosecution proceeded to its successful conclusion, the asserted reliability of Horizon was. on the face of it, reinforced. Defendants were prosecuted, convicted and sentenced on the basis that the Horizon data must be correct and cash must, therefore, be missing, when, in fact, there could be no confidence as to that foundation."

With that very brief overview, I turn to the evidence that we're about to hear in phase 1 of this Inquiry.

The number of people directly affected is vast. They stretch far beyond those who faced criminal prosecution. Those who were suspended or had their contracts terminated, those who were pursued for lost money, those who kept balancing the accounts by pouring money that they could not afford into POL, the

555 who brought a group action that we refer to as the Bates and others case, this Inquiry could never hope to hear all of their stories, all of their suffering, but it will provide a snapshot.

You will hear, Chair, from witnesses who experienced the pilot and roll-out of the Horizon IT system.

Our first witness, Mr Baljit Sethi, together with his wife Anjana Sethi, had run a Post Office in Kent since 1983 using a paper ledger. They had no problems with their accounts until they were encouraged by POL to take up and run a second Post Office in Essex in 2001. About a year later, now relying on Horizon, they suffered their first shortfalls of about £1,000 a week. This grew to about £17,000 and their contract was terminated.

You will hear, at one stage, they even experienced a surplus of £40,000 but continued to be pursued for the apparent deficit, losing their Post Offices and becoming insolvent. You will hear that Mr Sethi contemplated suicide.

Other witnesses will also give evidence as to the transfer from paper based or other accounting systems to Horizon and they will explain how their lives were changed. That's including but not limited

to evidence from Thomas English and Carol Edmondson.

You will hear evidence about the training and advice they received over the course of using Horizon and how they attempted to resolve disputes over shortfalls. This includes evidence from Mohammed Amir a current SPM. Mr Amir will tell you that he received insufficient training, which didn't give him practical instruction on the use of Horizon, that he used the helpline after experiencing a shortfall, only to see the shortfall double on carrying out the advice that he had been given.

Mr Amir suffered shortfalls in three different branches. This convinces him that problem lay with Horizon and not with dishonest staff in a particular branch. He will say that the response from POL was that the Horizon system could not make mistakes and that he was told that, as an SPM, he was contractually responsible for the shortfall.

Similar experiences with training, advice and dispute mechanisms will be explained in the evidence given by Scott Darlington, Linda Little, Louisa Powell, amongst others.

Former SPMs will give evidence relating to their treatment by auditors and the decisions on suspension and termination. Scott Darlington will give evidence

of the arrival of both the audit team and the fraud investigation team on the same day, with the investigation team carrying out an interview under caution, searching his home, and querying his personal and business bank accounts.

Susan Hazzleton was questioned on her own by two men for four hours and was told by them that she could go to prison. Siobhan Sayer's newborn baby was crying at her home and whilst it was searched for evidence of stolen money. You will hear from Harjinder Butoy about five auditors attending his branch before he was taken and held at a police station to be interviewed.

Others will give evidence of similar experiences. Many will speak about their attempts to raise concerns with POL. Wendy Martin will give evidence of closing her Post Office and raising press attention until a POL executive came to visit her branch. Jennifer O'Dell similarly met with that POL executive and will give evidence as to her experience of mediation with POL. Others will tell you about what happened when they wrote to the POL chief executive, Paula Vennells, and to their MPs and ministers.

A large number of witnesses, from whom you will hear, faced criminal prosecution. You will hear from

Josephine Hamilton today, who pleaded guilty to false accounting charges, having been told by the prosecution that more serious charges of theft would be dropped if she pleaded guilty to the false accounting charges. That's an experience shared by many who were in fear of a heavy prison sentence as the alternative.

Ms Hamilton will give evidence about her personal experiences but will also introduce to the Inquiry for the first time how she became involved in establishing the truth about Horizon, how she was involved in the first reporting in Computer Weekly, BBC Wales reporting and the foundation of the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, JFSA.

She will explain the background to the overturning of convictions in the Court of Appeal and the Group Litigation in the High Court.

Noel Thomas, who received a sentence of nine months' imprisonment, will also give evidence of how he first learned of their being wider problems with Horizon. Other witnesses who were also sentenced to terms of imprisonment will give their accounts: such as Janine Powell who was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, leaving behind two children; Tahir Mahmood, who was sentenced to nine months'

imprisonment; Parmod Kalia who was sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

Others received community orders or suspended sentences, such as Pauline Thomson, Margery Williams and Oyeteju Adedayo, who together with others will give their accounts. You will hear from Suzanne Palmer, one of a small number who were found not guilty after a jury trial but who were still terminated — had their contracts terminated, and suffered extreme financial hardship, including bankruptcy. Indeed, bankruptcy and losing one's home is a common theme throughout the evidence you'll hear over the next few weeks.

You will hear from Lisa Brennan, who was spared prison, being sentenced to a suspended sentence, only for her, and her six-year-old daughter to lose their home and to have to rely on the Salvation Army for food and clothing.

You will hear from Rita Threlfall, whose case reached the Crown Court but the prosecution was stopped because of her ill health. She was still forced, however, into bankruptcy and became reliant on her daughter to financial support.

Over the coming weeks you will hear evidence of a wide range of personal tragedies, like Gillian

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Howard who learned that she would be prosecuted on the day of her daughter's wedding.

The witnesses you will hear from come from all walks of life: an anonymous witness, who was a former prison officer; Timothy Burgess, who had been in the Royal Air Force; John Dickson, who had previously worked for Rolls Royce for 23 years.

Many of them had long-standing affiliations with POL: Damian Owens' parents ran a Post Office; Guy Vinall's father ran a post office for 20 years; Brent Whybro's wife received a long service award from the Post Office for 20 years, and his father had been an SPM for 40 years; William Graham had actually previously been a training manager who had trained SPMs on how to use Horizon.

A common theme amongst many of these witnesses, whatever their background, is a sense of the community within which each Post Office existed and how the actions of POL led to their ostracisation, to lost friendships and to worse.

Finally, there are those who did not live to see their convictions quashed or who did not know that their names would be cleared. Karen Wilson will give evidence about her husband, Julian, who was convicted of false accounting and sadly died before his

conviction was overturned by the Court of Appeal in April 2021.

Marion Holmes has provided a witness statement detailing the case of her husband, Peter Holmes, a former police officer who became an SPM and whose conviction for false accounting was also posthumously quashed in April last year.

As you said, sir, we'll begin hearing these stories today here at the IDRC in London and, as you said, we'll continue to hear these narratives, these accounts, these tragedies for the next two weeks here. We'll then travel to Leeds in the week commencing 28 February and to Cardiff in the week commencing 7 March to hear about different experiences from around this country. As you said, further human impact hearings will take place in due course in Northern Ireland and in Scotland.

However, it should be borne in mind that hearing about human impact will no doubt be a theme throughout this Inquiry and is not confined simply to these human impact hearings. Additionally, there are focus groups running from next month and as you, Chair, investigate what went wrong at each stage, the Inquiry's very likely to hear how these problems impacted upon and indeed, in some cases, tore apart people's lives.

Sir, that's all I say in opening at the moment.

We're going to hear from Mr Sethi next but I think
there's going to be a short break whilst the room is
reconfigured or some technical arrangements are put in
place. So can we have ten minutes please, sir?

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Of course. Thank you, Mr Beer. We

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Of course. Thank you, Mr Beer. We will depart for ten minutes.

(12.16 pm)

(A short break)

10 (12.27 pm)

MR BALJIT SETHI (sworn)

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Mr Sethi, thank you very much for coming. As it happens, we've only got about half-an-hour, or thereabouts, before lunch but if at any time during the proceedings you feel like a break just let me know and you'll have one, all right?

A. Thank you, sir.

Questioned by MR BEER

MR BEER: Mr Sethi, good afternoon.

As you know, by name is Jason Beer and I ask questions on behalf of the Inquiry. Can you give us your full name, please?

- 23 A. My full name is Baljit Singh Sethi.
- **Q.** I think you made two witness statements and I think they are in front of you. The first of them is dated

- 1 11 January 2022. Can you take that one up, please.
 - Thank you. Then look at the last page of the
- 3 statement itself; do you see your signature there?
- 4 A. Yes, sir.
- When you made that statement and now, were thecontents of it true to the best of your knowledge and

7 belief?

- 8 A. Yes, they are true and to the best of my belief.
- 9 Q. Thank you very much. Then the second witness10 statement, please. That should be dated
- 11 2 February 2022. Again, if you turn to the last page
- of that, do you see your signature?
- **A.** Yes, sir.
- **Q.** Are the contents of that statement true to the best ofyour knowledge and belief?
- 16 A. Yes, sir.
- 17 Q. Thank you.

Now, I think after you made your first witness statement it was shown to your wife Anjana Sethi, who sits alongside you; is that right?

- 21 A. Yes, sir.
- 22 Q. Did she confirm the accuracy of it?
- 23 A. Yes, sir, she did.
- **Q.** Sir, I think you know that we've got a witness
- 25 statement from Anjana Sethi, confirming the accuracy

| 1 | | of that first witness statement. | 1 | A. | Yes, sir. |
|----|----|--|----|----|--|
| 2 | | Can I ask you how old are you now? | 2 | Q. | You worked in a variety of banks after that? |
| 3 | A. | I'm 69, sir. | 3 | A. | Yes, sir. |
| 4 | Q. | How old is your wife? | 4 | Q. | With that background in mind, can we turn to your |
| 5 | A. | She's 67. | 5 | | first contact with the Post Office. How did it come |
| 6 | Q. | I think you met your wife, is this right, after you | 6 | | about that you and your wife ran the first |
| 7 | | first came to the United Kingdom in 1976 | 7 | | Post Office? |
| 8 | A. | Yes, sir. | 8 | A. | In 1983, since my wife already was running |
| 9 | Q. | she having already arrived ten years earlier in | 9 | | a Post Office with her father, she used to look after |
| 10 | | '66? | 10 | | his Post Office, she said "This is a good investment, |
| 11 | A. | Yes, sir. | 11 | | so let's buy a Post Office where we will be our own |
| 12 | Q. | Do you have children? | 12 | | bosses", and plus, you know, in those days, the |
| 13 | A. | Yes, I have two sons and one daughter. | 13 | | Post Office used to be in the house. So she said |
| 14 | Q. | How old are they now? | 14 | | that, "Look, you'll have to give up your job in the |
| 15 | A. | My son is 38, another one is 34 and our daughter 25. | 15 | | beginning", because we had a small son who was only |
| 16 | | Sorry. | 16 | | about two years old. |
| 17 | Q. | Just take a moment. We've got no rush at all, | 17 | | So I said, "okay, that's fine", and I'll run the |
| 18 | | Mr Sethi | 18 | | side of the business of the Post Office and she will |
| 19 | A. | Yeah, okay. | 19 | | run the Post Office and we could give attention to our |
| 20 | Q. | and please don't apologise. | 20 | | son also at the same time. So we purchased a small |
| 21 | | I think before you came to the UK in '76 you | 21 | | Post Office in 1983 and we ran it for 22 years. |
| 22 | | qualified in law in Bombay; is that right? | 22 | Q. | Where was that first Post Office in '83? |
| 23 | A. | Yes, sir. | 23 | A. | It was in a place called Harold Park Post Office, near |
| 24 | Q. | Then after you arrived in the UK you studied at | 24 | | Harold Road, near Romford in Essex. |
| 25 | | college; is that right? 37 | 25 | Q. | I think in the answer you gave before, your said that 38 |
| | | | | | |
| 1 | | your wife's father before that ran a Post Office. | 1 | | attempted armed robberies and they were attempts |
| 2 | | Where was that? | 2 | | because the robbers got away with nothing? |
| 3 | A. | Her father ran a Post Office in Gillingham in Kent and | 3 | A. | Yes, sir, and they came with guns, I don't know that |
| 4 | | we also ran it for 20 years. Actually, he passed away | 4 | | they came with knives or something; they came with |
| 5 | | while he was on duty. | 5 | | real guns. |

6 Q. So you said that you ran the Harold Park Post Office 7 for about 20 years. So that would be about until 8 2002/2003? 9 A. Yes, sir. 10 Q. Was that a successful or an unsuccessful business? 11 No, it was a very successful Post Office. We never 12 had any problems. Of course, we had seven armed 13 robberies but my wife was very brave and they didn't 14 take a single penny from the Post Office. She put her 15 life above everything and, today, I'm sitting in front 16 of you, saying that we stole from the Post Office --17 we had ample opportunity, seven attempts if we wanted, 18 we could have taken as much money and we could have 19 said, sorry, when the money was paid in the armed 20 robber struck and they took all the money, but we 21 never let them take a single penny. We got commended many times, for which they gave us certificates and 22 23 other things but, unfortunately, after all this, we 24 got nothing to show to that.

Q. So you say in your statement that there were seven

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ame with real guns. 5 6 Was this at the Harold Park Post Office? 7 Yes. sir. 8 At the Harold Park Post Office, what system did you 9 run for accounting? 10 We had a manual system which we ran, we had to balance 11 at the end of the week. In the beginning it used to 12 be on a Wednesday and, later on, it was changed to 13 a Friday. That was we could only balance once we 14 closed the Post Office and then we had to balance 15 everything, the stock, the money, whatever was with 16 us, and we never had any problem because my wife 17 already had experience and then I also started 18 learning from her, so that if she's not there or if 19 there's a problem, I can run it. 20 So we both ran it and we were very happy leading 21 a good life, only son at that time, and we were very 22 happy, we were doing well. The community we 23 represented, you won't believe it, it was like 24 a family community because people who lived around 25 there either had a brother, or a sister, or a father,

or mother living there, and the community loved us because we looked after them. If they had problems they would come to my wife to discuss, she used to offer them cup of tea or coffee, talk to them. If, say, you did not turn up on a certain day to collect your pension, she made sure she sent a message to the neighbour, could you please go and check that customer.

So the community just loved us. We didn't have to worry. My children when they started to grow up, we never had a problem to take them to school or leave the Post Office. The community people said "We will take them, we will pick them up, don't worry, Anjana, we will look after your child".

So we never had any problem and we were so loved and respected by the community that we were so happy. I think it was the best time of our lives.

- **Q.** At that time, you said that you were using a manual19 system?
- **A.** Yes, sir.

- 21 Q. Was that a paper-based ledger?
- 22 A. Yes, sir.
- 23 Q. If you noticed a discrepancy, what would you do?
- A. We would go all over the stock again, check it,sometimes we would take another half hour or maybe

15 minutes because it was only me or Anjana running the Post Office, there wasn't any outsider who was running, so we knew each other how we were working and we had to check.

And, luckily, you won't believe it, for 22 years we never a problem with the Post Office. We always balanced the books.

- **Q.** If there was a minor discrepancy, you would iron that out, you would balance the books?
- A. Yes, because the discrepancy would be like £2, or £3, or £4, so for that we would just put it in, or whatever had to be done, so that we carry on trading the next day in the morning.
- Q. Now, is it right that in about 2001 the Post Office approached you, and asked you to take up another franchise?
- A. Yes. We didn't want to buy because we didn't have the funds, so I said to the Post Office "Sorry, we are not interested", and they said, "No, Mr Sethi, this is a very good Post Office, we can't find anybody to run it and we don't want to close it because it's a budding Post Office with a lot of funds coming in, a lot of customers, so please buy it".

In the end, we gave in the pressure to them and they said "We'll help you in every possible way,

arrange for yourself". So we actually -- which place,
when we bought the place, because we knew the
Post Office was so good, we signed a 14-year lease,
because we thought in 14 years we'll run this
Post Office and then we can settle down and retire
peacefully, and we'll have a good life. So we signed
a 14-year lease with the Post Office and we were quite

except, of course, the money, which you have to

Q. Before you took over the new lease, in respect of the
old Post Office, the one at Harold Park, were you ever
audited by the Post Office?

happy running the business day-to-day.

- A. Yes, every two or three years, two auditors used to come unannounced, in the morning, say around about 8.30 or 8.15, and then you usually had to put a sign telling the customers that we shall be opening a bit late because the audit is being carried and they would carry out the audit, try to finish it by 9 o'clock and then once they found everything was in order they would tell us to open the Post Office.
- 21 Q. Did they find that everything was in order?
- 22 A. Yes, sir.
- Q. On those audits, over that 19/20-year period, were anyproblems over found by the Post Office?
- **A.** No, we were very lucky, I must say this in favour of 43

the Post Office, that our area manager was very good. If you ever had a problem all we needed was pick up the phone and ring him and he would be there within a few hours. So we never had any problem. We got maximum help from the Post Office, for which we were thankful to them.

- Q. Just winding forwards a little, taking things out of order, when you were subsequently investigated by the Post Office, in respect the second Post Office, do you know whether any reference was made back by then to the audits that had been conducted in the 20 years when you were using the paper-based ledgers?
- A. No, they didn't because they were not even interested.

 Because this Post Office in Brentwood came under

 Chelmsford and the one I ran in Harold Park came under

 Romford. Of course, they knew the whole history of us

 because when we took over -- when we started having

 shortages, you won't believe it, I used to send them

 a fax every day because, in those days, emails were

 not common thing.

So I used to fax them, I used to ring them up, say, "I've got a problem, please come and help me". And all response I used to get is: the manager is in a meeting, he is on the telephone, he is off sick today, he's on holiday; but nobody ever bothered to

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- 1 come back to me, not even once. It was never audited, 2 never -- nothing was done during my period.
- 3 Q. Okay. We'll come back to those in a moment. It's my 4 fault for taking you out of order. But your 5 recollection is, when things got bad in relation to 6 the second Post Office, nobody looked back at how you 7 had run the first Post Office?
- 8 No, sir. They just didn't want to know. When we told 9 them that this is what happened with us in that 10 Post Office, we had armed robberies, we never had 11 a problem in the system; they just didn't want to 12 know. They never even bothered responding or ever 13 ringing us.
- 14 Q. But you are telling the Chairman that, for near two 15 decades, on a paper-based system, you ran a Post 16 Office with no shortfalls, despite being audited 17 unannounced regularly?
- 18 A. Yes, we ran it very successfully. We never had any 19 problems and my wife just loved the place, she loved 20 the job and she was very happy and we were happy, 21 content people.
- 22 Now, the second Post Office you told us you were Q. 23 approached, I think, in about 2001. Was that at 24 99 Kings Road, Brentwood?
- 25 A. Yes, sir.

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available, I would rather have that Post Office on her name", and they said, "Oh, yes, we are fine because she has the experience, she actually has more experience than you, so yeah we are quite happy if you buy it", because what the Post Office looks at is -they don't care who buys the Post Office, who does it, as long as the Post Office runs and if there's a problem, the subpostmaster is liable for it at the end of the day.

So you can buy ten Post Offices and give it to ten different people to run it.

- 12 Q. So the second Post Office, the contract was in your 13 wife's name; is that right?
- 14 A. Yes, sir.
- 15 Q. Did you have to invest in order to take up the 16 contract with the Post Office for the second
- 17 Post Office? 18 **A.** Yes, sir, I had to invest very heavily. I had to pay 19 to the person who was running the Post Office to buy 20 the Post Office from there. I had to pay for my 21 lease, because the owner wasn't interested in selling 22 freehold. And then, when I took over, I invest a lot 23 of money in the business also, because I saw it was 24 a very viable business. So I invested heavily in the 25 business also and I set up everything there. I ran

Q. Do you know why they approached you to run that second Post Office?

3 A. Because they had seen that we had experience, we had 4 been running the Post Office in Harold Road so 5 successfully that they contacted us because this 6 Post Office was a very busy Post Office. We used to 7 do about 120 Special Deliveries a day. So they needed 8 people who could undertake the pressure, who could do 9 the job properly, so that there wouldn't be a queue 10 and people would be moaning that this Post Office is 11 useless, that people can't do the job properly.

> So we kept the customers happy, we kept the Post Office happy and, because of this, the Post Office said you are the ideal choice we want you to buy this place.

- 16 Q. Now, you took up their offer. Who was the 17 subpostmaster on the contract with the Post Office?
- 18 At that time it was my wife, Mrs Sethi, because when 19 we had my daughter, we got Harold Park Post Office 20 transferred on my name, because she said she'll 21 be busy with the baby. So I said, "Okay, I'll take 22 over at that time". So the Post Office called me for 23 interview, the usual things they have to do and then 24 transferred it to my name, and when we went to buy 25
 - Kings Road, I said to them, "Look, now that my wife is
- 1 newspapers and everything, confectionary, every item 2 possible which I could sell in my business. 3 When you started running the 99 Kings Road Post Office
- 4 in Brentwood, did you carry on with the Harold Park 5 one?
- 6 A. Yes. My wife was running that and I was running this 7 because, as this was away from my house, I used to 8 leave my house at 6.00 in the morning to run this 9 Post Office. And I just want to highlight one point 10 here, sir, if you would let me please.
- 11 Q. Of course.
- 12 A. I was the only man who ran the Post Office seven days 13 a week. They did not pay me that Saturday/Sunday. 14 I used to open the Post Office at 8 o'clock in the 15 morning and shut at 8 o'clock at night. Of course, 16 I had permission of the Post Office. Because it was 17 such a budding business, I said I'll work seven days 18 a week and I was the only Post Office in the country 19 which was running all seven days.
- 20 When you took over the Post Office at 99 Kings Road, 21 was that running a paper-based system or was it 22 already on Horizon?
- 23 No. At that time, the Horizon system was just coming Α. 24 in. So when I took over, there was already Horizon 25 system there because we had to go for training but,

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- 1 unfortunately, the training was very weak and I told
- 2 them when they gave the training I don't understand.
- 3 They said, "Don't worry. When you start doing it,
- 4 everything will fall into place", which it never did.
- 5 Q. How long did the training last?
- 6 A. It lasted for two days.
- 7 Q. Did you attend it with your wife or was --
- 8 A. No, I just went on my own and she went on her own.
- 9 Q. Was the paper-based system back at Harold Park
- 10 replaced by Horizon too?
- 11 Yes, sir. A.
- 12 Q. Can you remember when that was?
- 13 A. I think it all started in about 2000 or 2001.
- 14 Q. Did there come a time when at Kings Road you started
- 15 to notice shortfalls being reported on the Horizon
- 16 system?

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- 17 **A.** Yes, sir. After about one and a half year -- one
 - year -- I don't know -- I had a shock that the first
- 19 time was £1.000 and I was quite shocked. I spent
- 20 about four hours that night. I was there until 11.00
- 21 but I couldn't trace it. I thought, okay, maybe I
- 22 made a mistake. I might find it next week. The
- 23 following week when I did the balance, it shot up to
- 24 £2.000.
- 25 I had rung the Post Office, I sent them a fax.
- 1 and out and what has been received, or a difference 2
- between the stock held and the stock recorded as being
- 3 held, yes?
- 4 A. Yes, sir.
- 5 Q. A discrepancy, as you tell us in paragraph 3.3, will
- 6 naturally occur in any business which is handling many
- 7 cash transactions. This can be due to human error or
- 8 mis-keying, i.e. entering the wrong number in a cash
- 9 register or computer terminal, for example, yes?
- 10 A. Yes.
- 11 Q. You tell us in paragraph 3.4 what you've told us
- 12 already, that previously you used a manual paper-based
- 13 system which was time-consuming. However, when you
- 14 went back through having found a discrepancy, you
- 15 could identify in the records the cause of the
- 16 discrepancy, yes?
- 17 A. Yes, sir.
- 18 **Q.** You tell us in paragraph 3.6 what a shortfall is:
- 19 where a subpostmaster has been paid out more than has
- 20 been received, and the numbers do not balance as they
- 21 should and there is a deficit in the accounts.
- 22 A. Yes, sir.
- 23 Q. The reverse of a shortfall, you tell us in
- 24 paragraph 3.7, is a surplus. That is if you are
- 25 holding more stock or cash than the accounts, in fact,

- 1 I said, "There seems to be a problem in the Horizon
 - system. Would somebody please come and guide us".
- 3 Nobody bothered, nobody turned up. These shortages
 - lasted for 17 weeks when they ran up to £17,000.
- 5 Q. Now, I just want to examine, because you're our first
- 6 witness, some of the terminology about shortfalls,
- 7 discrepancies and balancing, okay?
- 8 A.
- 9 Q. Apologies for using you to do this. It's in your
- 10 second statement, Mr Sethi, and I'm working from
- 11 paragraph 3.1 in your second statement.
- 12 A. Yes, sir.
- 13 Where we asked you the question: what do you
- 14 understand by the terms "shortfall" and "discrepancy".
 - You tell us that when you were a subpostmaster, once
 - a week you would have to balance the books. This
 - means to review the stock held by the subpostmaster,
 - all the payments and receipts from that week's
- 19 trading, details of which are sent to the Post Office.
- 20 This was originally done on a Wednesday but later
- 21 undertaken on a Friday.
- 22 Is that all right?
- 23 A. Yes, sir.
- 24 You tell us in paragraph 3.2 a discrepancy is where
- 25 you find a difference between what has been paid in
- 1 record
- 2 A. Yes, sir.
- 3 So a discrepancy is either a shortfall or a surplus.
- 4 A. Yes, sir.
- 5 Q. Thank you.
- 6 What did you -- when did you first discover
- 7 a shortfall at Kings Road?
- 8 A. I think it was in September I discovered it was £1,000
- 9 short.
- 10 Q. In September .is that 2002?
- 11 A. 2001. I think.
- 12 Q. 2001.
- 13 Yes, because they closed it by 2002. Α.
- 14 How much was the system showing as a shortfall? A
- thousand pounds for that week? 15
- 16 Α. A thousand pounds every week.
- 17 What did you do when you noticed that first £1,000
- 18 shortfall?

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- 19 Well, the weekend I called one of my family friends,
- 20 who was also a subpostmaster, and asked him to go
- 21 through it. He went through also. He spent about
- 22 five hours with me but he didn't find anything. Then

we surely knew there was something wrong with the

- 24 Horizon.
- 25 Sorry, did you say "he said" or "you said"? Q.

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- A. No, I said to him -- I said, "I'm sure there's 1
- 2 a problem in the Horizon system because two of us have
- 3 done it. You're an experienced man, so am I". Now,
- 4 if he can't find a fault, then let me ask the
- 5 Post Office, "Please come, you have a look and find
- 6 out what's wrong" but they just refused to come. They
- 7 didn't even bother.
- 8 Q. Now, who's the "they" in that?
- 9 A. The Chelmsford head office where we had to report
- 10 everything. They were the people who were
- 11 responsible. We sent them faxes, I tried to phone
- 12 them but without any luck.
- 13 Q. So the part of the Post Office you contacted was your
- 14 head office in Chelmsford?
- 15 A. Yes, sir.
- 16 Q. You say in your statement that you asked them to come
- 17 to the branch to inspect the terminals because you
- 18 thought there was a problem with the Horizon
- 19 terminals: is that right?
- 20 Yes, sir.
- 21 Q. Did they say "No, we're not coming out" or did they
- 22 just not respond?
- 23 **A.** They just did not bother to respond.
- 24 Q. You said that you sent faxes, which takes me back too.
- 25 Why were you sending faxes?

- 1 Because I wanted some proof because if I will ring
 - them, there would be no proof that I rang them. So
- 3 I sent a fax and I kept a copy of that fax so that
 - tomorrow they can't turn back to me and say, "Oh, you
- 5 never rang. When did you ring? Whom did you ring?
- 6 Whom did you speak to?" So I made sure I sent a fax
- 7 and I retained a copy in my office which I did every
- 8
 - So you were asking the Post Office to come and look at
- 10 the operation of their system in your branch?
- 11 A.
- 12 And that you didn't receive any response at all?
- 13 A.
- 14 I think you told us that the shortfalls didn't stay
 - static; they grew?
- 16 A. Yes. Yes, sir.
- 17 Up to about £17,000?
- 18 Yes. That was about four months. A.
- 19 When they reached that level, did you receive some
- 20 contact from the Post Office?
- 21 A. Yes. Then we got a letter from them saying, "Please
- 22 make this good" -- "make good" means paying the 17,000
 - -- "and at the same time, as per your contract with
- 24 us, we are giving you three months' notice we shall be
 - terminating your contract".

- 1 Q. Was that the first communication you got from the
- 2 Post Office in relation to the shortfalls?
- 3
- 4 And what did you do in response to that communication?
- 5 A. I wrote back to them. I said --
- 6 Q. Another fax?
- 7 Yes, I sent them another fax telling them there's
- 8 a shortage, I've asked you to come and look, it's my
- 9 livelihood. I said come and check it, there surely is
- 10 a fault in the system, but they didn't want to listen.
- 11 Q. So, again, you identified the system as being the 12 problem in that communication?
- A. Yes, sir. 13

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- 14 And just tell us: you and your experienced friend,
- 15 what had led you to conclude that it was the system
- 16 that was the problem?
- 17 Because I was the only one who was running the
- 18 Post Office. It was not that I had some staff who
 - were running so that I could have said they have taken
- 20 the money or something. It was only me who was
- 21 running the Post Office and I had by that time nearly
- 22 20 years' experience running a Post Office. So I knew
- 23 exactly that if I could balance the books when they
- 24 were done manually, why should I not balance here?
- 25 I'm not taking out any money. I'm not doing anything 55

- 1 illegal. So why is this showing that -- there surely 2
 - has to be something wrong in the system but, at that
- 3 stage, the Post Office didn't want to know that.
- 4 Q. Did you eventually get a response to your
- 5 communications saying it's unfair that you're 6 terminating or proposing to terminate my contract?
- 7
- No, I didn't get any response but, you know, they say 8
- whom nobody helps, God helps. After that week, after 9 we got the letter, it started showing a surplus
- 10
- balance and this went up to 38,900 where I've said
- 11 there were the figure.
- 12 Q.

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- 13 And I got back to the Post Office and I say surely Α.
- 14 there's a problem in the system because it was showing
- 15 17,000 deficit. Now it's going up every week into
- 16 surplus balance. Please come and have a look, but
- 17 they still did not turn up. And on the day they came
- 18 to do the audit -- and I knew that there was surplus.
- 19 If I wanted to be dishonest, I could have taken out 20 the money every week.
- 21 Q. Hold on. Under your contract, were you allowed to

take out surpluses?

- 23 The contract does state this but I'm not 100 per cent
- 24 sure. It does say that anything short you make good,
- 25 anything surplus you withdraw. But whether it's in

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- 1 the contract or not, it's such a long time, I don't
- 2 know, but I'm sure it does say that. If you're
- 3 willing to take money from me you should have the same
- 4 thing to give it to me when it comes to but --
- 5 But, in any event, you said that you didn't think it 6 was right?
- 7 A. It was not right and, we being honest, we said, "No,
- 8 there's no way this money belongs to us and we're not
- 9 going to withdraw this money". So we let it there and
- 10 when they came and did the audit, there were two
- 11 officers from the Post Office, they did the audit and
- 12 showed a surplus of nearly £40,000 and I said to them,
- 13 "What happens?" and they said, "We will write to you".
- 14 Q. Just before we come on to the audit, I think before
- 15 the audit you knew that the Horizon system was showing
- 16 a surplus of just shy of £40,000?
- 17 A. Yes.
- 18 Q. Did you think the Horizon system was accurate in 19 showing the surplus?
- 20 A. No because --
- 21 **Q.** £40,000?
- 22 **A.** -- what is good for the goose is good for the gander.
- 23 The thing is when there's a shortage where I'm telling
- 24 you it is short, how can I be dishonest and tell you
- 25 tomorrow because it's in my favour? Sorry, sir, no,
- 1 with them, I signed the document, they signed, and 2

they gave me a copy of one of the documents.

- 3 **Q.** What were you signing for?
- 4 A. For that, whatever this statement is, is true -- the 5 statement with the auditor's date is true.
- 6 Q. And that said that there was a just shy of £40,000 7 surplus?
- 8 A. Yes, sir.
- 9 Q. And they were terminating your contract --
- 10 A. In spite of this.
- 11 Q. In spite of that. Did that make any sense to you?
- 12 A. It didn't because I said -- in fact, they put up an
- 13 audit -- they wanted me to put a notice in my window
- 14 saying that my wife was no more subpostmistress and
- 15 they are looking for a new subpostmaster or
- 16 subpostmistress in my Post Office, and I refused to do
- 17 that because what would the community think? They
- 18
- would think these people are thieves, they've been 19 robbing from the Post Office and that's why. It's not
- 20 only that. It wasn't true, so why would I do such a
- 21 thing? I refused to do it.
- Q. Did you ask the auditors what would happen to the 22 23
- 24 Yes, they said the Post Office will write to you.
- 25 Q. Did they?
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- no, no, this is something good now because it's giving
- 2 me money. It doesn't work that way.
- 3 Q. Now, you've told us that a three-month letter
 - proposing to terminate your contract had been sent and
- 5 did that expire, that three-month period, on 19 June
- 6 2002?
 - A. Yes, sir.
- 8 Q. On that day, as you have just told us, did some
- 9 auditors arrive?
- 10 A. Yes, they came that day to audit the Post Office
- 11 because that's what is usually done when they are
 - closing a Post Office. They come to audit it and then
- 13 they keep a copy and they give you one copy, and one
- 14 copy was given to us but, unfortunately, in the
 - 20 years I don't have a copy of that. But the
- 16 Post Office has agreed that there was a surplus. They
- 17 wrote to my MP and we have a copy of a letter from my
- 18 MP also.
- 19 Did you participate in the audit?
- 20 No. You can't do anything. You just stand there and
- 21 they do everything in front of you. They count the
- 22 stock, they count the money, they count everything,
- 23 and then they do everything, and then they tell you
- 24 this is a statement, this is what is surplus now, and
- you have to sign agreeing with them. And I agreed 25

 - Yes. A.

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- Q. Did they write to you?
- 3 No, they never wrote to me. One and a half years
- 4 passed. Then I contacted my MP and then they wrote
 - back to my MP.
- 6 **Q.** What did they say that you owed them?
- 7 Well, they wrote back to my MP saying that when we
 - took the computers away -- now, this is the
- 9 Post Office, whom we loved and we cared and we were so
- 10 honest to them, is doing an audit without me present
- 11 or any independent person present, and I've seen one
- 12 of the statements where they wrote missed balance
- 13 £41,000. How are you going to justify that missed
- 14 balance? I could put tomorrow missed balance £100,000
- 15 in my favour. Will you accept that, sir?
- 16 So they sent me a statement and they're telling 17 my MP, "Oh, Mr Sethi was actually 55,000 short, so he 18 still owes us 17,000 because that 38,000 is 19 compensated against that". So then I told my MP, "Why
- 20 are they not pursuing me or taking me to court or
 - saying we'll send you to prison" like they've done to others? Still never got a responding letter.
- 23 So they didn't pursue you for that sum and they didn't 24 criminally prosecute or investigate you?
- 25 A.

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- 1 **Q.** But they terminated your contract?
- A. Yes, but they know that there is this: when they don't leave you for a single penny, how would they leave you for 17,000? Am I the son-in-law of the Post Office?
- Q. On that note, Mr Sethi, we will break now, if that's
 a convenient moment, and come back after lunch to turn
 more directly to the human impact of all of this.
- 8 A. Thank you, sir.

9 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Mr Beer, normally in a situation where 10 a witness is giving sworn evidence a judge or a chair 11 might say something about speaking about your 12 evidence. I'm not really disposed to do that in these 13 circumstances because people have been talking about 14 this for 20 years; so it seems somewhat superfluous to 15 say that you can't speak about it for quarter of 16 an hour over your lunch.

17 See you after lunch, Mr Sethi, at 2.00.

18 (1.00 pm)

(Luncheon Adjournment)

20 (2.00 pm)

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21 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Yes, Mr Beer.

MR BEER: Thank you. Mr Sethi, we just left at the point
 at which your contract was terminated. Can I ask, did
 the Post Office terminate the contract for Harold Park

25 too?

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- 1 **A.** No, sir, only for Kings Road, Brentford.
- 2 Q. Only the 99 Kings Road one?
- 3 A. Yes, sir.
- 4 **Q.** So you carried on, you and your wife, working at that one?
- 6 A. Yes, sir.

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- Q. How long did you carry on working at the Harold Park one?
- A. Another one year, or so, because then they said that
 the Post Office is shutting down Post Offices because
 Harold Park was not a very busy Post Office and, plus,
- we had lost businesses by that time so they decided to shut it.
- io Silutit.
- Q. So the closure of Harold Park wasn't anything to dowith allegations against you, so far as you knew?
- 16 A. No, sir.
- 17 **Q.** Okay. That was just the normal course of business?
- 18 A. Yes, sir.
- 19 **Q.** In terms of the impact that the closure of20 99 Kings Road had on you, you say in your statement
- 21 that you had invested nearly £150,000 to lease the
- 22 property and the shop, plus thousands of pounds more
- 23 on stock levels and setting up the shop; is that
- 24 right?
- 25 A. Yes, sir.

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- 1 Q. Did that include improvements to the shop?
- 2 A. Yes, sir.
- 3 **Q.** You have told us already that you had a 14-year lease?
- 4 A. Yes, sir.
- 5 Q. Did you have to surrender that lease?
- 6 A. Yes, sir
- 7 Q. What was your salary at the Kings Road Post Office?
- 8 **A.** 35,000 per annum.
- 9 **Q.** Did you lose that salary?
- 10 **A.** In addition to the shop takings also.
- 11 **Q.** What was roughly the shop takings.
- 12 **A.** We were doing about 50,000 per annum.
- 13 **Q.** Was that takings or profit?
- 14 **A.** Well, you could say 20 per cent profit, at the most,
- and we also had a flat on the top, which we had let
- out, so we lost that flat's income also, on the top of
- 17 Kings Road Post Office.
- 18 Q. What were your intentions if this hadn't happened, in19 terms of hanging on to 99 Kings Road?
- 20 $\,$ **A.** We would have run it and after 14 years, God willing,
- 21 me and my wife would be well and happy, we would have
- 22 had enough savings for our old age and, plus, we would
- 23 be able to educate our children and everything,
- 24 because both children went to university and we
- 25 couldn't help them in any way.

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- They were working and studying at university. We felt so let down. We feel like as parents we are a failure to our children because we could not do anything to help them in any way. They helped themselves and, by God's grace, they got very good jobs in leading banks, and we are grateful to God, but we lost utterly everything. This was all thanks to the Post Office.
- 9 Q. So if this hadn't have happened it would have been
 10 your intention to carry on running the Post Office
 11 until retirement?
- 12 **A.** Yes, sir.
- 13 Q. You would have used the income to help provide for14 your children as they passed through education?
- 15 **A.** Yes, sir.
- 16 Q. By the last answers you've given the Chair, are you17 referring to the broader financial impact that this
- has on families, as well as those directly affected by it?
- 20 **A.** Yes, sir, we had to go into IVA and we were on the verge of bankruptcy, of losing everything we had
- worked for the last 20/25 years.
- 23 **Q.** So when did you go into an IVA?
- 24 A. Within one year, we went into IVA, sir.
- 25 **Q.** So within a year of the end of 2012 2002 rather?

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- 1 A. Yes, sir.
- Q. What was the effect of entering an IVA, in terms of your ability to get work?
- 4 A. It affected it in lots of ways. Number 1, I could not 5 open a bank account for six years. I could not get 6 a loan. My son had applied for a job in a bank, that 7 was his first job and he was worried because, if they 8 did a credit search, he would not get that job 9 thinking that his parents are thieves, because 10 a report would be on the credit report saying these 11 people have been -- their Post Office has been shut 12 down because of them stealing the money from the Post 13 Office.
- 14 Q. What did you do in terms of getting work? 15 A. To tell the truth, I was somewhat down and out that, 16 at one stage, I was thinking of contemplating suicide 17 but then I thought, no, this is the easy way out, what 18 about my family, my children. No, I'm going to do 19 something. I can't fight the Post Office because 20 I went to a barrister in London. He charged me £500 21 and he said to me "Mr Sethi, if I were you, you're 22 just waiting your time, because the Post Office 23 contract is so heavily weighed in favour of the Post 24 Office you cannot win, you cannot win, so my advice to 25 you was, I have to charge you money because you have

come to me, but for you it's to go and find another job".

I was nearly 54 at that time and, at 54, who's going to give you a job because wherever I went and, say, if I wanted to go back into banking, they didn't want to say you're too old, they will just say "Sorry, you've got too much experience and we don't have that kind of vacancy".

So, in the end, I got into security where I got minimum wage.

- 11 **Q.** So you were a security guard?
- 12 Yes, and I was doing night shift, which I'd never done 13 in my life. So, once again, no time with the children 14 because during nighttime I was away doing my shift 15 because I was doing a 12-hour shift, sometimes even 16 more because you are being paid hourly. The more work 17 you do, the more money you can get but, you know, with 18 minimum wage, it doesn't matter how many hours you put 19 in, there's not much return at the end of the day. 20
 - Q. In your answer before last, you said you went off to see a barrister was that a direct access barrister in 2004?
- A. One of my friends he said to me that best thing is we
 should go to a barrister because they're going to
 terminate your contract and let's see what he says.

1 **Q.** Was that in 2004?

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- A. Much earlier, sir, because, by the time they closed the Post Office, so I was seeking if I could do anything to redress the situation.
- Q. What, if any, impact did this have on your reputationwithin the community, ie what happened to you?
- 7 A. Our reputation was in shreds. People who used to hold 8 us in high esteem thought we were thieves, we were 9 robbing from the Post Office. People who used to stop 10 us in the street to say hello turned their face the 11 other way thinking "These people run a Post Office and 12 look the Post Office has shut them down because 13 they've been robbing from the Post Office", and we had 14 no way to prove it or tell anybody that this is wrong. 15 We tried our best to highlight -- there's a cutting 16 also of the newspaper.
- 17 Q. Which we're just coming to.
- A. Okay. It had a very bad impact on us in every aspect
 of life psychologically, financially, reputation-wise.
 The community who loved us didn't want to know us.
- 21 **Q.** You mentioned that you gave an interview to22 a newspaper. Was that a local newspaper?
- A. Yes, sir, because I had a Post Office in Brentford,
 I asked the local newspaper if they would like to come
 down and let me give my side of the story and they

- said yes, and they came to interview me and they published by interview in Brentford Gazette.
- Q. I think we've got the Article from the Brentford
 Gazette. I think that can be displayed. Whilst
 that's being done, Mr Sethi, if you look at your
 witness statement, at the end of the first one there
 is a copy of that article; can you see it?
 - A. Yes, sir.

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- 9 Q. Is this the article you're referring to?
- Yes, sir and, in this, I highlighted at that time, not 10 11 now, that the fault lies not with us, it lies with the 12 Horizon system, which the Post Office has refused to 13 come on numerous occasions when they have been told. 14 So I highlighted at that time saying there's a problem 15 with the Horizon system. But we were told: you are 16 the only Post Office in the country that has the 17 problem, nobody else has that.
- 18 **Q.** There's a lot packed into those answers there. Let's19 take it in stages.
- 20 A. Sorry, sir.
- Q. That's all right. I think we've dated this at about
 spring 2012, is that about right? Sorry, 2002 I keep saying 2012.
- 24 **A.** Yes, sir. Yes, sir.
- 25 Q. It's in the Brentford Gazette.

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A. Yes, sir.

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- 2 You can see the heading "Post chiefs tell shopkeeper 3 he must advertise to replace wife". That's what you 4 told us about before lunch. They wanted you to put up 5 an advert in the shop for a replacement position to 6 the one that your wife occupied in the Post Office?
 - A. Yes, sir.
 - Q. If we look at it together, it reads:

"A Brentwood shopkeeper has been faced with an impossible dilemma after postal chiefs asked him to advertise for a replacement for his wife.

"Anjana Sethi, sub post office mistress at Kings Road Post Office, has been told her contract will be terminated in June due to a dispute over alleged cash and business statement irregularities.

"Her husband Baljit runs the shop where the post office is based and is fighting the decision, claiming the problem is due to a faulty computer system installed by Post Office Ltd."

Is that what you were just referring to, that paragraph there?

- 22 A. Yes, sir.
- 23 Q. You were saying it's not just me saying in 2021 that 24 it was -- the fault was with Horizon, I was saying 25 that in 2002 and saying it publicly?

1 Yes, sir. I highlighted at that stage -- it was not 2 that I highlighted in 2012, or when the Post Office --3 I highlighted as soon as my Post Office was running 4 into problems. I highlighted that the fault lies not 5 with us, not with us, but what they have put the 6 system -- the fault lies with the system, sir.

7 We can see, if you look at the third column, in the 8 first paragraph, so third column, first paragraph, 9 there's a further reference to that:

> "Mr Sethi argues the system is faulty but Post Office ... has totally refuted this and claims it has sent experts down to check it twice."

- A. This is not true, sir. They never sent anybody ever to check it. They're saying they sent people twice. How come they didn't send the people when it was shortage? They didn't send anybody when it was short, they didn't send anybody when it was surplus. This is a false statement. I am sorry to say the Post Office, whom we love, has been telling lies, and lies, and lies. There's no truth in this statement, sir.
- Did this newspaper article have any effect on how 22 people viewed you in the local community? You said 23 you wanted to get your side of the story across?
- 24 A. Sir, at the end of the day, the thing is this, 25 newspapers are going to publish both sides of the

stories they will publish what you say but how you can convince the people is another matter because by printing it in the newspaper is nothing, people are still not going to believe you. They will just say that he was trying to prove his innocence when he has been a crook all the time.

So with the community it is very difficult. You see, anything you do wrong, it spreads like wildfire, and it's very difficult to convince. You can't convince every individual going around and telling them I'm done nothing wrong, sir. So virtually -- to tell you the truth, I only highlighted what I could do and that was the only reason. I even actually went to a tribunal to put my case forward, but the tribunal said to me, "Sorry, Mr Sethi you are not an employee of the Post Office, you are an agent and we do not deal in a Tribunal with agents".

- **Q.** In terms of the reputational harm that this caused you, you have spoken about people in the local community. What about friends and family?
- A. It was the same case because we stopped going out 22 because wherever we went there was always a talk about 23 the Post Office, directly or indirectly, and this affected us so badly that me and my wife decided we 25 shall not be going for any parties or anywhere,

because we have not done anything wrong, we didn't want to hide from the people, but people still are not going to believe your words because they are going to believe what the Post Office says.

You cannot convince everybody. Maybe one or two people might have agreed with you but, at the end of the day, there was nothing we could do to prove that we had done nothing wrong.

- 9 **Q.** You have told us about the financial impact that this 10 had on you. The broader consequences of that 11 financial impact, the impact on your health and how 12 you felt, on the harm it did to you in the community 13 and amongst friends and family; did there come a time 14 when you went to a mediation?
- 15 Yes. I can't remember the year but we did go in 2012 16 or something, or 2014, I don't know the exact --
- 17 Q. In your statement you pick the middle year, you said 18 approximately 2013 in your statement.
- 19 I'm sorry, because it's been such a long time and we 20 went there. We had actually given up all hope, and 21 I'm a person who's keeps all the records but my wife 22 said to me, look, your cupboard is full of this 23 rubbish, nothing is going to happen, why don't you 24 chuck it away. So I had to throw away everything.

When we went for this mediation, they offered me

(18) Pages 69 - 72

a paltry sum of £1,000. I said to them: are you joking? £1,000 for the last 15 years of the scandalous thing we have gone through, our lives have been turned upside down, our children have suffered, we have suffered. You know about me and my wife a diabetic, I'm actually on insulin. It's not hereditary, we never had any sickness, we never took a single day off closing the Post Office ever. In all these 25 or 30 years we ran the Post Office, we never rang up the Post Office saying "Oh, today my wife is sick, she can't run the Post Office", because we were more worried about the community.

We used to think we're providing a service and people are going to like you for that, for doing -- like I said to you, I show up on seven days a week in Brentwood. In Harold Park, I never used to open the Post Office at 9 o'clock, I used to open at 8.30 because I used to see snow is falling, people are standing outside, I would say, "no, no, no, please come in, don't stand outside, come inside, stand here but come in a queue, as you all have lined up, but please don't stand outside", because we used to open it early, so that people could --

There were people who couldn't -- there were people who used to like come to take money, say like

you want to withdraw £2,000, and a lady who used to walk up to us and say to me "Mr Sethi, you know, I feel a bit uneasy because there's a man standing there I think he looks dubious to me, can I leave my book with you, I've got ten weeks pension money there, can you please drop it to me after you close the Post Office".

And this is what I'm telling you, with heart on my hand, you won't believe it. I said to her "I will bring it after 5.30", because I closed the Post Office at 5.30. It was raining cats and dogs and my wife said "Where are you going", I said "You know my customer, she's left £500 with me, if I don't go at 5.30 she might get a heart attack thinking I have runaway with the money". So I said, no, I got drenched and she said to me "You could have waited", I said "No, that's not the question, the question is you trust me and if didn't come I was worried more about you than myself".

So this how you work with the community and that's why the community loved us because we cared for the community. If we saw somebody standing at a bus stop we used to give them a lift. We didn't used to just drive past, we used to say, no, let's give a lift and we say, oh, I live across the road. I said that

doesn't matter, this will take me only a minute.

So we did everything to get Post Office the business. I went to different pubs, charities, where they started banking with me, who were not even near me where I had my Post Office but because I gave them very good service, they came and banked with me. We used to get deposits of £100,000 a week.

- Q. Just going back to the mediation, you said that they offered --
- **A.** £1,000.

- 11 Q. Did you settle, in the end, for a different amount?
- A. Yes, in the end they told me, "look, we have wasted enough time, we'll give you 5,000, that is our final offer; do you want take it, take it or leave it". I talked to my wife, I said to her "Look, we're not getting anything, if we don't take this 5,000 we won't even get that, so we might as well take that 5,000 because, at the end of the day, if you don't accept that 5,000, we are going to get nothing".
- **Q.** Did it represent the actual losses that you had suffered?
- 22 A. No, sir. It was nowhere near the actual losses.
- Q. More recently, have you made an application to thePost Office's Historic Shortfall Scheme?
- **A.** Yes, sir. I've made -- to this historical shortfall, 75

which I wish to highlight, sir, if you give me an opportunity.

3 Can I say something about this historical 4 shortfall?

Q. Let's just take it in stages --

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Let Mr Beer ask the questions. I'm sure he's going to get to the relevant parts.

8 A. Yes, I have applied for --

MR BEER: So under the HSS, as we are calling it?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. When did you make the application?

A. Two years back, sir, in February 2020.

Q. February 2020?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. When did you receive a reply of substance from thePost Office?

A. Unfortunately, sir, I have not received a single substantial reply. Every three months, I write to my
 MP. She writes to the Post Office and they come with a stereotype statement "Mr and Mrs Sethi, we got 2,500 applications, so you're not the only one, please have patience and we will come back to you". This is the only reply I've received in the last two years.

But just last Thursday, after sitting on that for two years, now they have come back to me saying we

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1 want you to answer these 100 questions. 2 I mean, I've suffered for 20 years. I need help 3 from my children. I'm nearing 70. I will not live 4 long. I ask my children to help me. They got their 5 own lives, they got their own children. Now, they 6 want me to fill 100 questions to answer. Do you think 7 this is fair, sir? 8 Q. Just getting back to the chronology then, you have had 9 holding replies every three months or so for the last two years? 10 11 A. Yes, sir. 12 Q. Then on 10 February --13 A. Yes. sir. 14 Q. -- you received a letter, which I think has actually 15 got 68 questions in it, but if you count the 16 sub-questions, it comes out to over 100; is that 17 right? 18 A. Yes, sir. 19 Q. Is that the first time they have asked you for that 20 information?

you have asked me now again after six months, I already sent you this six months back", and then they came back to me saying, "Oh, sorry, there are lots of people dealing with this, so that person was dealing has mislaid it, the case has come to me new, so I need now reply from you".

This like passing the buck from you to him, him to her, which will be never ending. Even if I answer these 100 questions tomorrow, some bright geezer might get up tomorrow and say, "Oh, Mr Sethi, you know what, now people have changed, could you please answer those 100 questions again".

- 12 13 Looking at the questions generally, I'm not going to 14 go through them, are you in a position now 20 years on 15 to answer lots of them?
- 16 Not really, sir, because the questions they are asking Α. 17 me: when you bought the Post Office, they know it, 18 those are some of the typical questions; how much you 19 invested; when you bought it; how much was the 20 surplus; how much was the shortage. I mean, all this 21 information is held by the Post Office. They are just 22 wasting time, just to prolong the things and if this 23 goes on, I think I'll be dead and gone and we'll never 24 get anything from the Post Office.

You say in your statement that you are deeply worried

that you or your wife will die before you achieve any form of justice or meaningful compensation; is that the case?

A. Yes, sir, but before that whatever information, when

we put in for Historical Shortfall, they have asked me

repeating the same questions. The last time I wrote

to them and I said, "You know, these questions, which

so many questions which we have answered and they keep

4 A. Yes, sir.

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Q. What do you want from the Post Office?

A. I want two or three things from the Post Office: number 1, we want an apology from the Post Office saying they're sorry what they have done to us. We have not -- haven't received a single letter today saying they were wrong, they apologise, they are sorry. They haven't done that.

The impact that they had on us -- the people who did this, they should be investigated, not a single person has been brought to charge until today. They've gone scot-free, and the answer would be, sorry, they have left the organisation or they retired. Yeah, but they are the people who did it and this is not one person. This goes right to the top.

So I can't say, "Oh, my manager did it or my sub-manager did it", I'm sorry right up to the chief executive or the director of the Post Office everybody knew what exactly was happening. So I want that to be done.

Thirdly, no amount of compensation can return us the 20 years of hell we have gone through. Only my

wife and I know it, how we have struggled in these 20 years. We have worked so many hours for a petty amount of money but we didn't want handouts, we didn't go to the state to give us unemployment benefit or anything. We said, no, we'll make a life, we'll work hard.

As I said earlier, the Post Office took her again and made her a manager, which clearly shows that in one place you are saying she is dishonest, another place you are again making her a manager of a Post Office. How can you justify this?

So I want a good compensation not only for my -but for my colleagues, there are people who are worse off than me who suffered, they went to prison. I must say I consider myself lucky that didn't go because mine turned to a surplus. What if had not turned to a surplus? My wife would have to go to prison not me. because she was the subpostmistress. They would have charged her and who would have looked after my children. Our family would have been broken, the children would have not been educated, they wouldn't be what they are today.

I'm so proud today of my children. I can, hold my head up and say they worked so hard and I'm such a proud -- we are so proud parents of our children.

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They've helped us in every aspect, instead of we helping them.

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So I hope, sir, that the Post Office looks into this and gives us our due, which should have been done long time back. I don't want them to keep postponing and saying "It will happen in three months' time, six months' time, down the year". No, give us something now, so that we have something. We want to get something now, some compensation should be given now and then they can decide about other things later on.

But all they do is, "Sorry, Mr Sethi, there are 2,500 people". Yes, I know there are 2,500 people. You see in the papers I've been reading -- this is what Mr Scully said, he said 98 per cent of the subpostmasters have got the money. Then another place they say, no, 95 per cent have got. Another place they said 33 per cent. So where are my, I'm nowhere in those 98 per cent, or 95 per cent, or 33 per cent.

You're not giving exact figure. What we want is for you to come out and tell us that we have got this, we are doing this; they are doing exactly what they did when they closed me down. They believed that if they don't answer that is the end of the story. That's what they did when we were running shortage, they never came back, and now when we apply for

Historical Shortfall, they are doing exactly the same story.

I also wanted to ask you, sir, if tomorrow me and my wife pass away, will my children be able to get some compensation or will the matter just die along as we die?

- 7 Q. Mr Sethi, thank you very much for the evidence you 8 have given.
- 9 Thank you, sir. Α.
 - I haven't got any other questions for you. Is there anything else that you feel that you want to say that we haven't through this process of question and answers covered?
- 14 No, sir, I've said everything. I hope now that me and 15 my family gets justice, which is overdue to us and to 16 other subpostmasters, and my colleagues. God willing, 17 I hope that will happen.

Thank you very much, sir, and I'm so very, very grateful to you for giving me an opportunity to put my case. That's the first time in 20 years. You know everything has been blocking up and today I feel that most of it has come out and I feel a bit relaxed and I'm happy and I'm grateful to you.

Thank you very much, sir.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Well, thank you very much, and also 82

- 1 thank you Mrs Sethi, not just for supporting your 2 husband with your statement but for coming to sit by 3 him and supporting him today. Thank you.
- 4 A. Thank you, sir.
- 5 MR BEER: Thank you very much, Mr Sethi, if you return to 6 your seats now, we will move on to the next witness. 7 Thank you indeed.
- 8 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Mr Beer, while the preparations are 9 going on, if you think there is a need for a break 10 during the course of Mrs Hamilton's evidence you just 11 take that break.
 - MR BEER: Thank you, sir. Although she won't like being called by this name, Josephine Hamilton, please.

JOSEPHINE HAMILTON (sworn) Questioned by MR BEER

- MR BEER: Thank you for bringing your own Bible. Can you give us your full name, please.
- 18 A. Josephine Hamilton. Done it again.
- 19 Q. In front of you, there should be two witness 20 statements.

I should have said I ask questions on behalf of the Chair of the Inquiry Sir Wyn Williams, my name is Jason Beer.

There should be two witness statements in front of you. The first is dated 13 January and, if you

- 1 look at the last page of that, which is page 21, there 2 should be a signature. Is that your signature?
- 3 My signature -- oh, yes, there sorry.
- 4 Q. When you made that statement, were the contents of it 5 true to the best of your knowledge and belief?
- 6 A. Yes.
- 7 Q. If you look at the second statement, please, which 8
- should be dated 10 February 2022, on the last page, 9 which is page 4, there is a further signature; is that
- 10 your signature?
- 11 A. Yes.
- 12 Q. Are the contents of that statement true to the best of 13 your knowledge and belief?
- 14 A. Yes, sir.
- 15 Q. Now, Mrs Hamilton, can you tell us how old you are 16 now?
- 17 A. 64.
- 18 **Q.** Thank you. Before you took over running the Post 19
 - Office in South Warnborough in October 2001, we read
- 20 from your statements, you worked in a range of jobs,
- 21 I think?
- 22 A. Yes. I followed my husband's career.
- 23 Q. Okay. By my reckoning, looking at all the sources 24 available to me, I've seen that before you took over
- 25 the Post Office, you worked as an army -- or in army

Q. 4-0?

A.

4-0, yes.

| 1 | | personnel research? |
|----|----|--|
| 2 | A. | Yes. |
| 3 | Q. | As a care assistant? |
| 4 | A. | Yes. |
| 5 | Q. | You ran a pub, you ran a haulage business, you drove |
| 6 | | a tipper truck? |
| 7 | A. | Yes. |
| 8 | Q. | Having got an HGV licence, you were a long distance |
| 9 | | lorry driver? |
| 10 | A. | Yes. |
| 11 | Q. | So those six jobs preceded your work in the Post |
| 12 | | Office? |
| 13 | A. | Yes. |
| 14 | Q. | So how did it come about that you took over the Post |
| 15 | | Office in South Warnborough? |
| 16 | A. | Well, we were struggling to make haulage pay because |
| 17 | | the cost of fuel was such a lot of money and so |
| 18 | | somebody in the village because we'd been there for |
| 19 | | 15 years before that somebody suggested that I took |
| 20 | | over the village shop because it had been run by |
| 21 | | volunteers and it needed someone to kind of bring it |

3 Q. So can you just describe the Post Office? I called it 4 South Warnborough, whereabouts is that? 5 A. It's in Hampshire between Odiham and Alton, and 6 a quintessentially Hampshire village, it was a lovely 7 little shop and it was just a local community store, 8 really, with a Post Office in the back of it. 9 So it was run as a co-operative or a local community? 10 A. Yes. 11 **Q.** With a Post Office inside it? 12 A. Yes, yeah. 13 Q. People were concerned that if the shop closed the Post 14 Office would close? 15 A. Yes, the Post Office was really important because, at 16 that time, we had lots of elderly people in the 17 village, who really needed it. Did you have to pay any money to take over the 40-year 18 19 lease? 20 A. Well, they said -- they knew I didn't have a lot of 21 money so they said if you take it on, you can pay us 21 volunteers and it needed someone to, kind of, bring it 22 22 rent every year plus lease premium. So I was buying together. So they said "Why don't you take over the 23 lease on the shop", and, yeah, it had a Post Office in 23 it over the term of the lease. 24 24 it and there was somebody working in the Post Office. Q. So the "they" in that, is that that landlord, rather 25 So I took a 40-year lease on the business. 25 than Post Office? 86 85

A. Yes, that's the Village Shop Association. They owned 1 2 it or everyone had debentures in it. 3 Q. So I think you say in your statement the price of the 4 lease was £36,000? 5 A. Yes. 6 **Q.** You didn't have capital to pay it upfront? 7 A. No. 8 Q. So you were planning to clear it as you went along --9 A. Yes. 10 **Q.** -- expecting to clear it eventually? 11 A. Yes. Well, the plan was to clear it in about 12 five years but it didn't pan out like that because of 13 the Post Office. 14 Q. Were you lent some money to purchase the shop's

15 standing stock? 16 A. Yes. Yes, I was lent £10,000 by the store. Q. What happened when you, in October 2001, took over the 17 18 shop and the Post Office? 19 A. Well, it was just a bare shell, really, and we 20

realised that the road was really useful and we kind of turned it in -- we realised that with fresh produce and a coffee machine, you could actually turn it into a bit of a café, you know, a takeaway, on the way through to work. We captured lots of builders because we were open at 7.00 in the morning and that kind of

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1 started to grow the business, really. And then the 2 lady who was running the Post Office, she decided she 3 wanted to leave at Christmas that year, and so --

4 Q. This is still 2001?

5 This is still 2001, yes, and the subpostmaster, who 6 was subpostmaster in name only, he approached me and 7 said "Would you consider running it?" So I thought, 8 well, you know -- I mean, back in the day, it was 9 a tiny little Post Office. It was all paper-based, 10 although it had the Horizon system, everything --11 there was no chip and PIN, so it was easy to balance, 12 easy to work. It was just cheque and cash, and that 13 was it.

14 So when did you take over as manager of the Post Q. 15 Office then?

Christmas 2001. She left Christmas Eve. and I started 16 17 in between Christmas and New Year.

18 When did you officially become the postmistress?

19 Eventually in 2003, the subpostmaster was terminally 20 ill and they asked me -- well, we had to apply for the 21 position but nobody else came forward, so I went and 22 was interviewed in Basingstoke and I got the job and 23 took it over as subpostmistress.

24 When you took over or when you joined in October 2001, 25 then when you were manager in December 2001 and then,

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- 1 by the time you took over as the subpostmistress in
- 2 2003, were you aware of any issues with the accounts 3
- or balances of the Post Office? A. I knew they had had a £270 discrepancy, and I knew 4
- 5 that the subpostmaster had paid it but I just -- you
- 6 know, it was before my time, before I even took the
- 7 shop over. I knew that -- I had heard that Sue had
- 8 had a problem with the £270, so didn't really give it
- 9 another thought.
- 10 Q. Was there any discussion over what had caused the 11 discrepancy?
- 12 A. No.

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- 13 Q. When you joined in October 2001 what were the systems 14 that were in place?
- 15 We had, like, the basic Horizon system but because you
- 16 could match everything at the end of the day, it was
- 17 like double entry bookkeeping, you could see little 18 piles of paper with the pension dockets and things
- 19 like that. If you had made a mistake and you finished
- 20 something to cheque or cash and you had finished it to
- 21 cash and it should have been cheque, you could see,
- 22 because you had a pile of cheques and a pile of bits
- 23 and pieces that you could add up and see straight away
- 24 where you had made a mistake. So it was easy.
 - Q. Were you running parallel systems then?

- Just at the end of the day, if there was ever anything
- wrong, you could spread everything out and have a look
- 3 at it would be there, and so you could sort it out.
- 4 Q. You mentioned the introduction of chip and PIN. When
- 5 did that come in, in your branch? 6 A. It came in in late 2003. I cannot remember exactly
 - when but it was just about around the time I became
- 8 subpostmaster and it all went haywire from then on.
- 9 Q. Did you receive any training for the introduction of 10 the chip and PIN system?
- 11 A. No. They literally screwed it onto the counter,
- 12 a Fujitsu guy came, screwed it onto the counter and
- 13 I said "What's that". He said, "That's chip and PIN".
- 14 He said "It will be going live in a little while", and
 - that was it. That was the training.
- 16 Q. Did you receive any training in the wider Horizon 17
- 18 No. I had had four half days training between A.
- 19 Christmas and New Year when I took it over, when it
- 20 was paper-based, but the chip and PIN hadn't been
- 21 invented then, so nothing related to it.
- 22 You describe in your statement between
 - 25 December 2001 and 1 January 2002 you were visited
- 24 by a trainer from the Post Office.
- 25 A. Yes.

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- 1 Q. There were very few customers in the Post Office.
- 2 A. There were no customers.
- 3 **Q.** The trainer, therefore, gave you limited training.
- 4 What was that training about?
- 5 A. It was about basically what envelopes to put what in
- 6 at the end of the day and what to despatch to where.
- 7 He did a pretend balance and, I mean, we didn't have
- 8 any figures to play with because the Post Office
- 9 wasn't busy between Christmas and New Year. So he 10
- basically pinned everything on the wall because there 11 actually wasn't a balance between Christmas and New
- 12 Year, he pretended to do one, showed me what would be 13 done, and then left me to it.
- 14 Q. You said that when chip and PIN was installed, 15 everything started to go haywire?
- 16 A. Yes. I mean, you just couldn't -- once discrepancies
- 17 started happening, you couldn't actually find out
- 18 where it was -- what had gone wrong.
- 19 Q. You say in your statement that:
- 20 "This is when I started to experience
- 21 significant unexplained shortfalls."
- 22 A. Yes.
- 23 Q. The first discrepancy occurred on 2 December 2003 when
- 24 a shortfall showed up in the sum of £2,082, which the
- 25 Post Office had put into the suspense account?

- Yes. 1 A.
- 2 Q. Is that right?
- 3 Α.
- 4 Q. Was that almost immediately after the chip and PIN was 5
- 6 A. Yes, it was within a month or so. I can't be exactly
- 7 sure what date but it was around that time.
- 8 What was the suspense account, so far as you knew?
- 9 A. Well, something -- if you had something wrong it would
- 10 just be parked over there but it was when I went to
- 11 bring it out of suspense that the whole thing went --
- 12 it doubled in front of my eyes. They told me what to
- 13 do and the discrepancy doubled, and I demanded --
- 14 well, they said "You have got to make it good" and
- 15 I said, "Well, I'm not accepting that". I said
- 16 "I want the area manager to come down" and he came
- 17 down and couldn't --
- 18 Q. Can we just slow it down a little bit, if we may.
- 19 A.
- 20 So you got this discrepancy that showed up on
- 21 2 December 2003 --
- 22 A. Yes
- 23 Q. -- of £2,082. You said you contacted them. Who did
- 24 you contact?
- 25 The help desk. A.

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- 1 Q. So did you phone the help desk, the helpline?
- 2 Yes, I phoned the helpline.
- 3 Q. You said, I think, that you wanted to know how to take 4 that money out of the suspense account?
- 5 A. Yes, because they -- I can't remember the exact
- 6 process but you kind of take the suspense account out
- 7 to zero -- when they find out what's wrong, they take
- 8 it out and it becomes zero and whatever I did made it
- 9 minus 4,000 not 2,000.
- 10 Q. So were you given --
- 11 A. I didn't owe the 2,000.
- 12 Q. Were you given some instructions by the helpline and
- 13 did you carry those out?
- 14 A. Yes, I carried them out on 31 December, I think it 15
- 16 Q. In your statement you said 24 December?
- 17 A. 24 December, yes.
- 18 Q. So Christmas Eve rather than New Year's Eve?
- 19 A.
- 20 Q. It doubled to about 4,188.53, you say, in your
- 21 statement?
- 22 A. Yes.
- 23 Q. Did you speak to the help desk again?
- 24 A. Yes.

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25 Q. What did they say?

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- properly the other end", and I just -- I mean,
- 2 honestly, you might think I'm a real dummy but I never
- 3 thought -- I never thought that there was anything
- 4 wrong, really, I just thought "Oh, well, it's not
- 5 recording, so that they are on top of it and they've
- 6 changed the base unit".
- 7 Q. So you thought that solved whatever problem there was?
- 8 A. Yes, because you couldn't actually see what was
- 9 happening the other end so you didn't know really what 10 they were talking about.
- 11 Q. So these shortfalls were being carried over, I think 12 you said?
- 13 A. Yes, and eventually they kept my wages and then
- 14 another shortfall came of 750, and that was the same answer from the help desk, "Well, you have got to make 15 16 it good", and they kept my wages for that. Then there
- 17 was another smaller one, which I made good, and they 18
- said, "You know, any more of these and you're sacked". 19 So that's when I didn't report -- I borrowed 20 money and I remortgaged and I put more money in to try

and level it out and in the end I just ran out of

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- Q. So you were saying that you put some money in 23 24 yourself?
- 25 A. Yes.

Well, I ranted for about a week trying to get it sorted out because they just kept saying "Well, you've

- 3 got to make it good", and it's like, well, I didn't
- 4 owe 2,000 let alone 4,000. So I said, "Well, I want
- 5 the area manager to come down". So they knew about
- 6 the amount and allowed me to keep rolling it over and
- 7 the area manager came down some time in January and he
- 8 couldn't find it either but he said "Oh, I think
- 9 an error notice will be generated because I can't work
- 10 out what's gone on either", and the error notice never 11
 - came.
- 12 So they said we managed to get it down to about 13 3,100 and something, and they sent me a letter saying
- 14 we'd like you to send that by return of post and it's
- 15 like, well, I don't have that. So they said, well,
- 16 that's fine we'll keep your remuneration until it's
- 17
 - You mentioned about somebody from Fujitsu, I think, Q.
- 19 coming out to install the chip and PIN system?
- 20 A.

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- 21 Did anyone come out from Fujitsu after this complaint
- 22 was made by you in December 2003?
- 23 A. I'd had a couple of times engineers would come out and
- 24 change the base unit under the counter, and they said
- "We're just changing that because it's not recording 25

- They deducted some of your wages?
- 2 They were deducting two lots of wages, one straight
- 3 after the other, and then it kept going wrong and
- 4 I kept having deficits. And so I remortgaged the
- 5 house because I had a £9,000 one and I put £9,000 in
- 6 the safe to make that up and then I borrowed £3,000
- 7 from a friend and then I put that in, and I just gave
- 8 up because -- and that's when I didn't flag up that
- 9 there was money -- that the accounts didn't balance,
- 10 because it would come up with a figure that you should
- 11 have in your safe and if you didn't have it --
- 12 Well, you couldn't actually open the next day, 13 unless you agreed the figure and it would generate the
- 14 figure, so you just go, yeah, I've got that, because
- 15 I didn't know where else to go, because I'd already
- 16 tried to get them to come and sort it out but they
- 17
- 18 Q. So the system was showing deficits?
- 19 A.
- 20 You were seeking to make those deficits up from your
- 21 own private money and the money of others --
- 22 A.
- 23 -- by putting cash in the safe?
- 24 A. In the safe, yes, yes, yes. Yes.
- 25 But you knew that you hadn't taken any money?

- A. I know. And I just backed myself into a corner.
 I didn't know where else to go because I knew
 I couldn't get any help from the Post Office and every
 time I said "This isn't right", they just said "Well,
 you've got to pay it".
- Q. I think things came to a head at the beginning of2006?
- 8 A. Yes.

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- Q. You say in your statement that, by that time, you were
 becoming very worried and stressed about the
 continuous shortfalls and discrepancy on Horizon?
- 12 Yes, well, I had had chest pains and I went to the 13 doctor and they gave me an ECG but they thought it was 14 just stress and -- well, that period that last year, 15 when the amount was growing and growing and I just 16 didn't know -- I didn't know where to go for help and 17 they rang and said "We want you to remit £25,000 18 tomorrow because we're concerned about the amount of 19 cash you're holding", and I knew I didn't have it.

And a friend came past and saw the light on about 10 o'clock, and she came in and it was the friend that lent me the money and she said "Whatever's the matter", and I said "I don't know what I'm going to do, where can I find 25 grand". She said "You've just got to stop this because", you know, she said,

- "you're going to be really ill if -- you've got to whatever happens, you've got to draw a line under it".
 So she said "You're going to phone the Federation in
 the morning, and ask for help".
- Q. Did you phone the Federation, and by "the Federation"you mean the National Federation of SubPostmasters?
- A. Yes, and I phoned them in the morning and I said
 "I haven't got -- I've got a big discrepancy in my
 office". I said "I've got no idea how it's happened,
 I've had problems with the computer system, I've been
 putting money". And she said, "Well, you go find
 yourself a good criminal lawyer and we'll arrange
- 14 Q. Did you go and find yourself a good criminal lawyer?

an audit", and that was the sum total of their help.

- A. Well, fortunately, one of my customers was a criminal lawyer and she lived right opposite the shop. So
 I went and literally poured my heart out to her and
 I don't think she could really quite believe what was
 going on because she knew me.
- 20 **Q.** You told us that you went to see your GP?
- 21 A. Yes.

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- 22 Q. Did your GP sign you off from work?
- 23 A. Yes, with stress.
- 24 **Q.** For how long?
- 25 **A.** They signed me off for a month with stress but
- I couldn't take any time off because the shop -- I was
 the shop. It was me and one or two part-time others
 and I couldn't not be there.
- 4 Q. So even though you were signed off you carried on5 working?
- 6 **A.** Yes.

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- 7 Q. You said that an audit was going to be arranged by the 8 National Federation of SubPostmasters?
- 9 A. Yes, they arranged it for -- like, I rang them on the
 10 Monday evening and they came Wednesday morning.
 - Q. How many auditors arrived?

we didn't know.

- 12 A. There were two that came round to my house and I think
 13 they left one in the office, as well, while they were
 14 round at my house.
- 15 **Q.** What did the auditor say, as a result of the audit? 16 A. They said "There's a large discrepancy in your office, 17 what have you done with it, what have you done with 18 the money?" I said, "I don't even know -- I don't 19 know what's going on". I said "I can't -- I cannot 20 get to grips with the computer system", and I said 21 "I've absolutely no idea". And he said "Well, you're 22 the only one that's ever had problems with Horizon", 23 and I -- you know, at the time, I believed him because
 - **Q.** So they told you that you were the only person that

- 1 had had problems with Horizon?
- 2 A. That it had ever happened to, yeah, yeah. And,
- 3 I mean, I really did think I was going mental.
- 4 I just -- because, I mean, I'm not that unintelligent.
 - If I put everything out there, you should have been
- 6 able to find it. I couldn't get them to help me find
- 7 it and it was just crazy. I used to literally just
- 8 sit there like a mad woman with paperwork everywhere,
- 9 all over the floor, just thinking, it's got to be
- 10 here, you know.

But it wasn't. I couldn't find it because they had all the information the other end. I only had a screen and they wouldn't give it to you.

- 14 Q. You said that in your statement:
- "I began to feel like I was going mad and thatit was entirely my fault."
- 17 A. Yes.
- 18 Q. Is that how you felt?
- A. Yes, that's how I felt. When he said I was the only
 one, that's how I did feel. I mean, it really --
- 21 I thought, oh God, I must be -- you know, I just
- 22 thought it was me.
- Q. Did you operate under that mistaken belief, that you
 were the only one that had problems with Horizon --
- 25 **A.** Yes.

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- Q. -- until the media coverage came about inFebruary 2008?
- A. Yeah, yeah. Yes, I mean, when I actually got
 sentenced, it was almost like, although you don't want
 yourself in the national papers as being a thief,
 actually people started phoning me and it's like
 "I know someone this happened to, I know someone this
 happened to", and it's like, oh my God, you know, I'm
 not the only one.

It wasn't until that and then the penny started to drop, and then we started to -- because, I mean, back then I didn't really use the internet that much and a group of villagers who had been in court with me, they literally started trawling the internet and we found all these other people all over the country.

- 16 **Q.** We're getting ahead of ourselves.
- 17 **A.** Sorry

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- 18 Q. At the moment, we're dealing with the visit of the
 19 auditors in early 2006 and them telling you that you
 20 were the only person that had experienced problems
 21 with Horizon. I think you were suspended, is that
 22 right?
- 23 A. Yes, they suspended me at that point.
- 24 Q. We've got a date of 9 March 2006?
- 25 A. Yes.

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- 1 commemorative stamps had been left behind?
- 2 **A.** We found them on a shelf later on. They had just left them up on a shelf and they'd been in the safe, so ...
- 4 Q. Were you allowed to go back into the Post Office after5 that?
- 6 **A.** I had to go into there to lock the door but it wasn't a Post Office and when -- there was an alarm in there,
- 8 so I had to set that. But they -- then the new
- 9 subpostmaster from Hook, he came in and took it over
- temporarily, so I kept it running. He came the
- 11 following week.
- 12 Q. I think the next month, on 12 April, you received
 13 a letter from the Post Office asking you to attend for
 14 an interview; is that right?
- 15 **A.** Yes.
- 16 **Q.** By that time, you had spoken with and instructed the criminal lawyer?
- 18 **A.** Yes.
- 19 **Q.** They prepared with you a written statement?
- 20 A. Yes
- 21 Q. Did you read that statement out?
- 22 A. No, the lawyer read it out.
- 23 Q. Did you answer questions or give no comment?
- A. No, I -- yeah, no comment for two tapes. That was
 horrible.

A. Yes.

items.

- Q. "It was horrible".
- 6 A. It was and my Mum, bless her, she stepped -- I mean,
 - she was standing at the door and I can see her now,

Q. You say in your statement that the investigators also

started looking around the room as if to value your

- 8 she's stood there and she said "This my house too, you
- 9 know", because we owned the house jointly, and she
- 10 said "This is my house", and they stopped then. They
- 11 kind of backed off and they basically finished up and
- 12 left. I mean, thank goodness, because if it hadn't
- 13 been owned by my parents, as well, I'd have ended up
- down the route that a lot of others have ended up.
- 15 **Q.** When you went back to the Post Office, what did you
- 16 find had happened in Post Office?
- 17 **A.** They'd taken everything away. Obviously, I couldn't
- 18 get into -- they'd taken all the keys, so I couldn't
- 19 get into the safe, or anything like that, and
- they'd -- pretty much, I was locked out of my own PostOffice.
- 22 Q. Had they taken away the paperwork?
- 23 A. Yes, they'd taken the paperwork away.
- 24 $\,$ Q. You mentioned in your statement, however, that £500
- 25 worth on vehicle tax stamps and a pile of
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 - Q. How did you feel when you were being interviewed?
- 2 A. Awful. I couldn't look at him, I kept looking at the
- 3 desk, and he was -- he kept poking stuff underneath so
- 4 that I could read it and saying "Is this your bank
- 5 statement, is this your bank statement, what have you
- 6 done with this, where is it?" And it was just awful.
- 7 Q. Did you subsequently receive a letter on 23 May saying
- 8 that the Post Office was considering terminating your
- 9 contract?
- 10 **A.** Yes.

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- 11 Q. On 6 June did you receive a letter from the Post
- 12 Office saying that the audit had revealed a shortfall
- 13 in the sum of £36,600-odd?
- 14 **A.** Yes
- 15 **Q.** Was a breakdown given for that sum or not?
- 16 **A.** No
- 17 Q. On 16 June 2006, was your contract with the Post
- 18 Office terminated?
- 19 **A.** Yes
- 20 **Q.** Did you then receive a summons to appear before
- 21 a criminal court?
- 22 **A.** Yes
- 23 Q. Was that for a single count of theft --
- 24 A. Yes.
- 25 **Q.** -- for the 36,000?

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- 1 A. For the 36,600 and something, yes.
- 2 Q. Did you then attend firstly Aldershot Magistrates'
- 3 Court?
- 4 A. Yes.
- 5 **Q.** Did you plead not guilty to the charge of theft?
- 6 **A.** Yes
- 7 Q. Was your case sent up to the Crown Court at
- 8 Winchester?
- 9 **A.** Yes.
- 10 Q. Did you attend on three occasions?
- 11 A. Yes. I pleaded not guilty the first time and then, as12 we got closer to the trial, they did the plea bargain.
- 13 **Q.** Tell us about the plea bargain. How did that come
- 14 about?
- 15 **A.** Well, they said if you plead guilty to false
- 16 accounting, to --
- 17 $\,$ **Q.** The "they" there, is that your solicitor or is that
- 18 the Post Office?
- 19 A. No, Post Office. Yeah, post Office offered a plea
- 20 bargain, "If you plead guilty to 14 counts of false
- 21 accounting, don't mention Horizon on sentencing and
- repay all the money, we'll drop the theft". And my
- 23 lawyer -- I can remember her opening a file and
- 24 saying, "Did you know the money wasn't there when you
- 25 said it was?" I mean, basically you had to say it was 105
- 1 so ...
- Q. Even now, you say that you still feel guilty?
 A. Yes, because I kind of lied, not for any other reason
- 4 than I didn't know what to do.
- 5 Q. You came up for sentencing before the judge on
- 6 4 February 2008?
- 7 **A.** Yes.
- 8 **Q.** Did you think you were going to go to prison?
- 9 A. Yes, I had my bag packed. I went for my pre-sentence
- 10 report and she said "You are 75 per cent likely to go
- to prison for this", and I'd been told, you know,
- 12 I probably wouldn't go to prison but I didn't realise
- 13 the odds were 75 per cent. It was just -- and I'd
- 14 been told to look remorseful, and I sat there and
- 15 thought -- I said "75 per cent?" And she said "Yeah,
- 16 you'd better take your bag packed, you have got to
- 17 prepare your shop to be without you, make sure it runs
- 18 because you will be unemployable if you got to
- 19 prison". And she said "This is a really serious
- 20 offence", and I said "I know". So I looked -- well,
- 21 I was sad I was terrified actually.
- 22 Q. So you packed a bag --
- 23 A. Yes.
- 24 **Q.** -- just in case?
- 25 **A.** I didn't come home and I hugged by Mum and Dad goodbye

- to be able to serve customers the next day and you just said, yeah.
 - And I said "Yeah", and she said "Well, they're going to get you for false accounting, so you'd better just plead guilty because then you are less likely to go to prison".
 - So prison absolutely terrified me, so I would have almost said yes to anything. So I pleaded guilty.
- 10 Q. Did you do those three things, plead guilty --
- 11 **A.** 14 times.
- 12 Q. 14 counts of false accounting?
- 13 A. Yes, they made me stand -- it was -- it took about
- 14 half-an-hour to read it all out because they read out
- 15 every day "You said 14 times". I mean, it was just --
- 16 I just had to say it 14 times that I was guilty and it
- 17 just felt like just rubbing my nose in it.
- 18 **Q.** When you said that you were guilty, did you, in fact,
- 19 know that you'd done nothing wrong?
- 20 A. Yes. I knew I'd done nothing wrong but I couldn't
- 21 explain it, and I kind of felt guilty because
- 22 I thought I actually did say the money was there when
- 23 it wasn't, because every time I'd said it isn't they'd
- 24 taken the money off me and threatened me with the
 - sack. So I actually felt a little bit guilty as well,
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- 1 and my husband and my boys.
- 2 Q. One of the things that you had agreed to do was to
- 3 raise the £36,000-odd and pay it back?
- 4 A. Yes.

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- 5 Q. "Back" in inverted commas?
- 6 A. Yes.
- 7 **Q.** How did you raise that?
- 8 A. Well, we remortgaged but, because I had already
- 9 remortgaged to shovel money into the Post Office,
- 10 I could only get 30,000, so we had to have a village
- 11 meeting and I literally had to stand up in front of
- everybody and tell them what had happened.
- 13 **Q.** Of the 36, you remortgaged again and got 30?
- 14 A. I remortgaged again and got 30 but I was £6,000 or
- 15 6,600 short and Izzy, my lawyer, she came along and we
- 16 had a village meeting in the village hall and I had to
- tell everybody that I was £6,000 short and, although
- 18 I hadn't done anything wrong, I was short. So
- 19 literally people would drop money through a letter box
- and cheques and the money made up. So when I went to
- 21 court we had the money to pay them.
- 22 Q. So there was essentially a village whip round?
- A. Yes, yes. Said that in all of the papers: "Villagewhip round saves fallen subpostmistress".
- 25 Q. I've read the article.

- A. It was just incredible how good they were and they all 1 2 turned up in court to support me.
- 3 Q. Over 70, I think, 74, you say, in your witness 4 statement.
- 5 A. 74, and the vicar stood up in the witness box and said 6 how lovely I was and it was like -- I mean, honestly
- 7 I can laugh about it now but, at the time, it was just 8
- awful. I was so frightened. 9 **Q.** Did the appearance of the village, including the 10 vicar, have an effect on the sentence, or so it
- 11 seemed? 12 A. I'm quite sure it did because I know, like Noel over
- 13 there, a lot of us have been up for the same thing and 14 other people went to prison, and I didn't. So I think 15 it saved me.
- 16 **Q.** You were given a suspended sentence order?
- 17 A. I was given a supervision order.
- 18 Q. Sorry, supervision order, my mistake, and that 19 involved?
- 20 **A.** Going to the probation officer.
- 21 Q. Attending weekly meetings?
- 22 A. Yes, yes.
- 23 **Q.** That eventually went down to fortnightly and then monthly meetings with a probation officer? 24
- 25 A. Yes.

- 1 Then, after a while, six or seven months, I think --
- 2 They said --A.
- 3 Q. -- you didn't have to attend anymore?
- 4 Α. No, because I was behaving myself.
- 5 You had to pay costs in the sum of £1,000?
- 6 A. Yes.
- 7 Q. Can you remember what was said to the judge about why 8 you had committed these offences?
- 9 A. Well, I mean, they kind of made out that I was sorry
- 10 for what I'd done and I'd got a bit confused and, you
- 11 know -- a lot of it on the day was bit of a blur but
- 12 they said I'd got confused and made mistakes and, you
- 13 know, but I was really sorry.
- 14 Underneath it, you knew that you had taken no money?
- 15 Yeah. Yeah, yeah because I always went not guilty to
- 16 theft. And, you know, I hadn't taken any money and
- 17 I just -- but I just couldn't explain it because it
- 18 always sounded like there was a big pot of cash in the
- 19 safe and one day it was there and the next day it had
- 20 gone and you didn't know where it had gone, and you 21
- were the only one with the key, so ... 22 But it was never like that. It was just
- 23 a number on a screen. But it kind of -- computers 24 were a little bit magic to me back then. I know 25
 - better now but back in the day ...

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- Q. You told us about the journey to the Crown Court and 1 2 how you ended up there involved an audit that had been 3 undertaken.
- 4 A. Yes.

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- 5 Q. Did you later discover something about what had been 6 written concerning that audit? So later discover 7 a document that had been written, the internal report?
- 8 A. Oh, yes, yes. Well, when Second Sight did their 9 interim -- when they did their final report, they 10 wrote -- they clipped a passage which we used in the 11 Panorama programme which said, "Having examined all 12 the Horizon records, I can find no evidence of theft
- 13 or deliberate cash inflated figures."
- 14 Q. Was that in a Post Office investigation report?
- 15 A. Well, what they did was they -- so when the
 - Post Office investigation report came out, it was
- 17 going to guote from all the documents that
- 18 Second Sight had reported from and they'd numbered
- 19 everything in sequence, and the document -- I was
- 20 desperate to see what the rest of the investigator's
- 21 report read because it was only a little section from
- 22 it. So I went to document 12, which was the document
- 23 that Second Sight quoted from, and when I looked down
- 25
 - page of my interview under caution as document 12 and 111

the list there was no document 12. They put the first

1 the rest of it as document 13.

So I then emailed the Post Office and I said,

- 3 "Please could I see document 12. I think you've 4 labelled it wrong" and they said, "Oh, we're looking
- 5 into it" and I got three replies saying, "We're
- 6 looking into it". And then eventually I said, "Well,
- 7 that's all right, I'll get a copy of it from Second
- 8 Sight" and they then wrote back to me and said, "You
- 9 will never have that document, it's a legally 10 privileged document" and they don't know why
- 11 Second Sight quoted it in their report.
- 12 **Q.** Winding forward a long time, by the time you got to
- 13 the Court of Appeal in 2021 did you get sight of that
- 14 document?

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- 15 A. I did, yes.
- 16 In summary, did it say exactly what Second Sight had 17
- 18 Yes, exactly. There was that paragraph "having
- 19 examined all the Horizon records, I can find no
- 20 evidence of theft or deliberate cash inflated
- 21 figures." But it was that piece that just made me so
- 22 angry when in Second Sight's report -- it was just
- 23 like why did they do that? 24 MR BEER: Sir, might that be an appropriate moment to

25 take --

| 1 | SIR WYN WILLIAMS: It would be. | | | | |
|-----|---|--|--|--|--|
| 2 | May I just ask one question of my own. Can I | | | | |
| 3 | take you back to the plea bargain and I just want to | | | | |
| 4 | understand what went on. So were the discussions | | | | |
| 5 | about you pleading guilty all discussions taking place | | | | |
| 6 | at court? | | | | |
| 7 | A. Between the lawyers, yes. | | | | |
| 8 | SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Between the lawyers. So it was | | | | |
| 9 | discussions between the lawyers and then your lawyer | | | | |
| 10 | would come back and report to you what the Post Office | | | | |
| 11 | lawyers were prepared to accept? | | | | |
| 12 | A. Yes, yes. | | | | |
| 13 | SIR WYN WILLIAMS: The Post Office never put any of that | | | | |
| 14 | in writing as far as you were aware? | | | | |
| 15 | A. As far as I was aware, yes. | | | | |
| 16 | SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Fine. The suggestion that you | | | | |
| 17 | shouldn't say anything that was adverse about Horizon, | | | | |
| 18 | that came directly from the Post Office lawyers to | | | | |
| 19 | your lawyers as far as you are aware? | | | | |
| 20 | A. Yes. | | | | |
| 21 | SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Thanks. That's fine. | | | | |
| 22 | MR BEER: Shall we say quarter past. | | | | |
| 23 | SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Yes, fine. | | | | |
| 24 | (3.07 pm) | | | | |
| 25 | (A short break) | | | | |
| 113 | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

(3.17 pm) 1 2 MR BEER: Thank you, Chair. 3 Mrs Hamilton I want to move on to the 4 consequences of what we have just discussed for you 5 and try and look at it from a number of angles. 6 Firstly, the direct financial consequences on you; 7 secondly, the indirect financial consequences that it 8 had for you; thirdly, the reputational effect that it 9 had or impact that it had; fourthly, any effect on 10 your health; and then, lastly, the effect on your 11 family. 12 So starting with directly financial issues, 13 you've told us already that you were expected to repay 14 money before your conviction. 15 A. In your statement I think you say that you repaid in 16 excess of £13,000 between 2004 and 2005? 17 18 Yes A. 19 So was that a combination of actually giving money 20 over and deductions from your salary? 21 Yes, yeah. Α. 22 As part of the agreement that had been reached, the

1 **Q.** Was that in addition to the 13 that you had already repaid?

A. Yes, plus £1,000 costs.

4 Q. And £1,000 costs. You told us that you remortgaged
 5 your house and there was a whip round to try and make
 6 up the balance of the £36,000. You borrowed some

7 money from --

8 A. A friend.

9 Q. -- friends as well.

10 A. Yes.

11 Q. You say in your statement that the Post Office was12 repaid £50,644 in total.

13 **A.** Yes.

14 Q. What does that sum consist of?

15 **A.** Two lots of remortgaging and -- well, I mean,

16 that's -- we used credit cards to fund the shop as

17 well, which ended up spiralling out of control but

18 actually the monies I repaid and the wages that they

kept was -- I've been paying interest on the mortgage

20 ever since so, yeah.

21 **Q.** You say in your statement that you had debts at the point of conviction --

23 A. Yes.

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24 Q. -- and you had to sell a piece of land?

25 **A.** Yes. We had an old dilapidated garage that we'd never 115

used and we never used part of the garden. My parents 1 2 were getting older and they didn't use part of the 3 garden. We'd always decided when we reached 4 retirement or near retirement, we would try and see if 5 we could get planning permission to demolish the 6 garage and put a small house up there and -- but we 7 ended up having to sell the plot to kind of try and 8 give us some running money, because the mortgage 9 interest rate was much higher than it is now back 10 then, and I couldn't pay the mortgage and I thought 11 I was going to lose everything.

bargain that had been drawn, you were to repay

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12 Q. Did you split the proceeds --

13 **A.** Yes.

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£36.000.

A. Yes.

14 Q. -- between you, on the one hand, and your Mum and Dad15 of the other?

16 A. Mum and Dad, yes.

17 **Q.** What did you use your half of the proceeds for?

A. I chucked mine into the shop and, basically, helped me
 keep paying the mortgage, because I had racked up my
 credit cards by that time. So I basically used it

21 until it ran out. Mum and Dad, the only good thing --

22 if there is a good thing that could come out of it was

23 it gave them enough money to go visit my brother who

lived in New Zealand a few times. So they managed to

go and see him, which was good.

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- Q. So you paid off some of your debts and maintained the 1 2 monthly payments on the mortgage?
- 3 A. Yes, yes.

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- **Q.** What were you working as at this time?
- 5 A. Well, the shop ended up -- I realised I couldn't keep
- 6 the shop going any longer and I then, because of my
- 7 criminal record, I've ended up cleaning, because
- 8 people in the village know I'm honest and they've
- 9 taken me on as a cleaner, dog walker, I look after
- 10 houses when they're away, and things like that. So,
- 11 yeah, I've kept myself busy.
- 12 Q. So just like you had done before, you worked in the 13 Post Office --
- 14 A. Turned my hand to anything --
- 15 Q. You've turned your hand to things. Now, since this
- 16 time, the conviction, is that casual informal labour
- 17 in the community?
- 18 A. Yes.
- 19 Q. Had you got a plan to, in fact, work in a different 20
- 21 A. Well, we'd always thought eventually we would sell the
- 22 shop and -- as a going concern and, you know, decide
- 23 on what our future was. And I'd enjoyed the bit of
- 24 care work that I did but it took all of that away
- 25 because you couldn't work in any way. If you needed

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a CRB check, I didn't pass any CRB checks and, in the school I'd been a -- the classroom assistant had --

I'd been to look after my granddaughter and help make Easter bonnets and the classroom assistant had to leave the room and, because they knew I had a criminal record, they had to ask me to leave the room, which was awful. I mean, it was as embarrassing for them as me because we all knew each other and they knew I had a criminal record. It's things like that that you don't realise how far it impacts your life to have

- 12 Q. So it narrowed your employment opportunities, having 13 a criminal record?
- 14 A.
- 15 Q. You told us about the village turning out in your 16 support --
- 17 A. Yes.
- 18 Q. -- for the Crown Court sentencing hearing at
- 19 Winchester. That sounds as if your reputation wasn't
- 20
- 21 Well, the people that knew me came and supported me. Α.
- 22 Q.

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- 23 A. Other people that didn't know me would probably read
- 24 what was on the front of the paper. Because I went to
- 25 fill the car up the same week, and the local paper was

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- 1 on the counter and it had £36,000 postal fraudster and 2
- I was the front page, and you just realise then that 3 people might see you and think you're a thief.
- 4 Q. Did you think that, notwithstanding the villagers, the
- 5 close villagers that supported you, there was, 6 nonetheless, gossip about what you had done?
- 7 Yes, and there will always be people that doubted
 - anyway, even some people in the village probably doubt
- 9 it, you know. I was very lucky that a lot of people
- 10 believed in me.
- 11 Q. Any other reputational harm or damage that you can 12

- 13 **A.** Not reputational, it just is a horrible thing to be 14 accused of dishonesty when you're not dishonest.
- 15 You have told us about the direct financial impact, Q.
- 16 the need to sell something that you had planned to use
- 17 in a different way --
- 18 A. Yes.
- 19 Q. -- the narrowing of employment opportunities and the
- 20 harm it caused to your reputation. What effect did it
- 21 have on your family life?
- 22 A. Well, my Mum and Dad both had strokes within
- 23 three months of each other and they're now sadly --
- 24 well, they weren't here to see my conviction quashed
- 25 and I believe it was stress of everything I went 119

- 1 through and the fact that they'd racked their credit 2
 - cards up to try and keep my shop going. I mean,
- 3 they'd never been in debt in their lives and they
- 4 ended up giving me everything to keep me going, so
 - that, you know -- well, we just kept borrowing and
- 6 using the house, and I used their credit cards to pay
- 7 shop bills because it was just -- the whole thing was
- 8 just like a financial nightmare.
 - Q. Can I ask, when did your parents pass?
- 10 My Dad was January '16. They both had strokes in 11 2014, my Dad died in '16 and Mum died in '17.
- 12
- **Q.** Was that before the Court of Appeal hearing?
- 13 Yes. My Dad died just as we got the GLO awarded and 14 my Mum died four days before and I promised her I'd
- 15 go, but four days before the case management
- conference for the first trial -- first of the trials. 16
- 17 So they passed without knowing that you --
 - **A.** Yes, they knew I'd never stop fighting to prove my innocence but they still weren't there on the day.
- 20 You tell us in your statement, if you don't mind
- 21 discussing it now, this has had an impact on your
- 22 health, hasn't it?
- 23 Yes. I've become -- well, I've almost become obsessed
- 24 by fighting for justice, and I just -- I can't --
- 25 I can't sleep nights. You know, I just literally it

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1 goes round and round in my head, I'm so frustrated at 2 where we are now and, although I've got my conviction 3 quashed, I just feel the injustice of all of it for 4 everybody, especially the 555, who I stood alongside 5 and fought for justice with.

> It's just frustration, anger, and I can't ever get it out of my head.

- 8 Q. I'm going to come to some of the things that you did 9 as a result, in a moment, but, just dealing with you 10 at the moment, if we may. You tell us in your 11 statement that you have been diagnosed with 12 an adjustment disorder --
- 13 A. Yes.

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- 14 Q. -- and a mixed anxiety and depressive disorder, all 15 consequent upon what happened with Horizon after 2003; 16 is that right?
- 17 A. Yes.
- 18 Q. I'm not going to go into detail but is it right that 19 you're having some treatment for that?
- 20 A.
- 21 Q. So you told us -- we ended the narrative of you being 22 sentenced at the Winchester Crown Court, and then you 23 said you got lots of calls from people --
- 24 A. Yes.
- 25 Q. -- saying "You're not alone, this has happened to me"?

1 Yes. I mean, literally the calls started that I got 2 back to the shop same day, and the very next day 3 someone rang me and she'd been a subpostmistress in 4 Bournemouth and she said "They know exactly what's 5 going on". She said "I proved, I had every docket". 6 She said "They know exactly what's happened because 7 I proved it".

And then I had various phonecalls and the guy in the next village down came and he'd been accused of the same thing. He came to see me and then people started Googling about Post Office and Alan Bates set up PostOfficeVictims.org in 2002, and we kind of gradually got in touch with each other and then we met Noel, and we put the Welsh TV programme together and Computer Weekly did an article on seven of us. They phoned me in 2008 and asked if I'd give my story and that kind of was the beginning, really, of the JFSA because, gradually, it kind of mushroomed out.

- 19 So it grew organically from the villagers to meeting 20 Mr Bates?
- 21 Yes, yes. Α.
- 22 Then I think, eventually in November 2009, you met 23 17 subpostmasters at Fenny Compton village hall?
- 24 A. Yes, we had the first JFSA meeting. I'd met Noel by 25 then because there was a Welsh TV programme in 2009. 122

- 1 I think it was. They came as well.
- 2 Q. BBC Wales?
- 3 A. Yeah, BBC Wales. Noel came down to the village and
- 4 they filmed us in the village. So it was all --
- 5 I mean, from being told you're the only person it's
- 6 ever happened to, you suddenly realised there were
- 7 quite -- our stories were all identical. It was quite 8 a moment in the village hall.
- 9 Q. I think you met Kay Linnell?
- 10 A. Yes, that was at one of the village dos. She was --11 I ended up sitting next to her for a pudding course 12 and she --
- 13 **Q.** For a what, sorry?
- A. For a pudding course. You had starters in one house, 14 15 dinner in the another and a pudding in another.
- 16 Q. Sorry, I completely misunderstood. I thought you meant a course about puddings! That's my mind, not 17 18 yours.
- 19 She was there at the pudding course, which ended up Α. 20 stretching for about four hours because we didn't come 21 home until about 2 o'clock in the morning, because we 22 got deeply engrossed in Post Office conversation. 23 She'd been a customer anyway, and she hadn't really
- 24 realised what was going on. She then became one of 25 the best friends I've ever had, I think. She's 123

- 1 been -- she stood beside us and helped Alan and she 2 knows her way inside and out of everywhere.
- 3 Now, this group, I think, eventually formed up to
- 4 bring proceedings in the High Court; is that right?
- 5 A.
- 6 You had to find a legal team, didn't you?
- 7 Α.
- 8 You were part of the group that went to the High 9 Court?
- 10 Α. Yes, yeah.
- 11 Can you tell us what the experience was of that 12 litigation? I know, that's a very open question.
- 13 I'm in total awe of Justice Fraser. It was --Α.
- 14 I couldn't believe this massive courtroom and all
- 15 these people in it and it was literally like going 16
 - into battle.
- 17 Q. In what sense was it like going into battle?
- 18 Well, it was like a small army of our lawyer on that 19 side, matched by an even bigger army on that side and
- 20 the whole thing was just like a mass theatre, almost,
- 21 and --
- 22 Q. Did you attend court on most days?
- 23 I did, yes. I became obsessed and it was mind
- 24 blowing, the whole thing. But Justice Fraser cut
- 25 through it, you know, he could see -- I mean,

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- 1 sometimes you listen especially in the Horizon trial,
- 2 some of the arguments that they made and you're like,
- 3 "Well, I know I'm not legally qualified but, it's
- 4 like, that's completely bonkers" and he just cut right
- 5 through it and, yeah, we won -- two trials.
- 6 **Q.** By that, you are referring to the judgment number 3 on common issues and judgment number 6 on Horizon?
- 8 A. On Horizon, yes.
- 9 Q. Did you participate in the mediation?
- 10 A. Yes, I did, yes. Yes, I got to look in the eyes of
- the CEO and general counsel for Post Office and tell
- 12 them our stories but, you know, I don't know. It's
- a job to know how people actually really think.
- 14 I thought we were, sort of, making a difference by
- 15 speaking but I doubt that now.
- 16 **Q.** Did you receive money under the mediated agreement?
- 17 A. Yes, I did. I received a total of £18,000 and, yeah.
- 18 Q. Was that --
- 19 A. It was a life safer.
- 20 **Q.** I was about to say: was that money welcome at the time?
- $\,$ 22 $\,$ $\,$ A. $\,$ Yes, because my husband needed an operation which we
- 23 ended up paying for because he needed to keep working
- 24 because, even though he was in his 70s, he was still
- 25 gardening and we still needed -- Mum and Dad were 125
- 19 about a year to offload because it's not attractive
- 21 Q. Selling the business, did that include all the stock,

Q. Did you sell the business in 2014?

without a Post Office.

gone, by that time, and we needed -- he needed to keep

working because I didn't want to sell the house until

I knew that we'd come out the other side of it, and so

we had to pay for an operation for him to patch him up

Now, have you -- was that adequate recompense in

monetary terms for the losses that you had suffered?

No, because I'd given them 50, so far. That's without

all the rest of it that, you know -- it was nothing

Yes. I started trying to sell it 2013 but it took

and get him back to work.

Yes, he had a hernia.

So A hernia repair?

A hernia repair, yes.

So he worked as a gardener?

Q. I think he had a hernia, is that right?

22 fixtures and fittings?

really.

- 23 A. Yes.
- 24 Q. Despite that, was it still necessary for you to carry
- 25 on working as you were, doing informal casual labour

- 1 and your husband to work as a gardener?
- 2 **A.** Yes.
- 3 **Q.** Did you still carry a mortgage?
- 4 A. Yes, yes, we've still got a mortgage, even to this
- 5 day.
- 6 **Q.** Still to this day?
- 7 A. Yeah, yeah.
- 8 Q. And notwithstanding selling off the piece of land that
- 9 you have mentioned?
- 10 **A.** Yes. Because we sold it in 2008 and we got a fraction of what we would have got for it now. Well, we'd have
- built the house on it now, but ...
- 13 **Q.** More recently, have you approached the Post Office
- 14 seeking compensation?
- 15 **A.** Yes, my claim is in.
- 16 **Q.** Under what scheme did you make that claim?
- 17 A. Well, I did it through Hudgells, through the
- 18 compensation scheme.
- 19 **Q.** Did you, in fact, receive payment quite promptly by
- 20 way of an interim payment?
- 21 A. So I managed to pay back people that lent me money and
- 22 treat myself and put some money in the bank, in case
- 23 it takes a while to get the rest of the money.
- ${\bf 24} \quad \ \ {\bf Q.} \quad \ \ {\bf Just \ help \ us \ there, \ how \ promptly \ after \ making \ the}$
- 25 application under the scheme and receiving the money

- 1 was it? How long?
 - A. Two or three months. Yes, something like that. It
- 3 was quite quick.
- 4 Q. Can you remember when you made the application and
 - when you got the money?
- 6 A. I think I got the money in September.
- 7 **Q.** 2021?
- 8 A. 2021, yes.
- 9 Q. So about two or three months before then?
- 10 **A.** Ye
- 11 Q. Can you help us with the indirect financial costs of
- this? Can you give us an example of something that
- maybe we wouldn't think of naturally as this having
- 14 an indirect financial impact on you?
- 15 **A.** Well, just that we're still paying the mortgage and --
- 16 I don't know.
- 17 **Q.** I'm thinking, for example, did you have car insurance?
- 18 **A.** Oh, yes, yes. When I was prosecuted you had to pay -
 - well, it was very difficult to get insurance with
- 20 someone with a conviction and, even though my Mum
- 21 insured the house, she had to declare I was on it and
- 22 they racked up the premium. All of your insurances,
- 23 business insurance, house insurance, car insurance,
- 24 everything, carries a premium for someone who's got
- 25 a fraud conviction.

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- 1 **Q.** So those were all inflated because of your conviction?
- 2 Because of my conviction, yes.
- 3 Q. I think you entered a debt plan at some stage, as 4 well?
- 5 A. Yes, I entered a debt plan in 2010 because I just 6 couldn't service all the credit cards, but once I got 7 my interim payment I settled them all. So I've got 8 rid -- so the only debt I've got now is my mortgage.
- 9 Q. Did you pay off your Mum's debts too, where she had 10 lent you money?
- 11 A. We paid them until the day she died and then they were 12 written off.
- 13 Q. So what position are you in now then?
- 14 A. We've just got a big mortgage and, yeah.
- 15 Standing back, are there things that you want to tell 16 us about, as to the human impact that this has had on
- 17 you, that we haven't covered so far? 18 A. Well, just that I find it so sad that it's gone on for 19 so many years and literally wiped people. You know, 20 we're all exhausted, we've had almost 20 years of 21 fighting and people aren't with us that should be.
- 22 People like Julian Wilson, who you will hear from 23 Karen, you know, he's not here and his conviction --
- 24 there's other people too that have died and not had
- 25 their names cleared, and I just find it -- I'm so 129

- angry and I'm so angry about the group that they're refusing to compensate.
- They said they've had a full and final settlement and that isn't right because the mediation wasn't right. They knew they'd run us out of money.
- Just winding back a couple of things that you said there. You said "They knew they had run out of money"; what do you mean by that?
- 9 Well, they knew we couldn't fight further. Α.
- 10 Who's the "they"?
- 11 Post Office. Yeah, Post Office knew we couldn't fight 12 further because the funding pot was literally dry. 13 We'd won two court victories and so although -- they 14 limited the disclosure for the mediation and the 15 settlement, and they basically ran us out of road and 16 we were forced to accept the 58 million, which sounds 17 a lot but, if litigation funding isn't covered, 18 when -- if you can't recover the costs of the 19 litigation, then you're up against it.

So there was a point at which the scales would tip and Post Office knew it and, as for the full and final, well, there's people that have lost a whole pile of money and they deserve to be -- they deserve compensation for it.

You said in an answer before last that Julian Wilson

- 1 isn't with us.
- 2 A. Yes.

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- 3 Q. Tell us about your relationship with Julian Wilson.
- 4 A. Well, we teamed up with Alan, back in the days of --5 the beginning days of the JFSA.
- 6 Q. So Mr Bates?
- 7 Mr Bates, yes, and Noel, and we kind of fought beside 8 him and we all of us went on fact-finding missions and 9 gathering people together, and he was -- I went to the 10 statutory -- no, Select Committee hearing in 2015 with 11 him, and he was always there and he was always, like, 12 having someone to run stuff by, and then he got cancer 13 and sadly -- he said "I'm going to be there to the 14 end" and I went to see him just before he died.
- 15 **Q.** How long before he died?
 - A. About three days before he died. We had a JFSA meeting and because it was close to where he lived, I went to see him and I promised him I'd never stop until I cleared his name. And it's just -- it's things like that.

And Peter Holmes, he's not here either. You know, people that were there back in the beginning and --

24 Q. Tell us about what you know and your relationship with 25 Peter Holmes?

- 1 A. Well, I just met him at some JFSA meetings. I wasn't 2 as close to him as Julian, but Julian was such team 3 player and he -- it impacts people's health.
- 4 **Q.** You say in your statement:

"I've not been able to stop for one day. I'm drained and tired. I've lost the best years of my life. These years have been stolen from me and from my family. I feel worn down. I'm so angry about what happened."

- 10 A. I'm really angry about what happened, yes. And I am 11 tired. It's like I've had today here and then I've 12 got to go and work like the clappers to make up for 13 the fact that I haven't been at work today tomorrow, 14 and it shouldn't be -- I should be able to take a week 15 off, or something like that, but I can't.
- 16 Q. What about the time that it's allowed you to devote to 17 your family?
- 18 Well, my eldest son went through uni and I couldn't 19 help him. I haven't had the time with the 20 grandchildren, I haven't been able to, sort of, take 21 a week off and take them away and do things that 22 normal grandparents do and probably, much as I was at 23 home with my Mum, I was always in and out and I'd say 24 "I'll be back in an hour, back in two hours", doing 25 all these little jobs. You know, it's things like

1 that you realise you can't get back. 1 A. Yes 2 Q. You conclude your statement by saying that: 2 Q. You're comparing that to those who haven't been 3 "The Post Office has blood on their hands. 3 criminally convicted but who were part of the 555? 4 They've destroyed thousands of lives and I believe the 4 A. Yes, and have lost everything, including homes, 5 web of lies and deceit spans much further than the 5 marriages. I mean, I know a really good friend of 6 6 Post Office to Government and beyond and, after all of mine, she lost her home because of it and she 7 7 that, I know I'm lucky, lucky to have had a criminal didn't -- they got her to the court steps and said 8 conviction." 8 it's not in the public interest. I mean, it's wrong. 9 9 Q. Mrs Hamilton, they are the only questions that I want Why do you feel lucky to have had a criminal 10 10 conviction? to ask of you today. 11 A. Because I've got a chance of getting compensation and 11 Chair, do you have questions for Mrs Hamilton? 12 they haven't, they've been refused it. The Government 12 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, I don't have any questions. I'm 13 keep on flatly refusing. They say: no, you have had 13 sorry that you have had to put yourself through this 14 a full and final settlement. That's not right. I was 14 but I am very grateful for you doing it. 15 15 at the Select Committee with a guy -- I think it was Thank you. Α. 16 Christmas time or just after Christmas, or just 16 MR BEER: Thank you very much. Please do return to your 17 before, I can't remember. 17 18 Q. This is the BEIS Select Committee? 18 Chair, I'm in your hands as to whether we 19 A. Yes, the BEIS Select Committee, and he's given Post 19 proceed with Mr Blake to ask questions of the next Office over £100,000 and he's had £20,000 back and 20 20 21 21 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Whatis the time? it's just not right. 22 Q. What you are referring to is feeling lucky to have had 22 MR BEER: 3.45. 23 a criminal conviction, is that that's a gateway to 23 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: 3.45. 24 receiving compensation under the scheme that the 24 How do you feel, first of all, Mr Thomas? You 25 Post Office is operating? 25 are next up. Would you like to start this afternoon? 133 134

(Off microphone comments)

I think perhaps we should make a start in those circumstances. So let's start and see how we get on.

MR BEER: In that case, I hand over to Mr Blake.

SIR WYN WILLIAMS: For everyone to understand, so that they either don't rush or they break at a convenient moment, I'm quite happy to stay here until about 5.00. So if we could complete it by 5.00, that's fine. But if we can't, then we will just break off and we'll complete it when we're ready in the morning, all right.

HUGHIE NOEL THOMAS (sworn) Questioned by MR BLAKE

MR BLAKE: Thank you, Mr Thomas. My name is Julian Blake and I'm going to be asking you questions this afternoon on behalf of the Chair, and possibly into tomorrow morning as well.

Could you give your full name please.

- 19 A. Hughie Noel Thomas.
- Q. Mr Thomas, you have given two witness statements, bothof those statements should be in front of you?
- 22 A. Yes.

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Q. Could I ask you to look at the first of those witnessstatements. That should be 12 January?

25 A. Yes.

Q. Do you see your signature at the end of that statement?

3 **A.** Yes.

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4 Q. When you made it, was it true to the best of your 5 knowledge and belief?

6 A. True to the best, yes.

7 **Q.** The second witness statement, I think, is dated 8 10 February?

9 **A.** Yes

10 Q. Again, do you see your signature at the end of that?

11 **A.** Yes, I do.

12 Q. When you made that, was it true to the best of your13 knowledge and belief?

14 **A.** Yes

15 **Q.** I'm going to begin by asking you a few questions aboutyour background.

17 A. Yes.

18 **Q.** How old are you now?

19 **A.** 75

20 Q. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

21 **A.** I grew up in a little village called Malltraeth on the

22 Isle of Anglesey.

Q. I wasn't going to try and pronounce it myself, perhapsSir Wyn can.

25 **SIR WYN WILLIAMS:** I'm not going to put myself to that

- 1 test.
- 2 MR BLAKE: One of your first jobs was as a postman.
- 3 A. Yes.
- 4 Q. Can you tell us a little bit about that?
- 5 A. Yes. I started in 1965, 6 June, as a postman in
- 6 a place -- I'll challenge you again -- a place called
- 7 Bodorgan. I used to get up at 4.00 in the morning, go
- 8 to the sorting office, meet the railway train -- the
- 9 mail train in those days, take the bags to the sorting
- 10 office and then go on a 17-mile round trip delivering
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- 12 Q. I think after that job, you worked with your wife for 13 a little bit, is that right?
- 14 A. Yes. In 1974, my wife and I -- sorry, before that,
- 15 decimalisation 1972, my mother had a grocery shop.
- 16 She bought it in 1964, that's why I came to work --
- 17 help her out, I was an only child. She bought the
- 18 shop for the grand sum of £1,600. My father thought
- 19 she was mad but, anyway, we bought the shop and I came
- 20 into the business and I married in 1969, and my wife
- 21 and I took over in about 1972/73, because my mother
- 22 couldn't get her head round the decimalisation. 23
 - She'd been used to her 1.11 and her 3 pence, and whatever, and when it came to the new money -- as she used to call it, the silly money -- she just couldn't
 - 137

- get on with it.
- 2 In 1981, you bought your first Post Office.
- 3 A.
- 4 Q. Where was that?
- 5 A. That was in a village called Gaerwen on the old A5,
- 6 about three miles from Llanfairpwllgwyngyll. I won't 7
 - say the whole name but perhaps Sir Wyn can.
- 8 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: I've had more challenges this afternoon
- 9 with Mr Thomas than I normally get in a week!
- 10 Yes, it's the short one is Llanfair PG.
- 11 **MR BLAKE:** Then in 1984 you took over as subpostmaster?
- 12 A.
- 13 Q. Up until 1999/2000 did you enjoy the job?
- 14 Yes, I did. It was all done on paper and I used to
- 15 help my wife because, in those days, I used to start
- 16 at 5.00 in the morning, I used to finish delivering
- 17 the mail by about 11.30/12.00 and I used to do the
- 18 afternoon shift and my wife got on with the housework
- 19 and looking after our three children.
- 20 I'm going to move on now to the problems that you
- 21 experienced. Horizon was installed in about '99/2000,
- 22 and you said that you used a paper-based system before
 - Horizon; is that right?
- 24 A. Yes.

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- 25 Did you receive training?

- A. Yes, I had a day and a half in the Victoria Hotel in 1
- 2 Llanberis, with five other people who, at the time,
- 3 were older than me because I was quite spritely in
- 4 those days, and we had a day and a half. But
- 5 unfortunately Horizon didn't arrive in my office until
- 6 about getting on for about nine months afterwards. So
- 7 really it was quite a challenge.
- 8 Q. How soon was it that you noticed problems with
- 9 Horizon?
- 10 A. I first had -- according to my statement, I first had
- 11 one in about 2003 when I found a discrepancy of
- 12 £6,000. I contacted head office and we sorted it out
- 13 in the statement. The area manager came, who I'd
- 14 worked with in the Post Office before and a lady
- 15 called Mrs van den Bogerd came. She was the area
- 16 manager for Wales and the Marches at that time, and we
- 17 sat in our lounge and we had a cup of coffee and she
- 18 said "If you pay 3,000, we'll wipe off the other
- 19 3,000", so that's what happened then.
- 20 Q. So I think that was a specific problem in 2003.
- 21 A. Yes.
- 22 Q. Is that right? In general terms, did you experience 23 other problems with Horizon?
- 24 A. Yes. There was things we kept putting money in but, 25 unfortunately, I haven't got the records. We started

- 1 putting about 100/200, maybe 500 quid in sometimes 2
 - and, of course, in 2004, I think, I had an audit,
- 3 which was clear, everybody was happy.
- 4 Q. We'll get to the audit in a minute.
- 5 A. Yes, sorry.
- 6 Q. But before the audit happened, did you use the
- 7 helpline at all?
- 8 A. Yes, I did.
- 9 Did you find that useful or --Q.
- 10 A. No.
- 11 Q. Why not?
- 12 Well, to be quite honest with you, I think everything
- 13 had come in a rush because I had colleagues I had who
- 14 I'd worked with in the Post Office, because the
- 15 Post Office and the counter staff were all one at one
- 16 time, before the Post Office was split, and I was
- 17 getting friends coming and checking with me and,
- 18 honestly, I felt that they didn't have the experience
- 19 that was needed.
- 20 Q. You didn't find them helpful?
- 21 Α.
- 22 Q. Apart from noticing shortfalls, did you experience
- 23 other problems with the system?
- 24 Yes, what do you call it, we had a busy road, outside A.
- 25 the old A5, before the A55 and we had a problem with

- 1 electricity going off, and having to back up, and that 2 was taking time and then, sometimes, when you put the 3 Horizon on in the morning, it wouldn't come on or in the middle of a transaction it would go off. 4
- 5 Let's move on to that audit and the investigation. So 6 you said that you had an audit in 2004 and 2005, or 7 thereabouts?
- 8 A. Yes.
- 9 Q. That one went okay?
- 10 A. Yes.
- 11 Q. Then you had another in October 2005?
- 12 A. Yes, 13 October.
- 13 Q. How did that come about?
- 14 A. I had a knock on the door at 7.30 in the morning and
- 15 two auditors came in. I gave them a figure of what
- 16 I was losing and, about two hours after they completed
- 17 their audits, they came to me and said that they
- 18 agreed with me and they had to phone head office and,
- 19 at the time, head office was in Chester. But, in the
- 20 meantime, I had phoned the helpline on more than
- 21 a dozen occasions. I'd kept a record on a calendar
- 22 that the Post Office gave us and I kept a record on
- 23
- there, and I was phoning helpline up and they were 24 telling me just to carry on, and I carried on, and
- that was the biggest mistake I ever did, I think. 25
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- So were you expecting the auditors when they arrived?
- 2 A. I was expecting them some time but they didn't come
- 3 and then, all of a sudden, 13 October 2005, they're in 4
 - the door, 7.30 in the morning.
- 5 Q. You have said that you kept records. What did you do 6 with them, did you manage to keep them.
- 7 A. The Post Office took them. They hoovered my office,
- 8 I didn't have a shred of paper left, even my council
- 9 work went. Everything went.
- 10 Q. So when you say even your council work, you were 11 a local councillor at that time?
- 12 A.
- 13 Q. How did you feel when they arrived and were carrying 14
- 15 Well, you know, I expected the worst, to be quite Α.
- 16 honest, and it did become the worst and, as I said,
- 17 the worst thing was afterwards, in about a week, they
- 18 cleared my office, they took the keys of the shop, my
- 19 wife ran a small business selling cards, stationery
- 20 and knickknacks, and we weren't allowed to go in at
- 21 all because we didn't have the keys.
- 22 Q. They told you that there was a shortfall of around 23 £48,000 --
- 24 A. Yes
- -- and a cheque discrepancy of nearly £2,000; is that 25

- 1 right?
- 2 A. Yes.
- 3 Q. I think you were aware of that kind of a figure --
- 4 A. Yes.

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- 5 Q. -- in advance?
- 6 A. Yes. I gave that figure of around 50,000 to the
- auditors when they came that morning. 7 8 Q. At some stage, the police became involved as well.
- 9 Can you tell us a little bit about that?
- 10 A. Yes, the lady auditor said to me that she had to 11 report it to head office and about an hour/hour and 12 a half after she told me that, two investigators came.
- Q. Is this the same day as the auditors? 13
- 14 Yes. A lady came in, and a gentlemen with her, the 15 lady was quite robust. She wanted to interview me on 16 my own. I refused. At the time, the Post Office had 17 arranged for another postmaster to come and run the 18 office and I said, well, I'll have an interview with 19 Mr Jim Evans sitting there and she wouldn't have that.

So that conversation finished and she said they had to go outside and make a couple of telephone calls and within half-an-hour two policemen arrived. She walked through the door and she said "Cuff him, he's a thief".

25 Q. You went away with the police to the police station? 143

- 1 No, I didn't because the two policemen knew me and 2
 - I knew them and one of them said, "No, I'm not going
- 3 to cuff him". He said "Noel will find his way to
- 4 Holyhead Police Station for an interview". And she
- 5 was quite aggressive, actually, but I followed with my
- 6 daughter and my sister-in-law and I went to Holyhead
- 7 Police Station for an interview.
- 8 Q. How many people were interviewing you?
- 9 A.
- 10 Q. Were they from the Post Office?
- 11 A.
- 12 Q. How long did that interview last?
- Six hours. 13 Α.
- 14 How do you feel you were treated during that
- 15 interview?
- 16 A. Oh, terrible. She wanted me -- she was -- the lady
- 17 was quite aggressive with the sergeant in charge,
- 18 wanting me to be put in a cell and when I walked in,
- 19 first of all, she wanted me cuffed and, thankfully
- 20 again, I knew one of the policemen and he said no and
- 21 I got a cup of tea, and I waited for a solicitor to
- 22 call and a solicitor, Mr Ian Williams came and I was 23 interviewed alongside him.
- 24 After that interview, you were suspended; is that Q.

25 right?

- 1 Α. Yes.
- 2 Q. You had your contract terminated?
- 3 A. Yes.
- Q. I'm going to move on to the criminal proceedings that 4
- 5 were brought. Approximately how long after that were
- 6 you charged with a criminal offence?
- 7 A. I was charged about February the following year. The
- 8 1st, I think. I went to Llangefni Magistrates' Court
- 9 to be charged and then I was passed on to the Crown
- 10 Court and, over the months of leading up to
- 11 6 November, when I was charged -- sent to jail I had
- 12 to go about once a month either to Mold Crown Court or
- 13 to Caernarfon just to say my name and the
- 14 what-you-call-it and plead guilty or not guilty at the
- 15 time, and that's what happened.
- 16 **Q.** What offences were you charged with?
- 17 A. I was charged with theft.
- 18 Q. You had a trial in November 2006; is that correct?
- 19 A.
- 20 Q. You have described in your statement being offered
- 21 a plea bargain. Can you tell us a little bit about
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- 23 A. Yes. About ten minutes before I went into court, my
- 24 barrister came, Mr Wynn Williams -- Wyn Jones from
- 25 Chester came up to me and said, "They're offering you 145
 - A. Well, awful because I didn't expect it. I'd never
- 2 been a criminal in my life and I was taken down and
- 3 eventually landed up in Walton in Liverpool.
- 4 Q. Can you remember some of the words that the judge used
- 5 when he was sentencing you?
- 6 A. Yes, he'd had -- well, a lot of letters actually, very
- 7 powerful ones, from people supporting me and he read
 - some of them out and he said that I was a man of
- 9 character and I'd fallen down in life having been
- 10 a councillor and a postmaster all my life and -- but
- 11 unfortunately I was sent down.
- 12 Q. I know it's going to be difficult, but I'm going to
- 13 ask you a little bit about your time in prison.
- 14 A.
- 15 Q. Can you tell us a little bit about your first week in
- 16 prison in Liverpool?
- 17 A. Hell.
- 18 **Q.** What kind of a prison is that?
- 19 A. Very old. I arrived there with -- I was taken -- me
- 20 and a few others, we were taken to Wrexham first and
- 21 then we landed in Walton in Liverpool. I was
- 22 unfortunate actually, I was on the wrong side of the
- 23 van, and I was supposed to go to Altcourse but there
- 24 was no room. So I landed up in Walton and when
- 25 I landed up in Walton, I had the indignity of having 147

- a bargain" and I said, "What is it?" and he said, 1
- 2 "They're going to drop the theft as long as you take
- 3 the charge of false accounting and also that you don't
- 4 mention Horizon". And I said, "Well, what does that
- 5 mean? Will it keep me out of jail?" and he said,
 - "Well, hopefully". And I think, I can't remember, but
 - I did sign a piece of paper with my barrister to say
- 8 that I wouldn't mention Horizon, and when I went to
- 9 court, of course -- well, we know what happened.
- 10 Q. So you accepted that bargain?
- 11 A.

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- 12 Q. And you pleaded guilty?
- 13 A.
- 14 Q. And you were sentenced on 6 November?
- 15 A. Yes.
- To nine months' imprisonment? 16 Q.
- 17 A.
- 18 Q. Can you describe for us how you felt on receiving that
- 19 punishment?
- 20 Well, he said -- by the way they had changed the
- 21 judge. I'd had a judge right through and on the day
- 22 Mr Rodric took over and he sentenced me and he said
- 23 9 months, and I expected a suspended sentence but
- 24 unfortunately he said, "Take him down".
- 25 Q. And how did you feel then?

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- 1 to have a shower in front of a prison warden, taken to
 - a cell. I was there for eight days.
- 3 **Q.** Were you able to contact your family?
- 4 A. No. And during that time, I wasn't allowed -- only 5
 - out for my food. Sorry.
- 6 Q. Take your time. If you will like a break at any time?
 - No, it's all right. I had to just go out for food,
 - and 15 minutes about at a time on the landing, about
- 9 half-an-hour in the evening maybe, and that's how it
- 10 was for eight days.
- 11 Q. Can you remember why you weren't able to contact your
- 12 family?

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- 13 Because they couldn't process -- they were Α.
- 14 short-staffed or something and they couldn't process.
- 15 And not only that, what hurt me at the time, being
- 16 Welsh, I wrote two or three Welsh letters and I got
- 17 them returned because at the time they didn't have any
- 18 staff that could translate what I'd written.
- 19 There came a time, a week later, I think, you were
- 20 transferred to an open prison; is that right?
- 21 Yes. Α.
- 22 Q. Which prison was that?
- 23 Kirkham, near -- well, between Preston and Blackpool. Α.
- 24 Can you tell us a little hit about your time there? Q.
- 25 A. Yes. It was an open prison. It wasn't a place you

- 1 wanted to be. I settled in and I had a job in the
- 2 greenhouses. It was a big farm. It was run by
- 3 Lancashire College, I believe, and they were producing
- 4 a lot of vegetables and all the rest of it, and the
- 5 greenhouses were quite big. I think there was about
- 6 somewhere not far short of about 5 acres of glass
- 7 there. And at the time we were just tidying up,
- 8 sterilising and what you call it. But at least the
- 9 days went quicker.
- 10 **Q.** It's right to say you had your 60th birthday in
- 11 prison?
- 12 **A.** Yes.
- 13 Q. On 19 January 2007 you were released from prison.
- 14 **A.** Yes.
- 15 Q. And a condition of your release being that you were
- put on a tag?
- 17 A. Yes.
- 18 **Q.** How was that?
- 19 A. Not nice because you weren't allowed out of the house
- 20 before 7 in the morning and you had to be back in at 7
- 21 at night. At the time, having lost everything, I went
- 22 to live with my daughter in Malltraeth.
- 23 **Q.** And was it peaceful at night or were you disturbed?
- $24\,$ $\,$ A. No, disturbed because they couldn't get a signal and
- 25 it was quite often they used to knock on the door and 149

- 1 come and check if I was there.
- Q. So the electronic tag had a signal and if it lost that
 signal, they'd think you may have run --
- 4 A. They'd think I'd gone AWOL.
- 5 Q. I'm going to move on to the impact on you, financial
- 6 impact and personal impact. We have time. Would you
 - like a brief break at all?
- 8 A. No, I'm all right. Carry on if you like.
 - Q. I'm going to start with the financial impact. It's
- 10 right to say that you still had to pay for the
- 11 shortfall that you owed; is that right?
- 12 A. Yes.

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- 13 Q. How did you afford that?
- 14 A. I didn't, to be quite honest. I became bankrupt in
- 15 2008 -- 2007/2008. I had to. I was very lucky.
- 16 I sold my house -- well, the house it was then because
- the business had gone to my youngest son, who is
- sitting there, and that managed to clear a few debts.
- 19 But, unfortunately, with what I owed the Post Office
- 20 and the pressure that they kept sending letters
- 21 wanting the money, I went bankrupt. And because my
- 22 wife's name was on some things we had quite a problem
 - actually trying to sort my side of it out and my
- 24 wife's side and it took about two years for my wife to
- 25 get her pension, private pensions, back and things
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- 1 like that.
- 2 Q. What happened to your pension?
- 3 A. I lost it. They took my private pensions. In the
- 4 Proceeds of Crime in Mold, they -- because I'd worked
- 5 for the Post Office for 42 years in all, they had the
- 6 lawyer, the London lawyer, stood on his feet and told
- 7 the judge that he wanted to stop my pension.
- 8 **Q.** So as part of the sentencing there was a Proceeds of Crime Act application?
- 10 **A.** Yes.
- 11 **Q.** And that led to you losing your pension?
- 12 A. It didn't, thank goodness. Thanks to the judge,
- 13 Mr Nick Parry, he put them right and he said no,
- 14 because I'd worked for the Post Office for 42 years,
- paid a pension, and they thought that they could -- if
- 16 they could stop that, that that would be part of the
- money that would be paid back.
- 18 Q. You did lose your savings?
- 19 **A.** Yes.
- 20 Q. And who did you live with at that time?
- 21 A. I lived with my daughter until I got a pensioneers
- 22 bundle that relates that we had our Post Office in
- 23 Caerwyn.
- Q. You told us before that you were a councillor beforeyour conviction?
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- 1 A. Yes.
 - Q. What happened to that position?
- 3 A. I lost it unfortunately. Between my Post Office
- 4 salary and my council salary, I was earning somewhere
- 5 in the region of 45,000 at the time. The Post Office
- 6 salary was somewhere about 29/30,000 and my council
- 7 salary was somewhere in the region of about 15.
- 8 Q. And you lost that as well?
- 9 **A.** Yes.
- 10 Q. What about the shop? What happened to the shop and
- 11 the money that you --
- 12 A. Well, we had to -- my wife had to sell her cards cheap
- and the shop was empty, and we just couldn't open it
- 14 because we didn't have the keys. They wouldn't give
- 15 them back.
- 16 **Q.** What do you do for work now?
- 17 A. I used to work in the garden centre up to December --
- well, my birthday. I did six years in the garden
- 19 centre, three days a week. Before, that I took on
- 20 a job with -- I bought -- I managed to buy a van and
- 21 I used to be a courier for a company called Yodel.
- 22 I did that for four years, so -- to make ends meet.
- 23 **Q.** Do you still struggle financially?
- 24 A. No, it's better. I did get a bit of compensation
- 25 which I suppose you will mention. So that's helped.

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- 1 Q. You can tell us that now if you'd like.
- 2 A. Well, the first one was the settlement after the two
- 3 court cases of, you know, so-called 50-odd million but
- 4 only about £11 million was shared out between
- 5 500/1,000 of us. I managed to get 11,000 out of that
- 6 and, about three weeks afterwards, I had a very nice
- 7 letter saying -- with another £3,000 in it saying "for
- 8 the inconvenience of going to jail".
- 9 **Q.** And who was that from?
- 10 A. That came from the settlement through Freeths.
- 11 Q. I'm going to move on now to the personal impact on
- 12 you. How did you sleep during the period that we've
- 13 talked about today?
- 14 A. Terrible. I couldn't shut the bedroom door. I found
- 15 it very hard. That was more anything from the first
- 16 eight days and I did that in Kirkham as well. I never
- 17 shut the door. That took a lot out of me, to be quite
- 18 honest. Or a door slamming, I always used to get very
- 19 agitated.
- 20 Q. So being confined or hearing particular noises reminds
- 21 you of your time in prison?
- 22 A.
- 23 Q. And you've had a formal diagnosis I think of
- 24 adjustment disorder; is that right?
- A. Yes. My family doctor was very, very good with me in 25 153

- 1 the beginning. I managed to get some help and also, 2
 - living in Anglesey, I went for walks. I used to walk
- 3 four or five miles a day, just being outside, even in 4
 - the rain.
 - Q. How would you describe the psychological impact on you of all of this?
- 7 A. It was horrible. I'll be honest, and the worst thing
- 8 about it was I was sent to jail, my family had to face
- 9 the public.
- 10 Q. There's a reputational damage there. How was your 11 reputation before all of this?
- 12 It was fantastic. Like what you call it, the
- 13 gentleman in the beginning, you were a pillar of the
- 14 community. People used to -- not only for Post Office
 - work but they used to come for advice. You used to
- 16 help them fill forms and stuff like that up. You
- 17 know, they had confidence in you and, you know, they
- looked at you for advice. 18
- 19 And how did people treat you after the conviction?
- 20 A mixture. Living in a small community and having
- 21 been a postman, I travelled from one end of the island
- 22 to the other. I think in my time I delivered to about
- 23 20 different rounds, Post Office rounds, from Benllech
- 24 on one side of the island to Rhosneigr, Aberffraw.
- 25 You knew people and when you went to places like the 154
- 1 town centre Llangefni, you have people -- you know,
- 2 I even had one shout, "Shut the door, the thief's
- 3 arrived". You know, you expect it.
- 4 Q. It was in the paper at the time, I think, in the
 - newspaper?
- 6 A. Yes.

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- 7 Q. What was the impact of that on you and on your family 8
- 9 A. It wasn't very nice to have your family look at
- 10 pictures of you being led into a van to go away,
- 11 handcuffed. You know, it's -- it's not nice.
- 12 Q. You've spoken about your wife who's visibly upset in
- 13 court today. What about other members of your family?
- What was the effect on them? 14
- 15 **A.** That's my daughter, by the way.
- 16 Q. Ah, sorry, your daughter. Sorry.
- 17 A. My wife's not a very -- she doesn't like -- she's very
- 18 quiet, very firm. She's the boss of the house but
- 19 she's not -- she doesn't like to be in the limelight,
- 20 if you call it that. My son there and --
- 21 unfortunately, we lost Arfon two years ago. He was 22
- 23 Q. Mr Beer asked a question of a previous witness, that 24 is: what do you want from the Post Office?
- 25 Justice. I want to find out who knew because, in my 155

- time -- I've looked back -- there's been four
 - different governments so you can't blame one
- 3 government. There's been different ministers in
- 4 charge of ISS, as you call it. I was prosecuted in
- 5 the Royal Mail one. The Counters and the Royal Mail
- 6 were together because I think it was 2011 -- maybe
- 7 you'll correct me -- when they split and, you know,
- 8 these people knew, quite prominent people when you
- 9 look back, knew what was going on. They'd gone on
- 10 their way. They'd gone into greener pastures, if you
- 11 like. They've gone with their bonuses and their
- 12 multimillion pound back pocket cheques and all the
- 13 rest of it and why? Why haven't they -- why didn't
- 14 they pick it up? Why didn't they sort it out and let
- 15 it drag on like this?
- The final topic I'd like to talk to you about is 16
- 17 raising awareness because you've been guite involved
- 18 in raising awareness and I want to talk to you about
- 19 2008 and 2009. In 2008 you were contacted by somebody
- 21 Yes, a colleague of -- a village gentleman that lived
- 22 in South Warnborough who knew Jo very well.

called Roch Garrard; is that correct?

- 23 Can you describe your first contact?
- 24 Α. Yes, I had a letter off him and at about the same time
- 25 I was talking to Taro Naw, a Welsh -- a small, Welsh

- Panorama programme if you like, and I'd got to know 1 1 the second of your exhibits. 2 about them through a BBC reporter called Sion Tecwyn, 2 With a young picture of Jo. A. 3 3 who I'd been quite involved with through my council Q. So is this --4 work. We used to be you we used to talk a lot and if 4 A. You haven't changed, Jo. 5 anything happened on the island he would speak to me 5 Q. I think we heard Mrs Hamilton talk about a newspaper 6 6 maybe and Roch wrote a letter and that was the article at the time and this is it, is it? 7 beginning of the matter as far as I was concerned. 7 Α. 8 Q. I'm going to ask for that letter to be brought up on 8 Q. Again, knowing that you weren't the only person, that 9 the screen if we can. 9 had quite an impact on you, didn't it? 10 A. Yes. 10 A. 11 Q. It may take a moment. It's, I think, your first 11 Then we have another letter behind that. That's the 12 exhibit. It's on the screen to your right. 12 third exhibit. I think that confirms a conversation 13 A. Yes. 13 that you had with Mr Garrard. 14 **Q.** Is that the letter that you received? 14 A. 15 A. Yes. 15 Q. So you spoke to him on the telephone? **Q.** In 2008? 16 16 A. Yes. 17 A. Yes. 17 Q. You also became involved in the Computer Weekly 18 Q. Can you tell us, on receiving that letter for the 18 article; is that right? 19 first time how did you feel? 19 Yes. The lady rang me up and I think there was about 20 A. That I wasn't the only one because, as you heard from 20 six or seven of us that spoke to her and she ran it in one of her articles -- was it 2009, somewhere like 21 Jo and the gentleman at the beginning, the first thing 21 22 the Post Office were telling you that you were the 22 23 only one, there was nobody else, and at the time of 23 Q. Yes. How did you make contact with them originally? 24 24 Through Mr Garrett. He came but, as I said, the course there was no way of you finding out. 25 Q. I think he sent you an article, and we'll move on to 25 Taro Naw one was starting as well. So there was guite 157 158 1 a lot going on at the time. 1 many, many years. 2 Q. Taro Naw, is it a programme that you were aware of 2 But I'll put my life in three categories, if you 3 3 like. I started in Bodorgan, as I mentioned, going 4 A. Yes. It was quite a very well run Welsh documentary 4 back again, in a place called Paradwys which was -- in 5 5 or investigating programme, actually, which had looked English is "paradise". It's a small community in 6 into lots of other things before my story. 6 Anglesey and that was my first round. So I have been 7 7 Q. And can you just let us know how it was that you came to paradise and I've been to hell in Walton and 8 to meet Ms Hamilton through Taro Naw? 8 I think that will sum it up. 9 9 A. Yes. Well, we went down to South Warnborough and we MR BLAKE: Chair, do you have any questions at all? 10 met in the café, we had a cup of tea. Mr Garrard was 10 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: No, I don't have any questions. You 11 there as well and that's how we -- that's how we 11 will have heard me thank the two witnesses who came started. 12 before you. Q. Is there anything that you would like to add to your 13 A. Yes. 14 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: So I'm going to thank you in Welsh: evidence that you've given today?
- 12 13 14 15 A. Yes. I'll say this much. I was very proud to work 16 for the Post Office. I had 32 years of happiness, if you like, having started in 1965 for £3, 7 and 6 17 18 a week riding a bike for 17 miles. A postage stamp 19 was only 3 pence in those days. I worked myself up 20 when I was a postman. I became a higher grade. 21 I went to Cardiff to do that and I also used to run --22 when the local sorting office manager was off, I used 23 to do in charge but I never took the job on. My 24 postmaster's life was quite a happy life, working

alongside my wife and we have worked together for

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15 diolch yn fawr iawn yn wir. 16 A. Croeso. Thank you, sir. MR BLAKE: That concludes the day. We still start again 17 18 at 10.00 tomorrow morning. 19 SIR WYN WILLIAMS: Thanks to everyone. Now, we'll depart 20 without people standing again. 21 (4.28 pm) 22 (Adjourned until 10.00 am the following day) 23 24

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