

Witness Name: Deirdre Connolly
Statement No.: WITN0304_01
Exhibits: None
Dated: 3/2/2022

**IN THE POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY
BEFORE SIR WYN WILLIAMS**

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF DEIRDRE CONNOLLY

I, DEIRDRE CONNOLLY, WILL SAY as follow;

INTRODUCTION

1. I am grateful to the Chair to be invited to provide a “human impact” statement, concerning the physical, psychological, emotional, reputational and financial consequences to me and my family of being held responsible for shortfalls shown by the Horizon IT system and Post Office Limited’s actions toward me and my family. The initial paragraphs below provide a brief summary of my background, and to provide context to the detail of the human impact of the Horizon scandal on me and my family. This statement does not reflect a full account of my experiences or those of my family and if necessary or required I will provide further witness statement evidence.
2. I was born on the GRO I live in Strabane, County Tyrone, in Northern Ireland. I have been married to my husband Darius for thirty years. I have two children.

BACKGROUND PRIOR TO APPOINTMENT AS SPM

3. Before becoming a subpostmaster, I was working in a cooking oil company as an accounts administrator. The owner of the company, which has since gone on to grow substantially and to be a very successful business, did not want me to leave.
4. I was appointed subpostmistress of the Killeter branch in March 2006, this was my main branch. I owned and operated this branch until 02 June 2010, when my contract was terminated.
5. I began providing the outreach services in July 2009 at Aughabrack post office and Ardstraw post office. I did not own these branches, I was on a host contract for both branches until 02 June 2010, when my contract was terminated.

DECISION TO BECOME A SPM

6. I left my previous employment to become a subpostmaster because my husband and I had always wanted to own and run our own business – we thought the post office would be a “forever job” with a big, trusted national organisation and we would be able to save and make a good life for our family and eventually for our own retirement.
7. I used to enjoy helping people and I had a strong feeling that in doing my work people would come to me and I would be able to help them.
8. I anticipated that I would have a captive market with customers visiting my shop, which was the only shop in the neighbourhood, and that combining this with the post office would provide a steady income.

9. We began by leasing the business for two years, to see if it could be built up, as it was quite run down. After two years we got two mortgages, one for the house and one for the shop, and bought it in 2008. It was supposed to be a separate buy to let mortgage on the house, but the solicitors who acted for us didn't handle the properties properly and this eventually meant we lost both properties.
10. When we bought the shop and three stores we paid £225,000 for them and £75,000 for the house. This was an enormous investment for us. We knew it would be hard work but we had confidence in our ability to be able to manage the debt we took on.
11. We relied on having the Post Office salary to be able to take on this project.
12. We expected to be able to make the business a success and to be able to make a future for ourselves and provide a comfortable home and living for us and our children. This was not to be.

SHORTFALLS

13. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from flaws in the Horizon IT System, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, in order to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.
14. The Horizon system had been installed in my post office before the start of my two year lease. During my first couple of weeks, the previous SPM would come in, casually, for a few days when her new job permitted to help me to get to grips with the use of the system.
15. At the start of my running the post office I had had no training from the Post Office on Horizon at all.

16. The Post Office say its records show that I had a week's training in Belfast but this never happened.
17. I rang the helpline maybe two or three times a week but the helpline was no help and some of the staff could not even understand my accent. I did my best by working through the manuals, but the system was not easy to use or understand.
18. Eventually, I did have two people arrive at my branch to give me some training, but they came on a Wednesday afternoon when the Post Office was closed. All the systems were closed down and they could not show me anything.
19. In about 2009 the Post Office area manager came to me and asked me if I would take on two outreach sites – this was because the former people running these outreach sites had been warned by the police about the risk of Tiger Kidnappings (it was quite common for paramilitaries to take family members hostage to compel someone to commit a crime and post offices were considered a soft target given the cash they held) but I agreed to take on these sites.
20. Running the outreach sites involved taking a computer and a case full of money to two very rural areas, Ardstraw and Aughabrack.
21. The Post Office provided me with a personal alarm device but, it needed a network signal to work, and mobile signal was rarely available in more rural locations.
22. The two sites I was asked to run had had full time post offices, but later become outreach sites operating on Tuesdays only at Aughabrack, and on Mondays and Thursdays at Ardstraw.
23. The supplied computer had to be hooked up to the BT phone line in each location to run Horizon on it. At the outreach sites Horizon did not work well; the lines kept dropping and I wonder if the eventual major shortfall the Post Office claimed from me could have been caused by transactions I handled at Ardstraw.

24. One of the businesses I served at Ardstraw regularly deposited large sums of money with me. Logging this through Horizon would fail when the line went down. I sometimes had to put transactions through several times before eventually the transaction would report as complete.
25. On Wednesday morning the 2 June 2010 I arrived to open the shop at 08:30 but there was a strange car parked in the road – I did not want to get out of my car until someone else came, in case someone in the strange car was waiting to rob me. In Northern Ireland, post offices were often robbed by paramilitaries.
26. A regular customer arrived to get his paper. At that point, a man got out of the strange car and introduced himself as Terry Smithson from the Post Office, and told me that he had come to do a wee audit. I vaguely recognised the man as a Post Office trainer.
27. I opened the shop door and turned off the alarm. Mr Smithson put up a sign saying “Post Office closed audit in progress”.
28. I started the process of opening the time delay safe so Mr Smithson would be able to check the contents of the safe (the safe could not be opened for fifteen minutes or so after the unlocking process is started).
29. I went and got the papers out of the car and started to open the shop up as usual. I left Mr Smithson to get on with it. I had a member of staff, Susan Young, coming in to work in the shop at 09:00 so I would be able to do my usual job of balancing the Post Office account.
30. At about 09:30 there was a knock at the shop door. Mr Smithson said he had found a discrepancy (I thought this might have been fifty or sixty pounds, which would not have been uncommon) but he told me “it’s a lot, lot bigger”.

31. I got up and went down to the Post Office to ask if I could count it to check and he said "no I am going to suspend you I need your keys".
32. I was stunned and said "are you serious?" He said "I am, I have to contact people and report this". After saying this, he wouldn't even let me in to the Post Office section.
33. As I recollect Mr Smithson had brought a computer with him and his screen said there was a shortfall of £16,592.
34. Mr Smithson gave me no opportunity to check his calculations or what he was basing his findings on. He just declared that this shortfall had been found and suspended me. There was no process at all. I was utterly stunned.
35. I phoned my husband Darius to get him to come up and he rushed up to join me. Our employee Susan Young was able to see and hear all of this. Mr Smithson worked in the post office box until 3 or 4 pm.
36. In the meantime Darius and I went for a drive in the car for about three-quarters of an hour. Neither of us could understand what was happening. We just kept looking at each other and trying to work out what was going on.
37. At about 4 pm, Mr Smithson left the branch. He took my keys with him.
38. The following week, Mr Smithson returned to do the usual monthly balance and in doing that he found £1,000 in the safe. My husband was in the shop at the time. Mr Smithson explained that he had found a thousand pounds in the safe that he hadn't seen the week before. It was not a big safe and there was no reason why he should not have seen that amount of money. He had taken my keys at his first visit so no one had had any access to the safe since his prior visit. Mr Smithson took this money without discussion and said his reduced the claim from the Post Office against me to £15,592.

39. However, the fact that he was able to 'miss' one thousand pounds in cash demonstrates that his audit was obviously very poorly done. The Post Office was closed. The Post Office wrote to me to allow a temporary person to go in to open it again.
40. The Post Office accepted our recommendation of GRO. She went in and, as far as I know, she is still running the Post Office.
41. Later, I received a letter from Brian Trotter asking me to pay £15,592 back (the original shortfall discovered less the thousand pounds later found in the safe). I then received a letter and a phone call from Suzanne Winters, a fraud investigator for Post Office, inviting me to a meeting at Royal Mail Belfast.
42. I barely remember the conduct of that meeting because I was so shocked.
43. I was accompanied by a National Federation of Sub Postmasters man, whose name I cannot now recall; as far as I can remember he was from County Down. My husband Darius, who attended that meeting with me, tells me the NFSP man suggested that I should plead guilty and told me to tell them I took the money. We were both astonished that our representative would suggest this, rather than helping us. I felt that he was simply on the Post Office's side from the beginning.
44. The next meeting with Suzanne Winters took place in a small room at Omagh Royal Mail sorting office. I went with my husband Darius and my family solicitor, Paddy Roach. Suzanne Winters would not allow Darius to stay with me for the meeting and walked him right off the premises. My solicitor was told he was not allowed to speak.
45. We were taken upstairs to a room where we met a very tall man whose name I cannot now remember. I was told he had flown in that morning from England to interview me. I was told the meeting would be recorded but I do not know what may have happened to that recording – I have never been given a copy.

46. Amongst other questions I was asked if I had taken the money for paramilitaries.
47. On hearing this allegation, I began to shake and was absolutely petrified, I remember my mouth was very dry. At that point in time, it was quite common for people accused of collaborating with paramilitaries to be killed. My previous outreach work had already made me very aware of the very real risks of being murdered if I was suspected of collaborating with paramilitaries.
48. After we left the meeting, I was so clearly distressed that our solicitor said to my husband "that woman will not get through this you are just going to have to pay the money". My solicitor did not think I had taken the money but could see that the strain of the accusation and the fear of potential paramilitary consequences was affecting me very seriously.
49. The allegation about giving money to paramilitaries terrified us. We felt like we had to pay the Post Office or risk death.
50. We set out to raise the money. Darius phoned his mother and I phoned mine trying to borrow the money. My uncle gave me a cheque for £7,000, an aunt in Belfast sent me a cheque for £3,000, and Darius' mother gave us a cheque for about £3,000.
51. We sent the money by cheque for Brian Trotter's attention and I remember asking in my letter sending the cheque for a report as to how the money had gone missing in the first place and where I could have made a mistake. I have never received any answer to that letter.

HUMAN IMPACT

52. My life and the lives of my family were not only shattered, but the allegation made by the Post Office investigator put us in fear of our lives.

53. I feel like we paid the money to Post Office under threat to our lives, It was like having money extorted from you with menace. We had to go cap in hand to borrow money from our families to be able to pay back the claimed shortfall and we still owe that money. The shame of it still burns.
54. Our local community stopped coming to the shop as the story about the so-called audit spread very quickly. In the eyes of the community, we were thieves. The bailiffs came to re-possess the shop stores and house on the eve of our bankruptcy. The newspaper published the notice of our bankruptcy for all the world to see.
55. Communities in Northern Ireland are very close. Everyone knows everyone else's business. I had been branded a thief in my own town; I could not lift my head in public from the shame.
56. In fact, it was my dog Toby who got me through this. As I say, I felt unable to go out to face people in the community from shame, my husband Darius was at his wit's end. I turned to my dog Toby for the unconditional love and support he gave me. This may sound stupid, but without the love of my dog at this terrible time, I really do not think I would have got through this alive.
57. The money I got from the Group Litigation (Bates & Others v Post Office Ltd) was used to pay credit card bills I had run up owing to having lost my job and all my income.
58. I began to suffer from epilepsy in 2013 as a result of the stresses and strains of the situation I found myself in. My son found me on the floor of the shop with my first epileptic seizure at about 11:00 in the morning and I didn't come round until about 17:00 in hospital. I didn't recognise him and he is still traumatised by that.
59. As a result of my epilepsy I was not able to drive for a year could not work and my family had to look after me and ensure I was not left alone in case of further seizures.
60. My daughter GRO suffers to this day from anxiety.

61. My son was very badly affected by all of the stresses and strains and his concerns for me

GRO

62. Darius tried to keep the shop going separately from the Post Office work and his health suffered through this, leaving him now suffering from high blood pressure. However, without the Post Office salary we couldn't keep up with our finance requirements and we were both made bankrupt on 22 February 2013.

63. We were forced to sell the shop and premises. We made a loss on its sale.

64. We were only able to keep our house because it was in negative equity (from the original loan we raised to buy the shop) and there would have been no benefit to anyone in taking this away from us.

CONCLUSION

65. As a result of the Post Office action against me, I went from being a hardworking, respected, confident person, to being a recluse not wanting to see anyone or talk to anyone. I felt a sense of shame, embarrassment, and anger. I stopped going out of the house and didn't answer the phone to anyone.

66. The stress took its toll on my health. I began having panic attacks and I couldn't physically set foot in the shop. My husband had to deal with the fallout and run the shop full time, while supporting me.

67. I was treated for anxiety and depression and then had an epileptic seizure which my consultant said was a direct result of the stress Post Office put me under. I will be on medication for epilepsy for the rest of my life.

68. I went from a confident and bubbly person to a nervous wreck. The day that I received a letter from Post Office telling me that there would be no criminal proceedings instigated

against me was the darkest day for me. I was naïve and never even thought of criminal proceedings as I knew I hadn't done anything wrong. I was on the brink of committing suicide that day.

69. During the fraud interrogation, which included an ex-policeman from England that was flown in that morning, I felt intimidated, criminalised, scared and was accused of taking money for a paramilitary organization. The interrogator said repeatedly, "did you take the money for the paramilitaries".

70. The accusation terrified me, because if this rumour was circulated about me in my home town of Strabane, my life and the lives of my family would have been at genuine risk from the paramilitary organisations that were in operation then, and who are still in operation now.

71. I believe that the interrogator knew what a serious allegation he was making, and I think he did it deliberately to put me in fear of my life in the hope that he would break me and make me admit to things that I did not do. I do not believe that people in England would fully appreciate what a serious allegation this was to make, or how great the fear it would instil in me or the danger that it would put me and my family in. This was unforgiveable.

72. At the time, this all happened, I could see not future ahead. I thought we were finished as a family. It seemed certain that we would become bankrupt and lose our home. I also, as I have said, feared for my life and the lives of my family.

73. We have lost our place in our community and our previous successful business and dreams for the future and now have no prospect of the financial security and comfort that should have been ours.

74. What was done to me and others could not be more wrong. Those who did it, and those who allowed it to happen, must be held to account.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed: **GRO**

Dated: 3/2/2022

Deidre Connolly