

Question 1 of the Inquiry's Call for Evidence

What impact did the operation & management of the Horizon IT system have, & what effects were personally experienced as a result?

After reading the details about the current Post Office Inquiry and the request for anyone affected by the failings of the Horizon IT system to give evidence, I have decided to write this painful account to show the human impact that the Horizon dispute has had on my family. Whilst I am not employed by the Post Office, my family and I have been totally devastated by their actions for over a decade.

I am writing on behalf of my late brother Martin Griffiths who was a loyal Sub-postmaster for 18 years at Hope Farm Post Office, in Great Sutton, near Ellesmere Port in Cheshire. Martin ran this branch from 1995 until 2013 when he took his own life at the age of 59.

For 14 of those years, his post office was run very successfully and business was increased by the retail section selling greetings cards, gifts and stationery. However, in 2009 problems with his Horizon computer system began to surface. Every Wednesday when he did the end-of-week balance, small losses started appearing. Martin was a very proud man and fastidious with his accounts, so spent ages trying to figure out why there were discrepancies. I remember my brother saying that the Horizon software had been upgraded around this time and think it is no coincidence that the losses occurred during those four years after the system was altered, whereas for 14 years prior to 2009 there were no computer issues at his branch whatsoever.

At first Martin thought it might be a member of staff. He kept his eyes open for cash going missing. Were the losses happening when one particular employee was on shift? This atmosphere of suspicion continued for more than a year, but Martin could not find any evidence of any employee with their hands in the till. He continually tried to speak to the Help Line, but was told it must be his fault and he would have to make good the losses as the Horizon system was functioning perfectly well. Initially he did not want to worry his family with these debts, so used his personal savings to make good the losses, but this meant he could not afford the usual family holiday.

My elderly parents became very concerned as the losses started to increase into thousands of pounds. The stress began to take its toll. As Martin fought to make sense of the losses he could not explain, his personality and state of mind started to deteriorate. He had been outgoing and sociable, but during this period he began to change. He became very depressed and withdrawn and felt he was the only one in this dire situation and so it must be all his fault.

In 2011, I hated to see the toll this was taking on my brother and my parents, so I began to search the internet to see if other Sub-postmasters had similar problems with their Horizon system. I then to my shock, unearthed such a can of worms. I discovered Alan Bates who established the JFSA, and also watched a very alarming documentary made by Nick Wallis for "Inside Out", where he revealed that hundreds of Sub-postmasters were experiencing

unexplained losses. This could not be just a coincidence - these employees were not hardened criminals. I felt so angry and frustrated. I tried to show all my research to my brother, to prove he was not "the only one" in this mess, but he was too depressed to fight.

Later in 2011 Martin was audited and the Post Office suspended him. A temporary Sub-postmaster was installed. This was another blow to Martin's self-esteem. After three months, Martin got his job back, but the losses continued to escalate, and Martin seemed unable to stop them. The deteriorating financial situation affected his marriage and he reluctantly asked my parents for money. Between 2012 and 2013, my parents' life savings were swallowed up by the Post Office, as they continued to demand the "missing" money be settled.

The situation was desperate. The family could not understand why Horizon was continually showing these inexplicable discrepancies. Under the terms of his Sub-postmaster contract, Martin was not entitled to any investigative help from the Post Office. He was repeatedly told to make good the losses or face the termination of his contract. In July 2013 he received a letter informing him that due to his failure to manage the discrepancies at his branch and his failure to settle them in good time he was being sacked. He still owed thousands of pounds to the Post Office and his contract would be terminated at Hope Farm Road on 3rd October 2013.

The ongoing debt to the Post Office and the thousands of pounds he owed our parents, together with the thought of telling the staff that his contract was soon to terminate, all became too much. He could see no way out. Early on the morning of 23 September he made his usual journey to work, pulled over in a layby on the A41, got out of his car and deliberately stepped into the path of an oncoming bus. He was rushed to Aintree hospital which specialises in head injuries, where he lay in an induced coma. For an agonising three weeks my brother was on life support which had to be switched off on 11 October 2013.

Every time I read or hear a news item about the Horizon scandal, it brings back all the pain and the anger. My brother tragically lost his life due to a faulty computer system. The Post Office repeatedly denied computer error was the cause of losses amounting to millions. Instead, they arrogantly blamed my brother and thousands of other innocent Sub-postmasters, by wrongly accusing them of theft or false accounting.

Why did the P.O. not investigate Fujitsu to find out what was causing the glitch?

Why did the P.O. not provide support for their very worried employees?

Why did the P.O. halt the 'Second Sight' forensic investigation when difficult questions were asked?

Ex-CEO Paula Vennells insisted that only a tiny proportion of branches were experiencing computer problems - how wrong was she and her team to cover up this scandal for so many years. Those responsible must be held accountable for ruining so many lives. I really hope this inquiry does the right thing by finally uncovering the truth, and is not purely an exercise in 'lessons to be learned' for the future.

Justice must prevail. Until then my family cannot move on from our tragedy.

Thank you.

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