
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?

My name is Nicola Arch.

I was the manageress of Chalford Hill village shop and PO in 1999 when I was informed the roll out of Horizon will commence. I was one of the first to have the equipment installed. Day of installation business remained open while I was being shown how to use it. Very difficult with customers coming in/out. From week 1 problems occurred with balancing. I could not afford to put cash in that was short so in order to trade the following day I would have to declare more cash in the safe than there was. I contacted the help line on a weekly basis and was told that we are bound to have teething problems and to continue doing what I'm doing.

After approx. two months 3 individuals turned up prior to opening at 8.30am, to do an audit. I was told to close the business during this time. The audit revealed by then I was £28k short. I was escorted by two of the individuals to the crown office 8 miles away and locked in a room for questioning. This was a recorded interview. I was accused of theft and false accounting and was told the sooner I admit to what I've stolen the sooner I would be allowed to leave. I was also told I was the only one who had this problem. I was in absolute shock and scared. I had done nothing dishonest, only what I was told to do by help line. I was 29 years old and had never done anything illegal in my life. The questioning went on all day because I vehemently denied any wrongdoing. I was released later that day and the owner of the building rang me that evening to say I was not allowed to step foot in the building again and if he let me in then the PO would prosecute him! He was an elderly gentleman and scared himself so that day was my last. It was published in the local paper that I had stolen off of pensioners.

I was totally devastated. My job, business and reputation destroyed in one day. I would get horrible remarks said to me in the local supermarkets and landed up not leaving the house.

My fiancé and I did not leave the house although my now husband did continue to work so we had money to live on. My health deteriorated and I was put on anti-depressants and pain relief. This went on for two years waiting for trial at Bristol Crown Court. My solicitor said I was likely to be imprisoned as we had no access to the PO system to further investigate.

My fiancé decided that we should marry so he could reassure me he would stay with me. We went to Stroud registry office on the 25/8/2001 and got married with no dress, no flowers, no photos, no guests, no reception or honeymoon. We had no money and I was living like a recluse.

When court came in April 2002 I pleaded NOT guilty much to the PO investigators' disgust! They had questioned me numerous times during the wait for trial, at least 5 times at Stroud police station and I said from the start I would never agree to plead guilty when I was innocent. The jury found me NOT guilty after a four-day trial. By then I'd lost everything. All my stock was just dumped from my shop. I was a total wreck. We sold our shared ownership home and moved 20 miles away to try and build a new life which we have of a fashion. I worked for social

services up until I was 49 years old then I had to retire with ill health due to fibromyalgia, depression, IBS, arthritis in my feet, ankles, knees, hips and shoulders. My health never returned from that time and we lost all of our investment and business.

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