

Witness Statement of: Paul Norbert

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GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF PAUL NORBERT

This statement is a factual statement prepared for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry dealing with modules 3 and 4 in Phase 2 only. It does not, and is not intended to set out my experiences on the night of the fire, or the impact that these events and the aftermath have had on me.

I, **PAUL NORBERT**, will say as follows:

1. I make this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Public. This statement is an account of my personal experience of fire safety in the Walkways and of dealing with the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation ('TMO') (**Module 3**).
2. This statement will also briefly outline my experience in the aftermath of the tragic fire ('the fire') at Grenfell Tower ('the Tower') on 14 June 2017 (**Module 4**).
3. I provided a Witness Statement to the Inquiry dated 10 July 2018 (Unique ID: **IWS00000667**) for the purpose of Phase 1.

Background

4. I am a driving instructor by profession, but following the fire on 14 June 2017, I have not been able to return to employment.

5. I first moved into Flat [REDACTED] Testerton Walk on the 1st January 1997, I had a Secure Tenancy. Flat [REDACTED] Testerton Walk is a one-bedroom flat on the first floor of the block. I was already familiar with the area and community having grown up on Silchester Road, where I had lived with my mother since 1978.
6. I was unable to remain in Testerton Walk after the fire because it served as a constant reminder of what I had seen and experienced on 14 June 2017. I could see Grenfell Tower from my living room window; this was not good for my mental health. I thought that I would be placed in new permanent accommodation by now, but I am currently living in a bedsit and still have no certainty about my living situation.

Fire Safety

7. I do not remember anyone from the TMO or Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council ('RBKC'/'the Council') ever speaking to me about fire safety when I was living in Testerton Walk. I never took part in any fire drills and I am not aware of any having taken place while I was living in the Walkways. If there had been an emergency or a fire in the building, I would have just done what I thought was right. I probably would have tried to leave the building. If it was not possible exit through the main entrance, I might have tried getting out through my kitchen window or the balcony.
8. I was not aware of the fire strategy for the Walkways. In my experience, large buildings are usually evacuated when there is a serious fire, but I was not aware of any specified assembly point for the Walkways. I only heard of the "stay put" strategy after the fire on 14 June 2017. I cannot remember anyone ever speaking to me about the fire safety strategy for the building.
9. During the 20 years that I lived in Testerton Walk to my knowledge, there were one or two fires. Each time I knew there was a fire because I could smell smoke; I do not remember ever hearing a fire alarm go off and we were never evacuated from the building.

10. In or around 2004, I remember that I left a pot on my cooker and accidentally fell asleep in the living room before taking it off the fire. I remember being woken up by loud banging on my front door, when I opened it, a Fire Fighter from the London Fire Brigade (LFB) rushed past me and into my kitchen. It was only then that I noticed the smoke, and remembered the pot on the cooker. The Fire Fighter put out the fire on the cooker and left, he was not there for too long and I didn't have to evacuate my flat. He didn't advise me about what I should do if there was another fire in my flat or in the building.
11. Thankfully, nothing other than the cooking pot was damaged. A neighbour must have smelt the smoke coming from my flat and called the LFB. There were no smoke or fire alarms in my flat, so if my neighbour had not called the LFB it could have tuned into a far more serious incident.
12. Up until the day of the fire at the Tower on 14 June 2017, there were no fire or smoke alarms in my flat. No one from the TMO or RBKC attended my flat after the incident with the cooking pot to advise me about fire safety or to install smoke alarms. I do not remember ever hearing fire or smoke alarms go off in any of my neighbours' flats.
13. A few years after the incident with the small fire in my flat, I believe that there was a project in the Walkways where they did electrical works in some of the flats. I believe they may have installed smoke alarms in some of the flats. At the time of those works, I was in hospital for a few months so no work was carried out in my flat, but it was not offered after my return.
14. My front door had been replaced twice because of damage during the time I lived in the Walkways. At the time of the fire on 14 June 2017, my front door was sturdy but not solid; it also had a glass panel. I am not certain if my front door was a fire door, but I assume that it would have been. I do know that it did not have self-closing mechanisms, because it did not shut behind me, I had to close and lock it.
15. I do not remember ever hearing a fire alarm go off in the communal parts of the building, or seeing any sprinklers.

16. I'm not sure what fire safety measures were in place in the communal parts of the building, I cannot specifically remember whether there were any exit signs, fire extinguishers, fire hoses or back-up lighting, but I would assume that there would have at least been fire extinguishers.
17. I do not remember anyone carrying out fire safety assessments in the building, but I do remember gas safety checks each year in the flat.

Dealings with the TMO/RBKC

18. The TMO did not really listen to the concerns of residents about safety on the Estate. I believe that the TMO cared more about the appearance of things, rather than actually listening to residents on the Estate and their concerns. I believe it was that attitude which caused the fire on the 14 June 2017. If it wasn't for the TMO's desire to give the Tower a facelift because of the new Academy, then they never would have covered it with cladding.
19. Several of my neighbours were active in the Lancaster West Residents' Association. Although I cannot remember any specifics, I am aware that over the years they raised concerns about safety in the Estate.
20. We had constant issues with anti-social behaviour in the Walkways. On several occasions, I saw weapons hidden around the block. I called the TMO to report it, as would many of my neighbours, but as far as I am aware, the TMO did not take any steps to try and resolve the issue. I believe that I also reported it to the Police but now I cannot be certain.
21. I had asbestos in my flat. In around 2015, whilst replacing the carpet in my flat, I found a few broken floor tiles and I noticed that there was a powder that came off the tiles. I knew that there was asbestos in the flats at Testerton Walk. I was worried and contacted the TMO who said it might be asbestos, but they took no action and gave me no advice. They did not give me any more information about asbestos or its risks. They did not offer to come to my flat to test it, or to remove it.

22. About a year later, the TMO came to replace the tiles in my flat. I do not recall any information or action taken on the asbestos. I also began to notice a raised powdery substance throughout the ceilings in my flat, which I suspected was also asbestos. I asked the TMO to come and remove it but no one ever did.

Disrepairs

23. I would usually call the TMO to report a repair issue with my flat. We had on-going issues with leaks in the Walkway. On several occasions, there were leaks from the flat above, to my flat and the flat below mine. The neighbour, who lived in the flat below mine, often knocked on my door to complain that there was a leak from my flat to hers. I would always call the TMO to report a leak but the problem was never fully resolved.
24. When you called the TMO to report a repair, you never knew what to expect. It might take them a few hours to send someone to look at the problem, or it might take a few weeks. It differed from day-to-day. It also depended on who you spoke to. Over the years, I became familiar with some of the staff and so when I'd call, I would usually ask to speak to Deion Wilks or a man called Kareem (I cannot remember his last name). I knew that if I got through to them sometimes they would be able to speed up the process and send someone out to my flat quicker. You would also usually have to chase the TMO; I'd usually call two or three times before someone was sent out.
25. As I was living in my flat since 1997, I had a long history of dealing with TMO staff members. Over the years, I had contact with some staff members who were professional and others who were rude.
26. Although I was aware of the TMO's formal complaint's procedure I never used it because I knew I would have to chase a response and that it would not get anything resolved quickly.

Aftermath

27. I have had a very difficult experience in the aftermath of the fire, so much so, that it is difficult for me to put into words, the full extent of how I have been affected. So much

has happened that it's just not possible to go into detail about my full experience in the aftermath of the fire, so this statement only provides a brief account.

28. What I will say is that, I could not have expected the turn that my life took after that fire; my life has been a nightmare. I believed that residents and survivors would receive more support from the Government after the fire and that the TMO/RBKC would finally start listening to us.
29. Having lived in the local area for most of my life, I knew many of the people who passed away in the Tower. If not by name then from seeing them around the local area. It was a very close-knit community and many of the residents had lived in the area for decades, so most of us recognised each other and had mutual friends. I also worked as a Driving Instructor for many years and taught many of the kids in the local area to drive.
30. I first met Raymond Bernard who I knew as 'Moses' when I was 10 years old, at a friend's house. Moses was a couple of years older and his girlfriend at the time was the sister of a friend of mine. Over the years, we have gone to drinks together and we always stopped for a chat when we saw each other. In the days after the fire, there was not much information about those who were missing, so I found out from my neighbours in the community that he had passed away.
31. I first met Steve Power about thirty years ago. We were always friendly. I usually ran into him when he was walking his dogs. Again, I heard about his passing from the local community and then on the news.
32. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, there was a lot of confusion and rumours. After a few days, we knew that if someone was still missing, then they most likely did not make it out of the Tower. Posters with the faces of the missing were put up all around the local area.
33. As I stated in my Phase 1 statement, I had volunteered at the Youth Club at the Harrow Club for about 4 years. Yahya Hashim and Jessica Urbano attended the Youth Club regularly so I knew them well.

34. I found out that Jessica had passed away from her uncle, Carlos, with whom I was good friends.
35. I went to Primary School with Ernie Vital; I would see him around the community.
36. When I heard about the people I knew losing their lives, I wasn't able to process the fact that it had happened. By that point, I had emotionally shut down.
37. As I stated in my Phase 1 statement, I was shocked at the speed at which the fire spread across the Tower that night, it was horrifying.

Emergency Shelter and Accommodation

38. My then girlfriend and I stood outside, watching the fire spread across the Tower. We then went to my car, which was parked near Grenfell Walk and St Clements Church. I wanted to drive to the shops to buy cigarettes because I smoke when I am stressed and on that night, I was very stressed. However, the area was gridlocked with other cars and emergency vehicles. I saw that the Church had opened its doors so I spent a few hours wandering in and out of the Church, waiting for something to change or for someone to give us more information about what was happening.
39. In those early hours of 14 June, I met a few of my neighbours at the Church. We all tried to comfort each other. The Church had tea and coffee making facilities, as well as some snacks. It was upsetting to see people searching for their loved ones and concerned that they had not made it out of the Tower. I do not remember seeing anyone from RBKC at the Church that morning.
40. At around 6am on the 14 June 2017, I went back to my flat; I did not know what else to do. When I was there, I saw black ash and pieces of what looked like burnt plastic all over my balcony; I remember that I picked up a piece. I spent about an hour at the flat before the Police knocked on my door and told us that they were evacuating the building. They told me that I had to spend the night somewhere else. They suggested

that I go to St Clement's Church or other relief centres. I collected a few essential items including my wallet and left the flat; there was not enough time to get anything else.

41. I was very stressed and upset. I could feel my mental state deteriorating because of the shock of witnessing the fire and the chaos around us. I knew that I needed to be alone to try to gather my thoughts. I knew that I would not have the space to do that in a chaotic emergency shelter. Based on what I heard from the community, I believed that that was the only option being offered by RBKC, so I booked myself a room in a hotel in Bayswater. I went back to the Walkways that evening. Police Officers escorted me into the flat so that I could pack an overnight bag. The Tower was still burning at that point. Everyone, including me, was expecting it to collapse.
42. After spending the night in the hotel, on 15 June 2017 I went back to my flat. At some point that day, some people from the RBKC came in to check on me: I explained that I have Bipolar Affective Disorder. I told them that I did not want to stay in the flat because I was finding it so emotionally difficult. A couple of hours later, I received a call telling me that I could stay at the Grosvenor Hotel, Victoria. I was not told how long I would be able to stay there for.
43. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
44. I checked into the Grosvenor Hotel at some point after 12am on 16 June 2017. I was at the Grosvenor Hotel for 6 months. When I first checked-in, no one told me how long I would be staying there. I had no idea what was going to happen. RBKC would only renew the room at the end of each month.
45. Although the room was suitable, it was not a home. I was not able to cook my own food, as there were no cooking facilities. The novelty of living in a hotel wore off quickly and the uncertainty of not knowing how long I would be there, took a toll on my mental state. I could not settle, I became isolated and withdrawn.
46. I kept telling my Housing Officer that I needed to move into alternative permanent accommodation as soon as possible, because my mental health was deteriorating. It

would not have been good for my mental health to go back to the Testerton Walk and living in the hotel without any certainty was not any better.

47. I was offered a flat on a temporary basis. I moved into the flat in January 2018 because it offered a little more certainty than the hotel. I was hoping that the Council would then quickly find me somewhere permanent but to this day, I am still living in that temporary accommodation.

48. It is important for me to have routines in order to maintain my mental health. That became even more important after suffering the trauma of witnessing the fire and loss of friends and neighbours. I was not able to establish that routine at the hotel, so my mental health deteriorated.

Basic Provisions and Financial Assistance

49. There were no services at the hotel to assist residents and survivors so I had to go to the Westway Sports Centre for assistance. I went there a few times in the first couple of weeks after the fire.

50. For two months after the fire, I was not able to return to work because of my mental state, so I was using my savings to pay for everything: food, essential items and other expenses. Although I was not able to work, I still had to make payments to the company that provided me with work as a driving instructor.

51. I received a few hundred pounds in financial assistance from charities at the Westway. That money was invaluable in the first couple of weeks, as I did not receive any money from RBKC until at least a few weeks after the fire, when they provided me and other residents with £5,000 in financial assistance.

52. A few months after the fire I started receiving £300 from RBKC for my food and other expenses. I received this amount either weekly or fortnightly, I cannot recall exactly how often.

53. Since 14 June 2017, I have had two or three different Key Workers. There has been no continuity of care and there were periods where I did not have a Key Worker because one had left and another had yet to be appointed.
54. My first Key Worker was appointed a few weeks after the fire. I had no help until then and I was relying on the community for information about services. Although the Key Workers have been nice, I could tell that they were learning on the job. In the first couple of months, they had very little information. It was incredibly frustrating because although I had a Key Worker, I was still hearing about services from the community first. I would then have to tell my Key Worker about the availability of those services because they would not know anything about it. All of the Key Workers I have dealt with, have been from other Boroughs. Although they were acting on behalf of RBKC they did not seem to have clear lines of communication with them.
55. In the aftermath of the fire, I knew that I needed counselling to help me recover as I was struggling. For a few months, I was paying privately for counselling sessions. I then found out from a neighbour that the NHS were providing counselling for those affected by the fire. I approached NHS Grenfell Health and Wellbeing for assistance, but because I was already under the care of the Community Mental Health Team, I was told that they would not be able to provide me with counselling. I was disappointed because I knew the therapists at my Community Mental Health Team were not trauma specialists.
56. I did not have a Key Worker at the time so I did not know what my rights were in that situation. I felt helpless and alone.
57. In December 2018, both my Key Worker and Care Coordinator from my Community Mental Health Team were made redundant. There was no handover of care to other staff members, so suddenly losing two sources of support was devastating to my mental health. I felt completely alone and unsupported.

Needs of Special Groups

58. I feel that the needs of those with physical and mental health conditions were not where met in the aftermath of the fire. RBKC should have assessed the needs of special groups on 14 June 2017 and then, at the very least, they should have regularly checked on those people in the weeks and months after the fire.
59. Although the Council came to my flat on 15 June 2017 and placed me in a hotel, I felt forgotten and irrelevant after that. RBKC should have also acted quickly to ensure that I had psychological support in place
60. RBKC knew that I had a mental health condition, but had I not told their staff when they came to my home on 15 June 2017, no one would have asked. It was not until they were considering alternative housing for me, that they asked whether I had any special needs.
61. I told RBKC that I needed to be placed in permanent accommodation as soon as possible, so that I could settle down and focus on recovering, but they did not listen.
62. My Key Workers and Housing Officers all knew that I was struggling because I told them but they never took steps to help me. I tried to ask for help but they did not want to listen. I did not receive the support that I needed. At the very least as professionals, they should have liaised with my Community Mental Health Team to check if they were providing me with the support I needed.
63. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, it felt like RBKC was panicking. They had a spotlight on them and they wanted to appear to be doing all they could to support those affected by the fire. I understand that they might have done their best in a tragic situation and that in the first few weeks, it might have been necessary to address the needs of the wider affected group, rather than the specific needs of vulnerable individuals. However, it has been 2.5 years and my needs as an individual are still not being met.
64. My mental health has drastically deteriorated since the 14 June 2017. I have been struggling for 2.5 years and things do not seem to be getting any better. Although this

might sound odd and shocking to some people, but I often feel that, it would have been easier if I had died, than to have gone through the past 2.5 years. I do not mean any disrespect by this to those who lost loved ones in the tragedy. I only mean that my life since the fire has been a very difficult struggle without the support of RBKC, which I was owed as a duty of care.

Lessons learned

65. In future, I hope that those dealing with people who have gone through a traumatic event will be better prepared. Key Workers and Housing Officers should receive more mental health training, and should be required to deal with people more empathetically.
66. Local councils should check on residents who they know to have special needs and psychological support should be provided to them as a priority. They should be asked at every step what their needs are and they should then be listened to.
67. Communication between local councils and those acting on its behalf, such as Key Workers, should also be better, so that those affected have all the information they need and are not left relying on neighbours and friends.
68. I have really struggled in the aftermath of the fire. I hope that government and local councils learn lessons from Grenfell, so that someone else does not have to go through what I am still going through.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this statement are true.

I am willing for this statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and to be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed:

Paul Norbert

Dated: 14.02.2020