

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

2nd WITNESS STATEMENT OF ISABEL RANITO

I, ISABEL RANITO, will say as follows:

1. This statement is an account of my experience of fire safety in the Walkways and of dealing with the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation ('TMO') and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council ('the Council').
2. This statement will also provide a brief factual account of my experience in the aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower ('the fire') on 14 June 2017.
3. I provided a Witness Statement to the Inquiry dated 18 May 2018 (**Unique ID: IWS00000533**) for the purpose of Phase 1.

Background to tenancy

4. I have lived at [REDACTED] Testerton Walk on the Lancaster West Estate, with my husband, Cesar, since April 2001. It is a 3-bedroom maisonette. Our two children moved out in 2011 when they moved abroad for their studies.

Fire Safety

5. I cannot remember ever being given any information about what to do if there was a fire in our property or in the communal areas.
6. The only fire safety measure I can think of in our property were smoke detectors. When we moved in there was one smoke detector in our kitchen and one in the hallway outside the kitchen. The smoke detectors in our property were too sensitive and would often start beeping when I was cooking something. This was quite annoying but we knew it was

important that the smoke detectors worked. It was our responsibility, under our tenancy agreement, to make sure that the detectors were always working. We were always careful to make sure that the batteries were replaced.

7. In 2008, the London Fire Brigade carried out an inspection of our property. They changed the smoke detectors and gave us a carbon monoxide monitor. I think they said that they were replacing the smoke detectors because the ones we had were old. They also added another smoke detector upstairs in the hallway by the front door.
8. The only safety check of our property I can remember was the yearly gas safety check. We do not have gas in our property anymore. Everything is electric. I can't remember seeing any fire safety checks or inspections of the communal areas.
9. Since the fire, the smoke detectors in our property have been replaced again. The smoke detectors are less sensitive now. They aren't triggered by small amounts of smoke. I think the smoke detectors are now connected to our carbon monoxide detector. They were on separate systems before. I am not aware of any smoke detectors or fire alarms in the communal areas of the Walkways prior to the fire.
10. None of the doors in our property, including the front door, were fire proof when we moved in. The doors were not upgraded or replaced until after the fire. Since the fire, the Council have installed a fire proof front door. Aesthetically the door is much better than the previous one. However, although we were told that the door is fire proof there are lots of gaps around the frame. Although our old door was not fire proof, it was tightly sealed like a vacuum and there were no gaps. I do not think the new door would protect us better from a fire than the old door. In fact, we have received a letter from the Council informing us that our front door has failed a fire safety investigation and will need to be replaced. We received that letter at the beginning of 2019 but we have not heard anything further.
11. The Council have not replaced any of the interior doors in our property with fire doors. Some of the tenants in Testerton Walk decided not to return to their homes after the fire and I have seen workmen bringing in new internal doors to those properties. I think those new doors are fire-proof doors.
12. I cannot remember if there were any fire safety measures in the communal areas. I am not aware of anything specific. Since moving back to the Estate following our time in

hotels and temporary accommodation, I have noticed there are some new features in the communal areas which were not there before. These seem to be related to fire safety.

13. Some of the flats have windows that face onto the interior of Testerton Walk. These flats now have blinds installed that will automatically cover the windows if there is a fire. The wall that separates the two blocks of Testerton Walk now has an additional fire door. There used to be just one door and now there is a second wider door. If there is a fire, more people can get through. The rubbish chute has also changed. It is now much smaller than it was. It cannot be left open and automatically closes. I think that also helps with fire safety as fire cannot travel through any gap left open. I have also noticed that more CCTV cameras have been installed on the Estate. I have noticed these cameras around the entrance to our block under Grenfell Tower.
14. We never made any fire-safety complaints to the Council. It wasn't something we even really thought about or noticed until the fire occurred.

Relationship with the TMO prior to the fire

15. The TMO were complacent about problems on the Estate. There were constantly issues with the hot water on the Estate. It seemed every 1 to 2 months there was no hot water because something had broken. Cesar and I were always calling to complain. The TMO always said they were dealing with it and that we would have hot water again in a couple of hours. Their attitude to our complaints was always that it was just how the system was and everyone had the same problem. I found that this was often their excuse when you contacted them about different issues on the estate; it is an old system and nothing can be done about it. There was never any suggestion by them that they could upgrade or change the system so that these problems didn't continually occur.
16. We were also affected by multiple water leaks over the years. Some of these were caused by other tenants but others were caused by leaking pipes or radiators. The TMO were never very helpful or quick to respond when we reported these issues. In terms of any problems with leaking pipes, we received the same excuse; 'we can't do anything. The system is very old'.
17. It was the same for problems within our property. We had an issue with water pressure from the very beginning of our tenancy. The water pressure in our bathroom was awful.

The bathroom is upstairs and our kitchen is downstairs. We would often be up and down the stairs with a kettle to try and fill our bath with hot water. The Council kept saying that it was just how the water pressure was on the estate, that everyone had the same problem and there was nothing that they could do about it. In around 2011, Cesar ended up buying a water pump himself and getting builders to install it in our bathroom. After that, the water pressure in our bathroom was fine.

18. The TMO would not carry out refurbishments that we requested. Our kitchen was old and did not have a lot of space for storing things. There was only one cabinet on the wall but there was plenty of wall space to add more. We kept requesting that the Council refurbish our kitchen to add this storage but they always told us our kitchen was fine and they wouldn't change it. It was the same for the upstairs bathroom. We made lots of requests over the years for refurbishment of the bathroom but we were always told that they couldn't do it.
19. In the end, after many times of being told no by the Council and because we were desperate, either Cesar would end up doing the work himself, or we would pay for professionals to do it. We had the builders refurbish our bathroom when they installed the water pump. We would then request that the Council reimburse us for the cost of the work. The TMO always refused to reimburse us for any costs. They would say that we had not gotten their permission to do the work. I thought it was ridiculous because we were the ones improving their property.
20. Contacting the TMO was difficult. It was hard to get through to anyone and when you did, they were unhelpful or even rude to you. At some stage you had to consider giving up on calling them. It was not worth the stress of dealing with their unhelpfulness and the time wasted calling and chasing, when you knew that they weren't going to help you in the end anyway.

Aftermath

21. I have set out the events of the 14th June 2017 in my statement for Phase 1 of the Inquiry. I now want to expand on my comments in that statement about the aftermath of the fire.
22. Once we had evacuated our property, Cesar and I spent most of the night in the communal garden between Barandon Walk and Testeron Walk watching the fire. In the morning, at

around 10am, we went to the relief centre at St Clements Church. We had some tea and biscuits while we were there. There was coffee tea, water and breakfast foods being offered to the residents of the Estate.

23. We then went to sleep in our car for a couple of hours. We then spent the day wandering around the Estate. We kept stopping to talk to our neighbours and other residents. We didn't really know where to go or what to do. We were displaced.
24. We couldn't go back to our flat in Testerton Walk. The Police let me back in very briefly because I have a health condition [REDACTED] and I had to get my medication. As we did not know where else to go, we went to stay at my employer's house. We stayed there for 4 nights.
25. Nobody at the Council or the TMO contacted us. We didn't know where to get information from. We kept coming back to the Estate to collect things from our property and to go to the Westway Centre. At the Westway Centre we could speak to other residents and get some information.
26. Another resident told Cesar that we could get hotel accommodation from the Council. Cesar called the Council to request accommodation and he was able to get us a hotel room for one night. I think they agreed because Cesar mentioned my health to them. Cesar was told that we would have to ring up again the next day if we wanted to stay in a hotel again after the first night.
27. The hotel was in Bayswater. It was only for one night so it was fine. We just needed a bed and a bath. Cesar called again the next day and the Council agreed to reserve another hotel for us. The next hotel was the Mercure Hotel on Cromwell Road. Originally, it was reserved for one month but we ended up staying there for 6 months. From speaking to other residents, we got one of the best rooms in the hotel. It was a large room with a king-sized bed, a coffee machine, a small fridge, a TV and an ensuite bathroom. It was difficult because there were no cooking facilities. It was a long time to go without being able to cook for ourselves.
28. The hotel provided breakfast each day. The Council gave us food vouchers to use in the hotel to buy lunch and dinner. The hotel did not have a restaurant. It had a bar that served food. However, the menu was very limited with little choice – there were 4 or 5 different

dishes such as pizza or lasagne. The choices were always the same. It was all fast food and not very good quality. They had obviously been cooked from frozen or pre-cooked and then heated up. Cesar was lucky that he could eat at work.

29. I didn't enjoy the food at the hotel but I didn't complain about it. Some of the other residents who were staying at the hotel did complain about the food and about the amount of food vouchers we were given. The vouchers were initially £30 per person for lunch and dinner each day. The hotel food was quite expensive so people felt like the vouchers were not enough.
30. After people complained, the Council changed the system so that people were able to buy food outside the hotel and they also increased the amount of the food allowance. Although we didn't complain, we were glad that it changed. I was able to go out and buy food in Sainsbury's which I could then store in the small fridge in our room.
31. I feel that if people do well then you have to say that. I don't know if it changed for everybody but I feel like the Council were looking after us in the aftermath of the fire. They were more caring and I feel we were well-treated. I thought the better treatment might have been because of my chronic health condition as Cesar had mentioned it to them when he first called.
32. In around September or October, we were given a Key Worker. Before we were given a key worker, we were relying on information from the local community. Our key worker helped with things like receiving the food allowance and helping us move out of the hotel in to temporary accommodation. We had about three different Key Workers in total. I think it was because their job was quite stressful so there was a high turnover of staff.
33. Our Key Worker asked us if we wanted counselling. I had actually already contacted my GP about counselling and received a referral a week after the fire happened. I went to counselling for a year after the fire. I found it helped me.
34. We moved to a temporary flat in January 2018. We should have moved in December but there was a delay due to issues with the property, which had to be fixed first before we could move in. The Council were paying the rent but if we had any issues with the property, we had to speak to the estate agents.

35. The Council initially told us that we could stay in the property for a year rent-free and also keep our property in Testerton Walk while we decided what to do.
36. In August 2018, we heard that some of the flats in Testerton Walk were being refurbished. The TMO no longer exists. There is a housing team for the Council that operates out of the Baseline building on the Estate. The housing team did a survey with us and asked us what we would like changed in the property. They didn't do all of the things we asked for but they did do a lot of it. We asked them to paint the walls in our property and replace the kitchen, which they did. We also asked for them to change the bathroom. We wanted the bath replaced with a shower. However they told us that they couldn't replace the bathroom because it was okay. It was frustrating because the bathroom was only okay because we had done the work ourselves. The housing team agreed to do the other requested work.
37. In October 2018, we received a letter informing us that if we wanted to stay in the temporary property, we would have to start paying the rent. It would have been £1500 per week. We could not afford that. They gave us the option of returning to Testerton Walk and also gave us the option of alternative accommodation. However, when we visited one of the other flats they had said was available, we saw it was very oversubscribed. There were many other couples at the viewing.
38. At one point, I had thought that I would never be able to move back to Testerton Walk. However, in the end it is our home and we decided to go back. We were also happy with the fact that the housing team had agreed to carry out the refurbishments.
39. The housing team in the Baseline building have been good to us. Since we have returned to the property, they have dealt with any issues very quickly and efficiently. They are also nice to deal with. The TMO dealt with us like we were not human.
40. On 4 October 2019, there was a major leak of hot water into our property from the property above. It was a Friday evening so the team in the Baseline building had gone home. We had to call the out of hours line which goes to a call centre. The hot water was coming in to our flat and there was steam everywhere. All the power went as the water leaked into the electrical panel. We kept calling the out of hours number and the call handlers were unable to find us a plumber. After two hours of nothing being done, we had to call the Fire Brigade to come and help us. The Fire Brigade stopped the leak but

we had to leave the property.

41. The Council booked us a hotel room but when we arrived at the hotel, there was an issue with payment. We spent five hours in the hotel reception trying to sort it out. The Council had difficulties in trying to locate a credit card to pay the hotel and when it was finally located, the card was declined. At one point, the Council just stopped answering calls from us or from the hotel. I was starting to feel unwell. We had been up all night and the stress and tiredness was affecting my health condition. I emailed the Council that we would have to call an ambulance. The Council then sorted the issue out. It was almost 6am when we got in to the hotel room and we had been at the hotel since half past midnight.
42. The Council out of hours workers treated us badly. The hotel manager also told us that the Council staff were extremely rude to hotel staff and were shouting at them down the phone. We spent five nights in hotel accommodation. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I spoke to the housing team at the Baseline building when they opened and they were very understanding. They booked a room for us in the Mercure Hotel which was nearer to the hospital and they suggested we make a formal complaint about the way the out of hours team dealt with us.
43. The way that the Council deals with residents has improved in some ways but not all of the issues have been resolved.

Statement of truth

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

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

Signed: *Isabel Ranito*

Dated: 13-02-20