

IN THE MATTER OF

**Grenfell Tower
Public Inquiry**

Phase 2

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF
OTMANE BENKHAOULA**

I, Otmane Benkhaoula, will say:

1. I make this statement from my own personal knowledge and from matters that I have been told about by others; where the information does not come from my own personal knowledge, I make this clear below.
2. I make this statement because I held a secure tenancy in Flat [REDACTED] Grenfell Walk at the time of the fire. I had direct involvement with a handful of the other Grenfell Tower residents prior to the fire, including those who sadly passed away.
3. I am a Core Participant of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.
4. On the night of the fire, 14th June 2017, I was away [REDACTED] The next day, I received a telephone call that told me about the fire and that the police had removed them and everyone else from Grenfell Walk owing to safety concerns to residents.
5. I did not provide a witness statement in Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry nor, was I asked to provide a witness statement to the Police. However, I wish to make a statement on Phase 2 of the inquiry regarding the issues raised in Modules 3 & 4 of this inquiry.

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6. On 17 October 2006, I moved into a studio flat on the second floor at Flat No. [REDACTED] Grenfell Walk, part of the Lancaster West Housing Estate, in North Kensington, London, where I lived alone.

Fire Safety at Grenfell Walk

7. I had issues at my flat at Grenfell Walk such as to do with fire safety. The building in which my flat is situated in is very old and falling apart.
8. For example, the front door was very light and flimsy, because if I compared it to my front door in my new flat at Earls Court, of which I have been told by the TMO is a fire door and is considerably more sturdy and it has a self-closing mechanism, unlike my flimsy front door at Grenfell Walk.
9. Throughout Grenfell Walk, I did not notice any fire doors or marked fire doors in my flat or throughout the building.
10. The only fire safety equipment I saw in the building and hallways was in my flat, by the way of a smoke detector.
11. I noticed no signs on my landing or marked fire exits, fire extinguishers, fire blankets, emergency lighting, sprinklers or other fire safety equipment in the hallway.
12. There was no lift in my building, and the only escape was by the main stairs leading to the door. I was never given any information on how to leave the building in the event of a fire or on any fire safety drill, to date I still do not know what the fire safety strategy or fire safety policy at Grenfell Walk was.
13. All I knew to do in the event of fire was to rely on was my common sense, that being, the only alternative route to the main stair exit, was outside of my second-floor window.
14. Towards the end of 2013, I was concerned as to how I would escape the building quickly, as I had mobility issues from the tendon injury to my leg. The TMO were not aware of my condition at that time.

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15. I had no gas supply at my flat. I had electricity that provided light, heating and hot water. The only issue I had with the electricity is that the heating was off for two days but was subsequently repaired.
16. There was no extractor fan in my kitchen at the flat, but this was not an issue as I never cooked because of my insecurity of the lack of hygiene at the flat because of the mice.

Accommodation at Grenfell Walk

17. When I moved into Grenfell walk, I was working. During my stay at Grenfell Walk I had been employed at different times in three jobs. One was with the underground railways for Transport for London and then working in security. Lastly, as a meter reader, sometime in 2014.
18. I would complain to my care worker Dion of RBKC by telephoning my care worker. She would in turn get someone from the Tenants Management Organisation (TMO) to contact me regarding my complaint.
19. The TMO contacted me, I don't remember when, but they said they would send a person to place poison down, which they did. However, this didn't stop the mice droppings, as I continued to find them in my cupboards.
20. It drove me mad to find these droppings and I found it very difficult to eat in my kitchen and to sleep in my bedroom, knowing this.
21. In all I complained approximately twenty-five times to the TMO to get this issue resolved. To be fair after this length of time I don't recall the precise number. In the end the mice droppings issue was never resolved by the TMO.
22. I finally dealt with the issue myself, by spending my own money to kill the mice. I lost my appetite to eat while I was in the flat. I had to eat out every time I needed a meal, which cost me a considerable amount of my income.

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23. The bathroom in my flat was dirty, and the shower and toilet were in poor condition. The drain in the bath was green in colour, from the mould. This was despite me having tried to clean them with household cleaners.
24. When I first moved in to sign the tenancy agreement to the flat, I complained to the TMO officer then and there, about the state of the shower. He told me then that I should telephone the TMO and they would be taking care of the matter with the shower later, which never happened.
25. I further telephoned the TMO on several occasions to complain of the shower and toilet facilities. Each time a man would come to say they would fix the shower, but the green stains and dirt would remain throughout my time living there.
26. I also had problems maintaining my personal hygiene as there was not enough water pressure in the flat, to allow for an adequate amount of water to come out from the shower head.
27. The only way I could wash myself was to squat in the bath, and collect water from the taps, in a water jug I had purchased from the market, to pour over myself.
28. I also developed problems with the soles of my feet from standing the bath, they became very itchy.
29. These symptoms were picked up from an earlier visit to France, by a doctor there who prescribed cream and tablets.
30. I telephoned the TMO to fix the shower.
31. They attended my flat several times and on one occasion they came, they tried to block holes in my bathroom by placing expanding foam in the holes around the shower.
32. All their work made a further mess in my bathroom, leaving surplus foam sticking out of my shower unit.

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33. In the end I tried to fix it myself by buying a conduit to fit in the shower. But this failed to work and I was left with inadequate shower pressure, minus the convenience of being able to take a proper shower in my own home.
34. On the last visit by the TMO regarding the bathroom toilet & shower, they told me if I didn't like the units, that I should replace them out of my own pocket.
35. I eventually became so fed up with the TMO's inability to resolve my complaints, that I would withhold the rent payment.
36. This resulted in the landlord RBKC taking action to evict me. By that time I would pay the back rent to RBKC, because of my fear of losing my flat to someone else.
37. Unfortunately, I have no evidence of my complaints to the TMO, as at the time I telephoned them and I did not keep a log of my calls.
38. I now know that I must keep a written record of my conversations with the TMO.
39. I think I went Citizen Advice Bureau at Ladbroke Grove about these disrepairs, but I don't remember and I have no paperwork or correspondence with the Citizen Advice Bureau, as I have lost all my paperwork.
40. I felt my overall treatment by the TMO was bad. They were uncaring and non-responsive to my complaints. For example, I would go to the main reception at Grenfell Tower on the ground floor, and try to speak with Victoria of the TMO. I would have to wait hours to get a meeting with her, and sometimes I would be waiting and end up never seeing Victoria to register my complaint.
41. The TMO were also inefficient when they did respond to my complaints as they never properly resolved the complaint, only to keep coming back to my flat and on several occasions attempted to resolve the issues that I have stated.
42. In addition, the TMO made appointments with me to attend my flat to conduct repairs, but on several occasions, they failed to attend or notify me that they could not attend my flat to carry out repairs.

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43. While at Grenfell Walk, I knew all of my neighbours. I knew Mr. Wahabi and his family who all tragically perished in the fire.
44. I also knew of another victim of the fire, Moses. He was an Englishman.
45. Fortunately, another neighbour above me on the third floor Hakim, survived the fire.
46. I had one friend named 'Peter' he lived underneath me, on the first floor, he kept to himself, so I would go to check up on him and see if he was alright.

The Aftermath of the Fire

47. I returned to London, perhaps 3-4 days after the Grenfell tower fire, I can't remember exactly. When I got to the Grenfell Estate, I tried to get back into the flat, but was prevented from going into my flat at Grenfell Walk by the police perimeter that had been set up after the fire.
48. I knew then I needed to find alternative accommodation. I met some people, I knew of, who lived on the estate. They told them me to go to Ladbroke Grove Mosque, where they told me that I would get the help I needed.
49. I then went to the mosque. I met with charity workers who gave me a fresh set of clothes shoes and toiletries and they then told me to go to the Curve in Community Centre on Bard Road in North Kensington.
50. At the Curve I was directed by Hakim, a charity worker. I told Hakim I had just had a leg operation and wasn't walking properly at the time as I was limping, having just got rid of my crutches. Hakim then directed me to the RBKC personnel at the curve and told me not to worry and that I would have accommodation by the end of the day.
51. The people from RBKC had badges identifying them. I headed to a group of them. On arriving, they took my details and called the head office on my behalf and told me that the head office would call me back in one to two hours.

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52. I understood from RBKC personnel, that in giving my details to them that I would be provided with temporary accommodation straight away. At the time I was surprised that they had not asked me about my leg injury since I was limping.
53. Still at the Curve, I met with another group of charity workers who help me with getting my life on track, for example, by offering to pay for my taxi to get to my new accommodation, I took up their kind offer.
54. An hour and a half from speaking with RBKC at the Curve, RBKC head office called me and directed me to the hotel, by sending me the address by text message. I was very glad to hear their offer as I was feeling down and depressed from having lost my home and from being in pain as a result of my leg operation.
55. I then went to the hotel in Paddington by taxi, kindly provided by Hakim's charity.
56. The accommodation in the hotel was at the start okay, but I soon became agitated, as I felt I had been left on my own and I felt isolated as I didn't know anyone. It was only when a couple of weeks had passed, from arriving at the hotel, that I met someone from Grenfell Walk.
57. Then 2-3 weeks later, after moving into the hotel the RBKC organised Elizabeth O'Reilly who was appointed my keyworker to visit me at my hotel.
58. When we met the first time, she undertook an assessment of my needs and housing needs.
59. Afterwards, we met up regularly in a café. I can't remember if we discussed my circumstances and new needs at the time or if it was later.
60. My Keyworker was very helpful, and she offered emotional support and provided me with clothes on one occasion and other things.
61. I was very sad to hear that Elizabeth was not offered a permanent position with RBKC as a keyworker. She told me the reason was that her contract was about to finish and RBKC had not offer her another new contract, in the circumstances she was unable to continue working with me.

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62. The meals at the hotel were paid for by voucher, of which, £30 a day was provided by RBKC.
63. The meals were of a small portion and lacked variety as the menu was always based on Indian food with a few exceptions. This affected my appetite and sometimes I would go to bed hungry.
64. Approximately two months later. I found out from a visit to the Curve, and not from the RBKC, that I could contact the RBKC to get £300 cash a week to spend on food and sundries outside the hotel.
65. I raised this issue with my key worker Elizabeth why RBKC had never told me this, she replied, 'I thought you already knew about it.' This was wrong.
66. Other needs, such as additional toiletries, counselling, spending money, were met on my visit to the Curve which was provided by RBKC, and we were given free travel provided by Transport for London on the underground, for two or three months maximum.
67. Approximately a week later someone from the Town Hall came and spoke with me to tell me I would be assigned a key worker.
68. Sometime after the fire, while I was staying at the hotel in Paddington, I heard through the grapevine that we would be offered temporary accommodation by RBKC, I was very disappointed as I thought, we the residents on the Grenfell estate, would be re-housed in permanent accommodation.
69. I was so fed up living in a hotel, I didn't even think twice about accepting the first offer made to me. I took the first offer immediately, just so I could get out of the hotel. Even though, I knew that if I had found alternative temporary accommodation, that RBKC would pay the rent on it.

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70. After one week at my arrival back in the country, I received a payment from the Evening Standard and I received emergency relief and help from many generous charities, churches and mosques, namely: Westway Centre Portobello Rugby Club, Al Manaar Mosque and The Latymer Community Church. Their support lasted for one month. I was also given, along with other victims of the fire received a payment of £5,000 from RBKC or the government.
71. After the fire and for two weeks later, I went into shock. I felt very alone and isolated. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
72. It affected me to the extent that I had flashbacks imagining the terror of people I knew who lived in the Tower on the night of the fire who were trapped in the building.
73. I had dreamt on one occasion that I was trapped in the burning tower and could not get out. I awoke from my dream sweating and my heart racing with fear.
74. The anxiety continues to affect me especially when I am travelling on the underground and when the train stops in a tunnel, I feel very shaky and anxious.
75. Overall, I am disappointed with the response from the TMO to my housing issues.
76. From after the fire at Grenfell, I heard from other residents, that the TMO were not there immediately after the fire. They should have been first on the scene at the aftermath within the first hours after the fire, with support and services to care for the resident.
77. The fact that they had no plan or organisational structure to keep residents informed, only contributed to the chaos on the scene.
78. The TMO were unprepared for this emergency.
79. I never saw the TMO after the fire. Perhaps they feel guilty about the fire.

Statement of Truth

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

Otmane Benkhaoula

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

Signed:  _____

Print Full Name: OTMANE BENKHAOULA

Dated: 21/01/2020

Otmane Benkhaoula
Signed:
Dated: