

Grenfell Tower

Public Inquiry

Phase 2

Witness statement of

Margaret Novell

I, Margaret Novell, 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 have not filed a witness statement with the Metropolitan Police Service.
3. I have not filed a witness statement for Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, however, I witnessed the early stages of the fire spreading and the emergency response which I describe in this statement for completeness.
4. I moved into [REDACTED] Grenfell Walk on the 6th December 2001. I make this statement because I was a resident of Grenfell Walk at the time of the fire. This statement provides evidence to the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry about fire safety at Grenfell Walk and the provision of emergency relief in the aftermath.

Fire safety systems

5. There was not very much fire safety signage nor emergency lighting in the communal areas at my Grenfell Walk flat. I believe there were just fire alarms. There was regular lighting all along the balconies that were outside of my flat, around 3 or 4 lights on the ceiling, but I do not think this was emergency lighting.
6. There were maybe three notice boards outside near the ramps of the Walk with a map and other notices, but I did not really look at these. I do not recall that there was information relating to fire safety on these notice boards.

Doors

7. I remember that a new flat entrance door was installed in 2005 because they were doing general home improvement works to the flats at that time, such as installing a new kitchen. The new front door was very good, it had lots of bolts going through and it was quite secure. It was a fairly heavy door and was thicker than the old front door. There was something along the bottom of the door to prevent draughts coming in. There was also a square glass panel in the door. I do not think that the new front door was a self-closing door because if I did not lock it then it would stay open. So, I had to pull it shut to close it. The new front door was fine, so I never had any complaints about it.

Windows

8. My front windows looked out towards the Grenfell Tower and the back windows faced the gardens.
9. The windows were not draught proof. They were cold, single glazed and big windows all across the living room. They were massive and allowed in a lot of light. They never changed the windows in Grenfell Walk. But for 40-year-old windows they were good. We wanted new windows as they were so cold, but it never happened.

Electrics

10. Around 2005, they installed new electrics.
11. I never really had any problems with the electrics. However, at one point, some of the bulbs did not work. I had to wait until after the weekend for this to be resolved. There was an OGM on a Friday, and the TMO said the electrician could not come to fix it in the morning but could only come in the afternoon which did not work for me. I wanted them to do the bulbs before, but I had to wait, so it was left until Monday. They would have fixed it in the afternoon but could not straight away as I had to go to work.

Gas

12. They did put in new gas pipes at Grenfell Walk, but that was for everybody outside. I do not know where the gas came from, but I know that the water came from the Tower because there was a big tank in the tower.
13. I never had any problems with gas such as gas leaks, apart from one time, when carbon monoxide was in our cooker and they shut off the gas, but then they fixed it and we had to buy a new cooker. I believe that we had a cupboard that went into the kitchen. That was before the new pipes came in.

Other complaints with the property

14. I experienced some problems at different points with heating and water. There were ongoing water leaks. Sometimes the leaks came from the pipes underneath the cupboard where there was a big water tank which must have dripped. These leaks caused staining because the pipes went through the kitchen at that time.
15. The leaks at my flat went down to the flat underneath mine, to the neighbour below.
16. I raised the issue by telephoning the TMO but did not visit their offices.

17. One time a guy came in to see what was going on, and then left. When they did come to repair it was often the cheapest repair possible, they often did not resolve the problem at its source, but they just tinkered with it.
18. How I was treated when I complained was dependent upon the individual that I got. Some were good, some not, some did not know what they were doing, and some did not want to do anything anyway. Some did the job and went, but I did get the odd one who was sensitive towards my complaints.
19. A lot of times the boiler would break down and there would be no hot water. They would come to fix it relatively quickly. Towards the end of my time living at Grenfell Walk the breakdowns became more and more frequent because the system was really old. To begin with it was fine, but by the end the breakdowns would happen so often.

Fire safety inspections

20. There were some inspections carried out over the 18 years that I lived at Grenfell Walk. I would say that they came maybe every year to check the fire alarms. They did come in and I think they used to change them as well. I saw them carry out inspections of the fire alarms more frequently after 2005 because that was after the new kitchen was put in and the alarms were done at the same time. I cannot remember what they did before 2005 but they were a bit better afterwards.

Fire safety advice

21. I was not given any fire safety advice or instructions from RBKC or TMO prior to 14th June 2017. Neither was I told where the fire safety signs were or where to evacuate in the event of a fire.
22. Before 14th June 2017, I have never had to evacuate my flat at Grenfell Walk before.
23. I believe that the fire brigade gave a talk or something like that, but it seemed as if it was more for children. It was not official, and they did not come to my property.

24. There was no consultation with the residents at Grenfell Walk, regarding the work going on at Grenfell Tower, to let us know how those works would affect us.

Fire safety complaints

25. Personally, I never really had any concerns about fire safety, as I thought that we were alright in the small blocks. I had two escape routes from my flat, namely, the front door and the balcony. My flat was on the 3rd and 4th floor from the Walkway Level and there was no lift. To exit you had to go down the stairs. There were two lots of stairs that we could use but one was locked.

Night of the fire

26. I have not made a witness statement for Phase 1 of the Public Inquiry, therefore I will explain my experience of the night of the fire, to aid the Inquiry in understanding the information I provided relevant to Module 4 of Phase 2.
27. I first knew that something was happening when somebody knocked on my door said, "*you need to come out.*" It was my neighbour Hanan, not a fireman. So, I went out and it was at around half past one. I just threw something on, not totally changed but half and half and I went downstairs.
28. I did not believe what was happening, as a few years before that there was a fire, and that went out without a problem so I thought it would just be like that. When I got out, the fire was already raging, I saw a man holding a baby and bed sheets. I saw him trying to climb down, almost like he was trying to jump out of the window from a flat that was quite high up. I thought, "*don't do it,*" but in the end I think that they came out of the Tower.
29. There was an old man in the window approximately on the second or third floor, not that high up and within my eye line from where I was standing, waving a drying cloth. I think that he was blind. They did manage to take him out, but it took a long time, and I think that he was quite bad when he got out. I stood there for a while as I did not know what to do. I stood there for about 20 minutes or maybe longer, just looking and thinking "*don't fall.*" I think they took him out quite late. It was just something I heard, I think it was in the news.

I saw another man carrying a baby who was approximately on the same floor as the blind man.

30. I was on the walkway where there were quite a lot of people, but the fire brigade were not there at that point. I was standing physically in front of the walkway, on the south side of the tower and that is where people in the tower were trying to get down. I had to go at this point.
31. The police came and told us to return to our flats and lock the door. So, I returned to my flat, but I did not look out of the window because I would not have seen much anyway as the way my flat was made it quite difficult to see. I was on my own and after 5 minutes of getting into my flat, people came knocking on the door again, telling me to come out. I do not think that it was a policeman that knocked on my door. They were not in a uniform. I think that they were just banging on everybody's doors, trying to get everyone out. They told us to go down on the ramp onto the street.
32. I saw something like a ball of fire come out of a flat and fire went straight up, I could see how the fire went straight out, although I did not hear anything like an explosion. There was a family up the top of the Tower lined up against the window looking out, but I do not know what happened to them. I think it was something like the top of the tower to the right, I think it was two adults a mother and father and two children there was 4 of them. It looked like 4 people and in black and I thought *"how are they going to get out?"* It was terrible. I am not sure what happened after that.
33. People mostly went out the other side at Walmer Road. There were lots of people. Everyone from the tower went that way towards the sports centre and out to Walmer Road. They would not have come down the ramp as they were on the ground level.
34. There were quite a lot of people from east London. I think they came down with food or something like that.
35. I had my neighbour with me. A couple of hours later, the Christian Community Centre on Bramley Road past the shops opened up so we could have a cup of tea. We all had a cup of

tea, but my neighbour stayed there. I did not stay, and I came back out. I stayed around for 30 minutes; I did not stay for long in there. I think I went in a few times and came out.

36. I was watching all night. I went around to the other side to see what was happening. I walked down Bramley Road, onto Silchester. There were loads of people there, including some reporters from the newspapers.
37. I was far from the tower, so I did not see any of the fire brigade telling people to move back or to the side. The fire brigade left us alone really.
38. There were a lot of ambulances. Ambulance crew members were there, but they stayed over the road.
39. I never heard whether people from the emergency services were saying if you are hurt or traumatised come to this side. But there were places that you could not go beyond that as they had refused to let us pass there.
40. I did not see anybody from the council at that time that I would know of, neither did I hear anything about them.
41. In terms of assistance from official individuals, I suppose that there might have been a few marshals that said go along or something, but there was no real support offered. Just somebody from the Christian Community Centre.
42. I did not have a watch on me and my phone as it was in my bag, but I did not take it out, so I am unable to time reference anything from that night.
43. At one point, when I walked around the other side, Silchester, I was talking to a guy there and he said, *"my friends are still in there."* He did not think that they would be coming out. I think he mentioned about the kitchen as that is where it started. By this time the fire was near enough all around and the smoke was awful.
44. My neighbour kept asking, *"where is the water to try to put out the fire?"* Their hoses would only go up to two thirds of the Tower.

45. I did not sleep the whole day and we were camped in the Christian Community Centre. Although, I did not stay in there very much, I was in and out.
46. Earlier that morning, my neighbour and I went for a walk to the park in because we had been out all night, so we wanted to get away from the tower. At around 10am or 11am I had a cup of tea and some sandwiches. Then, about 4 people from my work came looking for me. They turned up at about 11am, at the Christian Community Centre since they lived nearby, and it was going on all night. The people from my work came in saying, *"you should have phoned us,"* and *"we didn't know where you were,"* but I did not think of that.
47. I was not at the Christian Community Centre by myself. I was also in there with my neighbour and a family of 2, a mother and son, who lived below me at Grenfell Walk. I think I felt that I was okay at the time, my neighbours were there with me so that was alright.
48. Not all the people in my block were at the Christian Community Centre. There was support there coming in from members of the public, I think I got some toothpaste and a hairbrush. There was a lot of stuff under the Westway flyover. Then I wanted a decent coffee. We went down to Ladbroke Grove at around 1 o'clock for coffee at Camden Coffee, it was nice to get away from it for a while.

Food and drink

49. There was food, such as sandwiches, at the Christian Community Centre where I was the morning of the fire. Once it got going a lot of people came down. No dinner was provided immediately after the fire, but there was food and fruit. However, later on, dinners and other refreshments were provided.
50. I do not know who was providing the food, but people were just putting it down. A bit of food was provided at the Westway, and people were coming into the Christian Community Centre bringing in food and putting it upstairs and downstairs. Quite a few donations were made as well as food, which included clothing, toiletries and the like.

51. The day after the fire I was in and out of the Westway all day. I was over there quite a few times because I spoke with people at the Westway. I was constantly looking at the tower because it was still ongoing.
52. When I was living at the hotel, volunteers used to go up in the evenings to give us food and other things, especially for babies. Cars and vans pulled up with donations. I did not see them wearing any badges, so I am not sure where they were from. They might have been people from the general public. I recall them bringing in a pizza. Living at the hotel was made comfortable but I had no facilities to cook. The hotel food was okay, but it was too much, so I stopped having their food and had soups instead. Then I did get some money for food.
53. I went back to the Grenfell Tower every day for 2 weeks. By that time there was still smoke there for a good few days. There was smoke there until maybe Thursday. Most of it had gone but still there was some left a couple of days later.

Public communication

54. I never really spoke to anybody from the TMO. Other people were getting hotels, but I was not. I asked various people for the TMO, but nobody knew where they were. When I asked people where to go to find them, they would direct me to go to various places, such as under the flyover, but when I walked down to where they told me to go, nobody was there. I could not find anyone I needed. Nobody came to me and no one really told me what to do if I needed accommodation or assistance. So, I had to go to look for someone to help and find all the information myself. I received all the information regarding relief from the volunteers and other individuals at the voluntary relief centres.
55. Most of the information that I received about the services and support available was by word of mouth and by being present and speaking with the volunteers at voluntary relief centres, it was not actually RBKC or the TMO themselves that approached us with information or asked us whether we needed help.
56. I never received information through social media, website updates, leaflets or newsletters.

Accommodation

57. After being at the Christian Community Centre, I went to the Westway. There was a woman sitting there whom I asked whether she could get me somewhere to sleep. So, she made a telephone call to arrange something for me and she took down my phone number. Then I received a call offering me to stay in one room at the Premier Inn in Earls Court, quite late, at around 7pm or 8pm in the evening. I think I got there at around 8pm. I was not given a choice about which hotel to go to because that is just where they told me to go.
58. Two people, who lived below me at Grenfell Walk, were going to stay at the Holiday Inn Hotel at North End Road and they did not know how to get there, so I got a taxi for us all. I paid for the taxi which cost approximately £38 to take us to all of our hotels. I was only helping the few that were my close friends. There was always something to do. I was not given money for transport in advance, but a person from RBKC refunded me for this later on.
59. I stayed at the Premier Inn Hotel in Earls Court for two and half months. They were very nice people working at the hotel. Someone came from the council to visit me while I was there, but they did not come regularly. I think there was a different woman who came later. I think that they were visiting other people too.
60. So many different hotels were occupied at that time. I believe that some of my neighbours who used to live at my block went to the North End Road Hotel as well as the Premier Inn Hotel. There were also other people from Grenfell in the Premier Inn Earls Court where I stayed.
61. I filled out and signed an application for housing through RBKC the following week after the fire. I was quite pleased that this was filled out. I do not remember the exact date of this but there were others there as well. A housing officer from RBKC came to the Premier Inn Hotel where I was staying, but I cannot recall the questions which he asked me. I remember that he took down some of my details. I spent around an hour completing various forms and questions. They came and took down details but then I did not see them anymore.

Basic provisions and financial assistance

62. At the Premier Inn Hotel in Earls Court, I had breakfast and had a meal at night. There was nothing for lunch, so I think you had to get lunch yourself. I did not get any financial support at this point, because they were already providing food.

63. They did have stuff at the Premier Inn Hotel, where I initially stayed, but just a few things, like brushes and sundries. There were some people offering clothing, but I did not accept any of this. Donations were offered for necessities, but I did not know what to ask for.

Coordination and leadership and adequacy of response

64. The way the TMO treated tenants depended on the person, sometimes they would be okay and sometimes they would be horrible.

65. In terms of their response in the aftermath, to begin with nobody knew what to do. We could not find anyone from central government, RBKC or the TMO in the immediate aftermath. Nobody knew where to go or what to give you or anything. They did not really have a presence around there at the site of the incident, it seemed to be volunteers directing people. I wouldn't say that RBKC or the TMO were prompt in offering support. Nobody from RBKC or the TMO came up to me and said, "is there anything that I can do for you?" There was nothing like that, you just did your own thing. I would advise that in the future the council should have a presence there in the immediate aftermath with representatives to help those that are vulnerable or in need. They should look after people and be more sympathetic to people's needs. The council should be more helpful if someone needs something or is in trouble, and they should not walk away from them.

66. Their communication was quite poor. The council could have done better if they had first asked us what sort of housing we would like, rather than going about it the way they did.

67. My social worker helped me the most because she would help get me the things that I was entitled to, and if she thought things were not for me, I would not get them, so she was straight. I came to like her and my key worker too.

Community

68. Losing my community is a big horrible thing that has happened. I feel a bit left out. I just feel on my own. At Grenfell Walk everyone was just always there for you. I do miss it. I was quite close with my neighbours and my whole block was very nice. Losing it affected me, you don't know where to go or who to speak to, so I would just stay in my hotel. I liked living at Grenfell Walk and I was happy there. The location there was a good one near the railway and two buses.

69. I only have one neighbour now living in the same block as me from where I used to live at Grenfell Walk, whereas the others are all dispersed but I do keep up with them at meetings and things like that. Some other people from my block are from Grenfell as well but they are from the Tower. If there is anything going on people from my community and I meet but we don't go around their houses.

Statement of Truth

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

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 website.

Signed: *M. Novell*

Name: Margaret Novell

Dated: *6th February 2020*