

IN THE MATTER OF THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HICHAM CHERBIKA

I Hicham Cherbika will say as follows: -

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 was a resident at ■■■ Grenfell Walk at the time of the Grenfell Tower fire with my wife and three children.
3. I witnessed the early stages of the fire spreading and the emergency response.
4. I had direct involvement with a handful of the other Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk residents prior to the fire, including those who sadly passed away.
5. I am a Core Participant of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.
6. I filed a witness statement for Phase 1 of the Inquiry (IWS00000038).
7. I did not file a witness statement to the MPS.

MODULE 3

Fire safety systems

Flat doors

7. At some point, I think it was maybe 2015, our front door was changed.
8. I did not think that they changed it to improve fire safety: I thought they did it because they had the money to do so, for example, money left in their annual refurbishment or repair budget. It wasn't replaced to make the flat safer or at least it didn't feel that way.
9. The door we had before it was changed was horrible, it was not safe. I could hear the wind coming through it, round the door frame.
10. The new, replacement door was heavy. I would say that it was better, there was no draft.
11. It had 3 locks: One at the top of the door, one in the middle and one at the bottom.
12. To my recollection, they asked me whether I wanted glazing or not, I chose it without glazing. Some of my neighbours chose their door with glazing.
13. There was no self-closing mechanism on my front door.
14. I do not recall anyone telling me that the new door was a fire-resistant door.
15. I could not tell whether the door was a fire door. I assumed so because it was heavy, but I did not know what the door was made of or what the inside material was and was given no information about this.

Communal doors

16. The main door was always open. It was not supposed to be. Nobody should be able to get in, unless they had the fob key. Yet, the door would be blocked open for access by anybody. We weren't happy about that. We felt that it was unsafe.

Fire safety signage

17. At Grenfell Walk, there were no signs indicating where to go or what to do in case of a fire.
18. With regards to the Tower, I used to go to into the Tower often, as I had friends there. I do not recall ever seeing any fire safety signage there.

Fire escape routes

19. At Grenfell Walk, it was never made clear to me where to go in case of fire and we weren't told by RBKC or the TMO where to go in the event of a fire.
20. I considered the staircase that leads to the back garden a fire escape route.
21. But that staircase was always dirty, and we thought that, if a fire happens, people will easily slip if they had to run down those stairs quickly, because someone had slipped on those stairs before.

Emergency lighting

22. To the best of my recollection, before the fire there was no emergency lighting around Grenfell Walk.

23. The external lighting was intermittent. One day it would be on, the next day it would be off and so on.

Fire safety checks/inspections

24. I do not remember any fire safety checks or inspections ever being undertaken at Grenfell Walk.

Fire safety advice

25. When we first moved into our Grenfell Walk flat, nobody gave us any advice on fire safety.
26. We were supposed to have a residents' meeting every month, but nobody ever talked to us about fire safety at Grenfell Walk.

Fire safety complaints

27. As I was out at work during the day, my wife Hanan used to deal with the majority if not all of the practical issues that affected our flat. Basically, all these things, pretty much every call, every visit, she dealt with as I was working. But we lived together so we would always talk about problems, what is wrong, what is right. So, I was aware of the issues.
28. We complained to the TMO about the condition of the staircase that leads to the park, given that this was the most obvious emergency exit from our block of flats. We emailed them, we told them that the cleaners were not cleaning those stairs and that it was an ongoing problem. They ignored our complaints.
29. The only time they sent someone to check it is when I told them that I had found a knife there.

30. Whenever we would complain, they would not give us a straight answer. They would always tell us that they would send someone, and it would take a month or two for someone to show up. Then the problem wouldn't be fixed, or it would be a temporary fix.
31. I felt like TMO and RBKC did not listen to us. They were the worst. I felt like they did not care and that put me off from complaining.

MODULE 4

Emergency Shelter and Accommodation

32. On the night of the fire, I went to Hanan's mum's house at 11 AM. She lives in Barlby Road, 15 minutes away from the Tower.
33. But I could not sleep, so, at 2PM, I went back to the Tower and I started hearing from people that the Westway was open and they were providing emergency shelter and support.
34. I went to there, to Westway, but at first, they did not let me in because I was not from the Tower.
35. They did not know that Grenfell Walk residents had been affected by the fire too. I explained that I lived in Grenfell Walk and that I had lost my house and everything inside. We had been evacuated and couldn't return. I told them that all I wanted was some powdered milk for our baby son [REDACTED] who was 11 months old. They told me that I had to register my name and they would give me a wristband. I was surprised, I did not want to be marked or identified in this way. People are quick to judge you without knowing you.
36. At the Westway there were charitable organisations such as the Red Cross and there were beds too, but we could not sleep there, there were too many people chatting. It was too noisy and quite chaotic. I brought the kids there, and I took some photographs. But it was clear that we wouldn't be able to stay there for any length of time.

Placement in hotels

37. We initially stayed with Hanan's parents in Barlby Road until the Friday, two days later.
38. My father-in-law told me that the Council was offering hotel accommodation. He had heard this from his friends in the community.
39. Nobody from the Council contacted us to tell us about the hotel accommodation until we contacted them.
40. We did not choose the hotel where they placed us, that was not even discussed. We were simply told where we were being emergency housed.
41. They placed us in the Copthorne Tara hotel, and they gave us two rooms on the 8th floor. Although on the same floor, the rooms were at the opposite sides, which was hopeless and no good for us. From memory, I stayed in one room with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and Hanan stayed with our baby son [REDACTED]
42. Our daughter [REDACTED] developed a phobia of lifts: She could not use the lift in the hotel, [REDACTED] So, I would walk all the way up to the 8th floor with her, every time. Still to date, she is too scared of taking lifts.
43. We did not feel safe in the hotel. I used to leave the hotel door open, just in case we had to run out.
44. Nobody from the hotel told us or gave us any information about the fire escape route. We had to figure it out ourselves.
45. We only found out about fire signage in the hotel because [REDACTED] was using the stairs.

46. We stayed in the hotel for over one year.
47. It was horrible. I felt like I was in a cage.
48. I had no patience at all. I was always angry.
49. We were all living on top of each other. There was not enough room for the 5 of us. With three young children it was difficult for them living in such a small space. There was no real room to do normal things like play or do their homework.
50. My daughter [REDACTED] education was affected by our staying at the hotel. She was right at the top of her class and she dropped down.
51. She had lots of nightmares; she could not sleep.
52. She did not have a place where she could sit down and concentrate. She was a keen student and the impact on her studying and her schoolwork affected her.
53. From memory I think there were just two chairs in each hotel room. Sometimes we were rushing to get a chair first to sit in it. We tended to all be in the same room.
54. We were trying to live as a family. But it was very difficult.
55. The hotel then gave us connected rooms. One room with two single beds and a double room.
56. There were tables in each room but at the end of the day it was just a room and we had to sit on the bed.
57. The mattress in the hotel room was not suitable for me. I needed an orthopaedic mattress because I had severe back pain as a result of slipping on the steps at the entrance of the Tower, on the night of the fire.

58. I asked my support worker to organise a proper orthopaedic mattress for me, but the hotel gave me the same mattress as before.
59. We wanted to get out of the hotel, and we knew that other survivors were placed in serviced apartments, so we asked to be moved into a serviced apartment.
60. The responsible person from the housing department reassured us that he would be happy to place us into a serviced apartment. But he then called us telling us that we would not be allowed to move.
61. I could not understand why, and I was not told why that was the case.

Food and drink

62. The food provided by the hotel was included as part of the accommodation. The food choices were limited as the meat served was not halal so we could only eat fish or pizza.
63. We could not eat unhealthy food like that every day, so we started buying our own food, out of my own pocket. If you did not eat at the hotel, you had to use your own money to buy food.

Basic Provisions and Financial Assistance

64. When we were in the hotel, there would be volunteers in the hotel lobby, giving out clothes and other items, but I would not know that they were there unless I bumped into them. Sometimes it was just luck.
65. It felt like it was randomly organised and confusing.
66. It was not clear who was who or who did what or what was available or being provided.
67. It also changed from day to day with no prior information. If you happened to see them, you would be aware of what was happening.

68. I remember we refrained from accepting some donations because some people did not believe we were worthy of receiving support, because we came from Grenfell Walk.
69. I could not understand it, we lost our house, our belongings, memories, everything.
70. The Council gave us a pre-paid card, with some food allowance, after July 2017. They would top it up like an Oyster card.
71. But the pre-paid card was not easy to use because whenever I would take money out on the card, they would charge me for it, reducing the amount of money available.
72. At the same time there was no way for me to know how much money I still had on the card. I wasn't given that information. You had to use it to find out what money was on it, then you would be charged for using it.
73. One day I remember that Hanan and I went to buy some food, but we could not because the card was declined. We had no idea that the money had ran out.
74. I remember panicking and not knowing what to do and how to sort it out.
75. It dawned on us that it was a Friday early evening just before 5pm , so we quickly ran straight to the Town Hall to speak to someone from the Council, before the offices closed for the day and the offices would then be closed over the weekend and we would be without any food.
76. We bumped into a Council worker, a lady who had just finished work for the day and I explained to her that we had ran out of money on the card and that I could not feed my kids.
77. She said that if I needed money, she could give me some out of her own pocket. But I told her that I wanted what I was entitled to.
78. I didn't want to take her own money from her, that wasn't right.

79. As it was a Friday, she said that she would top it up first thing on Monday morning, but couldn't do anything before then.
80. So, we had to wait for 3 days before the card could be topped up.
81. This was an example of us feeling like we weren't treated properly. We felt at the Council's mercy. It felt like they controlled our finances but didn't tell us anything. We found out the hard way.

Psychological support

82. While we were staying at the hotel, [REDACTED] was having panic attacks every week, I was constantly calling the ambulance. I thought I would lose her. It was awful.
83. When we first moved to the Hotel, Hestia, the mental health team was not there. They came after, as more survivors were placed in the hotel.
84. Thank God there was Hestia. They helped us a lot, especially a lady called Joy. They would also take care of [REDACTED] who was suffering in the hotel. He was 11 months old at the time and he had just started to walk, he wanted to play, at some point he started running everywhere and they would help with him.
85. To the best of my recollection, RBKC cut Hestia's available hours and later the service stopped. I did not understand why. I trusted them, I established a connection with them, and I needed their help.
86. When we had Hestia in the hotel, we could be sure that if someone had a panic attack, even in the middle of the night, someone would be there to help. We felt lucky to have them there.
87. Hestia treated us like normal people. I was fighting for them to stay but we lost that battle.

88. Initially, I started attending counselling sessions through the NHS at St Charles hospital. That treatment finished because the therapist left the service, she was replaced by a new therapist, but I did not connect with this lady. I was given the opportunity to continue with a third therapist, but I declined as I just could not face starting yet again.
89. Then, I started seeing Norman, a counsellor at the Grove, through Corpore, the private rehabilitation company.
90. I felt like it was helping me, we understood each other, but then Norman had to leave for health.
91. With regard to the children, the school that the kids attended was next to Grenfell Tower. It was moved to a temporary site away from the area after the fire.
92. My son [REDACTED] shut down, he refused to speak about the night of the fire and his feelings.
93. I felt that the school made no adjustments for what the kids had been through.
94. Hanan asked the headteacher for group therapy, but they did not organise anything.

Information and assistance

95. Immediately after the fire, there was no system in place to obtain information about missing people.
96. Everyone was looking around for everyone else, talking to each other. There didn't seem to be an organised method either by RBKC or the Council as to recording who was missing, who had been found etc. It was chaos.

Public communication

97. The only way to receive information about services and support available was to talk to other residents and survivors or ask around to volunteers.

98. Volunteers were the ones that helped me the most, they would give me information and update me on the services available.
99. The Council did not give us any information. We had to actively go out and look for information ourselves, not knowing what information we were looking for.
100. When I would go to the Council to ask for support, they would always make me feel like I was begging. It was humiliating.
101. Hanan had to go to meetings, which were always organised at the last minute, whilst I stayed with our three children. [REDACTED] would cry for his mummy.

Needs of specific groups

102. I am not aware of any particular support that was available for specific groups.
103. When we were moved into the hotel, Hanan called the hotel staff, asking them if the food was halal but they did not know what halal meant. So, our needs were not considered fully.

Voluntary and community groups

104. In the immediate aftermath, volunteers were distinguishing between Grenfell Walk and Grenfell Tower. They did not know that Grenfell Walk had been affected by the fire. We lost our homes and our belongings. We lost our lives.
105. Then, once we had identified ourselves, they would ask us what we needed and give us donations.
106. But we had to fight for anything.
107. There were lots of donations from many charities, clothes, everything. They would bring everything to the hotel.

108. People were very generous. The community was amazing, incredible. It was overwhelming. It gave you faith in your fellow man.

Adequacy of response and lessons learned

109. Firstly, the fire brigade should have come earlier, when the fire was still small.

110. In the aftermath, the Council could have handled it much better.

111. I think that, had the fire happened somewhere else, say in a white wealthy area of London, the response would have been different.

112. The Council did not care about us. We were not important for them.

113. We should have been treated better.

114. The Council should have given us information about the services and help available, instead of making us look for information ourselves, not knowing what information to look for.

115. We should not have found out about the support available by word of mouth.

Coordination and leadership

116. After the fire, it was like the Council did not know that we existed. They did not know where Grenfell Walk is, I had to show them where it is, because they thought we could just go back to our homes. But we had been evacuated and told that we would not be able to return.

117. We couldn't understand how they all didn't know this information.

118. They simply did not know what to do with us after the fire.

Statement of Truth

I confirm that the contents of 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: 

Mr Hicham Cherbika

Date: 