

Witness Statement of: Elizabeth Sobieszczak

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Date of statement: 12 February 2020

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH SOBIESZCZAK

I, Elizabeth Sobieszczak, will say as follows:-

1. I was a resident of 43 Grenfell Tower. Myself, my husband, Michael, and my adult daughter, Florentyna, are all survivors of the fire, which started on 14 June 2017. I am making this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry.
2. This is my second witness statement to the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry. My first witness statement is dated 26 September 2018 (Unique reference number: **IWS00001105**) and addressed my experiences on 13/14 June 2017. I have also provided four witness statements to the police dated 27 June 2017, 13 July 2017, 25 July 2017 and 20 November 2017.
3. This statement addresses the issues within module 3 (communication with residents and fire safety within the tower) and module 4 (aftermath) from the Inquiry's stated Phase 2 Schedule. I deal with issues relating to module 3 in paragraphs 7-33, and module 4 in paragraphs 34-63.

Background

4. I originally moved into flat 191 Grenfell Tower ('the Tower'), in February 1985 with my husband, Michael. We requested alternative housing in January 1991 as our daughter was due to be born in the April. In July 1993, we were offered flat 43 and the tenancy began on 2 August 1993 when our daughter was 2 years old.
5. Flat 43 was a 2-bedroom flat positioned in the corner of the Tower; it was very spacious which is what we liked most about it.
6. There was an amazing sense of community in the Tower, different from the rest of London. Everyone was on good terms and would look out for each other and make an effort with each other.

Relationship with the TMO & RBKC

7. I had very little faith in the TMO being able to sort out problems that we brought to their attention. They made us feel a nuisance and we often had to take matters into our own hands, or call on friends for assistance.
8. When there was a fault in the flat, I would report it to the TMO's Housing Office reception. The first person you would speak to would be the receptionist, who would say that they would allocate the job to someone before updating you on when that had been done and when your visit would take place.
9. You would very rarely get a call back and would have to call again and again to report the problem, which never seemed to be handed over properly and so you would have to waste more time repeating the same issues, with little faith that anything would be actioned.
10. We tried to resolve things as much as we could on our own before calling for help. The other frustrating thing was that, often, after waiting some time for someone to attend, thinking they would resolve the issue, they would attend just for the purposes of doing an assessment, and then say they would come back, so the whole ordeal and delay would start again. It came to the point where we lost faith to such an extent that we

began to just try and resolve issues ourselves or rely on friends, who were plumbers or handymen.

11. I remember thinking that they had a lot of cheek, because after someone from the TMO would attend our flat, even if they hadn't resolved the issue, or needed to return, they would send us a performance feedback slips through the front door, for us to complete and return in the post. It was just a general disregard and lack of care for the service they were providing and service users in general.

Issues in the flat

12. There was a continual problem that we had with our kitchen sink blocking or leaking at the back. This happened on many occasions and every time we would let the TMO know, after first trying to resolve the problem ourselves with bleach and a plunger. I remember being frustrated when someone came out on one occasion, because they too tried to resolve it just using a plunger, even though we said we had already tried that. You expect them to be better equipped. Because they couldn't do it, we then had to wait for someone to come back again and the problem continued for some time.
13. We had another problem with the sink taps in our bathroom. We had separate taps for the hot and cold water and one of them was not rotating properly so it wasn't possible to get a proper flow of water. When I phoned the TMO on that occasion, they said that I should solve this on my own and just keep trying to turn it, which I had obviously tried already. It was a bit of a closed circle, as they would continually push problems back on you.
14. There was a particularly distressing issue that we had with our waste pipe in the kitchen breaking and a leak. This happened a few times, but there was an occasion close to Christmas, when we made so many calls to the TMO because we couldn't use the sink. We told them it was urgent and they left us for about a week, so we couldn't have Christmas at home as planned.
15. Prior to the refurbishment, the radiators had been on timers, which we could not adjust ourselves, and so you would still be charged even if you were away on holiday for

example, because you couldn't regulate them. For the hot water, we had a meter that had to be charged, and a card to top up for hot water use. You would have to go to the shop to top this card up. I believe that this is the cheapest way of heating a property. It just meant that there was yet another thing to worry or think about, and it was as difficult as it could have been.

16. Just before the refurbishment, someone came in to change the front door and I remember there being a choice of pattern and colour. There was a problem with the door continually after that. It was heavy so it would automatically close behind you. You had to unlock it, and pull the handle down, and it was a heavy door and very difficult to open, so if you had hands full of shopping for example, you would have to awkwardly manoeuvre yourself in a way to keep it open.
17. I asked someone that came to check the doors, who was from the same company as the person that had installed it, if he could do anything to make it easier to open, and he said that he could. There was a chain between the frame and the inside of the door; he unscrewed the part of the chain that was fixed to the door so that it was just hanging on the frame. After that, it would still lock automatically, but it wouldn't resist as much when you tried to open it. In general, I do remember people having a problem with their front doors not closing properly, and residents were particularly worried if they had young children.

Meetings

18. There was a meeting with the architect that my family went to at some point in 2013 in the Methodist Church. All the residents could attend and I remember they would give time slots for when you could go along and speak to them. There were three people there I think, including the architect, and they had the model of the building, as well as drawings and a proposal, and they were talking through what the building would be like. I remember asking, during that meeting, specifically about the windows, which I always felt strongly about. I was asking about exactly what kind of windows they would be and saying it would be convenient to have windows that would open and tilt together, as they would be easier to wash, and tilt for safety. They said that they would have a further meeting to discuss this, which we would be given the opportunity to attend.

19. Soon after the initial meeting in 2013 with the architect, there was another meeting with the TMO, architect, and someone called Lynda from RBKC, which was at the community centre. I think it was a general opportunity for residents to go along and ask questions about things they were interested in, or worried about. People were given time slots in which to go along, and as I remember not a lot of people attended, I think it was probably because they were fed up and felt disengaged at that point. There were between 20 and 30 residents in total I would say. People were coming in waves and asking questions about various things.
20. During the refurbishment, the Residents Association would take responsibility for inviting all the residents to various meetings and making them known. We would get letters through the door informing us that there would be a meeting and asking us to attend between certain times. I went to one meeting about the HIU unit, to put forward to Rydon that we wanted ours to be in the kitchen. I remember that during that meeting, the RBKC representatives came across as very condescending and created the impression that we were nothing. I asked a question of someone called Lynda from RBKC and she put her hands up to indicate that I should stop talking. I remember saying at the time that it was very rude and that the purpose of the meeting was for our questions to be addressed.

The refurbishment

21. I set out some of my concerns in respect of the refurbishment in paragraph 5 of my first statement, so will not repeat those here, but will add to them.
22. We had a new boiler installed during the refurbishment, which was installed in the hallway. The hallway was narrow and the unit was quite cumbersome so it did get in the way and impacted negatively on the appearance of the hall. We were told it was supposed to be in the kitchen, but we were told it was too much work with the pipes etc. so it was better to put it in the hall. People were fighting to the end, the residents were not happy. I was clear that we didn't want the pipes going through the hallway as they looked ugly, and the old boiler was in the kitchen behind a thick wooden panel, and so the new boiler was supposed to be in the same place, but I was not listened to.

23. Also, the electricity was installed next to the boiler, which worried me. I was concerned at the time about these two units being next to each other and not separated, in particular in case of condensation and this mixing with the electricity. I called the TMO and explained my concerns, and asked if the two units could, at the very least, be separated from one another by a divider of some sort, but they said not to worry and that was the design that everyone had.
24. In some of the flats, I know that the hot water pipes would wrap around the ceiling of the hallway down to the main radiator. I said that I didn't want exposed pipes and I insisted on having the pipes fed through the wall to the bathroom and down and out of the bathroom, into the radiator in the hallway.
25. There were issues with the windows after the refurbishment, in particular, with those in the master bedroom. The window at one point literally came off its hinges and you could dismount the whole window and have it in your hands. There would also be such a draft from the window in the living room that it wasn't possible to close it. You would be able to feel the draft throughout the rest of the flat. I seem to remember that it got resolved after us having to report it a few times, and then someone came and saw to it, and it was ok.
26. They installed extractor fans within the kitchen windows, and I remember thinking at the time that it was a clumsy, badly done job, because of the way it looked. The design of it made no sense, because, with the wind, it was rattling all of the time and it was so noisy. Everyone complained about it and we never used it and found it useless as you just couldn't open the window. The rotating piece of plastic on the fan is what would make noise in the wind as it would rattle as it was being blown about. After everyone had complained a lot, they came and put a piece of rubber on it I think to stop it from moving about so much.

Communal area

27. The other thing that caused a real problem was the lifts, which were out of service very often after the refurbishment, so we would have to walk up the stairs. At the time of

the refurbishment as well, the people from Rydon were using the lifts with their equipment, and you had disabled people, mothers and people who couldn't walk well on the staircase, and Rydon's staff just obliviously continued to use the lifts.

28. When they added the two new floors, they didn't even bother to send us a note that the floor number had changed. The number of the flats remained the same as there were still 6 flats on each floor, but each floor number had increased by 2. We previously automatically knew our flat number and people could find it easily, because it started with a 4 and we were on floor 4. When it became floor 7, they didn't send anything to residents at all. I became aware of it because when I left the flat one day, there was a piece of paper stuck by the lift saying what the floor number was. I couldn't believe it was just on a scruffy piece of paper and I went back inside and told Michael. This caused problems, for example with the lift, as you would automatically press floor 4. It was so inconvenient. They never replaced the numbering on each of the internal floors, they just put the numbers on the staircase and in the lift itself.

Fire safety

29. There were never any fire safety drills done in the building and there was no equipment for putting out a fire; in hindsight it was a death trap.
30. After the refurbishment, there was a sign by the side of the lift, which said that in the case of a fire, we should 'stay put', but we didn't receive any other kind of written advice. A few times before the refurbishment, a member of the fire brigade came inside our flat just to check our smoke alarm, to see that it was operating properly. I had a few questions at that time because the Council decided that they wanted to change the electric sockets. They wanted to put the socket by the sink near the kitchen, I asked the fire brigade if it was okay and they said it was a safe distance. They were also going to change the fire alarm for an electric one, but the fire brigade said that wasn't necessary. They would come every year as I remember prior to the refurbishment, and they would produce a report, which we would get afterwards, but I don't think they came after the refurbishment.

31. I had previously heard the sound of the ventilation system on the ground floor during the refurbishment. I could hear it through our open bedroom window, because I suppose of the angle of the bedroom in relation to the ventilation system, and the proximity. I think it was being tested at the time; it was a distinctive and loud noise like a very large Hoover and I asked someone from one of the companies working on the refurbishment of the building what the sound was. They told me it was the ventilation system. I heard it on the night of the fire as well. The noise started via an outside vent. The ventilation system is just above bedroom window. I don't know how long it had been on because there was so much else going on.

Residents' communications

32. I was not aware of any complaints procedure, we were just given a booklet of telephone numbers and for the most part, would just phone the receptionist where there was a problem.

33. We did quite frequently have letters through the door, and I do recall that, though they didn't have translated versions, it would say that it was available in other languages, for example, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic.

Aftermath

34. I find it difficult to relive and to speak about the events of the night. For much of the months following the fire, I felt disorientated and unable to organise my thoughts. My husband and I relied on each other a lot and I don't know how I would have got through it if it weren't for him.

35. After the Tower was evacuated on the night of 14 June 2017, the police cordoned off an area where all the Tower residents could congregate. The cordoned off area was on the road in front of the entrance to the leisure centre. We stayed for a short time and then we wanted to move further away, so we moved out towards the swimming pool. My husband was very worried that the Tower was going to collapse, and I felt completely numb, but was very aware of all the debris falling from the Tower, which I realised were pieces of cladding on fire, and was clearly very dangerous. Florentyna

was in total shock and being very physically sick. I was also worried that people might start jumping from the building. You could see people inside the Tower and many of them were screaming for help and other things. The speed of the fire was unbelievable in how quickly it spread.

36. We remained by the swimming pool for some time, then someone told us that we had to go and register with the police, so that they could account for the survivors. We therefore went back to the cordoned off area and gave our names and addresses. They then moved us further back to the street behind the Portobello Rugby Club. They didn't say why they wanted to move us back but it was like they wanted to separate the residents who were survivors, and those that were just bystanders and watching.
37. The area that we were moved to is where the ambulance and the Red Cross were; many people were having breathing difficulties and didn't feel well, and were in a bad state emotionally. We waited there, all of us feeling terrified, at what decision was going to be taken for us next, and to be told where to go. We waited there amongst the chaos for what seemed an incredibly long time, and then a policeman told us that the Rugby Portobello Club had been opened.
38. We were some of the first people to arrive at the Rugby Portobello Club. When we went in, they gave us blankets and hot drinks and the three of us just sat there huddled together, waiting to be told what we should do next. As it got light outside, more people that we recognised from the Tower came in. The atmosphere became increasingly oppressive and harrowing, as so many people were traumatised and grieving, and looking for missing relatives or friends who had been in the Tower. Those who were trying to find people were desperate because they were going between various sites where those who had been evacuated had been taken and there was no way of them knowing where they would find their loved ones at that time, or if they would at all.
39. It was such a difficult place to be in and every so often, I had to go outside just to try and gulp down some air and have a change of environment. It wasn't long before the media descended on the scene and stationed themselves outside of the Rugby Portobello in waiting. When that happened, you couldn't even go for a private moment of peace to gather your thoughts outside, because the press would approach you and start firing

questions at you about who you were and what you had experienced. It was horrific. There didn't seem to be any protection from them.

40. As it got later in the morning, the police presence increased. RBKC began taking names, details of addresses and checking photographic ID, presumably trying to piece together a picture of who had made it out of the Tower. Some doctors came and some people also came bringing hot food. The environment in the Rugby Portobello was too much for me. I felt increasingly unable to cope.

Emergency Accommodation

41. At some point in the afternoon, my husband was told that we were going to be taken to the Copthorne Tara Hotel in High Street Kensington. As I remember, I think we were taken there by a taxi driver who was very supportive and had friends in the Tower, and was trying to help out by taking people to wherever they needed to go. We weren't charged for that journey as I recall.
42. It was a relief to leave the Rugby Portobello Club, but the hotel brought its own challenges. We had been allocated a tiny room to share between the three of us. There was a double bed in the room and then just enough room for a small single bed, right next to the double bed. It was unbelievably cramped.
43. We had to live that way for the best part of 6 months, until we were rehoused in November 2017. This was especially challenging when my daughter went back to work as an airhostess. She would finish her shifts at all hours of the day and night and would need to catch up on her sleep, so we would have to leave the room for as long as she needed to sleep for. It wasn't until a few weeks before we were re-housed that they gave her a separate room.
44. Nobody from RBKC was able to help us; they were useless, although they came for a meeting and spoke to my husband. They wrote down loads of notes but did nothing. The hotel said that they could not do anything for us, as they had to wait for authorisation from RBKC. We had no help from a key worker either.

45. For around 2 or 3 weeks after the fire, I felt unable to bring myself to leave the hotel. I would either stay in the room, or often walk around the grounds of the hotel, as I couldn't find a quiet moment or any privacy anywhere else. I didn't feel up to talking to people and there was no room or place in the hotel where it was possible to have a private conversation or space to think. Sitting in the lounge or the dining room meant that people, either those who had also come from the Tower or the Walks around the Tower, or even other hotel guests, would come up to you and try to strike up a conversation. I just didn't feel up to that, I needed time to try and get my head back in order again and process things.

Finances and Practicalities

46. Before we were taken to the Copthorne Tara Hotel, we were given cash at the Rugby Portobello. This was just to start us off as we had absolutely nothing at that point. There were representatives of RBKC there who were asking people how much they thought they would need, but of course, this was impossible to answer because we had no idea where we were going or what was in store for us. I can't remember exactly but I think we were given around £300 at that point.

47. A few days after the fire, a representative of RBKC came to the hotel to bring us £500 cash from RBKC, which we had to sign for, and a phone. It was a very basic phone topped up with £10. She also gave us some money; I can't remember the exact amount but I know that we had to sign for it. Her attitude was appalling. She made me so angry and upset because when she handed over the money to us, she said something along the lines that we should spend it wisely, implying that it was a big generous favour that they were doing and that we wouldn't get any more. It made us feel so small; I just felt at the end of my tether and this annoyed me so much, I said something sarcastic about going to buy my clothes from Harrods, because I wanted to get the point across that her tone had been unappreciated.

48. The Home Office had set up a stall in the Westway for people to obtain new passports. I was unable to do practical tasks like this without assistance at that stage because I was feeling so overwhelmed and devastated by what had happened, so my husband collected

the forms and filled them in and took me to Kensington High Street Station to get our passport photos. He then submitted everything at the Westway. As I remember, we didn't have any assistance from a key worker at this point. *Provisions*

Provisions

49. Before we were taken to the Hotel, my husband visited the St Francis of Assisi Church, where we had been told that we could get supplies. He picked up some clothes and toiletries, so that we could take these to the hotel and freshen up.
50. For the first week after the fire, we would continue to go to St Francis Church for clothes, which were laid out in the pews. After a while though of course, the Church needed to carry on its purpose and so they had to be moved for Mass, when they were transferred to the Community Church Hall. Some of the clothes were absolutely new and others were those that somebody had donated, but were in good condition. We had to go and buy new shoes I remember initially as we couldn't find any there.
51. Anything else that we needed for our morning routine for example, hairbrushes or toiletries would be brought to the hotel in cars by volunteers. We would find out from other residents that they were coming. There was an allocated special room for these things, so we would go in and collect what we needed. You could go to the room and say what you need and in what size and they would provide it to you, but you couldn't just go in and take what you wanted. After a while, they came to know you anyway and came to know what you needed.
52. The hotel provided us with complementary toiletries, however for more sensitive items, such as underwear or more personal toiletries, we would just go and buy our own using the small amount of money we received from RBKC. There were other simple things which were necessary but which weren't provided by the volunteers, for example face cream. They had the essential items such as deodorant and toothpaste and lots for children, but again, for things that were non-essential, like face cream, we had to go and buy our own.

Food

53. It was frustrating not to be able to cook for ourselves at that time as that might have introduced a dose of normality. There were a few restaurants and cafes within the hotel complex, which we would go to for all of our main meals. At the hotel restaurants, we would expense the receipts to our room, and the idea was that these would be settled by the Council on a weekly basis. There were a few occasions when we would come to expense the receipt to the room for our meal, to be told that we were not able to do so, because the bill had not been settled, so we would have to report to reception to resolve the problem. We relied on the hotel restaurants for every meal until November 2018. We got snacks like biscuits, fruit and tea bags from the St Francis Church. Also, shops like Marks and Spencer's would provide food occasionally.

Information Sharing

54. There would frequently be representatives of RBKC stationed in the lounge of the hotel. Sometimes they would come because someone had made an appointment, and sometimes they would drop in for a few hours on a certain day. In the first 2 weeks after the fire, I saw the RBKC representatives once or twice a week and after that time, I didn't see them at all. For the most part, we relied on other residents of the tower and walkways to find out about practical assistance, and we all shared what we learnt with each other. I know at the time when the flats became available, some months after the fire, representatives from RBKC would come to speak to us about this. We had lost faith in them from early on anyway because they were useless and couldn't deliver their promises, and they couldn't answer anything. This was in particular because of the bad experience that we had with the room at that time, we knew that other people were able to change rooms. We ended up having to beg them and it took such a long time, and we just felt disregarded again.

55. Our Priest would also visit the hotel two or three times a week in the evening and ask if he could do anything to help. I do remember I was telling him that I needed a holy bible in Polish and he brought it the next day.

56. On about a weekly basis, newsletters would come to the hotel from RBKC, which the porters would slip under our bedroom doors. There wasn't generally anything of real

value to us in the newsletters because we wanted specific answers about what was going to happen to us, and the newsletters tended to contain general information, which had often previously been provided already, such as telephone numbers for key workers and details of volunteers and some charities. For this reason, we tended to throw them away.

Voluntary groups

57. The Red Cross and independent charities in the Rugby Portobello Club were present and they are who stick in my mind. Volunteers from the Arab community also came with hot food and when we went to the Catholic Church, St Francis; the Priest there arranged everything.

Health

58. The GPs from my practise, The Exmoor Surgery, were at the Rugby Portobello Club on the first day after the fire. They were taking people's blood pressure and sugar levels and asking people what medications they had been on that they might need. One of the doctors wrote me a prescription for my asthma medication. Later in the morning somebody took all of the prescriptions to the pharmacy and collected all of the medications and brought them back and distributed them to us. I am not sure what time that was, the GP told me later it had been around 10am that morning.
59. The next time I saw a doctor was because I arranged an appointment to see my GP 2 or 3 weeks after the fire. For the weeks before this, I hadn't been able to leave the hotel as I felt too overwhelmed. I went to my surgery, [REDACTED] said my name, and gave my previous address, and I was told I would be fast tracked and seen as a priority.
60. Nobody medical came to the hotel to see if we needed help, we were left to own devices. Some of the residents, if they had any issues, were calling ambulances. They just needed more engagement and support.
61. About 6 months after the fire, I was contacted by someone at the Grenfell Health and Wellbeing Service who offered me counselling. I went along and registered myself and was told that I could have 6 sessions of counselling, but I did not feel ready; it was all

too raw and overwhelming. They called on a handful of occasions after that, to see how I was doing, but they did not seem to understand what I was going through. They would ask quite inane questions about how I was feeling and about the fire, which were superficial and bordered on the insensitive. I did not feel encouraged to engage with the service.

62. After about a year, I went to St Charles' Grenfell Health and Wellbeing Service and I registered. I had one session and I decided it was not for me. The best help I have had is speaking with my family who have shared the experience with me.

Others in the Tower

63. As I said at the beginning of my statement, the community in the tower was a close one. I knew a few of my neighbours to say hello and have a good chat to. Everyone was so polite, it didn't matter what nationality or age, and people got along. We knew the Elgwahry family well, as they lived on the same floor as us for years. They were a lovely family, and it is tragic what happened to them. Mariem and her mother Eslah Elgwahry both lost their lives in the fire. Everyone was close.

Life now

64. I have suffered psychological and physical injuries as a result of the fire. I will not go into detail in this statement for the Inquiry. I have spent a lot of time trying to get back to feeling myself after the fire. I have terrible memories, nightmares and flashbacks and have been diagnosed with PTSD, for which I have had some CBT. I am trying to keep occupied at all times, I used to like peaceful activities, such as reading, but can no longer sit with this because of my thoughts. I focus on the fact that we are alive and that is what matters. It is very traumatic, we are doing our best to move on, but it is still with us.

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.

Name: E. Sobieszczak

Signature: E. Sobieszczak

Date: 17.02.2020