

Witness Statement of: Alemishet Demissie
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GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF ALEMISHET DEMISSIE

I, *Alemishet Demissie*, will say as follows:-

1. I was a resident of Grenfell Tower and am a survivor 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 30 June 2018 (Unique reference number: **IWS00000860**) and addressed my experiences on 13/14 June 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 7-18, and module 4 in paragraphs 10-40.

Background

4. After living in temporary hostel accommodation for some time, I was delighted to sign the tenancy for 94 Grenfell Tower on 22 April 2004. The tenancy began on 3 May 2004.

I remember feeling really happy at the prospect of living in the Tower, in particular, because I already had friends living there from my Bible Study Group, and it was exciting to be moving into a new place and starting a new chapter.

5. I was very happy with my life living in the Tower. I was extremely fond of many of the people living there and the location, and the flat itself was lovely and spacious. I was able to live a full life there.
6. I entered a Right to Buy Application for the flat in April 2009, but that fell through in March 2010. It was the ultimate stage of the mortgage process that proved to be the issue. I only had to pay a very small outstanding amount to the bank, but even for that, I was not able to find a lender. One of the sticking points that the potential lenders had was that the Tower had originally been made of concrete, and the other problem, which I think speaks volumes, is that, I was advised that lenders don't like lending to individuals who are looking to purchase in tower blocks, especially on the higher floors.

The refurbishment

7. When the refurbishment happened, I don't remember feeling involved as such. Any updates or communication about it tended to come in the form of letters or newsletters through our doors. I remember seeing the architect of the refurbishment, who I now know is called Bruce Sounes, in person, at a meeting with the TMO prior to the refurbishment in 2012. He was telling us about what was planned for the design and he had a model of what the refurbished tower would look like, which he was showing and explaining to us all.

Issues with the refurbishment

8. In 2015, there was an issue surrounding the installation of the new boilers, and where this would be positioned in the flat. I hadn't generally felt engaged enough to attend meetings, however I did about this, as I felt strongly about it. We were told that the plan was for the engineers to install the boiler in the hallway, which we understood was because it would be cheaper and easier. I had a problem with this because, really, it was

a large obstacle, making this an impractical and unsafe place for it. Consideration didn't seem to have been given to the person having to live around it.

9. The TMO started to send letters about gaining access to the flats. Tenants were distressed; nobody was happy. At no point did I want to obstruct the access of the engineers coming in to do the work, but I wanted the boiler to be installed in the kitchen / living space, where the original one had been, so that it was more practical to live around, and so I wanted to make sure I was consulted first. Mine was eventually installed in the living room, but I know others had theirs put in their hallways, which they did not want. I think they had felt that they had no choice or say. I got the impression at this time that the TMO didn't really want to listen to people.

Issues in the flat

10. In October 2011, I had a terrible experience with water damage in my flat. The flat above flooded and all of the water came into my flat; there was loads of damage to my kitchen, bathroom, corridor and part of my living room. I reported the incident to the Council, who sent some workmen. They painted the ceiling of the bathroom and corridor, and also did something to the kitchen and bedroom ceilings, but didn't actually finish them. They left holes in the corners of the ceilings, and as I recall, they didn't actually paint the damaged walls.

Interaction with the TMO

11. I believe I spoke to someone at the TMO about it shortly afterwards, following which someone from the Council came to inspect it. The person that came to inspect it told me that the damages would be repaired without delay, but I waited over 6 months before anything was done. In this time, my flat was not liveable in and it was very challenging because it looked and smelled so bad that I couldn't stand it anymore, and couldn't have people around, so it really affected my life. I was forced into a position where I had to have it done myself, just so that I could go back to living normally; because of the extent of damage, I had to have the walls painted and decorated, floors changed and the kitchen cupboards and worktop changed.

12. I wrote to the Council in January 2013 to seek a refund. The TMO wrote to me saying that they wouldn't refund the money because they said that I hadn't consulted with the Council before getting the repair work done. It is right that I hadn't check with the TMO whether I would be refunded prior to having the job done, but I had made several phone calls to them, in which I conveyed how worried I was about the state of my flat and how much it was impacting on me, and so they were fully updated as to the fact that the work desperately needed doing, and of the unacceptable state I was living in for such a long time.
13. In May 2013, my flat was flooded for a second time. I made an urgent call to the TMO Office and asked for someone to attend on an emergency basis, but by the time the engineer arrived, considerable damage had been done. Even after the engineer arrived, it was a really long time before they worked out the source of the flooding and the laminated floor was beyond repair. Again, they refused to reimburse me for the repair work I needed.
14. I was very upset because I felt as though I had done everything I could to get the issues rectified, and even though they acknowledged a problem, they did nothing to help me, and I felt as though I was just being a nuisance. I couldn't understand their response; not only had my flat been ruined in the first place, but it then almost felt like I was being punished for having to take matters into my own hands. I was seriously disappointed with the way they dealt with that situation. It should have been the Council's responsibility to sort these issues out because they arose due to circumstances beyond my control, and it felt as though they neglected all responsibility.

Fire Safety

15. I don't remember any information being conveyed to us in respect of fire safety, or the stay put policy in advance of the fire.

Communal area

16. I don't recall there being any smoke alarms in the communal area, I certainly didn't hear any go off at any time. I also don't remember seeing any communication in respect

of fire safety, or signage, or any fire extinguishers. There were no drills or inspections that I recall in the time that I was living there.

In the flat

17. I did have a smoke alarm in the flat, which worked, though I don't remember it being checked in the time that I lived there.

Aftermath

18. On the night of Wednesday 14 June 2017, I was taken in an ambulance to Kings Hospital. I remained there for two nights and was on a ventilator because of the smoke that I had inhaled. I was terrified. My Pastor and a few friends came to visit me while I was in hospital. I did not see any representatives from RBKC at the hospital. During my time at the hospital, I had no idea what was going to happen to me afterwards, and I didn't know where anyone else was.
19. I escaped the fire with only the clothes that I had been wearing at the time, and my handbag containing my purse and phone. I had nothing else in the world with me and everything else had been destroyed in the fire.
20. I was discharged from hospital on Friday 16th June. I was not given any advice before leaving and I don't remember being told what I was being discharged with. I went in a small hospital car on my own to the offices of Wandsworth Council. I did not know why I was being taken there as this had not been explained to me by anyone. When we arrived, the taxi driver told me to wait in the building and then he left. After a bit of a wait, I was called to speak to the person behind the counter and I explained that I had come from Grenfell Tower. I remember that the first thing the woman behind the counter asked me was why I was there. As this had not been explained to me, all I could say was that I had just been driven there by the taxi driver. I was still very disorientated at this point. I believe that the carbon monoxide levels in my system were very high. Looking back, this must have had a great impact on my physical health, and I was also suffering mentally and emotionally with what I had been through. It was as much as I could do to put one foot in front of the other, and I was not in much of a position to

question things. It did not even occur to me at that time how strange it was that I had been driven to an entirely different borough after everything I had been through. I felt desperately disorientated and remember having a strong sense that I needed to be near my home, somewhere familiar.

Emergency accommodation

21. The woman I spoke to at Wandsworth Council was very sympathetic. She said that there was a local Bed and Breakfast where I could stay for the weekend. I remember I had to sign something but I wasn't in the headspace to be able to recall now what that document was. The lady behind the counter gave me the name of the Bed and Breakfast, and she told me which buses to take to get there. I did not know the area and I had an acute sense of being completely isolated. I think perhaps I took 2 buses from the Council building to get to the Bed and Breakfast. I had to ask people along the way where the place was and they were doing their best to direct me there. I eventually made it there after quite a long and difficult journey.
22. When I arrived at the Bed and Breakfast, the place was fine and the host was courteous. They showed me around, told me how I could get in and out, and then I was shown to my bedroom. I was entirely alone, I didn't know the area and I was in terrible shock. Above anything else, my mental health was really not good and I was on the edge, mentally and emotionally.
23. I only stayed there for one night. I felt dreadful. I was shaken and desperate to be in West London. Even though I knew I could not be in my home, I really needed to be somewhere familiar for some stability and continuity. I told the host at the Bed and Breakfast that I could not continue to stay there and I contacted someone at Wandsworth Council, who said that I needed to attend the Council Office again to sign some documents.
24. On Saturday, 18th June, I got the train back to West London. I remember I was in such a fragile state that I cried for the whole journey. Strangers were coming up to me and asking me what was wrong and if I needed help. My Pastor and his wife met me off the train at the other end and my pastor then took me to the Rugby Portobello.

25. There were so many people at the Rugby Portobello Centre. I was interviewed by a young lady who asked if I could return to stay at the Bed and Breakfast in Wandsworth. I said that I really didn't feel able to do that. Then she asked if I could stay with family, and again I said I couldn't; I did not want to stay with family, I did not want to feel dependant in that way. I remember then that my Pastor said that he would find a hotel for me if the Council could pay. I could do very little at that stage to help myself. In the end it was my Pastor that helped me find somewhere to stay.
26. I think it was my Pastor who suggested that I should stay at the Holiday Inn and helped to arrange this. I went there on the evening of Saturday 18th June. I remember my friend Elsa arrived the next morning, on the Sunday. I was so relieved to see her; to see a familiar face. I knew Elsa from church from before fire. I was just sitting in the dining room when she came in. We knew each other from greeting each other when walking in and out of the Tower. It was such an enormous comfort to see her, and in a sense, to be in it together, having felt alone up to that point. I remember at one point shortly afterwards, RBKC were going to arrange for either Elsa or I to be moved to another hotel; my social worker actually fought against this because we needed each other for support.
27. At that stage we were all so confused. We were trying so hard to live a normal life but of course it was anything but normal. I had been through this tragedy, and I was alive, but I was suffering from that trauma. We were in a really bad state of mind and physically we still weren't doing well.
28. I was moved to Radisson Blu Hotel after around 1 week of being there as the Holiday Inn had another booking. We were moved without warning and we weren't given any explanation as to why. Initially we were not told where we were being moved to, and we were all feeling very distressed, and quite paranoid at that stage. A few people were really angry because we all needed stability and a sense of security. If I remember correctly, two social workers from Brent, who had come to see us at the Holiday Inn once or twice, who took me to the new hotel. Again, that Radisson Blu was a bit of a way out being in Marble Arch, but we were provided with travel cards and so could travel around freely, which was a small weight off the mind.

Provision of support

29. I found the two social workers from Brent to be a tremendous source of support to me and I think others found that as well. They were two Christian women and ever so helpful. They were very empathetic and provided a lot of reassurance. It helped that me to know that they shared my faith with me as I knew that they would go away and pray for me, and that gave me some much needed strength. They also helped me with practical tasks such as filling in forms when I needed.

Practical support

30. I remember for quite a few days after the fire, I wore the same outfit; nobody cared. After this time, we learnt that we could get supplies from the Westway or the Rugby Portobello, which is where I went to get shoes and clothes. There were no facilities to do our laundry at the Holiday Inn, but we could at the Radisson Blu. Someone from my church also brought me some new clothes to wear.

31. When you went into the Westway, they also had sections for travel, passports, benefits and other things, and I was able to arrange to get a new passport from there.

32. Obviously it wasn't possible at the hotels to be able to cook for ourselves, but all meals were provided for us, which was good, because we didn't have to think of anything. It was nice to have other things as well such as our rooms cleaned, laundry done, and beds made at that time. Just having those basic things you need to function taken care of was a great help because of the head space that we were in; I wouldn't have been able to manage anything for myself. It also gives you the time and space to begin to process what has happened to you.

Financial assistance

33. On the Saturday after the fire, RBKC were providing £500 as quick financial assistance at one of the rest centres. I originally said I didn't need it because I had taken my handbag down with me when I was taken out of the fire, and so I had my bank card; I

said that they should give it to people that would need it. I remember someone, I am not sure who, being fairly adamant that I might need the money and insisting that I take £500. That would have been on the Saturday after the fire, 18th June. Around a week after the fire, we all learnt that we should go to the Post Office to get some emergency funds. As I was a tenant, I was entitled to get £5,000.

Information communicated to residents

34. When it came to obtaining updating information, we just shared what we knew with each other really; we supported each other throughout. The social workers did their best to help, but they weren't being updated by RBKC and so they couldn't pass information on to us, as much as they might have wanted to. For that reason, they weren't much help.
35. I remember that Grenfell United put up a list of survivors in the Portobello Centre, who were people they had identified themselves. Grenfell United were amazingly helpful throughout in terms of information sharing, even though they were victims themselves; they had lived in the Tower and they tried their best.
36. I seem to remember that we were sent Newsletters quite frequently in relation to lots of things, such as what support was available. These came weekly and were put under our hotel room doors in the Raddision Blue. The most important thing however was the word of mouth and the shared community aspect; we were travelling, eating, and spending a lot of our time together and so this relationship really mattered. It was a huge comfort to have each other, and I relied a lot on my church community for things.
37. I was also incredibly moved by the support we got from people generally within the community and outside of it. The kindness that people are capable of really touched me. That is one thing about such a tragedy; in some ways, it brings out the best in people. Often we go through life thinking that people don't care, but events like this prove otherwise. We needed a lot of support and the community delivered. I have always loved people and cared for others, but what this showed me was how much others care. I remember there were times that I would overhear Grenfell being spoken about in public, for example in the street, or in taxis, and members of the public were

so angry about what had happened. Everyone was responding as if it had happened to them, which, in a strange way, is comforting.

Psychological Support and Medical Treatment

38. I have suffered physical and psychological injuries as a result of the fire. I will not go into detail of those injuries or the treatment in this statement for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.
39. Medical care has been available through my GP and NHS nurses often attended the Radisson Blu hotel, although I did not use their services.

Impact

40. The frame of mind that I have found myself in at times has been tremendously challenging and hard to think about or even try to put into words. It helps me enormously to be positive. I used to be cynical, but in order to allow myself to try to even begin to move forwards, I have had to focus on the positives. That is not always realistic. My relationship with the Lord has helped me a lot. I cannot underestimate or convey how low and fragile I have felt, and still feel at times, but I am trying my best now to see the light in everything, and appreciate everything, and that has begun to help me. Really my faith to me now is all about being positive, otherwise what does anything mean after something like this.
41. What comforts me now is the fact that I am still here. I have moved house and got married and have tried to move on. There is no question that, at times, I haven't been myself, and I have thought I could not cope or go on. I still have to remind myself often of the benefits of being positive, and that I wouldn't be able to appreciate the good without the bad, and this is reinforced by my faith, which is my foundation. On the night of 14th June, all the facts were telling me that my time on this earth was up, and that my life was about to come to an end, and I thank God that I am still here, and have found the strength to try to build myself up again.



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.

Signed:

Dated:

 
19/02/20 19/02/20