

Witness Statement of: Florentyna Sobieszczak

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Exhibits: 0

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GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF FLORENTYNA SOBIESZCZAK

I, Florentyna Sobieszczak, will say as follows:-

1. I was a resident of 43 Grenfell Tower. Myself and my mother, Elizabeth Sobieszczak, and my father, Michael Sobieszczak, 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 29 June 2018 (Unique reference number: **IWS00000831**) 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 8-15, and module 4 in paragraphs 16-33.

Background

4. I grew up in Grenfell Tower and lived there for my whole life until the fire. When I was born, my parents lived on the 19th floor, which I don't remember much about, and when I was a few years old, we moved down to flat 43, which at the time was on the 4th floor, but after the refurbishment, became the 7th floor. I loved the area and I loved the community. I generally felt safe there. I always had a thing about being burgled and I remember worrying a bit about security, but I don't remember it crossing my mind that fire would be an issue to worry about.
5. Between 2009 and 2013, I was away studying at the University of Roehampton, but I would go home every other weekend to visit my parents. In 2013, during my final year of university, I lived at home.
6. My parents dealt with repairs when they needed doing and liaised with the TMO.
7. I work as a flight attendant for British Airways.

The refurbishment

8. When the planning stage of the refurbishment first started, I was away at university, but it was around the time that I moved back home in 2013, that it was properly starting to get underway. It was around this time as well that I attended a meeting with my dad. There were three or four people doing presentations, I believe they were representatives of the TMO and Rydon. The focus was on how the building would look and I distinctly remember there being very little discussion, if any, about health and safety. I seem to remember that we were also shown samples of the cladding. I said to my dad during the meeting that it didn't matter what we said or thought, as they had clearly made their minds up about what they were doing anyway. The meeting didn't seem to be for our input as residents as such, but, I believe, was just so that they could say that they had involved us in some way. This is the only meeting that I went to.
9. We got the impression that the main focus was the renovation of the school and the nearby sports centre, and that our building was secondary, and was being refurbished to bring it up to standard, in keeping with those surrounding it. I remember thinking,

because the other buildings were green, that ours would be made green too, and that that wouldn't look good.

10. I do also remember that there was a guy in the building who was really against the refurbishment altogether. He would get really angry and say that we shouldn't let them be in charge of our community and let them change things. I think his name was David Collins. I am pretty sure that he lived in one of the basement flats and he was very anti-Council. I remember him saying that he would sue the RBKC if they continued with their plans. He certainly wasn't the only one, a lot of people were very unhappy about the Council's general attitude.

11. I didn't overthink it. At the time, I trusted people and institutions to deliver on their promises. It's like big flight companies, such as British Airways; you just have that implicit sense of trust that they will do things the right way, and with RBKC, being the Council, that feeling was heightened, because they had a duty to us. They were like our parents in a sense, they should have had our backs and that's what I believed. I didn't second guess it, the trust was just there from my point of view.

12. At the time when the refurbishment properly got going, I was spending most weekends with my boyfriend at the time, in Northampton, and so I wasn't there to witness a lot of it in detail. I do remember though being at home one day when they were working outside of my bedroom; I put my head out of my bedroom window, just to have a look and see how everything was progressing, and I got a glimpse of the material between the cladding and the wall. It looked like polystyrene. I am obviously not an expert in construction, but I remember being very surprised at the way it looked, and to be honest, how cheap and flimsy it looked.

Fire Safety

13. After the renovation, fire notices were put up outside the lifts, to say not to use the lifts in the event of a fire. I remember they looked really cheap and it was a badly done job. They were put in the middle of the two lifts, above or below the call button and they were crooked.

14. There were no fire extinguishers in the communal area or sprinklers, and I don't remember seeing any fire alarms, though there may have been one in the landing area. I don't remember hearing any fire alarms go off on the night of the fire at all. I go through yearly evacuation training with my work and I think me hearing alarms at work would trigger the memory, in the way that other sounds have, but that hasn't happened. I remember on the night of the fire, we went over the corridor into a neighbour's flat, which was opposite ours, it was full of smoke, and no smoke alarm was going off in her flat either. There were no alarms in our kitchen but there was one in the hallway by the door.
15. There was nothing written down anywhere, or communicated to us, ever, to say what we should do in the event of a fire. Comparing this to my work seems very strange, because obviously you have the safety briefing at the beginning of the flight and then you have documents provided to remind you of what actions to take in the event of an emergency. When it came to Grenfell, we were never told what to do, and I would not have known what to do or where to assemble for example. There had been no leaflets and nothing made available on the walls in the communal areas to guide us. On the night, it was a question of relying on gut instinct and the fireman who told us to leave the building; he seemed fairly calm and had no breathing apparatus and we followed his instructions. I couldn't comment on anything else in respect of fire from recollection.

Aftermath

16. I truly believe that the community saved us following the fire. They were there for us in terms of clothes, food, shelter, and support, whatever we needed. I don't remember noticing the presence of any organisation per se, but I do recall strangers coming in from around the neighbourhood. Those are the people that I remember most vividly, who provided so much support. We spent some time at the St. Francis of Assisi Church and cars would be pulling up with clothes and food; that is what resonates in my memory.

17. After the fire, we went straight to the Rugby Portobello Club. At Paragraph 18 of my first statement, I describe the fear, shock and panic that I experienced at that time, which I will not repeat in this statement.
18. My parents sorted everything out from that point on really. I do remember thinking that it was well organised there and I have to give credit where it is due for that, because we were under so much stress. I remember feeling reassured at that point that people had our backs and that we were supported, and that that is how it should have been all along, but of course the Council let us down in that respect. At some point towards the evening my parents were told that we had been allocated a hotel. Local taxi drivers were volunteering to drive people to where they needed to be and we were taken in a taxi to the Copthorne Tara Hotel, in High Street Kensington.
19. When we got to the hotel, we were shown to our room pretty much straight away. There was just one room for the three of us to share. There was a double bed for my parents and then a single pull down bed for me right next to the double bed, in the corner. The single bed was obviously meant for a child, though I could just about fit in it. We knew that the room was unsuitable but we didn't care that night, because we just needed to rest and process everything; we just thought we would deal with it another day when we had more energy.
20. We ended up living that way for four months. My dad was emailing and calling the Council about it constantly to try to get us an alternative, more suitable, room. We were in the hotel for a total of 6 months, and it wasn't until 4 months in, that I finally got my own room for the remaining 2 months. This is something that should have been sorted out quickly and easily, and instead, we were left to live this way for four months.
21. It was a horrible way to live for such a long time. It was totally unmanageable to have three adults experiencing trauma and trying desperately to process what had happened, living in such close quarters, and dealing with things in their own ways. It led to really bad arguments between my parents and also between myself and both of my parents, individually and together. There was no privacy and nowhere that we could go individually or for my parents to be together. I believe it stopped us from being able to

heal or move forward. It also delayed my recovery so that I was unable to work for longer than I would have liked.

22. Two weeks after the fire, when BA found out how we were living, they asked me what they could do for me. I told them that I just needed physical space to be able to sort out my head so that I could return to work. They booked a hotel for me straight away, the Holiday Inn Express in Hammersmith. I stayed there for a week and that was an enormous relief. It allowed me to begin to get my thoughts in order and it meant that I was able to return to work the following week, three weeks after the fire. BA told me that I did not need to rush back to work but I wanted to for my own sake; I needed the routine and structure of work and the distraction of focussing my attention on something other than the fire. When I told BA that I was ready and wanted to return, they booked another hotel for me for a night close to the airport, so that I could commute easily for my first flight back. Had my employer not stepped in and helped in getting us all the space that we needed from each other at that time, even if it was only for a week, I think things would have possibly been even worse for us.

23. Obviously my employer could not continue to pay for my hotel accommodation and I wouldn't have allowed them to; it was the Council's responsibility. RBKC continued to fail in that responsibility in terms of the emergency accommodation they provided and the lack of response to our requests for more space. For my first flight back, I had asked my employer if I could do a very long haul trip, as I did not want to go back to living in the hotel room with my parents. I was allocated a flight to Shanghai. I spent a night there. I returned to the hotel in London a few days later, at around 6am. I had all of my luggage with me. I had to wake my parents up and they went out while I got some sleep until about 11am. There was barely any room for my luggage. This continued for the next three months. My parents were amazing, I could not have asked for more support from them. However, there was no down time from each other, no privacy, and so our relationships really suffered just at the time when we needed each other the most. I believe that their health only really started to improve when I moved out into my own hotel room.

Practical supplies

24. For the first couple of days after the fire, we relied on friends and family who would visit us with suitcases of clothes and food, and as I described before, the generosity of the community. My parents and I would also go to the Rugby Portobello to collect clothes and toiletries that had been donated.
25. Then, after a couple of days, the Council said we could have what we wanted in the hotel and charged the food to the room. That was a huge source of stress lifted.
26. My parents dealt with the financial side of things. On a day to day basis, all we needed to worry about financially was the cost of food and that was covered. Generally speaking, we were able to rely on the community and private businesses for everything else; for example, Vodafone gave me a new phone. I can't emphasise enough that the spirit of the community was amazing.

Medical assistance

27. Within two days of the fire, someone came to the hotel from RBKC and asked whether there was anything that we might need. They asked in particular about prescriptions, which was a huge help for us because I needed contact lenses and my mum suffers with [REDACTED], so she needed her medications for those.

Emotional support

28. The support we got was all very practical in nature. There was very little emotional support; certainly, no one ever actively came to me regarding emotional support. I remember dad telling me that there were some facilities in the Westway, where you could talk to people if you needed to. About 2 days after the fire, I took myself there and told them that I thought I needed counselling. I was happy opening up and speaking to friends and family but I felt I needed to speak to someone impartial and professional. They gave me a leaflet in case I wanted to seek any further support in the future. I couldn't be certain of whether the people I saw there were from the NHS or a charity. In any event, I felt like the process of going back to the area where everything had happened was just more unhelpful. I did not think it was good for me to be there and so I did not return to speak to anyone again.

29. About a year later, I remember receiving a voicemail and a letter which had details of a number to call if you wanted to have counselling; which I believe would have been through the NHS. From what I remember, there was no other support at the time or offers of counselling before then. I called the number and had the initial phone assessment. At some point after that, I was informed by letter or voicemail that I was eligible to have counselling and could start it. However, nothing came of this. I did not receive any further communication until a long time later.

30. About two years after the fire, I received a second letter, which referred to a specialist Grenfell Tower Counselling Service at the local GP Centre. At that time, I did not feel able to return to the area and so that help did not materialise; I had taken a step back and was confiding in and relying on my friends and family. I was lucky to have that support network. Although it was good to know that people were available to help if required, the information should have been made available much sooner, because in the first few weeks after the fire, when we needed it the most, it was not clear how to access these services. By the time these access points were clear, it seemed a bit late.

Communication

31. Occasionally there were people stationed in the reception of the Copthorne Tara who would help with practical things that were needed urgently, such as medication prescriptions or Oyster Cards but nothing more than that. I couldn't be certain whether these people were from RBKC or charities. Generally, I do not remember any specific efforts that the Council made to reach out or get in touch with people in the first 7 days after the fire. I do not remember receiving any calls or emails and have no record of these; I do not remember receiving any letters with information or updates, and generally, I felt that we were kept in the dark about things.

Key workers

32. The inconsistency of the quality of the key workers that were allocated to support our family really challenged and frustrated me. I really felt we needed and would have benefited from some support, for someone to help us with managing our day-to-day

lives, our accommodation and with practical administration. We must have had around 15 key workers altogether. I remember wondering why we could not have just one person who we were able to rely on consistently. That would have been a real source of stability in the weeks after the fire. As it was, we had no effective help at a time when we had lost everything and were so shocked and traumatised.

Moving forward

33. I know I take a fairly balanced view; I have always been that way, able to see the positive as well as the negative. I know that the Council is just made up of humans at the end of the day, who were probably doing their best, but their actions led to this tragedy. I am lucky now to have my flat and have been able to move forward. It took some time to feel that way, but I feel I am starting to get there now. From my point of view, one of the most unforgiveable things, was expecting three adults to live together in such a small hotel room after the fire, for so long. This stopped any of us from being able to process what had happened to us, or begin to move forward for a very long time.

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: *Florentyna Sobieszczak*

Signature: 

Date: *14/2/20*