

Witness Statement of: Esther Watts

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GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF ESTHER WATTS

This statement is a factual statement prepared for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry dealing with modules 3 and 4 in Phase 2 only. It does not, and is not intended to set out my experiences on the night of the fire, or the impact that these events and the aftermath have had on me (and my family).

I, **Esther Watts**, will say as follows:-

1. I was a resident of Flat 332 Hurstway Walk. I am making this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry.
2. This is my first witness statement to the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry.
3. This statement addresses the issues within module 3 (Communication with residents and fire safety in the Walkways) and module 4 (aftermath) from the Inquiry's stated Phase 2 schedule. I deal with issues relating to module 7-16 in paragraphs, and module 4 in paragraphs 17-51.

Background

4. I am originally from Liverpool and moved to London when I was around 6 years old. I have a big family being the youngest of six siblings, and I have two children of my own, Amina, who is 35 and a son, who is now 14, and suffers from learning disabilities. At the time of the fire, I was working part time in sales in the home department of House of Fraser, in White City.
5. I previously lived in Chelsea for around 20 years before moving to the flat in Hurstway Walk towards the end of March 2015. The tenancy for Hurstway Walk was in my name and the landlord was RBKC, though I was housed by Notting Hill Genesis. It was intended to be temporary social accommodation.
6. I moved out of the Walkways after the fire because I found it too difficult to return and resettlement there with my son; we no longer felt safe there and the memories were too hard to bare.
7. Flat 332 Hurstway Walk is a 2-bedroom property. Standing on the living room balcony, Grenfell Tower would be visible to the right hand side. I was quite fond of the location of the flat. I wouldn't have said that I knew the area very well, but I suppose that I was quite happy because I was able to take one bus easily to Chelsea, where my family and friends were based. My son and I settled in quite quickly, and came to know our neighbours to say hello to, and I also came to know individuals living in the Tower; In particular, I had a friendship with Zainab Deen, and knew her son, Jeremiah Deen, who both lived on the 14th floor of the Tower, and who both lost their lives in the fire.

Communication with the TMO/RBKC

8. The day before moving in to the flat, I had an appointment in Kings Cross with a representative of the RBKC to sign for and collect the keys to the flat. At this appointment, I was provided with a folder, which contained booklets providing information about the tenancy. The folder also included documents such as certificates of previous gas checks, and insurance statements for appliances already contained within the flat. I did look through most of the information in this folder in the early days

of my tenancy, but I did not find opportunity where the contents were helpful to refer to after that point.

9. When I signed my tenancy, I was given the number for the Estate Office, and the name of a Housing Officer, to contact in case of requiring assistance. My understanding was that RBKC were responsible for repairs and that matters should be followed up via the Housing Office. If I needed a repair doing in the flat, I understood that I should call the number for the Estate Office to report it, and arrange for someone to come out and resolve the problem, which is what I did.
10. I think that they contracted out for certain types of repair work, and so, frequently, when I phoned the Estate Office, I would be told that they would have to phone the contractor to follow up. They would provide a reference number and a time-frame for when someone would be in contact. A lot of the time, they would contact you within that time-frame, but not always, and sometimes I would have to phone again. Sometimes they would also say that they could not provide a time when the contractors would call or when they would get back to you. They would ask you to hold the line and would phone out to the contractor to follow up. If they were not able to reach the contractors, they would ask you to phone back the next day. I would also phone Notting Hill Genesis Housing to let them know that the repairs were taking some time; they would just encourage me to keep telephoning the TMO, which I did.
11. I do not remember ever being made aware of a formal complaints system, and there was no information about the procedure for making complaints in the folder that I was provided with.

Problems in the flat

12. When my son and I moved in to the flat, the balcony door in the living room was already broken; the glass was cracked and the door did not unlock properly. It was a while before anybody came out to resolve the problem, despite me chasing, but when they did attend, it was so bad that the whole door had to be replaced.
13. In around May 2016, there was an issue with the wiring in the flat, which in turn, meant that the ceiling lights in the living room would not turn on, despite me changing the

bulbs. I recall that we had to light the room with lamps for some months before the issue was resolved.

14. The flats in the Walkways were heated via a communal system, which would be turned off by RBKC externally at the beginning of summer, and would be turned on again in October. In October 2016, when the heating had been put back on, the flat did not heat up, which we found out was because none of the radiators were working. I can recall that it took until November for someone to come and bleed the radiators. It had started to get cold in the flat by this point and my son and I were both having to wrap up to keep warm.

Fire Safety

15. There were three fire alarms in the flat, one in the downstairs hallway, one in the upstairs hallway and a third in the kitchen. I think the alarms were possibly checked around a month after we moved in, but not again after that. When I first moved in, there was an initial fire alarm testing appointment, at the time of which, I was told that the alarms were working properly, but there was no written confirmation, similar to that you receive when a gas check is done. As I said, I do not recall the alarms being tested after this point.
16. I do not recall seeing anything for putting out a fire, such as blankets or fire extinguishers in the communal areas of Hurstway Walk. There were no fire drills during the whole time that we lived in the Walkways. Had there been a fire, I would have had to follow my own initiative and instinct about what to do, because we were never told by RBKC or the TMO. As far as I can remember, there was no fire safety information put-up in the communal areas. When I have been back to the building, I have seen big notice boards with advice as to action to take, but they were not present when I lived there, and we also never received any information verbally or in the post.
17. I am not be able to add anything else in respect of fire safety.

Aftermath

18. I was woken up at around 3am on the morning of 14th June 2017 by our dog, Rosie, barking, and by my son, who was 12 at the time, who said that someone was banging on the front door. It was the Police, who told us that there was a fire and that we had to evacuate immediately. I was aware that the flat smelt quite smoky, and for this reason, believed that the fire was in our block. I was in total panic and terrified for myself and for my son, but I was trying my best to be strong for him. I will never forget that feeling of fear and the Police shouting, though I think that I must have gone into a sort of automatic mode at the time. I still have visions of my son just standing there in his pyjamas, looking lost. I tried my best to be calm for his sake; I told him to put his coat on and make his way out ahead of me, as I was most concerned for his safety. I said that I would follow on. I went upstairs and got my handbag. I put Rosie on her lead and prepared to leave. I looked everywhere for our pet cats as well but couldn't see them, I knew that I would have to leave them, so I shouted out to say that I would return for them.
19. At first, we left via the front entrance of the building, with Grenfell Tower on our left. It was then that we saw the fire for the first time, and a huge gathering of people staring up at it. I was disorientated and in total shock at what I was seeing, as was my son.
20. The Police shouted at us then to go out of the back entrance of Hurstway Walk instead, and so we did as we were told and once we had exited, walked around to the road with Latimer Road tube station on it. I made phone calls to my sisters and then to my daughter and told them what was happening, and to reassure them that we were ok. While we were on the phone, they put their televisions on and saw what was happening. I was also very worried about Zainab, and her son, and I tried to call her phone, but the call would not connect.
21. My son and I stopped and stood by Bramley House and we could see most of the Tower. There were a huge number of people also standing by Bramley House; I cannot be sure where they came from, but assume that they had also been evacuated from the Walkways, or were perhaps passers-by from the surrounding community. Everyone was in what I can only describe as a 'zombie like' state; everyone was in silence and in

tremendous shock, just staring at the Tower. You could hear people shouting from inside the Tower, I can still hear those screams today. It was like something from a nightmare, it did not feel real. I had not had time to find my glasses and put them on, so I could only really make out the fire and I could see the shapes of people inside the building, and their sheets coming out of the Tower. My son however was able to see things in much more detail.

22. While we were standing there, he was describing to me in detail, that he could see people waving out of the windows and dropping sheets out, and signally for help. It was all horrifying. The street where we were standing was full of smoke, which we must have been breathing in. I am sure that I must have been coughing, but I cannot remember now. I could see pieces of the building on fire falling down from towards the top of the Tower onto the ground close to the Tower, and floating around in the air.
23. There were no professionals around at this time in the area that we were standing in, as I recall, no police, and nobody from the fire brigade. It was just packed with residents from the Estate and others from the community. [REDACTED] and I found some of our neighbours in the crowd and we all stuck together. When it got to full daylight, around 7am or 8am, together, we agreed to go back to our flats, just to gather belongings, but not to stay or sleep. It was horrifying, so surreal and disorientating, and the area was full of smoke, so we did not feel safe. I really wanted to check on the cats and make sure they were ok. The police did not stop us from going back at this time.
24. My son was hysterical at that point; he was screaming and shouting and having tantrums and very distressed; he didn't want go into the flat, so he stood outside the main front door. The flat was full of smoke, which hit you as soon as you opened the front door. I ran in using the top that I was wearing to cover my mouth. I wasn't inside the flat for more than a few minutes because of the smoke. I was so worried about the cats but I couldn't find them, and I couldn't bear to be in there, so I didn't pick anything else up either.
25. When we left the flat on 14th June, my son and I walked around the Estate for a while. We weren't sure where to go or what to do; we talked to a few other people who were around the area, just to find out what they were doing. We were told by one of those

people that the St Clement's Church and Westway Sports Centre had opened, and that some of the residents from the Tower and the Walkways were heading there. We were relying on what we were told by neighbours and other residents, otherwise we would not have known what to do with ourselves; I think that must have been the same for a lot of other residents. I felt bewildered and knew that my son needed to have something to eat, so we went to a café by Latimer Road Station and ordered some breakfast and a cup of tea each. Neither of us could eat much at all; we were both in shock. My sisters, who live in Chelsea, were calling while we were there, to check that we were ok.

26. When we came out of the café, it was maybe 9am or 9:30am. We walked around the area for a bit and came to a church past Latimer Road Station, which I think is St John's. We went inside, and we were able to have a drink; the place was full of people. Someone came in shortly afterwards, though I cannot be sure who this was, and announced that the housing people from the RBKC were at the Westway, for anyone that required assistance with accommodation.

Relief Centres

27. When we got to the Westway, it was after 10.30am. There were tables set-up inside that had signs on them saying 'RBKC Housing' and there were people, who I presume were from the Council, behind the tables. I queued there for quite some time, and on reaching the front, I was asked to provide my name, address and ID, which I did, and I told them that we could not return to our flat. We were told to wait while something was arranged, which we did.

28. The atmosphere was chaotic really, because there were so many people there, all of whom were upset and in shock. We stayed at the Westway all day until it was evening until probably 11pm, so around 12 hours in total. We found a seat and my son kept drifting off to sleep. I did have to keep going to and fro to ask people from the Council how much longer we would be waiting, and what was going to happen. At about 11pm, volunteers had started to put beds out in the gym, and at that point I thought that we might end up having to stay at the Westway, as we had received no update.

Accommodation

29. I believe it was soon after 11pm that evening when someone, who I assume was a representative of RBKC, told us that we would be going to a hotel in Hammersmith, the Première Inn. We were told to go and wait in the car park, where a taxi that had been arranged and would pick us up and take us to the hotel.
30. We were at the Première Inn for a total of 9 months. My son and I had to share quite a small room in the hotel for the entire time that we were there, which was a real challenge. Initially, I had not realised that the bed, which appeared to be a double bed, was in fact two single beds pushed together, with a double sheet on it, and double duvet. We therefore ended up sharing until I asked about this, and someone brought this to my attention, after a few days. It didn't seem appropriate and was very cramped for the two of us. It was particularly challenging because, as I will say more about below, due to my son having been so distressed by what he had witnessed on the night of the fire. He was wetting the bed almost every night for the whole time that we stayed there. We desperately needed more space, or an adjoining room.
31. During the weeks after the fire, I continued to try and work part-time at House of Fraser as I had been doing, and was also going back to our flat a few times a day to check on the cats, and gather belongings when needed. I didn't take much from the flat as things, such as clothes, smelt strongly of smoke, and because we didn't have much room.
32. We took Rosie, the dog, with us to the hotel, but she was only able to stay for 2 nights before she went to stay with my brother and his wife for two weeks. The Blue Cross later took Rosie and the three cats until we were rehoused.

Debris

33. When I returned to the flat, I found thick, dark debris all over the terrace that had come from the Tower. There were big, thick lumps of black, charred material, and there was also a lot of black ash covering the terrace. I did not touch the debris on the terrace at

all. I remember phoning RBKC on a few occasions to tell them about the debris but nobody came. It must have been cleared up at some point, but I am not sure when, as we did not return, and I was not updated.

Lack of information available

34. I can recall that, from quite early on, we did get newsletters to the hotel, which I did find helpful, in that they set out information about where to go for certain things. However, I believe that the majority of information that we got was from each other, by that I mean the residents of the Estate staying at the hotel. These were not people that I had known before to the fire, but we came to know each other as we chatted in the hotel, and we relied on each other to find out about what was going on and what support was available. It was only from speaking to others at the hotel that for example, I found out about the financial support that was available.

35. About four weeks after we moved to the hotel, a representative from Hammersmith and Fulham Council came to the hotel, to answer any questions that residents' had, but prior to that, I do not recall seeing anybody from the RBKC or any other Council at the hotel.

Practical Support

36. I cannot recall much about the arrangement in terms of food, but I know that breakfast and lunch were provided by the hotel, the costs of which were met by the Council up to a certain amount. I think we later got an allowance for food for our evening meal, but prior to this, we relied on Charities, who would come to the hotel to ask what we wanted to eat in the evening, and then would return with hot food.

37. When it came to getting clothes and toiletries, and any other food we needed, we would go to the Westway, before everything was later transferred to The Curve. From the first week after the fire, volunteers were also bringing toiletries and clothes to the hotel in boxes. They would be stationed downstairs, and someone from reception would ring up and say we could go down to collect things that we needed. I hadn't taken much from the flat, as the house was full of smoke, so I took a few of the donated things for my son and I to help us get by.

38. I am struggling to recall details of the financial assistance that we received. I do recall having to go to the Westway to provide my name and details, and show my ID, to confirm that I was eligible to receive £5,000 and a few days later, this was transferred into my account. I also remember picking up £250 from the Post Office. I believe I received both of these payments within the first 2 months after the fire, but I couldn't be more exact than that. I know that I would not have been aware of this assistance being available, had it not been for hearing this from the other residents staying in the same hotel.

Medical assistance

39. On Friday 16th June 2017, I woke up with a very sore and blocked nose and I felt very weak to the extent that I thought I was going to collapse. I went to the Westway where there were a number of NHS doctors. They checked me over, checking specifically inside my nose, and they also took my blood pressure. They said that I had very high blood pressure, which I had never had before in my life, but the doctor I saw thought that it would come down the following day and that it was likely due to the smoke that I had inhaled. She said that I had an infection in my nose and she gave me some cream to apply to it. She made an appointment for me with my GP at the Colville Health Centre on the following Monday, 19th June.

40. When I went to see my GP, she tested my blood pressure again, which she confirmed was still high, and prescribed some more cream for my nose. She agreed that my high blood pressure and nose infection were likely due to the smoke that I had inhaled. She said that if I had any concerns, I could return to see her within the week.

41. My nose was painful for a few weeks, but improved after then. A few months later, I visited my GP again as a routine visit for something else, and had my blood pressure tested again, which she confirmed had returned to normal.

Lack of support for my son's exceptional needs

42. On Friday 16th June 2017, when I went to see the doctor at the Westway, my son came with me, along with my sister, who supported him when he was being seen by the doctor. The doctor who saw my son said that he also had high blood pressure. At that point, the challenges that I experienced with my son at the hotel hadn't really started, and so I could not bring these to the attention of the doctor.
43. In the weeks after the fire, my son was very unsettled, and had a lot of thick gunk coming from his nose, which was a shade of green. As a result of his learning disabilities, his reaction to what he had seen might not have been what one might expect. He finds it very difficult to express himself, and so he was internalising a lot. He was exhibiting very different behaviours than normal, overstimulated, very loud, unable to sleep, and I could never get him to settle.
44. We had an appointment already in the diary with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) under RBKC for him on Friday 16th June for a separate matter, which was with two of his psychologists. They were aware of what he had been through with the fire, and I made them aware of the circumstances that we were living in in the hotel, but they didn't provide or offer any support. There was no follow up appointment made, and nobody from CAMHS came to see him at the hotel. At that time, again, there hadn't really been time for his issues to get fully underway and so I could not bring these to their attention.
45. There were some therapists stationed in the hotel in the reception area. I don't remember when I first saw them there, it could have been the end of the second week, or the beginning of the third week, after the fire. There was no specific announcement to say that they were there, I learnt who they were from speaking to someone else staying in the hotel. I explained to them my son was 12 years old, that we had a small room, and that his behaviour was very challenging. I also told them about his disabilities. I told them that he wasn't leaving the hotel room often because of his issues and because of what he had been through. From what I remember, nobody visited him to check that he was ok, and he never received any help. I would have hoped that someone would come to see him, or to check on his welfare, but they did not.

46. The things that he saw on the night of the fire deeply affected him. He wouldn't speak about his experience and internalised a lot. Throughout the whole time that we were at the hotel, he was scared to leave the room, and of returning to Latimer Road, because of the emotional turmoil that he was going through. He was very different to the way he had been before the fire, very loud but also very nervous and clinging to me all of the time. He was wetting the bed almost every single night that we were in the hotel for the entire time that we were there. I would have to strip the bed daily and take the sheets to the launderette over the road. The room was really small and so it was a very unpleasant and upsetting experience. Neither of us were really able to sleep for most of the time that we were in the hotel. Even when I was tired and trying to drop off, my son was still awake, and overstimulated, so it was difficult for either of us to get any rest. In the end, over time, we became exhausted.
47. I believe I did make further appointments with our GP to talk through issues that my son was having, but I don't think anything really came of these. The procedure for accessing support for him was not clear and nobody ever attended the hotel to help him. He was supposed to be at school throughout June and for some of July before the school summer holiday started, but in the end, because of what he had been through, he couldn't return until September.
48. In my view, the Council did not provide us with any help, in particular when it came to my son and the support that he should have had and that they were aware he needed; he was and is in such a bad way.

My friends living in the Tower

49. I want to speak briefly here about my friend who lived in the Tower, Zainab Deen, and her son, Jeremiah Deen.
50. I met Zainab on the day that she looked around her flat in the Tower. It would have been around September 2015. On that day, I had come out of the flat with Rosie, the dog, to take her for a walk, and I recall that Zainab stopped me to ask which way to go to get to the Tower. The refurbishments were ongoing at that time and so it wasn't clear how to enter the ground floor. She said to me that she was on her own and that the

person that was going to see the flat with her was at work, and so she asked if I would possibly mind going with her to see the flat, as she had Jeremiah, who was only a baby then. I said that I had the dog but that I could, and she said that was ok with her. We went up together and she really liked the flat but she said she was going through a bidding process with it, and so nothing was certain. At some point, a man joined her on the visit, and so I left her at that time.

51. Zainab and I exchanged phone numbers that day and we kept in touch; she phoned me a few weeks later to say that she had got the flat, and she moved in towards the end of that year from what I recall.
52. From then on, we became quite close friends and I would visit her once or twice a week in her flat and I would take my son as well. We would go to hers mostly because I had the pets in my flat, though she did come to ours a few times. We would text or call each other in between seeing each other, and we talked quite closely. There is also a day that I will never forget when Zainab intervened when a gang of boys were beating my son up in the area around the Tower; she stopped it and told my son to go home and they began to throw stones at her. I will never forget that she did that and was very grateful. In the relatively short time that we knew each other, I would say that we were good friends.
53. We moved to our new home in August 2019 and this allowed us to begin to start moving on, but this will be a long process. It has been a really traumatic time for both my son and I, and one that is very difficult for me to explain, and very painful to relive, to try to put into words.

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 for it to be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed: 

Dated: 14.2.20