

## **GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY**

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### **SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF DAVID O'CONNELL**

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#### **Background**

1. I have not previously made a statement to the police but I have already provided a statement to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry as part of phase 1 (IWS00000166).
2. I understand that this statement will form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and will be published on the Inquiry's website in due course.
3. I live in Barandon Walk on the Lancaster West Estate, and have lived here since around 2013. I live with Viviana Rullo, the leaseholder of the property, who has also submitted a statement to the Inquiry for phase 1 and will also be submitting a statement for phase 2.

#### **Fire Safety Systems, advice and complaints**

4. Prior to the fire, I did try to find out what systems the TMO had in place to ensure the fire safety of residents of Barandon Walk. I had previously worked as a busker on the London Underground, and there was a health safety culture instilled in us, so I wanted to find out more about the procedures and measures at Barandon Walk. I had a look and I could not find any fire safety signage or advice for residents on the walls of the building or around it on the estate. I remember asking Viviana about where we should assemble in the event of a fire, and whether, as the leaseholder, she had ever received any information about this. Most places have muster points, and I was curious that there did not appear to be any for the Walkways. She told me she had not received any information.
5. A year or so before the fire, I became curious about the pipes running alongside inside of the walkway, as I thought these may be gas pipes. I was not an expert in this, but if they were it would not seem like necessarily the safest thing to have inside a closed building. I don't think I raised this issue specifically with the TMO.

The truth was I had no expectations of the TMO bothering to answer this question properly.

### **Repairs and maintenance**

6. I had such little confidence in the TMO to sort any our problems because Viviana and I were in constant contact with them about a range of repair issues in our flat. Often when we woke up in the morning, there would be no hot running water. I remember one period when there was no hot water for five consecutive days around the beginning of 2016. As a snapshot of this, I exhibit a section of the repair call out log from Viviana's housing records, as **Exhibit DOC/1**. It felt like the problem seemed to get worse after the refurbishment at Grenfell Tower was completed. On many occasions we would ring the TMO repairs hotline, and we would be told that nobody else had called before. It would be implied to us that we were wrong about the issue we were calling about. In any event what difference does it make if nobody else has called about a problem, if one person is ringing about it?
7. Also, when we called they would often ask Viviana and I to call back at times which were more convenient for them, which was often after 9am. They never said why this was, but I assumed this was because it would mean they wouldn't have to call out an out of hours engineer. Also, when we raised concerns about the hot water system not working in the summer, we were told that we didn't receive heating in the summer; we knew this was not true because why should the hot water not work properly in the summer?
8. In January 2015, someone from TMO came to our flat unannounced and said that he thought there was a water leak. He conducted a search for it, and concluded that there wasn't a leak. A week or so later a neighbour of ours saw two men trying to force the windows in our kitchen to try to get in. Our neighbour told us that she asked what they were doing and asked for ID. She said that they refused to answer, and didn't show any ID. Our neighbour told Viviana and I about this the day after, on 29 January 2015, at which point we called the TMO. A record of this call is exhibited as **Exhibit DOC2**. The call handler informed me that the TMO had the right to break in to find out if there was a leak. There had been no communication from the TMO: no note, no warning, no appointment

made. It could have been anyone trying to get into our home. I subsequently examined the bathroom myself, discovered a leak, and had it fixed at my own expense, because I didn't trust the TMO to do a proper job.

9. It seemed as though there was an attitude at the TMO where residents were not treated with respect as residents. They would push back on every issue or complaint we raised with them. It seemed like it must have been a deliberate on their part to try and question any repair issues raised with them. However, Viviana had the personal phone number for an engineer; he would drive from Hampshire to the Estate and re-fire the boiler in the Tower when the TMO would not call him out.

### **Kensington Academy and Leisure Centre development (KALC)**

10. As soon as I learned of the proposals to build the KALC on the Lancaster West Estate I was opposed to them. I did not think that Lancaster Green was a suitable site to build a school, and that the surrounding infrastructure wasn't right. I felt like the school was being built without a thought for the local residents. Many people from the estate used the green space that used to be there, and once the school was built it was more difficult for them to reach the park without making a big detour around Ladbroke Grove.
11. I remember raising these issues with Cllr Elizabeth Campbell, who was then responsible for Education and Libraries, at an RBKC meeting about the proposals for the school that was held at the Museum of Brands on Lancaster Road. I cannot remember exactly when this meeting was, but I do remember expressing my concern that there would be increased traffic problems that would have a significant and negative effect on many local residents. I cannot remember exactly what she said, but I remember her answer being dismissive of my concerns.
12. Viviana was also involved in the campaign to oppose KALC and worked with the Grenfell Action Group. She was more involved than me, and was a member of the Lancaster West Residents' Association (LWRA); I was not able to become a full member as our understanding was that it was not possible to have more than one person from the same address as an active member. I am now currently more

involved with the LWRA, as Viviana wanted to step back from it for a while. At the moment I am the LWRA's secretary.

### Aftermath

13. I have already given evidence regarding my experiences on the night of the fire as part of my phase 1 statement, which I shall not repeat here. At around 5 to 5.30am on 14 June 2017, Viviana and I were sat on the wall outside Barandon Walk. I remember speaking to my mum on the phone. I wanted to re-assure her that I was OK. Volunteers turned up with biscuits and water for everybody.
14. Viviana and I then went to the Clement James Church at around 5am to find out more information about what was happening. At around 7am, we went to Embassy Café on Mortimer Square. After that, Viviana and I walked to my office on Wood Lane, where I tried to distract myself with work. I had a small amount of cash, as before I left the flat I had managed to pick up my wallet and a coat. I spoke to a friend of mine, who lives in Shepherd's Bush, to ask about the possibility of Viviana and I staying in his spare room that evening. I began to think that we may not be allowed back in to our flat on Barandon Walk that day. I didn't think it would be good to go somewhere too far away, as I wanted to be close to the flat and not too far from our pet cats. I told him I would try to find out more about what was happening, and he told us to contact him again if we needed somewhere to stay that evening.
15. Later that afternoon we went back to Barandon Walk, where the police told us we wouldn't be allowed back into our flat. After that we headed down to the Clement James Church to try to find out more information about what was happening and when we might expect to get back into our flat. We spoke to someone from the TMO who wasn't able to give us any proper information about when we could return to our flat. This distressed Viviana. Some nurses there took her into a separate room [REDACTED] After a while, we went to the Harrow Club, where I picked up a t-shirt and pair of socks.
16. By the early evening time, around 6 to 7pm, we were at the Clement James Centre and we were asking around for information about whether we would be allowed

back into our flat or not for that evening. I think there was somebody from the council there, but I cannot be sure, and I don't think they had any information regardless. The staff at the Clement James Church were trying to help us and had mentioned a few possibilities regarding a place to stay that night. They seemed to be offering places more like somewhere makeshift that we could crash out, rather than hotel rooms. We were exhausted as we had been awake for most of the previous evening. Time was moving on and we were getting worried about nothing materialising. So, I called my friend back who I had spoken to earlier in the day, and asked him whether we could stay at his flat as we had not found anywhere else to stay. He agreed to this, so we travelled over to Shepherd's Bush to stay with him. His flat was on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor, and had a clear view of Grenfell Tower. When we got to this flat, we could still see the fire burning fiercely inside.

17. On 15 June 2017 I had to get up early as I had a deadline at work that I had to submit some work by. I found this was helpful as it encouraged me to just get on with things as normally as possible. While I was at work, Viviana had had conversations with someone from the TMO to see if it was possible for us to get back into our flat. We had heard rumours that some Barandon residents were being let into the flats, so we headed over there as we wanted to find out for ourselves and at about 2pm we were let back in. We started to settle down and checked up on our pets. A few hours later, between 4 and 5pm, a police officer saw one of us standing at the window and they came up to our front door and told us we had to leave. At this point I rang up my friend in Shepherd's Bush, who again offered us somewhere to stay that evening.
18. Later on Thursday evening Viviana and I went to an emergency meeting of the LWRA at the Latymer Community Church. This felt like the only way for us to find out what was happening. It was at this point that we first learned of the Westway and the kind of services it provided. From what I can remember, I do not think anyone from the Council or the TMO came to this meeting.
19. On Friday I went to the office as normal. We were still in shock. It was helpful for me to focus on work for a few hours. That afternoon, Viviana told me she had received a text from the TMO saying we were being allowed back into our flat. We

had a few drinks with some friends after work, did some shopping, and returned home late that evening.

20. Initially when we returned there was no hot water, and we had no internet or television services. The internet would not be fixed properly for the rest of the summer and would only work in fits and starts. We had no hot water for at least a month after this, maybe slightly longer.
21. It was only when we got back that we were able to hear the strange groaning and creaking noises that the remains of Grenfell Tower was making. It was quite loud as it reverberated around the estate. This was obviously concerning. I began to worry that it may collapse and that it wasn't 100% sure it was safe. I am no longer concerned about it falling down, of course, but its presence still makes me feel nervous and the thought is there in the back of my mind.

### **The Westway and Hotel**

22. Viviana and I first went to the Westway on the morning of Saturday 17 June 2017. This was the only place that you could get direct access to the authorities. Viviana and I were glad to have access to our flat again, but we knew we would find it very difficult to carry on being there. We therefore wanted to find somebody from RBKC or the TMO to talk to them about the possibility of moving in to a hotel, at least for a short while.
23. We found someone who worked for the TMO at the Westway, who was sat at an unmarked desk. All the others were marked and identified, so I assumed this was deliberate and because the people from the TMO didn't want people to know they were there because people would have been angry towards them. He did seem very scared when he spoke to us. Anyway, he told us that hotels were not available for leaseholders. This was profoundly depressed. I didn't understand, as we were living in a flat with no hot water and we didn't know how safe it was to be there. We didn't have the resources or the ability to move out in the short term, as all my relatives are from outside of London. This didn't seem fair to me. Why should we have to have suffer if there was provision for other people? We would hear this as a constant mantra from RBKC: 'sorry, this is not available for leaseholders'. People from the Council and the TMO seemed like they felt sorry for

us, but that didn't really fix anything. With RBKC and the TMO, if you don't fight for something you don't get it. I feel like that applied especially if you were a leaseholder. It's still a bit like this.

24. I was not convinced about the safety of the water, as I wasn't sure whether this came through the water mains under Grenfell Tower and I wasn't sure about the safety of the tower. Psychologically it was hard living here. And all the surfaces in our flat were covered in this thick black dust that entered our flat after the fire; some of the windows had been left open while we had been evacuated out of the block. It was becoming harder and harder for Viviana and I to maintain normality.
25. Over the next few days, we went to the Westway most days. I didn't know what half the people at the Westway were doing, and the services being put on seemed to overlook leaseholders. We still had no hot water at our flat, and even though there were showers at the Westway, we still preferred to use our own as the washing facilities at the Westway were not great. We also went to the Westway to try to get more information and to see whether there were different policies in place for leaseholders regarding access to hotels. It was only through Viviana's persistence at the Westway that somebody from RBKC eventually agreed to find us a hotel room. There was nothing different about this time she asked. We just managed to find someone who was sympathetic to our situation. It wasn't a common thing for leaseholders to be given a hotel, and as far as we were aware us being offered the hotel on this day couldn't have been as a result of a policy change at the Council.
26. We were finally offered a room at Hotel Paddington, RBKC did not give us any options at all in terms of our needs and preferences. The hotel staff were very kind. The food was great, and the room was adequate for our needs. We would often only stay there overnight, and would come back to our flat in Barandon Walk to work or check on our pets most days. We checked in to the hotel on 6 July 2017, and checked out on 5 August.
27. There was no information provided to us regarding the potential length of our stay, and we were given no direct point of contact with RBKC or the TMO who we could raise any concerns with. The newsletters were delivered to our hotel rooms



regularly, rather than our flat. I didn't find the newsletter particularly informative, and I think I found out more from speaking to people and going to meetings.

## **Meetings**

28. We went to a number of public LWRA meetings over the following weeks, and after Gold Command was transferred from RBKC to London Councils, we did notice representatives from the Council, the TMO and other public authorities did start to come eventually.
29. At one LWRA meeting in the first few days after the fire, a woman from Public Health England told residents they should not worry about the toxicity of the air. I remember her telling residents that they shouldn't worry about this, and I remember feeling like she was being a little patronising in the way she addressed the room. It was to some extent reassuring when senior figures came to speak at these meetings, but I don't know how much they actually improved things on the ground. These meetings were, however the only place from which Viviana and I could obtain information, so it seemed very important to go to them. People were deeply traumatised, and the meetings were occasionally difficult. These meetings definitely gave me the sense that I was living in a disaster zone.

## **Medical support, counselling and concerns about toxicity**

30. In the following days and weeks after the fire, my GP didn't reach out to contact me. My understanding is that the NHS contacted selected GP surgeries in the North Kensington area and instructed them to make direct contact with Grenfell survivors and those patients registered as living on the Lancaster West Estate. My GP is in Shepherd's Bush, however, as I used to live there. I assumed that is why they didn't contact me. I feel like this should have been more people-tailored.
31. Nobody contacted me within the first week following the fire about the availability of counselling services. Two weeks or so after, however, someone from the NHS knocked on our flat door and asked if we wanted counselling services. They must have been affiliated with some part of the NHS. I didn't feel at the time that this



support would benefit me. This was the only time I can remember counselling services being directly offered to me.

32. The NHS offered me an enhanced health check in the summer of 2019, to measure the toxicity. I accepted this initially but on going there I discovered that it was a standard health check for being 50 which I had just had. I declined the test and left having wasted two days as the first appointment was cancelled when I got there.
33. I feel like the Council should have decontaminated all the Walkways flats properly, rather than just doing a quick paint job. A lot of flats were covered in ash and debris, and many flats, ours included, developed a dusty and oily film from the Tower. RBKC only did a quick paint job of the common parts and individual flats of the Walkways, which was never going to be enough. We were offered this redecoration service, and I can't fault the job they did, but it would have been nice if they'd have done a deep clean beforehand for those flats in the immediate vicinity of the Tower.

## Conclusion

34. I now know far more people in the Ladbroke Grove area than before. Sharing this awful experience has brought everyone here together, but at the same time has created a distance between us and everyone else. It now feels as though there is a line dividing the people who were there, and the people who weren't. I have spoken to friends and family about what has happened, but it is a lot of effort to tell the whole story to people who weren't here. There are things that you can't say as they are just too horrible to describe.
35. The TMO didn't know who lived in each flat, and the fire safety information they had was out of date. They didn't care. There was no long term plan for the Walkways, and the TMO didn't have proper resources. It felt like a bare-bones organisation. It seemed like they wanted to make as much money as possible from housing management and not properly look after tenants.
36. RBKC didn't seem to care either, and my suspicion is that that was why the TMO was set up in the first place. I came to understand they were planning to demolish

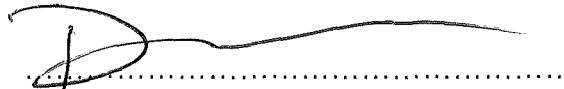
the Walkways, and I think they were running it into the ground as a result. I also lived in Kensington & Chelsea in the 1990s, and the attitude seemed different then. Their attitude was more compassionate. I think the change in their approach is mostly due to them having become preoccupied with property speculation. They knew how much the land was now worth.

37. The government and RBKC must not have had a proper plan to respond to a disaster of this magnitude. I didn't expect people to be left with nothing and to feel abandoned like that. People had no idea what to do, and this must have deepened their trauma. You would expect the services of the state to look after survivors and others after a disaster like this, but there are still many problems even now. Things are improving a little, and people on the estate are feeling a little more optimistic that things are slowly returning to normal. I think it is important that the Inquiry gets to the bottom of why the authorities failed, to make sure people are never let down in the same way again.

#### **Statement of Truth**

**I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.**

Signed:



David O'Connell

Date:

24<sup>th</sup> Feb 2020