

Witness Statement of: Effi Stergiopoulou

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 0

Date of statement: 25 February 2020

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF EFFI STERGIOPOULOU

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.

I, *Effi Stergiopoulou*, will say as follows:-

1. I am a resident of Hurstway Walk. 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 22 May 2018 (Unique reference number: **IWS00000432**) 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 7-34, and module 4 in paragraphs 35-55.

Background

4. I moved into [REDACTED] Hurstway Walk in February 2008; I am a leaseholder and have shared ownership with Notting Hill Housing. I work as a Young People's Health Network Coordinator for the NHS.
5. Grenfell Tower is part of the same estate as my block. It is located at the bottom of my block and so is very close to my flat, although you cannot see it from the flat windows as they face the other way. I live on the second floor which means that there is a flat roof above my flat. My flat was also closely linked to the tower in other ways, for example, the main boiler for my block was based in the Tower and destroyed in the fire.
6. Prior to the fire, I liked living here, except for my frustrating experience of the TMO when trying to resolve issues within my flat and the wider estate, some of which will be described below.

TMO

7. It was my experience that the TMO were not at all concerned about residents and not interested in resolving repairs in an acceptable manner and timeframe. There was a lack of transparency about whether the repairs I raised (those relating to the outside of my flat, such as leaks in the roof) had been completed, or whether they had even been logged.
8. On the occasions that I spoke to customer services/call centre staff from the TMO on the phone, I often found them to be quite rude, not at all empathetic, and quite quick to put blame on me for issues, or suggest that I hadn't considered clearly apparent potential causes for problems. For example, when I was experiencing leaks from the glass vents on the roof in the communal corridor, I remember being asked whether I had just left the window open, causing the wall of my kitchen to become wet. There is no outside window near my kitchen and it was clearly visible where the leak originated from.
9. I was rarely, if ever, able to speak to the same person on the phone twice, and so it was not possible to build a relationship, but also, there did not appear to be a record

of information kept in my experience, so I would always have to explain things again and again. It was rarely possible to ascertain whether a repair had been completed, what action had been taken and whether the repair was now considered complete. I soon took to emailing as opposed to phoning to ensure that there was a written record, and also something to refer to. Unfortunately, this did not significantly improve the information flow or resolution of repairs.

10. I also remember a number of occasions where appointments were confirmed, and nobody would come to assess them, meaning I would have altered work commitments or stayed in to wait in vain. All of this contributed to a real lack of trust and confidence in the TMO.

11. In the end, after attempting to escalate the challenges I was facing, it became a question of picking my battles as even the complaints process did not produce satisfactory results and I did not know how to escalate complaints further. I was running out of energy to pursue repairs when nothing seemed to be getting done and it was impossible to obtain information.

Complaints procedure

12. I am familiar with the procedure for submitting online complaints. I submitted an online complaint to the TMO in October 2012 in respect of leaks and liability for these, and again in July 2015 in respect of fire safety, to the latter of which, I received a response in the first week of August. I then recall making a further online complaint in September 2016 regarding a continuing leak and a new issue with the stack pipe backing up into my bath. I was not made aware however of the procedure for escalating a complaint. On the last occasion, I was offered £50 as a compensation gesture in recognition of the fact that the matter had not been dealt with properly.

Issues in the flat

Leaks and damp

13. As soon as I moved into the flat in February 2008, I noticed that there was a leak from

the ceiling vents outside, in the corner between my flat and the neighbours at [REDACTED] When it rained heavily, the wall was getting soaked and the landing below and the communal corridor were also getting wet. The water was actually soaking through the walls into my flat. I called the TMO Housing Office on numerous occasions about this. It seemed that they were logging it as a new repair every time, which concerned me as there did not appear to be a systematic approach to the repair.

14. Although staff would often say that they would call me back with an update, I never received a call with any further information of what investigations or repairs had been done, if any, and what the next steps would be. Even when I contacted the office with update requests, I hardly ever received a response. I thought it may have been because Notting Hill own the head lease of my flat, and so the TMO might have been corresponding with them rather than me, but this was not properly communicated to me if so. I felt it was more urgent than this in any event and that they would have prioritised the fact that the issue needed seeing to. When I spoke to Notting Hill Housing about this at a later stage they were not aware of the issue so I assume they had not been communicated with either.
15. By late 2008, the leak started penetrating further into my flat through the kitchen wall, damaging the wall but also creating a smell of damp. I began to notice patches of damp appearing in other rooms indicating new leaks. I telephoned the TMO to no avail. At this point, I also spoke to my neighbour at Flat [REDACTED] They told me that their roof terrace, which is the space above my flat, had been flooding for many years as a result of the water not draining efficiently, and that this had never been fully resolved, despite them having reported the issue on countless occasions.
16. At some point, it seemed as though some repairs must have been carried out on the terrace, as even through bad weather conditions, the flooding and leaking had stopped. In October 2010, a maintenance surveyor was sent from leasehold services to assess the level of damage done by the flooding and damp. The surveyor took damp readings from all of the areas of concern and confirmed that the damp in the bedroom area had not entirely dried. The surveyor recommended that the ceilings in every room would need re-plastering and redecorating.

17. After submitting a claim form in respect of the insurance cover for this to RBKC on 13 December 2010, nearly two years later, in October 2012, I submitted a formal complaint as I had not been able to gain further information and was told that the claim had been submitted to the wrong department. I then received a letter from Lancaster West which confirmed that the damage to the terrace above my flat had been resolved, but that the liability in respect of the required works remained outstanding. I was not surprised that I had not been made aware that the repair had been carried out, but that obviously emphasises the extent of poor communication.
18. I submitted a complaint to the TMO in October 2012 when the repairs were still outstanding and the damp was worsening. In the living room in particular, puddles were forming on the floor and window sill. The repair to my flat was eventually carried out at some point in 2013.
19. Something else that stands out in my memory is that, in the course of this process, John Griffin, the maintenance surveyor, came to my flat with three other men, including the decorators that were going to repair my flat, prior to the redecorating being carried out. He was commenting on the condensation on my single glazed windows and that that could cause the leak on the ceiling which to me was obviously a separate problem, because that was a localised leak. He suggested I buy some cereal bowls, paint them, put salt in them and place them on the window sill, and that they would absorb the condensation and resolve the problem with the ceiling. I found this suggestion extremely unhelpful and insulting as it was ignoring the source of the problem, which was the leaking roof.
20. At the end of December 2013, when there was bad weather, after the flat had been redone, and the leaking areas sealed, the leak in the living room returned and stained the newly plastered and painted ceiling.
21. In January 2015 all leaks appeared again inside my flat, and again, it was challenging to arrange for the repair. I cannot recall exactly what happened after this point, but I know that some more work was done to patch up the roof because my neighbours had to let the workmen in to gain access. The leak stopped after this.

22. When I first moved into my flat, nothing regarding asbestos was raised in the survey. A few weeks later it came to my attention that there was a panel covering stack pipes right next to the front door to my flat and it had a sticker reading, 'danger asbestos'. When I found this, I requested an asbestos survey report which I received quickly without issues.
23. Around January or February 2018, an asbestos specialist came to assess my flat. This was because the Council had offered to paint all residents' flats following the Grenfell fire and wanted to ensure their painters were not exposed to asbestos. I was told this by the RBKC staff member managing the bookings for painting the flats. Whilst I commend the Council for ensuring their contractors' working environment is safe, I was shocked that for ten years I had been living in a flat with asbestos in the ceiling, which in several areas had been damaged by leaks, and that the TMO and RBKC did not have any concern for my health, or sense of urgency to repair these. Samples were taken from damaged areas as the surveyor suspected asbestos in the ceiling, and it was only then that it came to my attention that asbestos was also present inside my flat.
24. I was worried at this time as, due to the damage caused by the flooding, the ceiling had been crumbling. The report came back and the surveyor concluded it was low risk, but when I asked him, the surveyor said, even with that level of risk, I should have an annual check, to ensure nothing has changed. I requested a copy of the report from RBKC and was told that I had to put in a Freedom of Information request to obtain it, even though it related to a flat that I own. I did so and was sent the report in March 2018.
25. One year later, as advised by the asbestos surveyor, I followed up with RBKC's W11 Repairs Team regarding the annual asbestos check and was told, in an email from that team, that there weren't any plans for follow up and that "Asbestos - if secure or encapsulated in a residential property - does not need to be monitored annually, unless it is going to be disturbed or has been through an accident/leak etc. I'm happy for us to send a surveyor to look at your home, to provide peace of mind if helpful?"

26. I took the team up on their offer of a visual inspection and everything was deemed safe. Following the above statement in the email about asbestos being safe unless disturbed through an accident or leak, I am concerned that I have been exposed to it since I moved into my flat, given the history of damage to my ceiling because of leaks. As previously stated I am shocked that the TMO did not inform me of the risk and did not take the necessary steps to repair the damage quickly.

Communal area

Rubbish disposal

27. The chutes for rubbish disposal in the communal areas are quite small and a regular sized bin bag has never been able to fit inside them. Because of this, residents leave their rubbish bags on the landing on a daily basis. Since the fire happened, there have been more cleaners manning the building, who are disposing of the bin bags, but before then, the bags would stay on the landing until the cleaner was scheduled to come again and be a real issue. There was, and still is, nowhere to put larger items, for example, beds, mattresses, cookers, that people need to dispose of, and so these would also frequently be, and still are, left in the communal areas, next to the stairs. This is a particular problem over bank holidays because there is an extra day that no cleaner is present.

28. This, of course, was, and remains, a fire hazard, and should people need to evacuate, some of these items could be blocking two fire escapes including the main entrance, in fact they actually pose a fire risk in themselves. The facilities have not improved since the fire and so the problem persists to this day. I have sent a many emails including photos about the problem but nothing has been resolved.

Fire safety

29. As a leaseholder, fire alarms in my flat are my responsibility and I installed those, one in the living room and one in the hallway. I have been surprised that there have been no checks to these at any time however, as I would have considered that the TMO/RBKC had and have a duty of care to all residents in the building, including

ensuring that leaseholders' properties are fitted with smoke detectors so they do not pose a risk to council tenants.

30. I never recall seeing any fire alarms in the communal areas, or any fire extinguishers or other equipment, but it was also not on my mind and so I would not necessarily have noticed them. No drills were carried out and I do not recall receiving any information in respect of what to do if there were to be a fire.

Previous experience of a fire

31. In July 2015, a neighbour of mine left a pan on their electric hob, forgot to turn off the hob and left their flat. It was a surprise to me that no alarm went off and the only reason I became aware of the issue was because they had left their window open, and I think the smoke must have drifted up and through the vent in my bathroom window, which meant that I could smell it. It was after midnight and I went out into the hallway, where I found another neighbour, who had also smelt it. We identified the flat that it was coming from, and as the window to that flat was open, my neighbour was able to pull the blind to one side, which is when he saw that it was coming from the pan on the hob in the kitchen. I called the fire brigade who attended, entered the flat and removed the pan.
32. The next day I contacted the Lancaster West Office to inform them of what had happened, expecting that they would confirm that they would, at the very least, test the smoke alarm in my neighbour's flat and check any alarms in the communal areas. I was told that it was not common for alarms to be installed in communal areas as they would be tampered with and residents would complain about that. They also told me it was the responsibility of the occupants to ensure that their alarms were in working order.
33. As I was not satisfied with my concerns not being taken seriously, I logged a complaint with the TMO as no alarm had sounded, either in the neighbour's flat, or in the communal areas. I received a phone call and written response to the complaint and was told that there were no smoke alarms in our communal areas, as the ceiling vents are designed to open in the event of a fire and let the smoke escape. I was also told, in

an email from the TMO, "There is no requirement under current fire legislation or associated good practice guides for there to be an automatic fire detection (fire alarm) system installed in this building." I don't entirely understand the rationale in the above arguments as in my mind an alarm is designed to alert residents to the fire so that they can escape. I was also told again that fire alarms had been installed in all council flats (my neighbour downstairs confirmed they had an alarm) and that it was the residents' responsibility to ensure that they work.

34. Although serious harm was prevented in the previous night's incident, it was clear to me that it was not safe to pass responsibility of checking and maintenance of fire alarms to residents, especially as some are elderly or immobile and would not be able to reach the unit. I was shocked that the TMO had no sense of their duty of care to the residents of the building they were being paid to manage and maintain, neither had RBKC.

Aftermath

35. I have set out my experience of the night in detail in paragraphs 6-18 of my first statement.
36. In the morning of 14 June 2017, I woke up around 5am and shortly after was alerted to the fire by my mother who had seen the news on TV and called me to check if I was ok. I then looked out of my window which faces Bramley Road (away from Grenfell Tower) and saw around 20 fire engines outside. I turned on the TV, saw that Grenfell was on fire and went outside. The tower was still burning and I met my neighbours who had been alerted to the fire earlier in the night, were telling me how the tragedy had unfolded and that there were still people inside the building. As I set out in paragraph 19 of my first statement, on the evening of 14 June 2017, I stayed with a friend who lives nearby because I did not know whether it was safe to stay at my flat.
37. There were rumours of residents being evacuated and I was concerned that Grenfell Tower might collapse or that there may be a gas explosion as I didn't know how my gas pipes were connected to Grenfell with our communal heating/gas systems. The

gas supply in my kitchen remained connected during and after the fire as far as I am aware. Some neighbours, however, told me a few days after the fire that their supply had been disconnected for safety reasons. This confirmed my fears about the thoroughness of the council's safety precautions.

38. I returned to Hurstway the day after the fire to collect a few items and to try to get some information from neighbours, as no one had contacted me to tell me whether it was safe to return to my flat. When attempting to find out whether it was safe to enter my building, I saw a police officer and asked whether it would be possible for me to go and collect some belongings from my flat. He told me that nobody was allowed in at all, although I had just seen someone enter the building across from where we were standing and so I couldn't understand this. He told me that if I needed any information that I should go to Kensington Leisure Centre.

39. I began to walk in that direction and came across a second police officer close by. He told me that I in fact could go into my flat as that part of the building, being further away, had not been evacuated. It was extremely unhelpful to have these mixed messages and it did not contribute to feeling safe in returning. I collected some items from the flat and then returned to my friend's house, where I stayed until Saturday 17th June. I remember also feeling concerned about the gas works that had been ongoing just outside my block for several weeks and so I didn't want to remain close by in case they were linked to Grenfell Tower and had been damaged.

Relief Centres

40. I attended the Westway Sports Centre in order to pick up the financial assistance payment offered to all residents. Other than this, I did not spend any time there in the aftermath.

Practical support

41. It was through one of my neighbours that I found out that I was eligible for the financial assistance mentioned above. I attended the Westway within the first week of the fire to collect £250. When I attended, I remember I had to fill in a form with the

Red Cross and also a second form. These were then submitted and the cash was provided on the same day.

42. Several months after the fire, the Council offered to clean residents' carpets and curtains and to paint our flats, presumably to remove any residue from the fire, and I took them up on their offer. I cannot recall seeing any debris or soot on my balcony but remember my immediate neighbour telling me they had significant amounts in their flat. I assumed there would be particles of dust and soot from the fire present in my flat and welcomed the council's offer. My experience of having my curtains dry cleaned was appalling. The whole process appeared very disorganised and I was not given a receipt at the time of collection despite requesting one and asking how I would have proof of having handed over my curtains. I was told the person collecting would take pictures of the curtains as a record, but I did not receive a copy or a receipt. Unfortunately, once the curtains had been cleaned, I only received one set back and it took several months to make clear to the Council that I really had not received them as there had not been a receipt system, and for the Council to compensate me.

Communication

43. During the time that I was staying at my friend's house, I tried to ring RBKC for an update as to whether it was safe to return home, and to establish the situation with evacuation. I got through to someone who was obviously just manning the phone. I was told that they were not able to give me any of this information because the Council were due to do a press release. The number that I had called was one that I had been provided from a neighbour, or found online, and was supposed to be a housing number for emergency assistance. I could not believe that the council seemed more concerned with the press release than actually helping and guiding those that had been impacted.
44. For the most part, it was a question of relying on each other as it was chaos. I would get most of the information that I needed from my neighbours. There was no point where I was able to identify someone from Council, or build up any sort of familiarity with anyone; they just had no presence. I was working full time so I don't know if

someone attempted to make contact during the day, but certainly they made no efforts in the initial stages to fit around my schedule and contact me at other times to see how I was, or what I might need, neither was a card put through my letter box to indicate that someone had called or tried to visit.

45. At some point, newsletters started coming through the front door, but I would struggle to say when that was. I remember thinking that it was at quite a late stage. The newsletters could have been helpful in theory, but were often repeating over and over again the same information, so it was not clear whether the information presented within them was old or new. It was as if the Council were just trying to show that they were keeping in touch with residents, but there was no actual concern for the content, like keeping up appearances. The sort of information that was circulated was about the mobilisation of the wellbeing service or activities for children; there may also have been updates as to the procedure for being rehoused. The information did not really seem to be tailored to the various types of residents on the estate.

Emotional Support

46. Nobody came to offer support in the first week, but, later, I remember a GP knocked on my door to ask how I was doing and explained that I could access my GP for support if needed. They were trying to contact all residents in my block.
47. I cannot recall specifically anything being posted, or given to me in respect of emotional support, nor do I remember being contacted by email or phone about the counselling service. I think it was mentioned in the newsletters though when they eventually started coming through.

Communication

48. We had residents meetings after the fire, where residents could ask questions and at one point, someone from Gold Command attended and informed us how the tower and the community aspect was being managed. . The usefulness of these meetings was limited at that point because residents were still in shock from the trauma they had experienced and very angry at the lack of support and organisation; the meetings

were mostly dealing with questions around individual situations. Had there been a more structured approach from the council and/or the government to supporting individuals, the meetings could have been more helpful for all concerned. I remember finding out at these meetings that some letters had been sent to residents either with information about meetings or other important updates.

49. Communication was difficult and I relied on asking my neighbours for updates as they often seemed to have more information than me; this was because in my case, RBKC told me information was being sent via Notting Hill. Notting Hill denied receiving most, if not all, of the communication, so I was being passed back and forth between them, not knowing where the problem lay and not receiving any information.
50. Yet again, I found it astonishing that, in such an extreme situation like the aftermath of the Grenfell fire, the Council did not use common sense to communicate with shared owners on Lancaster West, for example, by posting all important communication through the doors, or asking for our addresses to send information by post; they chose to prioritise the routine procedure they use, which was hindering me receiving important communication at such a distressing and uncertain time. I requested to be communicated with directly but can, to this day, not be sure that I receive all relevant letters.
51. It was helpful when residents took initiative to set up the WhatsApp group to receive updates on; that is when I first felt as though I was more informed. Certainly until then, the most helpful source was my neighbours. I wanted to know whether we were going to be evacuated, and whether it was safe to remain in our flats, but I never received any information or evidence of safety checks given its proximity to the Tower and the interconnectedness in terms of pipework. I did not begin to feel safer in my flat until several months after the fire. My concerns were around my health, i.e. ongoing air quality due to toxic particles released in the fire and from the burnt building, the safety of the structure of Grenfell whether debris would continue to fall from the building or it would collapse and whether gas pipes had been damaged and may cause a fire hazard. Latimer Road Underground Station was closed for safety reasons for several weeks, yet residents of the estate were not given information to be reassured that it was safe to continue living there. There was a great amount of

uncertainty in the neighbourhood and availability of support was chaotic and lacking. Emotions were running high as friends and relatives were looking for survivors from the fire they had not been able to locate and were putting up posters on the streets with their names, photographs and contact numbers. Neighbours were telling each other the shocking accounts of what they had witnessed on the night of the fire and how they were trying to get support.


Impact

52. On the surface of things, it may not seem that life in my block has changed a lot since the fire, but it certainly has in many ways that are difficult to explain.
53. Living in close proximity of the burnt shell of Grenfell since the fire has a great impact, especially during the time when it was not covered up. The ; prospect of the tower being brought down is extremely worrying, especially as there is little information about the timeline, how it will be carried out, whether residents will be temporarily rehoused to avoid, for example, asbestos exposure and how the surrounding flats and area will be cleaned afterwards to remove any toxic debris or residue. Residents have had ongoing concerns about their health because of asbestos exposed and released in the fire and have been given no reassurance by experts. I and other residents am also worried following the more recent discussion around soil toxicity; it is difficult to know what the long-term health consequences of living here will be.
54. The estate faces years of disruption because of the planned works to bring it up to standard following the fire as it was neglected for years. Leaseholders are being disproportionately impacted as the Council is planning to charge for the works which are being carried out as a result of the fire and which we have choice over.
55. These are a few of the more concrete and practical ways that life has changed since the fire, but there are many more which are a lot more nuanced and difficult to speak about.

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: Effi Stergiopoulou
Signature: 
Date: 25/02/2020

