

**Witness Statement of: Eliane Lara**

**No. of statement: 1**

**Exhibits: 0**

**Date of statement: 25/02/2020**

## **GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY**

---

### **FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF ELIANE LARA**

---

I, **Eliane Lara**, will say as follows:-

1. I was a resident of 536 Barandon 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 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 7-25, and module 4 in paragraphs 26-30.

### **Background**

#### *Living in Barandon Walk*

4. I moved into 536 Barandon Walk in September 1994 with my partner and our two sons, who were 1 and 4 at the time. My mother in law at the time lived on Barandon Walk then and had observed that the flat been unoccupied for a while. I therefore approached the Town Hall and said that I knew that nobody was living there and

they told me that I could rent it. The tenancy was in my name and I rented it from RBKC for the duration of the time that we lived there.

5. The property was a 2-bedroom maisonette, positioned on the top floor of Barandon Walk. The sitting room faced inwards, overlooking the green concourse area in the middle of the finger blocks. If you were to look out of the living room or bedroom windows, you would be able to see the Tower from the front, to the right hand side, from about the 7<sup>th</sup> floor upwards. Neither the block nor the flat itself were very easy on the eyes. I always thought that the arrangement of the buildings had the feel of a prison. I did however do my utmost to make the flat homely for my family.
6. When we first moved in, I was working for an Estate Agents, Brian Lack, just off Ladbroke Grove. Then later in 1994, I began working for a GP practice. My two youngest sons were born in 2006 and 2011.
7. We remained living in the flat as a family of 5 until after the fire. Since 2019, we have lived in a new property in Richmond, as we had to move after the fire.

#### *Management of the Building*

8. The general attitude of the TMO was very negative. Whatever I reported, they did not seem to care, and I believe they frequently thought people were complaining for the sake of it, or for something to do. I just wanted for things to work the way they were supposed to and for my family to feel safe and secure. It got to the point where I couldn't rely on them and so I largely resorted to trying to resolve things myself, or relying on friends.
9. I don't think people had any faith in what they were told by the TMO. I got the sense that they would just say what you wanted to hear to appease you. They did not follow through with things.
10. I was not aware of a complaints process.

## **Interaction with the TMO: Issues in the flat**

### *Living Room balcony doors*

11. In the living room, we had a large set of French windows opening onto the balcony. Towards the end of 2007, my eldest son, who was very young at the time, accidentally kicked a football into the window and it broke, leaving half a pane of glass still in the frame. I called the TMO Estate Office to ask for this to be fixed as soon as possible. I emphasised that it was very dangerous with small children living in the flat all the same; I asked if someone could come and see to it as soon as possible. I was really worried about one of my sons hurting themselves on the glass, or about the glass falling on top of them. I waited over a week and nobody attended, and I had to tape over the window frame to protect my children. When I telephoned again, I was told that this wouldn't be classed as an emergency, but that someone would attend soon; no specific appointment date was given.
12. This was made more frustrating by the fact that I had already made requests for someone to come and look at the same door earlier in the year. As the door was old, when opening it, it would frequently come away from its hinges. I know that quite a few other residents also called the TMO about this as well and this had been a general issue for some time. The French window in the flat opposite mine came off completely. Again, the TMO didn't seem to give any consideration to the fact that having children meant that this was quite a dangerous state of affairs, and so very troubling for me.
13. Eventually, somebody did come to the flat, but it was an electrician. The issue with the door had been inaccurately recorded by someone in the Estate Office as an electrical issue that needed resolving. It was a very long time before this got resolved.
14. In the summer of 2008, I phoned the Estate Office to ask if someone could come round and put a lock on the top or bottom of the balcony door as the main lock was

not working. It took some time, but after around 2 months, someone came and did this. Shortly afterwards the key broke in the new lock, so I had to ask for someone to come out again. Again, I was told that this wasn't an emergency. At the time, I remember being frustrated by this and I brought up the fact that if there was a fire, it may be necessary to move on to the balcony with my children in order to keep safe.

15. Ironically that was the same day that there was a fire in Barandon Walk, which I will say more about below. I phoned the Estate Office again the next day and spoke to somebody called Lynda, who was not the same person that I had spoken to the day before. I asked for it to be specifically noted that I had phoned the previous day, drawn this issue to their attention, and raised that it may be a fire issue and that it had not been classified as an emergency. Someone was sent around the same afternoon and fixed the lock. However, this then continued to be an ongoing problem for some years, with the lock continually breaking, and amongst other things, being a concern for me in terms of security.

### *Boiler*

16. In around 2009, I had an issue with the boiler and there was no heating in the flat as a result I remember this quite vividly because the plumber who came around to investigate it was quite a small man. I recall that, because of the position of the boiler, I had to give him a chair to stand on so that he could see it properly. He somehow managed to drop his spanner behind the access panel enclosing the boiler during his investigations, which meant that this had to be removed in order for the spanner to be retrieved. He described to me afterwards that he had remedied it in a way, which should serve as a permanent solution, but the same day, the boiler itself started dripping water, and so I had to phone them and start the process again. The TMO said that someone would come back to look at it, but as I recall, I think it was some weeks before this happened, and this then caused continual issues for a lot of the time that we lived in the property.



## *Electrics*

17. Hurstway Walk and Testerton Walk had refurbishments done to their bathrooms and kitchens in 2011 or 2012, I believe that this was in accordance with government guidelines. Someone came from RBKC to look at mine at around the same time that the other flats were being done, and they said I was not able to have mine done, as I had refurbished my kitchen and bathroom too recently. They did however arrange for the flat to be re-wired and they counted that as having upgraded the flat.
18. After this was done, one of the plugs in the kitchen by the washing machine would continually come away from the wall, exposing the wires. I phoned the Estate Office to report this as usual and emphasised that there were children in the house, and that this was dangerous for everyone. Someone came and just put a thin strip of silicone around the outline of the plug. It couldn't have lasted more than a few months before it happened again and I had to call someone out.
19. Around this time, and leading up to the fire, there were also quite a few electrical fuses. I had a new cooker in my kitchen and I remember that from towards the end of 2015, it kept sparking and tripping at the socket used or turning the cooker on and off. Someone came around to check it and said that it all looked to be in good working order.
20. In around March 2017, just before the fire, I was cooking a roast and there was a massive bang from the kitchen. I went in and my whole cooker had blown. After the fire happened, when workmen came around to assess the wiring. RBKC sent an electrician around to look at the cooker again. This electrician said that there was no wonder it had happened as the wires had previously been fixed the wrong way around.

## *Blocked toilet*

21. Due to it being an old building, everything frequently got blocked and clogged. I reported the toilet blockage to the TMO in June 2010, and someone from the TMO

attended who said that they would have to break the cistern in order to fix it. I said that I didn't want this as I didn't trust that they would replace it and I couldn't be left in a position where I was left without a toilet, especially with so many children in the house.

22. I rang the Estate Office while he was there and told them what he had said and that he was ill equipped. I passed the person on the phone in the office over to the plumber, and the plumber said he would come back another day. I emphasised to the Estate Office that if there was a delay and it flooded, they wouldn't only be dealing with my flat, but likely also the two below me, so three in total. After a lot of discussion about this, someone came back that afternoon and looked thoroughly. They said that the toilet was blocked because the leaves had filled up the drain on the balcony and so the pipes were not draining properly.

### *Communal Areas*

23. The TMO were no better at keeping the communal parts of the block in good condition. The windows in the ceiling of the top floor of Barandon Walk were supposed to be weather censored, to close if there was rain or snow. They wouldn't, and frequently this meant that a pool of water would collect on the floor of the communal hallway on the top floor. It would also drip down and reach the ground floor of Barandon Walk at times and so this would bother residents on the first floor too. This was a real problem for me because I often would be juggling young children, holding the hand of one and pushing the push chair and maybe carrying the push chair down the stairs. If I had slipped, it might have been quite nasty for me and the children. Again, I brought this to the attention of the TMO repeatedly but I don't think it was ever properly resolved.

### *Asbestos*

24. I am aware that in 2018, after the fire, a lot of asbestos was removed from the flat. There was so much that we had to go and stay in temporary accommodation, about which I will say more below. This doesn't appear to be reflected in the repairs data. I am very concerned as to what my family and I were exposed to in the time that we were living there.

### *Previous fires*

25. As I briefly touched on previously, there was a fire in Barandon Walk in around 2009. It was in the evening time but as I remember, it was still light and it wasn't a time when most people would have started going to bed. It had started in the rubbish chutes. What brought it to my attention at first was the light reflecting off the sirens of the fire ambulance bouncing around the living room. I was used to hearing sirens go down the main road and would often filter them out but hadn't noticed a fire engine so close before.

26. I opened the front door to see what was happening and it was so smoky that you couldn't see in front of you. I knew to wrap my face and those of the boys with a towel and my instinct was just to leave the building. I had to carry the youngest and hold the hands of the other two, and I felt my way down the bannister. It was very disorientating and difficult to find the way to the main door. No smoke alarm sounded at all in the communal areas. It wouldn't have done in the flats anyway because of where the fire was.

27. I remember hearing from some of the other residents in Barandon Walk afterwards that the main concern of the fire brigade were the gas pipes, though I didn't hear this from a member of the fire brigade directly. The gas pipes had been a concern for everyone living in Barandon for some time. The main gas hub was in Grenfell Tower and the pipes, as I understand it, were fed underneath through the basement garages, and were exposed within the block. I never made a complaint about them but I understand that others in the block did. This was also because young people



would come in and swing off them or play around them and we were very conscious of how dangerous this could be.

28. After the fire, someone did come around and label the gas pipes. I spoke up about this at the time to those that were labelling the pipes because nobody had ever taken any interest before, and I believed that it was too little too late.

## **Fire Safety**

29. The only thing that I can recall in terms of fire safety equipment in the block was that there were two red boxes, which said 'Fire' on them positioned at the front and back entrances. I think that these contained extinguishers and perhaps other things, but they were always padlocked shut. There were no signs in respect of fire safety either. The only signs were those advising that children shouldn't play in the indoor corridors.

### *After the fire*

30. Following the fire, things have changed quite dramatically in respect of fire safety. I know that the flats on the middle level have had fire curtains put in, though we hadn't on our floor. RBKC also said after the fire that they had to replace our doors with fire doors. I didn't want this because the previous door was fantastically secure. When the new fire door was first put in, you could see gaps all the way around the edges, to the extent that, if you were standing outside of the flat, you could see snippets of the inside. The door hadn't been fitted level. I went down to Baseline to report this, and someone returned and removed the hinges and refitted it.

## **Aftermath**

31. The night of the fire itself, and most of the day after, are something of a daze to me, because of the distress. Three of my sons and I watched the fire from around 1:30am on the morning of 14<sup>th</sup> June, until late afternoon. We were standing right below



where we lived in front of the Tower. I didn't know where to go with my kids. I remember having a burning sensation in my throat, and that there was a lady, Fatima, who was giving out surgical masks to the elderly and children.

32. I think at around 5am, a friend told us that we could go and take shelter in St Clements or St James, and at some point, I went to St Clement's Church to use the toilets, but I didn't feel right staying or helping myself to anything because we hadn't been residents in the Tower itself.
33. I just wanted to make sure that we were all together and it wasn't until about 5pm that we realised that we hadn't properly eaten or even had any water. I couldn't tell you what I did for most of those hours. I lost all concept of time, though I could hear and see everything happening around me. I carried that feeling for quite some time afterwards.
34. One of the people that was congregated around the Tower with us said that we could go to Westway Sport Centre ('Westway') for some food and drinks, and I remember someone saying that Jamie Oliver had sent some parcels of food over. We made our way there; I cannot really remember RBKC having much of a presence. There were volunteers from different areas and boroughs but I cannot remember being aware of anyone from our Council.
35. We also went to the Curve slightly after it opened in the late summer, where we were told about hotel accommodation, and the availability of food and clothes, but again, I thought that was really for people who no longer had a home to return to, and had lost everything. It wasn't communicated clearly to me that this might be an option for us.
36. There was also a large media presence outside of the relief Centres, and around the Tower. They would be listening into conversations and hovering close by; they would come along and put a microphone in your face. I remember one of reporter kept asking me how I was feeling and other very intrusive questions. I said that I was overwhelmed and that we needed some space. It was too much to be there at

that time as there was too much going on. It was just a blur of movement and noise and I wasn't taking anything in. After a while, my children and I returned to sit on a brick wall outside of the Tower, where people often sat in the summertime, so that we could have some space.

37. Later in the evening, when it was starting to go dark, people were going back to St Clement's, but I didn't want to do that as it was too busy and chaotic. My youngest son's godparents were close by, so we decided to go there. My mum had called us at that point but I didn't want to worry her by turning up there. I got in the car and just drove to White City where my son's godparents lived. It was one of those journeys where I couldn't tell you how I got there, but we just did, I must have gone into automatic.
38. The day after the fire, on 15 June, we were able to briefly return to the flat, escorted by police, to get clothes and belongings. We had to show our ID and things like that. I went back with my eldest son to get a suitcase and filled it with things we might need for staying in White City. There were lots of stories going on and being passed around residents at that time, and it wasn't always clear what we were allowed to do, or where we were allowed to go. We knew that we were not able to return to the flat at that point as the police had said it was not safe to be in the surrounds of the Tower.
39. On Friday 16<sup>th</sup> June, we returned to the flat again. There were very few families there then; two of my neighbours were there downstairs, but nobody else from what I can recall. It felt very eerie, I had never really experienced such a feeling. There was usually a lot of commotion around the block and in the corridors, and it was quite full of life, but you could have heard a pin drop then. For the following weeks that we were there, I kept thinking that I could hear creaking; at the time I thought that my mind was playing tricks on me, but looking back, I think this noise could have come from the Tower. It was also very cold and we had no hot water as we didn't have the gas working. For all these reasons, I found it very difficult to be in

the building. I kept the curtains shut for the whole time as I didn't want to see anything.

40. We went to the Westway on a few occasions as well in that first week and there seemed to be a mixture of people there volunteering. They would give you a wrist band which would mean that you would be able to get access to things you needed, such as sandwiches or clothes. I didn't take these things, but I tended to take the boys there, because they could do face painting and other activities. I thought that was a nice distraction for them, and a chance for us to get out of the flat. There were people in the Westway who mentioned in passing being able to go to a hotel, but they didn't fully explain this at any point, and I felt quite adamant at that stage that I wanted to remain at home.
41. In the first week of October 2017, after encouragement and help from my key worker, me and my two youngest sons went to the Grand Park Hotel, in Paddington. We were originally provided with a double room, and then quite quickly we changed to a slightly bigger room, with one double bed and one pull out bed. It felt like a relief to be there at first but we were told the following day that they would only provide breakfast, which is not what I had understood. For this reason, I contacted my key worker again and explained that this wasn't sustainable under the circumstances and with my sons. I returned home for a few nights and then the three of us went to the Millennium Gloucester Hotel in the second week of October 2017.
42. We had a fairly good experience at the Millennium Gloucester Hotel. We had three separate beds and it was very comfortable. I remember it was the best night's sleep I'd had until that point, after the fire.
43. During the day, the boys would go to school, and so I would either return to the flat to collect things that we needed, or do the washing, or go to see my mum at her house for the day. Then I would return with the boys, to the hotel, in the late afternoon.



44. We stayed at that hotel until 16 December 2017, which is when the heating and hot water were turned back on, and we returned to Barandon Walk.
45. On 5 February 2018, I was offered Stafford House in Kensington. It was a beautiful place, very spacious, and on the high street. There was then however a lot of confusion as we had been told at the Town Hall, if you were accommodated temporarily, you didn't have to pay, but I was paying duplicate fees.
46. On 25 May 2018, a letter came through the post at Stafford House stating that, should we want to stay, we would need to start covering the costs of the property, the total of which were £2,000. We left that day as we had only taken very few belongings. We packed up my son's car and drove back to Barandon Walk, after cleaning the flat and leaving it as we had found it.
47. We stayed in Barandon Walk then from May 2018 until March 2019, when we went to stay temporarily in Bramley House. We moved in there on 19 March 2019. This was because in February 2019, we were notified of an issue with asbestos in our flat in Barandon Walk.
48. I handed the tenancy back to Baseline and signed a secure tenancy for our current house in Richmond on 23 June 2019.

#### *Debris*

49. There were a lot of large chunks of debris and ash on the balcony and the awning when we returned to the flat. We did not touch these and they were cleaned up professionally some time later.

#### *Financial assistance*

50. I was entitled to emergency funds. I think it was someone from St Clement's church that made me aware that this was available. I went to The Curve to fill in the forms for the Red Cross and we had to take proof of where we had lived and our passports or another form of ID. It was within the first 2 weeks I think that I collected this

money, but I would struggle to say exactly when. I got £500 fairly quickly, and then a few weeks later, £5000.

### *Practical Support*

51. At the first hotel that we went to, we were only able to have breakfast and didn't have support for our other meals, making this arrangement unsustainable.
52. At the Millennium Gloucester Hotel, all our meals were included and paid for by RBKC, which was a weight off the mind, and took a lot of stress off, especially given that I have young children.
53. When we then left the hotels at the end of December 2017, and returned to Barandon Walk, RBKC then began putting £1,800 into my account every two weeks for food for the three of us.

### *Psychological support*

54. We did have support from CAMHS of RBKC from quite early on after the fire, for my youngest children, which was a relief. These services were available at The Curve.
55. At one point, I can't remember exactly what day, but within the first few days after the fire, I had taken the boys to the Westway to do face painting. I was very spaced out, tearful and overwhelmed. My friends had been calling me but I had not felt up to taking their calls, and so I'd had minimal support. I wanted to speak to a counsellor directly in the Westway, and I did which was helpful. That is how the ball got rolling then. They recommended that I go to St Charles Hospital but suggested that we wait a few weeks, given it was natural to be in a state of shock and to see how this evolved.

56. In August 2017, I started going to St Charles' for counselling and saw a counsellor called James, who I continued to see weekly. That carried on for about a year or perhaps a year and a half. It was then changed to a counsellor called Sarah, who was senior to James. They then began to see me less and less, so that it became every 2 weeks, and then monthly.

57. The biggest impact of the fire for us as a family has been on our mental health.

#### *Key Worker*

58. I was allocated a key worker called Nicola relatively early on, who was very good. As I understand, she had been drafted in from Chelsea and Westminster. We kept in contact mainly through texting, and, as I have said above, she helped a lot with supporting generally and facilitating the move to hotels, and between hotels.

59. In around mid-2018, I was given another keyworker, who wasn't quite as efficient as Nicola had been, and this did make things a bit harder to manage.

#### *Impact*

60. It is hard to put into words how dramatically our lives have changed since the fire. In simple terms, the things I used to enjoy, such as music, and catching up with the news, now make me incredibly anxious. I am suffering with depression, anxiety, flashbacks and a tremor, which is brought on by memories of the night. I still take medication for these things. My sons are not the same people that they were. The younger ones wake up in the night and experience hallucinations at times, and if they hear sirens, they will panic. My youngest son in particular has not been able to attend school since January [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

61. 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).

### 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: ELIZANE LARA.

Signature: Elizane Lara.

Date: 25.02.2020.