

Witness Statement of: Nadia Elbouti

No. of statement: 3

Exhibits: 1

Date of statement: 25.02.2020

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF NADIA ELBOUTI

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, **NADIA ELBOUTI**, will say as follows:

1. I make this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Fire Public Inquiry only. This statement is an account of my personal experience of fire safety in the Walkways and dealing with the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation ('TMO') and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council ('RBKC') (**Module 3**).
2. This statement will also provide a brief factual account of my experience in the aftermath of the fire ('the fire') at Grenfell Tower ('the Tower') on 14 June 2017 (**Module 4**).
3. I provided a Witness Statement to the Inquiry dated 10 July 2018 (**IWS00000947**) and Supplementary Witness Statement dated 9 October 2018 (**IWS00001129**) for the purpose of Phase 1.

4. I make this statement in Arabic and it has been translated into English for the purposes of the Inquiry. If I am called to give oral evidence at the Inquiry, I will require an Arabic (Moroccan) translator to assist me.

Background

5. I live at [REDACTED] Hurstway Walk with my daughter who is 15 years old and attends Kensington Aldridge Academy. I have a secure tenancy and have lived in the property since 14 February 2005. The flat is a two-bedroom split-level flat, on the third floor of the building.

Fire Safety

6. We were never advised or sent any information by the TMO/RBKC about what we should do in a fire or an emergency.
7. Fire safety signs were only put up after the fire at Grenfell Tower. I do not remember seeing any before the fire, not even emergency exit signs. There were no fire extinguishers, sprinklers or alarms in the communal areas of Hurstway Walk before the 14 June 2017, or if there were I never saw them.
8. Before the fire we had a wooden door, it was really light, it was not solid but would close by itself if you pushed it hard enough. The door was so old that the bottom of it was splintering off; you could tell that it was not a fire resistant door. We asked the TMO several times to change our front door, but they never did. I have recently been provided with a copy of the repairs data for my flat by RBKC, which I exhibit here as **Exhibit NE/6**. I was surprised to see that our various complaints about the front door were not logged.
9. After the 14 June 2017, our front door was replaced; we were told that the new doors are fire resistant. The communal doors were not changed after the fire, so we assumed that they have always been fire resistant.

10. I am not aware of the emergency lighting system in my block, but I recall that before 14 June 2017 there was a constant issue with some of the lights in the communal areas being out. Usually it was the lights on the side of the block facing on to Latimer Road. we would need to use the torch on our mobile phones to move around parts of the block.
11. I am not aware of any fire safety checks or inspections having taken place in Hurstway Walk. There are no fire alarms or sprinklers in the communal areas, and I only recall one or two gas checks having been carried out in all the time I've lived in my flat.
12. We have always had three smoke alarms in our flat. They are located in the kitchen, the corridor outside the kitchen and the hallway near our front door. From what I recall, the alarms in my flat have only been checked twice since I first moved into the Walkways in 2005.
13. In late 2015, the alarm in our kitchen began making a weird whistling noise, like the battery dying; we reported it to the TMO straight away. We soon realised that the fire alarm was not working when the smoke from cooking triggered the alarm in the corridor outside the kitchen but not the one in the kitchen. It took weeks from when we first reported the defective fire alarm to the TMO for them to send out someone to look at it and even then, it was not fixed straight away. There was a point that even the weird whistling noise stopped, so I assume it was completely broken.
14. The TMO are generally slow to respond to issues of safety. In addition to the fire alarm, which took weeks to fix, in December 2016 we reported our broken balcony door to the TMO, not only was it unsafe, it was also the middle of winter. It took the TMO three months to replace the balcony door, we were told that it was because they were waiting for a new door to arrive. By any measure, three months is an unreasonable length of time to wait for a new door.
15. The TMO was careless about fire safety. My daughter's best friend Mierna Choucair lived on the 22nd floor of Grenfell Tower. My daughter spent a lot of time at Mierna's home, so she often heard Mierna's mother on the phone to the TMO, especially during the recent refurbishments of the Tower. She remembers her complaining about the

radiators not working and the windows being loose. My daughter also distinctly remembers Mierna's mother complaining about the lack of fire extinguishers in the communal areas, she was simply passed from person to person.

16. There has never been a serious fire in my block, but once our downstairs neighbour's boiler burst and caused a small fire. The fire brigade came, but we were not evacuated from the building. We later found out from our neighbours, that when a repairman came to replace the boiler, he commented that he had not seen that type of boiler for years and didn't realise any were still in use.

17. After that small fire, it would have been the TMO/RBKC's opportunity to inform the residents about their fire strategy, but they did not send us a letter, or tell us what we should be doing if another fire broke out. They should have also replaced all the boilers after that incident, but did not; we are still having problems with hot water.

Dealings with RBKC and the TMO

18. My experience of having to deal with the TMO has been terrible; I have been taken advantage of because of my limited English language skills.

19. When we first moved into the Walkways, as a single parent I had no choice but to do my best to communicate directly with the Estate Office. The kitchen was in a terrible state and needed repairing, I would call regularly and visited the Estate Office in person to chase-up, but I was simply passed from person to person and eventually dismissed by staff who told me that they couldn't understand what I was saying. Eventually, I was able to speak to the manager directly, and he simply told me that they do not do kitchen refurbishments and that I would have to do it myself. I eventually gave up, and did the essential repairs myself; I had to buy the tools and materials myself.

20. As my daughter got older, I had no choice but to rely on her as my translator, she was about 8 years old when she first started to speak to the Estate Office on my behalf. Not only would she call, but she also wrote letters for me in English, which I would then take to the estate Office in person. At no point did the staff question why they were

receiving calls about repairs or rent from a child. They did not think to ask whether they needed to make any changes so that they could speak to me directly.

21. Although my daughter was occasionally successful in getting someone out to carry out repairs when needed, more often than not, she too was being passed around from person to person. They also found it easy to dismiss her because she was a child. We would have to chase them if we needed anything done but whenever there was an issue with rent, they would contact us in seconds.
22. They also made us feel like we were to blame for the issues with the flat. They would ask us why something was broken and needed fixing. My daughter and I are very proud of our flat. I spent a lot of time decorating it and making it a home, it is our home and we are not careless or reckless with it, but as with any flat that is lived in, occasionally repairs would be needed, so it offended me when I was blamed for these.
23. It would take ages for them to send out someone to carry out day-to-day repairs, it would have to be an absolute emergency for them to come out. They would sometimes send someone out when my daughter was at school and because they were not able to understand me, they would just leave.
24. I remember that in 2016, I cannot recall exactly when, my daughter called them on a Sunday, as we had no hot water, our neighbours also did not have any hot water. The Estate Office said that they could not send anyone out that day, so she asked them what we should do; she had school the next day and needed to have a shower. The hot water was turned off a lot during that period because they were refurbishing Grenfell Tower; it is around this time that my daughter started to go swimming in the Leisure Centre almost every Sunday, just so she could have a shower.
25. The next day we still had no hot water. My daughter again called to chase up, the person she spoke to could not find a note of her call from the day before and she had to explain everything again. It took a week for them to send someone out to check the water.
26. That was not the only occasion where my daughter called to follow up on something and was told that there was no note of it on the system. The TMO's record keeping was

generally poor. The staff themselves would comment that their IT systems were slow. There were also a lot of errors, the Council had a kitchen refurbishment programme which I had been applying to for years. My application had always been unsuccessful and I was never given a proper reason as to why I was not successful. Our kitchen had needed a refurbishment for many years, I just felt marginalised because many of my neighbours had their kitchens redone. I often cried about this.

27. About 6 months before the fire, I received a call letting me know that my application had finally been successful, I was very happy and excited about this. I couldn't believe that after so many years my kitchen would finally be fixed. When I did not hear further, I called them directly and gave them the reference number I had been given, I was told that it was a mistake and that my application was unsuccessful, I was devastated.

28. It is now 2020 and we still do not have double-glazed windows, not even secondary glazing. The flat is so cold that I feel like I don't have any windows at all. The only reason we have managed to get through the winters is because our stove is really, really hot so it gives off a lot of heat but we still freeze at night. We have been asking for double-glazing since we first moved in and have always been told that it can't be done.

29. The difficulty of living in a flat that is often so cold is worsened by the fact that we have very little access to hot water. There is only ever enough hot water in the morning for one person to have a shower. It would take a whole day to heat up again for the next person. I believe that we get less hot water because our flat is located on the top floor of the Walkway. We have had to arrange our lives so that I have a shower at night before going to sleep, and my daughter in the morning before she goes to school. Despite this, we still routinely need to go to the leisure centre to have a shower. If we were a big family of more than two people, I am not sure that we would be able to cope with this.

30. The issues with the hot water means that I cannot even wash the dishes during the day, I've had to spend years saving money so that I could buy a dishwasher.

31. Before the refurbishments to Grenfell Tower there was only one boiler servicing the Tower and all the Walkways, so the difficulties with the hot water made some sense.

Since the fire, we have had a temporary boiler installed for Hurstway Walk; we are still having issues with the hot water. They said that it was temporary but it has been 2.5 years and it is still there.

32. You would not think that the Queen's Royal Borough would not have hot water for their residents.

Aftermath

33. At paragraphs 10 – 36 of my Phase 1 Witness Statement dated 10 July 2018 (IWS00000947) I describe the horrifying events of 14 June 2017 and at paragraphs 41 – 43 I briefly referred to the impact which the events of the 14 June 2017 have had on my daughter and I. I now wish to expand on that. However, as this statement is made for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, it will become a public document, so I do not feel comfortable going into detail about how much we have been affected.

34. We lost close friends, who were like our family, as well as our community to the fire. My daughter and Mierna Choucair first met when they were both in nursery; they quickly became best friends and then more like sisters. My daughter insisted on going to the same Secondary School as Mierna. They were in the same class and spent all day together. After school, they usually went to the library together or to Mierna's home to study. We did not have a computer so my daughter would usually go to Mierna's to use their computer. As she was always at Mierna's home, she also grew very close to Mierna's younger sisters Fatima and Zainab. My daughter would help Mierna to look after her younger sisters and was especially close to Zainab who she treated as her little sister. My daughter is my only child, she loved going to the Choucairs' home and spending time with all three sisters.

35. I would usually see Mierna's parents, Bassem and Nadia, when I went to collect my daughter from their home. Over the years we became good friends. They were the only people I trusted to look after my daughter. My daughter's father is not around and Bassem was like a father to her. He would bring them all treats when he came home from work, and would walk my daughter back home when I was not able to pick her

up. I knew that they treated her as their own daughter, so I was comfortable with her spending a lot of time at their home. My daughter and Mierna celebrated many birthdays together.

36. On the night of the fire, we were very worried about Mierna's family; my daughter called Mierna and told her about the fire. She called her several times throughout the night and sent her pictures of the fire spreading, so that she knew how serious the fire was, she begged her to escape. During the last call my daughter had with Mierna, Mierna told her that their flat was full of smoke and it was too hot for them to get out. When Mierna stopped answering her phone, we tried to get information about her family; we asked the police and desperately searched around for them. We ran into Mierna's aunt that night and helped her search for them. We had no idea that we would not see their family again.

37. My daughter did not speak for three days after the fire, it terrified me. She now tells me that her last conversation with Mierna was replaying in her head.

38. In the days and weeks after the fire, we still had a little hope that Mierna's family had made it out. We kept in contact with her aunt, who like everyone else had very little information about the missing. About a month after the fire Mierna's aunt called us and confirmed that the family had died in the Tower. We were devastated. Our hearts were aching. I tried to stay strong for my daughter, and I do not usually show emotion, but when we had that news I couldn't stop crying. My daughter was broken by the news; it was the worst thing to happen to her. It broke my heart to see her that way. It still really hurts us both.

39. Before the Tower was refurbished, there was a park in front of the Tower, where the children would play and the adults would have picnics. Those from the Moroccan community would go to the park together. Someone would be on tea duty someone else would be on cake duty. Faouzia El Wahabi was one of those who would come to the picnics; she was always smiling no matter what was going on in her life. I used to spend hours speaking to her, she was a lovely and happy person and often made us laugh,

40. Before 14 June 2017, you would see everyone standing in the area around the Tower, chatting and laughing with each other and the children playing, especially in the summer.

Emergency Shelter and Accommodation

41. On the morning of the fire, after watching the Tower burn, I received a call from a friend who told us to go to the Clement James Centre because they were helping residents. I did not know what else to do, we were terrified to go back into our flat; the area felt like it was haunted. We were at the Clement James Centre for hours, going in and out of the Church. We were lost and did not know what to do. At some point in the late afternoon, I received a call from a friend telling me that we needed to go to the Westway Sports Centre because they were registering everyone affected by the fire. I assumed she meant a government body was registering everyone but I later discovered that this was not the case.
42. When we arrived at the entrance of the Westway there were a lot of people everywhere, someone from the Red Cross asked for our names, address and ID because you had to be either a Tower or Walkway resident to enter. After registering us, they escorted us in and asked if we wanted anything to eat, it was near to Iftar time and I was fasting so we sat down with a lot of other people and broke our fast. The Zakat Foundation was providing food; there were also huge deliveries from Nandos and Marks & Spencer. Bassem Choucrair worked for the local Marks & Spencer. As well as deliveries from national businesses, there were also deliveries from some smaller local business who had connections to the area. The charities also provided us with essential items such as shampoo, conditioner body wash and clothes, which were all donated.
43. We had to spend a lot of time wandering around until we finally found someone from the Council. We were in a group with some of our other neighbours; we were too terrified to stay in our flats because we did not know if it was safe. Eventually, we were offered a room at a hotel at the Holiday Inn, Kensington.
44. Before heading to the hotel, although I was terrified, I knew that I needed to go back to our flat to collect my daughter's medication. When we left our flat, we only had my

daughter's phone. I left my daughter with friends and went back to Hurstway Walk, when I arrived, I found Police standing outside, they were not letting anyone in, I begged them to let me in for five minutes so I can get my daughters medication, finally a Police Officer agreed to escort me in. I ran in to my bedroom and collected my daughter's medication, our ID and a change of clothes for the both of us. I wanted to spend as little time as possible there.

45. When we arrived at the Holiday Inn hotel, it was really late at night; we were told by the receptionist that the room was booked for seven days. We were still in shock. I knew my daughter just needed to sleep. I had not begun to process things yet so I did not question the length of stay.
46. We were given one room with two single beds. The room was suitable for a short 7-day stay. However, the food at the hotel was not, we were not asked if we had any specific dietary needs. My daughter suffers [REDACTED] which is very debilitating and means she has spent a lot of time in and out of hospital. She had developed [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and was hospitalised for 15 days in May and June 2017. She had only been out for a about two weeks when the fire happened, and was just starting to improve and return to normal. As a result of, her condition, there are certain foods which my daughter is not able to eat such as tomatoes and salads.
47. It was still Ramadan and I was fasting. There was no halal food at the hotel or anything available at Iftar time, because it was usually after the set mealtime. As a result, we had to buy take-away food for my daughter. Every day I went to the Westway or to the Al Manar Mosque to break my fast. There were no services at the hotel so we had to go to the Westway.
48. After seven days at the hotel, we went back to the Westway and asked them where we were meant to go as we could not go back to our flat: The gas had been turned off so there was no heating or hot water.
49. My daughter's doctor at the Hospital as well as our GP, told us to stay in the hotel rather than go home because of my daughter's [REDACTED] she needed to be able to take care of

herself properly, to have access to basic things such as hot water. It was her hospital doctor who said this

50. We were eventually offered a room in the Mecure Hotel, Paddington but again we were not told how long we would be able to stay. We ended up staying at the hotel until April 2018, but the booking was only renewed at the end of each month so we had no stability or security. We were concerned that we might be moved to other hotels, because that is what happened to other families.
51. At the beginning of our stay, we were given vouchers for the canteen across the road from the hotel. At the start, the canteen did not have halal food but then as there were Muslim residents staying at the hotel, they started making halal chicken. This was the only halal option, there was generally no variety of food and it was not healthy. So, we had to buy healthy food from other suppliers which was expensive as we had no cooking facilities. In September 2017, they provided us with £250 a week for food.
52. I had started going back to our flat about a week after the fire, just to check that everything was fine and to clean a little. My daughter was terrified to go back to flat, she went back with me once when I went to clean, as soon as she stepped into it, she started having flashbacks and burst into tears.
53. I knew that I could not force her to go back and live there when she was in that state, so we stayed in the hotel. I kept changing my mind about whether we should permanently move out of Hurstway Walks, the area felt like a graveyard and we did not know if we could go back to living there, but our flat was our home. If we chose to move, it was unlikely that we would be offered a place as nice as our flat and my daughter would have had to move schools. Thankfully, after a few months of counselling my daughter felt able to go back to the flat, but she was too scared to sleep in her own room.

Debris

54. On the night of the fire, we found it really, really hard to breathe. We could feel the fumes filling our lungs. Since then, my daughter continues to cough a lot, she feels that

her lungs have gotten weaker and our GP is carrying out investigations to try and figure out what is wrong.

55. After the fire, there was debris everywhere in our local area; it was a mixture of black and grey ash as well as pieces of material that I now believe to have been cladding. I remember my daughter picking up a huge black chunk. As soon as she squeezed it a little, it crumbled into ash. There seemed to be more debris around on 16 June 2017, than on the night of the fire. It was a windy day so I think the debris were spread around further.

56. About a month after the fire, whilst I was visiting our flat to check that everything was fine and to do a little cleaning, I found a lot of debris on our balcony. I had to clean it myself because it did not seem like anyone else was going to. It was a mixture of black ash and small chunks; it was enough to fill the dustpan. There were also chunks of debris in the playground opposite our block where the kids play. To this day, you can still find pieces of debris in the playground.

57. No one from RBKC ever came to clean the debris from our flat; all they did was send someone to clean the insides of our windows. That was 7 months after the fire.

Psychological Support

58. For the first week or two after the fire, we were in shock. My daughter did not speak to anyone. Neither of us could believe what had happened. We were frightened and cried uncontrollably. We thought things like this would happen in countries without emergency fire services, but not in London. We had lost our close friends. We had lost our community. We had witnessed something so horrific and tragic. I left Morocco because I wanted a better, safer future for my child I never thought something like the fire would happen in the country where we had built our future.

59. The fire caused my daughter to become very unwell. She became depressed and withdrawn [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] My daughter has told me that she just kept replaying what had

happened over and over again. Emotionally, the impact has been devastating. My daughter has become really sensitive – she starts crying out of nowhere. For a long time after we returned to our flat in April 2018, she slept in the same room as me because she was so scared of something happening when she was asleep.

60. My daughter still asks me about what we would do if a fire happened in our block, how we would get out. She has suggested we have a rope that we could attach to the balcony so that we could climb out to escape in an emergency. The stress and anxiety aggravates her condition, causing the stomach pains to get much worse, so she is often in serious pain. My daughter has now been diagnosed with PTSD. She started attending weekly counselling sessions at the Curve in September 2017 and continues to do so. This is provided by NHS Grenfell Health and Wellbeing.

61. I have also been diagnosed with PTSD. I have struggled to cope with what happened and have found myself preoccupied with death. I was referred to the Grenfell Wellbeing Centre at St Charles Hospital and since September 2018, I have had weekly counselling sessions. Until recently, I found it very helpful as the counsellor spoke Arabic, that counsellor has now gone on maternity leave and I attend sessions with a new counsellor and an Arabic translator, which makes it very difficult.

62. After we returned to our flat in April 2018, sometimes I just go out on the balcony and stare at the Tower, imagining how it was before. It is haunting me.

Communication

63. In the first few days after the fire, it was hectic. The Council and the TMO were not really doing anything. They did not check up on anyone and did not make it easy for people to identify officers from the TMO or RBK&C or advise who could assist. We had to spend a lot of time looking around the Westway before we found someone from official I'm not sure if they were from RBKC or another Council.

64. No arrangements were made by the council or government in the immediate aftermath of the fire to accommodate people with special needs. There were people with

disabilities or mobility difficulties who could not make it down to the Westway or other relief centre to speak to them. There were also a lot of people like me, who spoke very little or no English and had to rely on the assistance of volunteers who spoke our languages, just to communicate our basic needs to the Council and other organisations. I'm not sure what I would have done if the volunteers were not there to help, especially as my daughter, in her shock, stopped speaking for days after the fire.

65. The only effective support we received seemed to be from the volunteers. As well as interpreting, they helped me arrange accommodation through the officials at the Westway. There were also volunteers from all professions doing what they could to help. For example, counsellors came to our hotel and sat with residents in the hotel lobby until 3am. We would talk to them in the lobby at the Mecure on some occasions they were able to book a room in the lobby.

66. Unfortunately, I do not believe that RBKC have learned from their mistakes. Since the fire the only work they have carried out in the block is replace our front doors, put up a few signs, and install a temporary boiler. There are so many issues with our flat, which we have raised with RBKC and we are still being ignored.

67. My communication with RBKC is still primarily through my daughter. I know that she needs to concentrate on her studies and should not have to deal with adult issues such as housing repairs and rent but I have no other choice but to rely on her as there are no interpreters available at RBKC.

68. I believe that my daughter is not the only child having to act as their parent's mouthpiece and interpreter in their dealings with RBKC I wonder what it will take for things to change, if not a fire which killed so many people and the chaos which followed.

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.

Signed: 

Dated: 25/2/20