

Witness Statement of: Mahmoud Kabouh

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 0

Date of statement: 25 February 2020

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MAHMOUD KABOUH

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, **Mahmoud Kabouh**, will say as follows:-

1. I am a resident of flat [REDACTED] Testerton Walk. I am making this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.
2. This is my first witness statement to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, and 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 3-19, and module 4 in paragraphs 20-36.

Background

3. My wife, Amina, and I moved into our flat around 25 years ago, in 1995. Our daughter, Insaff, was 4 or 5 years old at the time, and our son, Said, was just a baby. The tenancy is in my wife's name.

4. Flat ■■■ is a two-bedroom property split over two levels, positioned to the North East of the Tower.
5. We have enjoyed living here. We have a lot of friends and relatives in the area and there is a sense of community.

Communication with the TMO

6. The TMO never listened to residents. When we had a problem in the flat, I would report it to the Estate Office either in person or on the telephone. The TMO staff in the office might make notes of what you were saying, but it was obvious to me that there was an absence of care on their part. The staff member would then provide a direct number for an independent contractor if that is what was needed, or would tell you that your message would be recorded and passed on, and that a date for an appointment would be confirmed.
7. It was often necessary to report issues numerous times. When I made contact with the Estate Office, I would therefore ask to speak to someone that I had spoken to on the previous occasion, but frequently, would be told that they weren't available. It was not possible to build up relationships or rapports with anyone in particular.
8. In relation to repair issues that were being dealt with internally by the TMO, you would be left waiting weeks before someone would attend. When they did, the job would often be done in a hurry, with bad or short lasting results. You would usually have to ask them to come back again. This was very time consuming and disheartening.

Repair Issues in the flat

Water pressure

9. The water pressure has always been was very low in the flat. This was difficult having a family of four. I telephoned the Estate Office and was told by a member of staff there that this was likely to do with the type of shower-head that we had, and that we should resolve this ourselves by purchasing a new one. We did so and the problems didn't stop

there. I believe there may have been issues with the pipes that fed the hot water to the Walkways from the boiler, which was positioned in the Tower, because we did also experience blockages and leaks with these pipes.

Intercom and main door

10. For most of the time that we have lived here, the intercom connecting the main front door to our flat has not worked. The front main door to the block has also been faulty on a few occasions and each time, it has taken a very long time for it to be fixed. There is a CCTV camera inside the door but it's not like anyone is really going to take any notice of that. This has also been a weight on our shoulders due to security concerns.

Mould in bedroom

11. Poor ventilation within the flat led to a build-up of mould, especially within the bedroom. I again reported this to the Estate Office who took a long time in sending someone out after we had reported it. The people that attended washed down the walls that were affected, but did not redecorate, and so the problem came back.

Mice

12. Throughout the time that we have lived here, we've had a problem with mice. We reported the issue to the TMO, and after a while, they provided us with mouse box traps, but these never seemed to work. The problem continued until we got our cat.

Heating

13. The heating system has always been problematic and expensive to run. The main boiler was located in the Tower. The TMO would switch it off in summer time, but would often leave it on until around October, when you just didn't need it. It could only be regulated through the radiators. This would be very expensive to run, especially when it wasn't needed.

Complaints system

14. I do recall making a formal written complaint on at least one occasion. I would either go to the Estate Office or collect a Complaints Form, which I would fill in and return. Sometimes I would describe the complaint to staff at the Estate Office and they completed the form on my behalf, but you would have no way of knowing whether they had sent the form off. In either case, I don't know whether the complaints were properly logged, and I do not recall receiving a response.

Fire Safety

15. We never received any information or instructions about how to respond in the event of a fire, and we were not told about the "Stay-Put" strategy prior to the fire.

In the flat

16. When we moved into the flat, there were no fire or smoke alarms at all. We did raise it with the Estate Office and they said it was something that we would have to fit ourselves, that it was 'tenant business' and so in the end, we fitted our own. These were never subsequently checked from RBKC or the TMO.

Communal areas

17. Before the 14 June 2017, I never saw any fire safety equipment in the communal areas, such as fire alarms, sprinklers or fire extinguishers, and I also never saw any signs or information communicating what to do if there were to be a fire.

Since the fire

18. Following the fire, quite a lot has changed in that we now have a new front door, which is supposed to be fire proof. We have had carbon monoxide detectors installed inside the flat. In the communal areas of the building, there are new signs, which show which way you should exit in the event of the fire.

19. I am not able to comment further on issues in respect of fire safety.

Aftermath

20. On the day of the fire, it was Ramadan, my family and I had just returned from a very long day of prayers at Al Manar Mosque. It was probably about 1:00am and I was having a cigarette on the balcony. I suddenly heard screaming and shouting for help outside, and I saw people running. I just thought it was kids playing about at first, so I didn't think anything of it, but then I started to smell smoke very strongly.
21. I then heard my wife calling me saying that the Tower was on fire. The four of us went outside and that is when the reality of it all hit home. At that time, the fire was only around the sixth floor. There were probably 3 or 4 fire engines on the ground and it didn't seem like they could control things. I say this because the atmosphere appeared chaotic.
22. We stood at the base of the Tower for about 4 hours, just in disbelief over what we were seeing. We were transfixed, it was like a terrible panorama. Our relatives were phoning to check on our wellbeing but we couldn't answer as it was too overwhelming. It was such a terrible feeling and the atmosphere became increasingly desperate.
23. At some time after 5am, we were told by police to leave the main area around the Tower; they also told us that we were not allowed to return to our flat. The police couldn't tell us where we could go when we asked. I remember that my wife was only in her night-dress and I said to the police that she must be allowed to return to the flat, at least to put a gown on. The police said that this was ok but to hurry; we didn't take anything else with us.
24. We congregated briefly in Whitechurch Road. We were probably there for about an hour to an hour and a half with our neighbours, after which, somebody told us that we could go to St Clement's Church.

Relief Centres

25. At St Clement's Church, there was everything you needed: food, clothes, hot drinks and somewhere to pray. There was plenty of food available and we decided to break our fast as we had been through so much; we needed the energy to be able to process everything. As much of a terrible nightmare as the situation was, I found the atmosphere there to be one of solidarity. There must have been 200-300 people in the church so it was very chaotic, but I felt relieved to be alive and to be surrounded by friends. Of course, that being said, there was an enormous sense of shock from the fire and we were in deep shock as well.

Emergency Accommodation

26. Some hours later, while we were still at St Clement's, either a representative of RBKC, or a police officer, told us that we could return to gather some things from the flat, but that we would could not stay there and that we could stay at a hotel.

27. I decided to leave London that evening (on 14 June 2017) to stay with some family in Newcastle for a few days. I needed to gather my thoughts away from everything for a short while. Meanwhile, my wife and children stayed with friends for a few days in London.

28. At some point within the first few days of the fire, my daughter attended a meeting with some other neighbours who said that it would be possible for us to stay in a hotel and that RBKC would provide for this. My daughter called RBKC and was given a list of hotels that we could stay at. She chose Kensington Gardens Hotel as it had a garage and she thought that we would need the car.

29. During that phone call, my daughter had made RBKC aware that I would be joining my family at the hotel a day or so later, and that they would need space for me. Despite this, they were only given 3-single rooms in the hotel.

30. I returned from Newcastle around the beginning of the week after the fire. My wife and I had to share a single bed in one of the single rooms. Not until about a month later were we able to get a double room.

31. We remained at the hotel for around a year in total.

Food

32. We were able to order food from the restaurants in the hotel. The costs of this, up to a certain amount, was met by RBKC. We just had to put it to the room that we were staying in.

33. There was a serious issue for us in that the hotel did not serve Halal food, and so we were very restricted in terms of what we could order from the menu. We therefore had to eat vegetarian food or go to Al Manar Mosque to eat donated food.

34. As I recall, it took a month or more for us to be made aware of the option of having £300/week transferred directly into our bank account for food, as opposed to eating in the hotel. We were relieved to take advantage of this, as it meant we were not so restricted in terms of what we ate. Of course, we were still not able to cook food for ourselves as there were no cooking facilities.

Financial and other support

35. I know that after some time, we were made aware of there being financial assistance available. We however did not accept this.

Impact

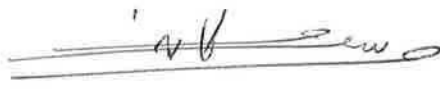
36. We will never forget this tragedy, and have certainly suffered over what we have seen and been part of, but we feel very lucky to be in the position that we are, given that others were not so fortunate.

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: MAHMOUD KABOUH

Signature: 

Date: 25.02.2020