

Witness statement of Michael John

1. My name is Michael John and I am 64 years old. I have lived at [REDACTED] Barandon Walk for over 40 years. I was one of the first occupants of the Lancaster West Estate when in late 1974 I moved in. This is the first witness statement that I have provided to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and I have not to date provided a statement to the Metropolitan Police Service.

14 June 2017: Evacuation

2. On the night of the fire at Grenfell Tower my nephew who worked in the area was staying with me in my flat in Barandon Walk. I had been living alone there but sometimes my sons or nephews would stay over with me. I am disabled and don't have a carer so my nephews stay with me just in case of any emergency or anything I may need.
3. I had a stroke 12 years ago now and about 5 years ago something went in my back. I was diagnosed with [REDACTED] in 2015 and I am now wheelchair bound. I am registered partially blind and have had issues with my heart since my stroke.
4. At about 1am on the night of the fire, my nephew came into my room and told me that Grenfell Tower was on fire. I had already heard fire engines driving to the Tower, but I thought nothing of it as fires were regular occurrences on the Lancaster West Estate, with the fire brigade being called at least once a month. I was used to hearing fire engines arriving on the Estate. My nephew went to have a look at the fire and came back to me saying that it looked like it was being kept under control.
5. At about 2:30am I heard a loud bang on the door. At first, I ignored the banging because I thought it might be some antisocial behaviour. The banging continued and got louder and louder. I then heard shouts of "get out, get out now, you have to get out. If you don't open the door, we will kick the door down". At the time I thought that the shouting was very hostile, but I thought it might be important, so my nephew opened the door. Men who I assume were police continued to shout that we had to get out or we would be thrown out. The police said that the building might collapse and so we had to get out.
6. The police did not ask if there were any elderly or disabled people in the flat. They did not ask if there was anyone who may need help, they just told us to get out. I

asked my nephew to request assistance for me as I was in a wheelchair, but they did not respond. I explained that I could not walk and so I might need some help getting out of the building, but they were more concerned about knocking on doors or kicking doors down. The police seemed pre-occupied. From memory, I think that the police said that if I didn't leave voluntarily, they would drag me out, which I found very insensitive and unnecessary.

7. At some point after the police arrived at my door, I managed to get into my bathroom commode and wheeled myself to the door. After I received no response from the policemen, I had to force myself out of the commode and on to my wheelchair that my nephew had put outside my flat for me. As there are steps out the front door of my flat, I had to drag myself out the front door and walk up the steps and, with the help of my nephew, get into my wheelchair.
8. Once in the wheelchair I was then wheeled towards the stairs to go out of the building.
9. After being pushed in the wheelchair to the stairs to go out of the building, I asked a few policemen who were banging on doors to help me to go down the stairs. I was unable to use the ramp on the Latimer Road end of Barandon Walk because it had been blocked off due to the risk of falling debris.
10. I had to force myself out of the wheelchair and with the help of my nephew walk down the stairs. It was a huge struggle for me and I had to really force myself. My nephew could not lift me in the wheelchair, so I had to put my hands around his shoulders and use the bannister, going down one step at a time. I had one hand over my nephew and one hand on the bannister, and put my feet down one step at a time. It was very slow and painful because at that time, I had extreme pain because of the problem in my back. I had to descend roughly 14 steps in this way. When we got to the ground level my nephew had to collect my wheelchair from the top of the stairs. While he did this, I held onto the bannister until the wheelchair was brought down.
11. At the foot of the stairs my nephew wheeled me to an area nearby. I stayed in a little veranda on the landing near the entrance to the Estate in my wheelchair for over an hour with my nephew by my side. I was there for so long because nobody knew what to do. There was no plan, I was just told "get out" and when I got out nobody told me where to go. It was as if the emergency services or whoever came to get people out didn't care, like I did not really matter. There was no real organisation. I am sorry to say, even up to today I have had no explanation of what was going on, except that

there was fire and we had to get out. No one in a position of authority said anything else.

12. After sitting in my wheelchair on the landing for over an hour with no information and with the smell of smoke starting to fill my lungs, I was anxious to find a way out of the Estate so I decided to find a way to get to my sister, who didn't live too far from the Estate. As the time went on, I became more concerned about being stuck where I was. Due to the police cordons, I was effectively being kettled in a small space. As a disabled person, I didn't know how I was going to get down from the landing to the street level.
13. Eventually, my nephew managed to persuade some members of the public and one officer to help lift me from the landing down the stairs to the street level in my wheelchair.
14. In general, I was in excruciating pain from the way in which I was physically evacuated. I found the whole experience traumatic. If it were not for my sister's support, I would have been left out on the streets due to the lack of information provided on the night and the days following.

Immediate aftermath: Emergency accommodation

15. My wife, Carol, drove me up to my sister's home. She lives in Barlby Road, Ladbroke Grove and I think I stayed at my sister's for 3 or 4 days. I was not told about any emergency accommodation so I had to go to my sister's otherwise I would have had nowhere else to go.
16. When I was staying at my sister's, I slept on a long bench in the kitchen. It was a far from ideal sleeping situation as it was very hard on my back and access to her bathroom isn't easy for me. I could not sleep on the floor, because in my condition, I would not have been able to get back up. I had to bear the pain and stay where I was. I also stayed in the same clothes as I was evacuated in for those 3 or 4 days, because I was not able to return to Barandon Walk.
17. During my time at my sisters, I was never contacted by the Council or the TMO to provide me with information about any help I could get. Luckily, I was contacted by an occupational therapist who had been helping me with various issues before the fire. A couple of days after the fire, he reached out to me because he was concerned that I had nowhere to live as the emergency services were not allowing people back to

Barandon Walk at that time. I was never informed of any hotel accommodation or emergency clothing or food at this time.

18. While I was staying at my sisters, I asked my nephew to retrieve my medication from my flat in Barandon Walk. Initially my nephew was refused entry by the authorities, but after pleading with them, they finally allowed him in.
19. After 3 or 4 days at my sister's, I just decided I had inconvenienced my sister enough and the situation was not doing my back any favours, so I tried to go back to my place in Barandon Walk. At that point my eldest son took me back to my flat. Immediately after the fire, the police were not allowing residents into their homes.
20. I stayed in my flat for about a week before realising that I needed to find alternative temporary accommodation. There was no real wheelchair access to get out the building and the Latimer Road access was going to be closed for a while, so I didn't really have a way of getting out of the building. My family advised me that the best thing was to go into temporary accommodation. My occupational therapist helped me find my temporary accommodation.
21. When I was back in my flat for the week, I remember that although there was water, there was no hot water. I think that it was just cold water because the building which provided the hot water was based in the tower block, so when that caught on fire all that went.
22. When I was back in Barandon Walk for a week, I was concerned about the pollution and I wasn't sure if it was safe for me to be in the area, but I had limited options for accommodation.

Aftermath: Temporary accommodation

23. Due to my previous experience of the Council and the TMO, I did not really ask them for much help after the fire. Carol had gone to the Westway Sports Centre on my behalf to try and arrange temporary accommodation for me. Members of the Council who were there tried to offer me accommodation that would have placed me far away from my family and out of the Borough. I couldn't accept this as I needed help from my family and community during this traumatic time.
24. Thanks to my occupational therapist, I was given a place in temporary accommodation. It was an assisted living home in 15 Burgess Fields, 57 Wornington Road, W10 5PT.

25. I remained in this temporary accommodation for a year and it was a very lonely experience. Unlike the other people who lived in the assisted living, I was not attended to or checked on by the staff. Nor was I given any psychological support after my traumatic experience. The staff didn't really deal with me as a resident of the home.
26. Different people came in and out of my life at that point offering help. I have had several key workers, all of which promised me many things, but often didn't deliver. The system was so ineffective and although the key workers were often nice people, the process was unprofessional and ineffective. I did though have a good experience with a key worker called Jackie Keiza. When I was living in temporary accommodation, I was thankfully getting free food delivered to me by a restaurant called Makan for a few months because I wasn't receiving food payments from the Council. This was despite the fact that my temporary accommodation had no cooking facilities. Jackie helped organise for my food payments to be backdated.
27. The professional person that really helped me during this time was Arantxa Gaba from the Citizens Advice Bureau. She has been helping me ever since. Isis Amlak, a community coordinator, has also been a great help to me since the fire. I am so grateful for all the help that they have given me.
28. The Council on the other hand didn't seem to be bothered. They acted as if they did not know that I existed. It felt like I didn't exist and during this time, the Council didn't really help me at all. I was not provided information about things available or what to do by officials from the Council. Instead, I had to rely on hearsay from other survivors and residents.

Residents' complaints

29. Due to their location on site in the Lancaster West Estate, the TMO were my first point of contact when I had a complaint or an issue that needed to be resolved. This was especially after my stroke in 2006 which restricted my mobility. Carol also made many complaints on my behalf to the TMO over the years. However, it didn't take me long to come to the realisation that it often was not even worth complaining to the TMO. The complaints that I made over the years rarely resulted in action being taken. Eventually, I stopped complaining due to the unlikelihood of receiving an adequate response or solution.

30. Over the years I made a number of complaints about a wide variety of issues, including pest infestations, leaks, flood damage and disability accessibility. The TMO would take ages to respond to any complaints and sometimes wouldn't respond at all. When they did come to my flat to rectify something that I had complained about, I was never given any prior warning. There was a culture of poor communication with the residents. We were not consulted to find what days would best suit us. Often, they would turn up unannounced to fix something, say they would return to finish it, and never return. I noticed that after a period of time surveyors no longer came to inspect and assess whether works had been done to a reasonable standard.
31. For example, I complained about cockroach and mice infestations over the years and the TMO never got back to me. They didn't even send someone to inspect the property, so I considered paying for a solution myself. There was also once a fire next door to my flat in Barandon Walk. As a result of the fire, pipes and radiators burst and there was water damage to my flat from the fire engine. The TMO did come and do some work to the kitchen and bedroom, but there is still some water damage in my place and I am still waiting to receive compensation 14 years later. I had an expensive bed that was badly damaged by the water, but I was never compensated for this.
32. It was clear to me that the receptionist at the TMO office was very stretched and struggled to manage the desk and the constant flow of residents complaining. She couldn't speak English very well and it was hard to communicate with her.
33. I have managed to locate one of the many letters that I sent to the TMO complaining about the state of my flat (Exhibit MJ/1). Unfortunately, most of the other letters and emails Carol sent to the TMO on my behalf were sent from an older email address that is no longer in use. On 24 November 2010, I wrote to Deon Wilks of the TMO, my allocated housing officer, outlining several issues I had with my flat that remained unresolved despite my efforts to get them sorted by the TMO. Most of these issues remain unresolved to this day. I never received a response to this letter.
34. In my letter I highlighted the fact that "although I have lived here for thirty-six years there has been no maintenance or refurbishment work carried out on the flat apart from some electrical re-wiring". I also raised the issue of lighting in the downstairs passage at Barandon Walk. This issue, I believe was caused by water leakage in my block. It was a particularly important issue to me because due to my partial sight, I found it very difficult to get around without proper lighting. Even though I made this very clear to the TMO when I visited them in their office, they clearly didn't consider

it urgent as it took them months to sort out. I was also concerned of the potential dangers associated with water in the electric circuits.

35. In my opinion, the TMO allowed the Lancaster West Estate to be run down and mismanaged. They ignored the needs of the tenants over the last four decades. It was a system of managed neglect. I think that they were trying to get us residents to move out, by just letting the Estate deteriorate. The TMO and the Council seem to care more about money than the residents and so it was inevitable that something like the Grenfell Tower fire was going to happen. All they cared about was collecting rent, not looking after the residents.
36. In my experience, no real thought or consideration was given to the elderly or disabled people living in Barandon Walk. In the early 80's they changed the layout of the building. It used to be one long walkway and then in the 80's they decided to block it off into sections. The Council put partition walls along the walkway to, I think, act as a deterrent for people running from police. In doing so, the only way to access the part of the building where I lived, the so-called 400's, was via a ramp going down to Latimer train station. There was no wheelchair access on the other side of the building. It was always a struggle with my back getting in and out of my block. My flat was number [REDACTED] before the partitioning of the Walkways.
37. As I mentioned, I still have issues with my flat. In my view, as there is an intense spotlight on the Estate after the fire, there are teams of people cleaning the building, but it's all cosmetic and no positive changes have been made to my building, particularly in relation to disability access. Disability access is still very poor.
38. Over two years ago, my flat was assessed by my occupational therapist. The recommended works to my kitchen and bathroom were completed relatively quickly and a stair lift was installed after continuously insisting, but I am still waiting for the entrance to my flat to be made wheelchair friendly. To get into my flat, there is a raised step. It makes it very difficult for me to get in and out of my flat. The Council have agreed to remove the step and make the access more suitable. They have sent people on a few occasions to inspect the step, but this has still not been sorted. The Council recently sent somebody to my flat and I thought they were at my place to remove the step, but actually they came to bring my front door up to the regulation standards. This addition to the door has made it more difficult for me to get in and out of the flat.

39. Since the fire, I have complained to RBKC at the Curve about the need for a new water tank, but as usual, they have sent people to look at it (in December 2018 and again in July 2019), and then no further action has been taken. The water tank needs replacing because it is contaminated and infested with dead animals.
40. I have also been asking for the extractor fans in my flat to be replaced for over 30 years, because they are not working. In the summer, for example, it gets really, really hot. Again, the TMO have sent people over the years to inspect, but nothing has been done. Most recently the Council sent workmen last summer to inspect the fans, but as far as I am aware, no job was ever raised.
41. I have been complaining for a year about water damage to my flat that has been caused by a leak in my neighbour's flat. On this occasion, the council sent somebody who claimed to have rectified the issue, but when it next rained, the water came through. I informed the Council about this and was told that they would send someone to fix the leak at source, but no one has confirmed that this had been done, nor have they repaired the water damage in my flat.
42. After the fire, I went to a panel discussion with Isis Amlak at the Notting Hill Methodist Church and asked members of the panel about the pollution in the area following the fire. Somebody on the panel from the Council explained that a specialist had surveyed the area and advised that everything appeared to be normal. I do not recall receiving any further information about pollution in the area from the Council since and I am concerned about my health and safety.

Fire safety measures

43. Throughout my time living on the Lancaster West Estate, I was never given any fire safety advice or leaflet. I remember that the fire brigade carried out some inspections of the building before the fire. No evacuation plan was distributed and there was certainly no special evacuation plan created for me as a disabled person. I remember being concerned about some exposed gas pipes in my building, but I did not complain to the TMO about it because I knew that they wouldn't take any action.
44. Before the fire in June 2017, I remember that fire engines were frequently called to the Estate in the event of fires. I was always concerned about the accessibility for emergency services to the Lancaster West Estate after the school was built and the sports centre rebuilt. After this, I was concerned that access to the Tower block was really restricted. I always hoped that the issue of accessibility in the time of an

emergency had been properly thought out. I assumed they would be aware of the limited access fire engines would have to the tower in the event of a serious fire.

45. Prior to the fire, when doors needed replacing, they were never replaced by fire doors (which they should have been). This must have been something to do with the cost and in my opinion formed part of a wider approach by the TMO and Council. It seemed to me that any works that were ever done were always done cheaply and never checked by a surveyor.
46. As far as I am aware, I have never seen or heard any fire alarms in Barandon Walk. The TMO did install smoke detectors in my flat before the fire, but they were not maintained at all. On one occasion, the battery ran out and my smoke alarms rang for over a year. The TMO eventually came a replaced it.
47. Since the fire, I have been concerned to see that there are gas pipes on the outside and inside of my building. In my opinion, gas pipes should be either built into the building or be underground. I am concerned about the possibility of another Grenfell Tower fire.

Concluding remarks

48. I would like the Inquiry to recommend that lessons are learned about emergency evacuation. I would like the Inquiry to focus in particular on the need for the emergency services to be trained in special emergency procedures for evacuating disabled people. I do not want others to go through what I experienced on that night in June 2017.
49. I think real lessons need to be learned from the failure of the emergency services, Council and the TMO to properly communicate information to the residents in the immediate aftermath of the fire.
50. In my opinion, there was no real response from the Council after the fire. I believe that the little action that has actually taken place was as a result of public pressure. In general, I have had to rely on others to get my life back to normal after the fire, not the Council. I genuinely don't know what I would have done after the fire without my family, Isis and Arantxa. I feel let down by the Council and the Central Government. From my perspective, the lack of communication and assistance from the Council after the fire is a continuation of the way in which the residents of the Lancaster West Estate were treated before the fire, with neglect and contempt.

Statement of truth

51. I believe that the facts stated in this Statement are true. I agree that this statement can form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and can be published on the Inquiry's web site.

Signed: 

Michael John

Dated: 28/02/2020