

IN THE MATTER OF THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF ASIA GHAMHI

I, Asia Ghamhi, born [REDACTED], c/o Birnberg Peirce Ltd, 14 Inverness Street, London NW1 7HJ, WILL SAY as follows:

Background

1. My brother Abdulaziz El-Wahabi, sister-in-law Faouzia El-Wahabi, nephew Yasin El-Wahabi, niece Nur Huda El-Wahabi, and nephew Mehdi El-Wahabi lived in Flat 182 on the 21st floor of Grenfell Tower. They passed away in the fire on 14th June 2017. I loved them dearly and I miss them every day. It has been more than two years but time hasn't made it easier at all.
2. My sister Hanan Wahabi also lived in Grenfell Tower, together with her husband Salah Eddine Chebiouni, son Zakariya Chebiouni and younger daughter. Thankfully they escaped the fire, although it has been very hard for them.
3. I live very close to Grenfell Tower, around 15 minutes' walk away. We are a close-knit family and are always visiting each other, so I was very often at Abdulaziz's flat or Hanan's flat, and they were often at mine. Our mother lives around the corner from my place, so we would gather together in her flat often as well. I saw Abdulaziz, Faouzia, Yasin, Nur Huda and Mehdi at least once a week.
4. I work as an administrative assistant in the Education department at RBKC. I have worked for RBKC for 32 years and I am still there. I love seeing the smiles of schoolchildren, and I tell myself that it is still important to work for education, even though I am extremely sad and angry about RBKC's role in Grenfell. I was meant to receive an award for 30 years' service at RBKC shortly after the time that the fire happened; the award ceremony was postponed. I received the award some months afterwards. I am proud of the work that I do, but it is really hard to keep going.

5. I have given a statement to the Metropolitan Police Service dated 19 April 2018 (which I will refer to as my MPS Statement). That statement describes my experience of the night of the fire, what I saw and heard when I arrived outside the building around 2am, and my telephone conversation with Faouzia. I consent to my MPS Statement being disclosed to the Inquiry for use in evidence.
6. This is my first statement to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

Fire safety systems

7. I was often at my brother's and sister's flats in Grenfell Tower, so I saw what was happening with the refurbishment and the issues they were having in the building.
8. The lifts weren't always working when I visited.
9. The front door to my brother's flat didn't always close properly. I noticed sometimes when I knocked on it, it would open just from knocking.
10. After the new windows were put in with the refurbishment, there was a draught in my brother's flat and it became colder.
11. I don't remember seeing any fire safety signage in the building.
12. Some floors in the building had floor numbers painted on, but some floors didn't have numbers.
13. Before the refurbishment, the hallway between the flats was a sociable community area. Children would play there and neighbours would chat to each other. After the refurbishment, the hallway became narrower because a part of it was boxed up. The wall of the boxed area was sticking out. There were also pipes showing. It became too cramped to be a nice area for the neighbours to spend time in.
14. My brother's family went without gas for at least three months during the refurbishment. There was a gas smell in the flat but he wasn't getting any gas for cooking in the kitchen. They had to use the electric cooker during this time.
15. There was a new door entry system for getting in the building after the refurbishment. You buzzed the flat from outside the building, then the first door would unlock and you could come in. There was a second door that would unlock at the same time. You had to really hurry between the two doors because the second door would lock itself quite quickly. It happened to me a few times that I was locked in between the two doors. There was no button to press to get in the second door or to buzz the flat from

the second door, so I had to call my brother by phone to ask him to come down and let me in, or go out the building and buzz the flat again from outside the first door.

Fire safety complaints

16. My brother and his family were upset because of the works in the refurbishment.

They were unhappy about the way the pipes were coming in to their flat, and all the dust from the works. My brother told me that he had made lots of complaints. He and my sister-in-law went to meetings to say what they had to say but their voices weren't heard. RBKC had a duty to them, but failed them.

Emergency shelter and accommodation

17. My husband Mokhtar Ghamhi and my children Anas, Iman and Usama Ghamhi were all there standing outside the building on the night of the fire. All our family were just standing and waiting for Abdulaziz, Faouzia, Yasin, Nur Huda and Mehdi to come out. Hanan was in a nightgown. Children were without shoes. I was in my slippers, and wearing an abaya over my nightie. We needed shelter but didn't have anywhere to go, until my son Anas knocked on the door of the caretaker of the Rugby Portobello Club and asked him to open it up for us. RBKC didn't get shelter for us; it was Anas who arranged that. The charities and everyone then used the Rugby Portobello Club.

18. I was at the Rugby Portobello Club the whole day. Families came in, and the community brought donations. The community included all minorities, including Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews. I wondered how they had got organised so quickly.

19. Some people came from RBKC to the Rugby Portobello Club that day – on 14th June – and wanted us to leave the club. But we couldn't leave when we didn't know what had happened to our family – we needed to be there so that someone could find us if they had information on our family. We asked to stay until at least we had broken our fast in the evening.

20. I returned to the Rugby Portobello Club the next day and the day after that. I wanted to be there to receive information about our family.

21. I went with Hanan to the Westway Centre to get her a new passport. I also went with her to find somewhere she could get passport photos taken, and I paid for them since she had no money. It was a really difficult time, and even getting the passport photos was hard on us emotionally. We went to a photographer's on Portobello Road and

they were rude to us, they had no sympathy at all – we got upset and had to leave. We ended up getting the passport photos done at a chemist shop on Ladbroke Grove.

22. We were invited to St Clement's Church for a vigil. St Clement's is opposite Grenfell, and Nur Huda and Mehdi used to go there for homework club.

Food and drink

23. The community provided food and drink for everyone. There was plenty of Halal and vegetarian food, provided by Islamic Relief and the Sikh organisation from around the corner from Grenfell. The food was available in the Rugby Portobello Club and all down the street. I didn't see RBKC providing any food or drink.

Basic provisions and financial assistance

24. There were a lot of donations from the community. People went to the shops and brought things brand new – people's generosity was amazing. I saw a white van giving out blankets, and they were new blankets. The whole street was packed with donations. Some volunteers came in and it was all organised into categories and sizes. The Red Cross was there helping to organise things.
25. There were people of every nationality and every faith helping out. The love and support from the community was amazing – showing how strong we are as a community. Everyone ate together. I thought "This is how the world should be". It was something positive I could notice even while I was in my grief.
26. I gave Hanan my clothes to wear on the first day. Later we picked up some clothes, toothbrushes, and toothpaste from the Rugby Portobello Club and took them to Hanan's hotel.
27. I didn't notice any financial assistance being given. I wasn't offered any money.

Psychological support

28. I didn't see any psychological support or services being offered in the first days and weeks after the fire.
29. I don't think I will ever recover from the shock of what I saw and heard on the night of the fire. I saw the fire spreading so fast, knowing my loved ones were inside the

building. I keep seeing my brother's hand waving at the window of the burning building.

30. It was my GP who referred me to counselling. I think it was around July 2017. My GP has been amazing. Without her support, I wouldn't have even known to go for counselling. I did not receive any information about psychological services through RBKC.
31. I didn't have a keyworker until around six months after the fire. I found out then that other bereaved families had keyworkers. We are quite a large family and I wasn't expecting all of us to be supported, but I was shocked that no one from RBKC had contacted my Mum. She had lost her son, daughter-in-law and three grandchildren, and no one had checked on her. I felt so sad at the look in my Mum's eyes having lost her son. I googled Grenfell support and spoke to someone called Dominique at the Curve Community Centre. Usually I am a calm person, but I was really upset and cried on the phone and told her that my Mum wasn't getting any support. After that call, someone called Rhona from RBKC came to visit my Mum. She asked whether the siblings also needed keyworkers and I called all my siblings who confirmed that they would like keyworkers. Then I gave Rhona all my siblings' contact numbers.
32. I heard from my nephew that he called RBKC and he had been put on hold for fifteen minutes while people at RBKC discussed my family. He could still hear them although he was meant to be on hold. They were saying things like "These people just want money", "Who are all these people". Rhona was there and she didn't say anything horrible herself, but she didn't stand up for our family. Next time I met Rhona I told her that I was disappointed about the way my family was being discussed and disappointed that she didn't stand up for us.
33. There have been several changes of keyworker, and it has been confusing and disruptive. Rhona left RBKC not long after my nephew's call. It was very sudden, and it wasn't because of my family's complaint about the call, as far as I know. Then there was a keyworker called Nicola. When Eid was approaching, I asked Nicola whether RBKC could cover the cost of taking my Mum to the cemetery for Eid, as we would have gathered as a family for Eid but Abdulaziz, Faouzia, Yasin, Nur Huda and Mehdi couldn't be with us. Nicola was kind and said it would be no problem as long as I provided the cab receipt, which I did. But then I got a call from RBKC saying that Nicola would no longer be our keyworker and we would get a different keyworker.

Our next keyworker, Sharon, said that she couldn't find the cab receipt for our trip to the cemetery on the file, but luckily I had a photo of it on my phone and sent it to her, so she could arrange the reimbursement. Sharon was amazing but she had to move on as well, and now we have Daniel as our keyworker. It is difficult to feel supported by the keyworker service when the keyworker keeps changing, sometimes at very short notice and without even saying goodbye. It feels like they are playing with people's emotions.

34. I always have the same keyworker as my Mum because I live close by and coordinate things for her, so my Mum has had to go through these changes as well.

35. My Mum is elderly and has been frail for years. She lives in an RBKC council flat and for years we have been asking RBKC to turn the bathroom into a wet room as she cannot get in and out of the bath on her own. My siblings and I take turns to care for her and it was taking us around an hour to help her into the bath and another hour to help her out. That process was painful for her and for us. I started asking RBKC for a wet room for her around two years before the fire. Then the fire happened and RBKC finally did the wet room. It is bittersweet because that is something that RBKC should have done earlier.

Information and assistance

36. Someone gave me the phone number for the missing person line on 14th June. The number was on a wall near Grenfell. I called the missing person line many times that day. No one picked up the phone. Each time I was leaving a voice message, but I never got a call back, so I didn't get to speak to anyone.

37. The next day – 15th June – I went to Hanan's hotel to check on her and someone there said that RBKC would have information about missing people, so I called RBKC while I was at the hotel and I gave my family's names and flat number. The RBKC person on the phone said that my family were not down as missing people on the register. That gave me hope that they might be in hospital.

38. I didn't go to hospitals myself because I knew that my children, nieces and nephews were going to hospitals. I tried calling some hospitals – St Mary's, Charing Cross – but they didn't give information over the phone.

39. For the first two days, no one came to see us as the family of missing people. No one checked on my Mum, although it was her son that was missing. On Friday 16th June, we met the Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) from the police at my sister Amina Chaer-Yemlahi's flat in the evening. The FLOs told us that the missing would be classified as deceased. I had to call Faouzia's Mum in Morocco to tell her what the police had said. On Saturday 17th June in the morning, I and my siblings sat down with my Mum and tried to tell her in a gentle way.
40. Andy and Jenny were our FLOs and they were very supportive to us. They didn't come across as police officers; they were like normal people. After the meeting at Amina's, they started coming to my house. Whatever information they could provide, they would. They were there for us when we did the visit of Grenfell Tower, and when we went for the remains of our family. They were there for the burials and the anniversary commemoration in Westminster. They saw our pain. I hope they have access to therapy too, because they saw so much pain. Then Andy and Jenny moved on and we had Carlos and David as our FLOs. Carlos and David are helpful, though I do miss Andy and Jenny because they were there for us in that very difficult time.

Public communication

41. I don't remember getting any information about services or support. I didn't get any leaflets or newsletters. I was trying to grieve and felt like I was in a different world, so I wasn't thinking about services that might be available. As I stated above, I had to google Grenfell support to find a phone number to call around six months after the fire.

Voluntary and community groups

42. All the help and donations were from the community. I find it sad that RBKC were not the first ones to offer support.
43. The Moroccan Embassy staff came to meet the community in the Rugby Portobello Club and paid their respects to the families. The staff from the Moroccan Consulate in Paddington came to visit my Mum, much sooner than anyone from RBKC. At Eid, months after the fire, staff from the Moroccan Embassy remembered my Mum and

brought sweets to her to pay respects. These are human things to do to support each other at difficult times.

44. Without my faith and the love of the community, I don't know how I would have survived.

Coordination and leadership

45. I didn't see anyone from RBKC, TMO or the central government taking leadership in the immediate aftermath. RBKC should have been the first people there to provide support but they weren't there on the night of the fire. I am reliving that night again and again and I don't remember anyone from RBKC. I did see a couple of people from RBKC on 14th June but they were just asking us to leave the Rugby Portobello Club. I didn't see anyone at all from TMO or the central government.

Adequacy of response and lessons learned


46. I can only speak as a bereaved family member, and there was no response from RBKC for the bereaved. I feel broken in pieces. I have changed so much in my mental state and physical health. I keep working but I just don't function as I used to. There is therapy thanks to my GP and St Charles Hospital, and they have been amazing, but I still need therapy and will need it long-term. I am trying to find myself again but it's hard. It's all the more painful because I work for RBKC and they don't check on me. I had to be off work from June to September 2017. Twice I've had a breakdown at work. I have cried so much that my eyes are damaged, I have severe chest pains, and I am exhausted all the time. I can't see properly, can't sleep, can't eat properly. I keep going and I am trying my best but I don't feel any sympathy. I feel like I am just a number to them. No one at RBKC asks me how I am feeling as a bereaved employee.
47. My children are suffering too, and I try to support them but the grief is overwhelming for all of us. RBKC has a rehabilitation scheme for bereaved family members but it makes no sense to me. My daughter's education has been messed up. She tried to access RBKC's rehabilitation scheme but they didn't offer any support because she couldn't bring herself to talk about what had happened. My son needed temporary accommodation, and RBKC placed him in a building opposite Grenfell.

48. I got so sad and angry that I punched a mattress to try to process my emotions on my own. It must have been quite bad because I had to have physiotherapy for my arm afterwards. The rehabilitation case manager from RBKC's scheme tried to find out whether RBKC would support physiotherapy and RBKC said no because they don't think my injury is related to Grenfell. This kind of thing makes it look like I want money. I don't want money. I want my loved ones back – my brother Abdulaziz, sister-in-law Faouzia, nephew Yasin, niece Nur Huda, and nephew Mehdi.

49. RBKC needs to own up to what they did and learn the lessons. Don't let Grenfell happen again.

50. **I understand that this statement will form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and will be published on the Inquiry's website in due course.**

I believe that the contents of this witness statement are true.

Signed:.....

Dated:26/2/20.....

Asia Ghamhi