

Witness Statement of: Belainesh Araia  
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## GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

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### PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF BELAINESH ARAIA

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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).

Signed ...*Belainesh*.....

I, **Belainesh Araia**, will say as follows:-

1. This is my first witness statement to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and relates to Phase 2 of the Inquiry. This statement will focus on my experience of fire safety in the Walkways (Module 3) and my experience in the immediate aftermath of the fire (Module 4). However, to ensure that my other evidence can be understood in context, I will briefly outline my experience on the night of the fire.

#### Background

2. I have been a foster carer for looked after children for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) since 2006. As part of my role as a foster carer I must provide accommodation which is safe and suitable for the child's needs. I am assisted and monitored by a Supervising Social Worker (SSW) who works for RBKC Social Services. The children that I look after are also supported by the Child Social Worker (CSW) who also RBKC Social Services.
3. I chose to be a foster carer because I came here as a refugee and felt like I needed to pay back to society in some way. I was also working as an interpreter. When

caring for children you have the responsibility for their health, welfare and education. Above all, you have to provide the child with a sustainable and secure base.

4. I have referred to the children I have fostered in this statement sequentially as 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D'.

#### Flat 304 Testerton Walk

5. I used to live in Camden with my daughter and granddaughter. Then my daughter went to University and I started foster caring in 2006. I used my daughter's old room to provide for a foster child. My daughter finished her education in 2009 and I had to decide if I wanted to either stop fostering or not. I approached my SSW at the time, Salwa. I explained my housing situation for her and told her I had to give up fostering to provide for my daughter and granddaughter. She explained that there was a scheme I could be part of, where I would be provided with suitable accommodation to carry on fostering looked after children. Which I accepted.
6. I viewed the Flat 304 Testerton Walk, a three bedroom flat, on 18 May 2010 with Deon Wilks who worked for the Lancaster West Estate Office, run by the Tenant Management Organisation (TMO). I went to the viewing with my reservations, I knew that this would be an opportunity given it was a three bed flat. After viewing the flat, my first impressions were not good. It was a neglected flat and it was clear that a lot of work was needed to ensure it was suitable for fostering a child.
7. As part of my flat viewing, Deon provided me with a copy of the tenancy agreement for me to sign. I was not expecting that, I believed that I was simply there to view the flat. I felt forced to sign the tenancy agreement. I was made to feel that I had no other option but to accept the offer. The reason I moved to the flat was to foster for RBKC, I didn't come from RBKC background. I was advised in an intimidating letter from RBKC that if I refuse the offer, there will be serious consequences to my welfare application. I exhibit a copy of this letter at **BA/1**.
8. I was naïve and thought that RBKC would help me to make sure that the flat was suitable for the vulnerable children I was fostering for them. They were ultimately responsible for these children and I trusted that they would not let me down by

- ensuring I had a suitable property for my role. I was shocked at the state of the flat and I expressed that to Deon. She told me it is up to me and offered me a £150 decorations voucher. I exhibit a copy of this at **BA/2**. The place was in ruin. It was unliveable. I used the voucher and I spent more than four thousand pounds on painting, re-decoration, skirting, tiling and laminate flooring. I remember having to use a steamer to take off the wallpaper.
9. I remember being given a booklet with my tenancy agreement. The booklet included a list of important telephone numbers and information about electricity.
  10. I moved into Flat 304 Testerton Walk on 30 May 2010. At that time I was caring for a 17 year old girl, A, as well as my granddaughter, who was 9 at the time.
  11. The flat was on the first floor of Testerton Walk. It was about three to four metres from the entrance which lead to Grenfell Tower. The view from my bedroom window and all the other windows looked out onto Grenfell Tower.
  12. In July 2010, A turned 18 and she left her placement. When she left, Salwa said she needed me to foster a child who has special needs. I was working at a school as a teaching assistant for special needs children at the time. I had to weigh up the needs of the child I was working with at the school, and the child who needed a foster carer. I decided to give up my job in school to look after the child. B was 9 years old at the time. He had autism and ADHD and asthma. Given B's special needs it was important that his home environment was safe and did not impact him negatively.
  13. After a number of weeks living in the property, I had discovered a number of serious health and safety issues with the flat that required urgent work to make the flat safe. There were a number of issues, but I will focus on two which caused me a great deal of concern. The running water from the taps in the property was brown and dirty. There were two streams of running water in the flat, one which was brown and other stream from the kitchen only was running through as clear. I didn't trust it. I exhibit a photograph of the water tank supplying dirty water at **BA/3**. I would have to buy lots of bottles of water for drinking.
  14. The second issue I had was that the water taps in the kitchen, toilets and bathroom provided hot and cold water in two separate taps. The hot water taps would

produce extremely hot water which could have burned your hands if used on its own. As described above, it was imperative that the accommodation I was providing was safe and suitable for my foster children's needs. These issues were noted by Kent County Council, they were the local authority responsible for A. They wrote to RBKC to advise that A was very happy with her placement but these issues needed to be resolved.

15. These issues were ongoing for a number of years and were only resolved after I instructed a solicitors firm in 2013 to help me challenge the disrepair. Before this, I wrote numerous complaint letters to the TMO and progressed through their complaint procedure. They did not take into account my situation. Deon Wilks was my Housing Officer and I had hope with her because she helped me and I would call her about my problems. However, behind the person, the TMO staff were working for an organisation which I felt was there to silence you. Most of the TMO staff were there as a front. I worked hard to make the flat better, but some things were out of my hands. So, I had to fight back to make sure my home was safe and suitable for the children I was caring for.
16. Before the fire, I complained a number of times about damp and a damage following a leak to my flat. I exhausted the TMO's complaint procedure again. I was continually put in a position that was out of my control. The TMO did not take into account the vulnerable children I was fostering and after fighting for a year I received compensation from RBKC following the fire.

#### Grenfell Tower

17. I visited Grenfell Tower many times because I had friends there. One of the people we lost, Amal Ahmedin, only lived there for 8 months before the fire. She came to me to ask me about the area and the place, about 3 months before the fire I visited her. I remember using the lifts to get to the 19<sup>th</sup> floor. Amal's flat was in the corner and you could see the skyline of London. It was so beautiful. When I woke up on the night of the fire I saw the fire shoot up from the 4<sup>th</sup> floor up to her floor and I tried to call her. I now feel guilty for providing positive advice about the area and the neighbourhood, which may have helped her to make her decision to move. After the refurbishment Amal, her sister and I were happy to see it looking better.

18. My other friend, Berkti Haftom, she was a friend of my foster child. We would share babysitting. I remember I visited her two months before the fire. She lived on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor.
19. RBKC sent us letters about working with Kensington Aldridge Academy and refurbishing the tower.

#### Fire safety systems in Testerton Walk

20. The main door that I used, that led to Grenfell Tower, was very heavy and would close behind you. However, my front door did not self-close and I had to push it to shut it behind me.
21. I don't remember seeing any fire safety signage in Testerton Walk, only signs saying 'No ball games'.
22. I don't remember seeing any emergency lighting in Testerton Walk and only remember seeing smoke alarms in my own home, not in the communal areas.

#### Fire safety advice

23. At the time of the fire, I was not aware of the fire safety advice or the stay put policy. From my own knowledge, I knew that we had to evacuate and leave.

### **Module 4**

#### The 14 June 2017 and week after the fire

24. On the night of the fire, I woke up at around 1.30am to the sound of a helicopter. I thought that maybe they are raiding for drugs. When I tried to get back to sleep again, I heard "help help" from my bedroom window. When I opened my window, and I saw flames coming out of the fourth floor window at Grenfell Tower and I heard shouting and screaming for help from across the Tower.
25. On the night, my granddaughter was with her mum at St John's Wood and B was staying with his mother. It was the day after the refurbishment in my flat was being finished. The workmen were finishing up the painting so I asked that B stay with his mum whilst they were carrying out the decorating.

26. On the night of the fire, I was also fostering C, an 11 year old autistic child. I went to wake up C, she was in the bedroom next to mine. I gave her a gown to put on and we ran out. I left everything in my flat.
27. On our way out, I saw the police, they said you stay in the green between Testerton and Barandon Walk. No one from RBKC was there, telling us what to do and what was happening. I stood in the green area with my next door neighbour, Jenny. We were all so confused.
28. At around 2am or 3am I wanted to get back into the flat to get my phone to call my daughter and granddaughter. I left C with my neighbour and went to my flat. On my way, I saw a dead body in the communal area. It was horrifying. A policeman escorted me to my flat, and I remember him saying 'quick'. I rushed in and grabbed my phone. I didn't get anything else from my flat, I had to be quick.
29. Later on, my granddaughter joined us and we stayed on the green watching in horror at the Tower until around 6.30am. We were there all night. We didn't know what to do, or where to go. I remember hearing the helicopters and shouting. I was crying because my friends Amal and Berkti, who lived in the Tower, were not answering. I was really lost and confused. I remember smelling burning and seeing chunks of cladding and dust coming down off the Tower and into the area where we were stood. Most of the chunks were small but there were some large chunks. I remember hearing the noise of the fire crackling and people in the Tower shouting help. I saw people in the windows shouting for help. It felt like it was end of world. I did not know what to do or where to go. We all felt helpless and powerless.
30. My granddaughter stayed with us. Her best friend, Ines Alves, was living in the Tower. My granddaughter was really worried about her friend and her family's wellbeing. She was at school at the time and doing her GCSEs. She needed to go to school and she booked for us a taxi to my daughter's place but all the roads were blocked off. This was around 6.30am. So we all walked towards Holland Road where we sat outside a shop and waited for an Uber to arrive. When the taxi came, my granddaughter left to go to school. We still had our pyjamas on and were covered in dust from the debris that had fallen from the Tower. The shopkeeper was kind and he gave us food and we used his address to order an Uber.

31. The first person from RBKC to contact me was Sarah, she was the CSW for B. She wanted to see how we were. She contacted me at around 6am on 14 June 2017. We were all very overwhelmed and I said to her "*What am I going to do about my home?*". We were very worried that the Tower was going to fall down and we continued to worry about it whilst we stayed at my daughters.

#### Accommodation

32. It was not feasible for me to move into a hotel because of the needs of the children I was fostering.
33. I stayed at my daughter's place with my granddaughter and C until the first week of July 2017. It was very overcrowded. She had a two bedroom flat. C had her own bed and my granddaughter and I slept on the sofas. I still preferred to be overcrowded than to go to a hotel. I had to look after C and attend to her special needs. It was not easy.
34. I didn't want to go back to Testerton Walk. I was so horrified and devastated by what had happened. I didn't contact anyone from RBKC about going back to my flat.
35. I remember receiving a call from RBKC in the first week of July 2017 and they told me everything is safe and I can go back to my flat. We trusted them in that everything was safe. C, my granddaughter and I went back to my flat at Testerton Walk. B did not come back with us and returned to his mother.

#### *Return to Testerton Walk*

36. On 10 July 2017, I visited the Westway to find out about moving out of Testerton Walk. I spoke to Simon Lloyd who was sitting at the RBKC housing desk. His approach was positive and I completed a suitability form for housing.
37. On the 14 July 2017, I had a meeting with my SSW, Afrah and CSW for B, Sarah. After we finished the meeting, they asked me if I am sure that I am safe at my flat at Testerton Walk or if I wanted to move. My answer was that even though I didn't want to come back, I didn't want to be additional burden to the council. That was

struggling to deal with the aftermath of the fire.

38. I knew that it was going to be difficult, but I hadn't lost my life. In a way I was thinking, the council would not allow us to come back if the tower was going to come down. I had to trust them.
39. When we moved back to Testerton Walk in the first week of July 2017, there was debris from the Tower and powder on our balcony. I felt dirty in my flat. I cleaned the flat myself. Months after we cleaned and had moved out of the flat, RBKC contacted us to clean the curtains and clear the balcony. It was too late, we had already done the clearing and cleaning.
40. After moving back to Testerton Walk there was fire in a flat two doors away from mine. We were evacuated in front of the flat that was burning. They could have taken us a different way. We were evacuated by emergency services. When the fire happened, C started to have nightmares. The nights were long. I contacted Sarah and I told her we needed to move because my child was suffering. C was only 10 years old and she loved to stay with me but she found it too difficult. Sarah was very cooperative, she used to be B's Social Worker so she knew me.
41. After the second fire, D, a 16 year old, was placed in my care.

#### *Serviced apartment*

42. As a result of the second fire in our block, myself, my granddaughter and my two foster children felt very unsafe and we were moved into a serviced apartment in Kilburn on 3 August 2017. There were four of us moving into the serviced apartment.
43. Sarah found the serviced apartment that was closer to my daughter. She was very considerate. I really appreciated that. It was a good apartment and it had a kitchen. I was happy with the location and social services provided taxis for C to go to school because it was a longer journey.
44. The serviced apartment was not home for us. The problem I had was that RBKC would not always pay the rent money on time. They were meant to pay every Tuesday and the manager of the apartments, Michele, would say RBKC haven't paid and you need to move out on the Thursday. I was really frustrated. I would have to

call up my Key Worker from RBKC every time and get them to transfer payment for the apartment.

45. I was worried. This kept happening and they weren't paying so I thought they were trying to tell me to move out. It felt as though they were pushing me to move to another accommodation by being late with the payment. They were making our lives difficult and causing us upset. One of the housing officer's from RBKC, Lavina, was very aggressive with trying to get us to move to temporary accommodation. She imposed a lot of stress on me at what was already a stressful time in my life.
46. The serviced apartment was not home and it was affecting my role as a foster carer. D moved to another placement in September 2017. I was supposed to have two foster children and there was no certainty on how long we would have to stay in the apartment for. They offered me private accommodation on a temporary basis, that was very expensive. I told them that this was not for me. I needed stability for the vulnerable child. As promised, I was hoping that I would have priority for permanent accommodation. Tri-borough Social Services were asking me to take on a second foster child. Despite, the Tri-borough policy not to place looked after children in temporary accommodation. I wasn't supposed to have a child in temporary accommodation, because I cannot give the child guaranteed safety and security. I was really hoping I could start my life again and then Lavina told me I was not entitled to permanent accommodation. It was very frustrating and confusing.
47. They kept pushing me to move out and would be late with paying for the serviced apartment. It was a systematic way of bullying. I lived in the serviced apartment for one year and four days.

#### *Permanent accommodation*

48. In July 2018, I viewed the property I am currently living in. I had a meeting prior to this with Roberto Bruni, the Deputy Housing Manager. He said as you are fostering and overcrowded you should be offered permanent accommodation. He finally understood my situation. I was happy that I was able to move out of the serviced apartment and provide stability for the children I was looking after.
49. The house needed some repair work before I could move in. Roberto said I could go

on holiday and when I come back it would be ready for me to move into. When I came back from holiday in August 2018, it wasn't ready. I had to live with my daughter in Kilburn for months. It took months to fix the flooring, we moved into the property in December 2018. Then in January 2019 there was no gas in the house.

#### Basic Provisions and Financial assistance

50. On the 15 June 2017, I went to Primark to buy new clothes because we had nothing to wear. I had to go and buy my own items. My daughter provided me with money to buy items for myself, my granddaughter and my foster child. I was not made aware of the relief centres or donations that had been raised for those affected.
51. As a result of the fire and being forced to leave my home at Testerton Walk and move to a serviced apartment. I was unable to foster new children because the apartment was not suitable for new children and did not offer the stability a looked after child needed. It would have been contrary to the Foster Carer's Handbook. I was employed by RBKC to foster two children and I wasn't able to do so, so my income was reduced. I was struggling and was regularly overdrawn. I had to cut my granddaughter's pocket money, meaning she wasn't able to socialise with her friends. Something she needed to distract her from the stressful environment of living in a serviced apartment. I had no choice but to take on a part-time job because I had such little money for food. It was a very difficult time for me.
52. In December 2017, I received a handbook from RBKC about financial support. It stated that those in hotels and serviced apartments were entitled to £300 per week per person for food allowance and additional allowance for travel costs. I had not been provided with this information before and I called up my Key Worker straight away. I started receiving this allowance in January 2018. It was disappointing that my Key Worker had not made me aware of this before.
53. I complained to my Key Worker after not receiving this allowance whilst I was living in the serviced apartment. After exhausting RBKC's complaint procedure, I was provided a spreadsheet detailing the backdated allowance as though it was paid to me, but I hadn't received it. The spreadsheet shows that it was adjusted in August but again it did not come to me. When I asked what had happened, I wasn't given reliable and clear information as to where this money had gone and why I hadn't

received it.

54. Two weeks after the fire, RBKC social services provided clothes for C. I also received a letter from RBKC offering financial support of £5000 for each family and I collected this from the Rugby Portobello club.

#### Support and information from Key Workers

55. I had three Key Workers following the fire. They were Sarah McManus from July 2017 to November 2017, Francesca Eastman from January 2018 to July 2018 and Samantha Pitts from November 2018. Sarah was my foster child's Social Worker so she understood my situation. Sarah was helpful but she didn't give me the information I needed. I don't think she knew about the food allowance I was entitled to.
56. Then RBKC changed the system for appointment of Key Workers and I had Francesca. Francesca was not supportive and she would tell me she was looking into the food allowance payments, but she hadn't done anything to help me. I felt like Francesca was there to take information from me but not help me. It was the way she would ask me questions. Francesca told me she was leaving the country and my Key Worker changed.
57. The change in Key Workers during what was already a stressful time, put a lot of stress on me. I should have been able to rely on them for support and information but that was not what happened.

#### Information and Assistance

58. We had very little information about Amal and Berkti. I knew Amal through my friend, Fatima. Fatima and Amal's family were going to different hospitals to try and get information about Amal and her family. Fatima's husband told me that it was obvious that they had died because we would have expected to have heard from them. In the week following the fire, I went to Chelsea & Westminster hospital to ask about Amal and Berkti because we were not getting any information from the Police and RBKC. The hospital staff didn't tell me anything straight, but they said if

they knew that they had died then Amal and Berkti's families would have known.

59. There was nothing from RBKC or central government to confirm whether Amal or Berkti had died. The day after the fire, news said that 6 people had died. I couldn't believe it. I had seen someone fall on the night of the fire and seen people in the window. I thought, we would be very lucky if there was only 60 people that had died.
60. Not knowing whether Amal and Berkti had survived exasperated my anxiety. Even though I knew that they had probably died. We didn't know their situation for certain. How did they die? Did they burn in the fire? It was a very difficult situation and not having the answers made it worse.
61. When I found out that my friends and our neighbours had died, we started the mourning process. We would get together every day. In my culture, when you are grieving you spend time at the relatives house. When I wasn't caring for my foster children and granddaughter, I spent my time going to Amal's sister's house and Berkti's sister's house. It was not an easy time. It is a time in my life that I won't forget.

#### Public communication

62. For the most part, in the aftermath of the fire the time I received information from watching TV and from my neighbours who I had lived with at Testerton Walk. My next door neighbour had added me in a group chat on WhatsApp which included other residents of Testerton Walk. We were all going through the same thing and helping each other out. I trusted this information. This was how I found out that there was residents meetings. At the residents meetings, I found out about day activities, massages and the Curve.
63. I don't remember receiving updates from RBKC or text messages. I found that word of mouth was the best way to get information.

#### Needs of specific groups

64. On the night of the fire, I evacuated with a vulnerable child, later my granddaughter joined us. There was no plan or procedure. We spent the whole night in our pyjamas, watching the Tower on fire.
65. I was looking after and caring for a child with complex needs and I believe looked after children should be a priority for the government and society. Social Services owed them a duty and should have been fighting for them. I was expecting RBKC to support C and provide us with permanent and suitable accommodation. Tri-borough Social Services support in regards to housing came too little and too late.

#### Psychological Support

66. Following the 14 June 2017, I visited my GP who referred me to Grenfell Health & Wellbeing where I received counselling. I found the counselling to be helpful. However, my housing situation and my role as a foster carer dominated my sessions, meaning I wasn't able to focus on the horrific events of the night with my counsellor. The events on the night of the fire and those following continue to affect me.
67. My foster child's GP was very concerned about her and they provided her with integrated care from the nurse which helped her. The events following the fire caused my foster child to suffer a mental health breakdown and she was hospitalised on 19 April 2018. She has subsequently been moved by Social Services to the North of England. Before the fire, I had been planning on looking after her for the long term. Her move caused me and continues to cause me a great deal of upset and anguish.

#### Impact

68. After the Grenfell Tower fire, I lost my community. We were living next to Grenfell Tower and it felt like everyone in the neighbourhood was a big family. I miss my friends and the style of life.
69. I used to have trust in the system and the Government. I was so grateful that I was able to live here when I first moved to the UK. I feel like I have been let down by the system. It makes you restless and untrusting. I am always suspicious.

70. It is very hard to trust the system because we have been betrayed. Being a foster carer is a very rewarding job. I have been put in a position where I was not able to make choices and lost my trust in RBKC. I was always in fear that I would be placed somewhere more unsuitable and unsafe. I could not get any reassurances from RBKC that this would not happen. I felt powerless. I could not do anything. It was so frustrating.

#### Adequacy of response & lessons learned

71. The emergency relief provided by RBKC and central Government following the fire was not adequate. We knew nothing. We were just suffering. It was only around the late morning on 14 June 2017 that we started to get something as basic as water. The whole night we spent fixated on Grenfell Tower and those inside. There was nothing to interrupt it. We were just in disbelief. There were police around, but I didn't see anyone from TMO.

72. RBKC need to listen to people. If you look at my experience, it felt as though they were ignoring me on purpose. When someone comes to them for help, they need to listen. They need to respect human beings. They need to treat everyone as human beings. I lived in the richest borough in the UK, but yet people were living in the Tower in terrible conditions.

**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: Belainesh

Date: 26/02/2020