

Witness Statement of: Ahmed Elgwahry
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Exhibits: 1
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GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF AHMED ELGWAHRY

I, Ahmed Elgwahry will say as follows:-

1. This is my second statement and relates to Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. My first statement dated 25 July 2018 deals with the night of the fire (IWS00000988). 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 my family and me. I will refer selectively to certain matters rather than give a full account.

Background

2. I lived in Grenfell Tower growing up but left home for University, prior to the refurbishment. I have lived in a number of student halls, shared accommodation, flats and now own my own house. In all the properties and types of accommodation that I have lived in, none has experienced the number of problems that my mother's flat had in Grenfell Tower. My mother and sister lived in Flat 196 on the 22nd floor and died in the fire, trapped on the top floor (23rd) where they had gone seeking safety.
3. Although I moved out, I frequently visited my mother and sister, spoke with them almost daily by phone, and so I knew what was going on. Given the high location of the flat, when I visited I was able to see the school and leisure centre development and increasing removal of the open spaces and restriction of routes to the Tower. It was as if the Tower was being slowly strangled. As the refurbishment continued it was as if this strangulation continued on the inside

the building. The space in the lobby reduced: the ceiling height was lowered, the wall in front of the lift was built out and a boiler appeared in my mother's hall near the entrance. It felt as if the inside of the building was being squeezed to become smaller and smaller.

Concerns during the refurbishment

4. My mother kept her flat in very good condition and was extremely house proud. It was a cosy warm flat. Her approach was not to leave things to the TMO and Council and instead to do as much as possible herself, although there were physical limits on what she could do due to her disabilities which I explain below. She was not the kind of person who wanted to argue or fight with the council nor complain about matters. However, as the refurbishment started my mother became very frustrated by the treatment and attitude of the TMO towards her. There was significant disruption to her home and new gas pipes now ran through the front door area and along the hall and bedrooms. The disruption and attitude of the contractors and council bothered my mother and she was very vocal about it to my sister, Mariem. My sister would relay my mother's concerns to me as my mother was very upset about the intrusive nature of the work and the way it was being done. Nothing changed and there came a point when my mother became so frustrated that she started to refuse to allow people in to the flat. This was not like my mother, who was by nature co-operative, but was a mark of how frustrated she had become. It felt to her as if the contractors did not treat her with basic dignity and did not respect the fact that the flat was my mother's home. Builders did not clean up or were rude and dismissive about concerns.
5. Through Mariem, my mother tried to get her concerns heard and I know that Mariem attended resident meetings and was in contact with the Grenfell Compact which was set up in order to voice the residents' concerns about the refurbishment. She spoke to many residents including David Collins, Ed Daffarn and Willie Thompson about problems with the refurbishment for example the fact that the windows let in drafts and were defective (see Mariem's email 22.2.16 to Willie Thompson IWS00000998_0049-50 and his reply IWS00000998_0051-52) and shared the frustration of dealing with the TMO. It seemed wrong to my mother that the TMO, on behalf of the council would ruin her flat by placing a boiler in the hall. There was a purpose built space in the kitchen for the boiler and

replacing this was the least disruptive but placing the boiler in the hall was unsightly and felt dangerous. It reduced the space and hampered access. I thought these were reasonable concerns.

6. My mother got to the point of saying that she did not want to be alone when works were carried out and Mariem would take time off work in order to be with my mother. Mariem tried to articulate the frustrations, particularly about the boiler, but there came a point that my mother even stopped reporting the problems and stopped complaining. She reached the point of giving up. This change occurred because she was scared. I remember my mother telling me she was afraid of losing her tenancy and accepted defeat in that she could no longer stop them. She said, "I don't want them to kick me out. Let them in. We can't stop them".

7. My mother would speak to Mariem and knew about the threats residents had received from the TMO about access to their flats for work to be done. These residents had apparently been made to feel that their tenancies were somehow at risk if they did not co-operate. My mother was frightened that her home would be taken and there appeared to be a climate of fear being generated by the TMO as a result of which residents felt it was not wise to complain. My mother and sister were not the sort of people who would complain or cause problems unless there was something really bothering them. Mariem was an intelligent and rational woman who led a full and active life. When she said told me there were problems with the flat, I knew there must be. There was nothing to be gained by complaining and I knew my sister too well to believe she would waste time on complaining without a reason. She complained because there were real problems and genuine frustration at the way the TMO was handling them.

Emails from Mariem to the TMO

8. I knew that Mariem was in contact with the TMO about the flat. I have exhibited these emails in my first statement. I have now obtained my mother's housing file and was surprised that there was no reference to my mother's or sister's concerns or complaints. There was no record of Mariem's calls and none of the emails were within the file. It was as if my mother's voice and concerns were washed from the file. It contained documents about the tenancy and rent but my mother's voice is

missing. I do not know if my sister's emails expressing her and my mother's concerns were deliberately removed, or if there was simply a policy of not adding this information to the housing file but it concerns me that tenants' voices are masked or just ignored in this way.

9. Mariem wrote to Willie Thompson on 22 February 2016 IWS00000998_0049 asking him to raise the issues with the TMO. She stated:

Since fitting the boiler we have had difficulty sleeping due to the noise the boiler makes. There is a loud buzzing noise which gets much worse in the evening and prevents both me and mother from sleeping. I raised this issue with Rydon on numerous occasions and until today they still don't know how to fix it. A simple answer as we do not know what this could be" is just not good enough. The way it feels now is that Rydon are trying to fob us off as they don't have the answer and are now saying they have put a request for the contractor to come back and take a look however they can not give me a date or time as to when I will be hearing back from them. It has been so bad that my mum needs to wear ear plugs to try and help her sleep along with leaving the bedroom window open so the street noise can drown out the noise from the boiler.

On another note I mentioned that the windows let in a breeze and you can hear a whistling noise, this should not happen with double glazed windows. When raised to Rydon someone came up and accused me of not closing the flap at the top - this was a false accusation and once again I was fobbed of

Another incident happened where the window in my living completely came off the hinges and nearly hurt me and my mum as it was hanging oft We had to wait all weekend in the freezing winter for Rydon to get back in on Monday to only come in and accuse me of pulling at the window to hard. I wouldn't like to say I am weak but there is no way possible that I could of pulled the window hard enough for it to completely come off its hinges!

10. I recall specific problems with the window coming off its hinges. Amazingly the TMO accused my mother of deliberately doing this and saying that she pulled it from its hinges. This was an utterly ridiculous suggestion. My mother and sister would have no reason to do this and in the case of my mother certainly not the strength or dexterity to do it. It seemed to me that the TMO wanted to blame my mother rather than listen to her. I see from IWS00000998_0054 an email from Dave Hughes of Rydon to Mariem confirming these issues that he recorded Mariem was not happy that she/my mother were being blamed for the broken windows. As my mother had neurological problems resulting in a lack of dexterity in her hands this meant she struggled to even be able to use the windows as her grip

was so weak, which made it all the more ridiculous that she was accused of breaking them.

11. Mariem was busy, but was concerned about the attitude or the TMO and was active in attending meetings of residents at which issues were discussed. Even when not able to attend the meeting she passed the information to the Compact who passed details to the TMO. Peter Maddison was at the meeting and he later responded to Mariem.
12. The window came off in February when it was very cold. The wind was blowing in and it was obviously serious that a window was hanging off on the 22nd floor. My mother was not the kind to complain or grumble about the council and Mariem was incensed that the TMO would blame my mother for the problem. My mother was obviously not the kind of person to do this. Mariem thought it was rude and added insult to injury and I remember laughing about it with her as it was just so ridiculous.

Residents' meetings and concerns

13. There was growing concern in the Tower about the works and in particular the attitude and response of the TMO. They were not listening. Mariem attended various residents' meetings or let them know her views. I do not know how many she attended. Mariem was intelligent and independent and more than able to deal with these things without my help but we did discuss one of them. On one visit Mohammed Rasoul joined us in the flat with Mariem and my mother. Mariem and Mohamed described how attending the meetings felt like being bullied. They both laughed as they described the TMO residents' meetings. They referred to the TMO as 'just a bully' and Mariem thought the meetings were meaningless. She said 'they just invited us to bully us'.
14. One of the main concerns the residents raised was the issue of the installation by National grid of the gas pipe in the stairwell. Understandably the residents were concerned about this and asked that an independent adjudicator be involved to carry out an investigation into the safety of it (paragraph 3 point 3 IWS00000998_0061). Mariem was aware of this as the relevant email from the Grenfell Leaseholders' Association to RBKC was forwarded to her on 21 April 2017

IWS00000998_0060-62. Eventually this became a formal complaint by the residents which TMO complaints rejected on the basis it was down to National Grid how they carried out the work, but there was no reason to question it and the fire risk assessor was content that the work posed no risk IWS00000998_0089-90. This seemed to my sister and those she knew in the Grenfell compact to be a complete abdication of responsibility by TMO but thinking about it RBKC was also at fault as it was made aware of the residents' concerns that the gas pipe should not have been installed in the stairwell and yet RBKC did not investigate.

Quality of work

15. It was obvious that the windows did not fit properly (see Dave Hughes' email 25th February 2016 at item 1) about the need to seal the surrounds with mastic [IWS00000998_0054] and had gaps around them: the work done was not good. The windows never fully closed and took a lot of pressure on the handle to shut it but even when this was done, the lock would never 'click'. It meant that when I closed the window I was never sure it was shut or would come open.
16. My mother lived in the flat for about 30 years and knew the area. She never complained about noise or mentioned it until after the refurbishment. There was an obvious change and she began being able to hear other people at night. The boiler in the hall made an irritating noise. She was told that this was caused by the 'tundish' and was finally fixed. The windows would whistle. My mother started to use earplugs in order to be able to sleep.
17. The extractor fan is another example of poor quality work. It never worked or served any purpose. In his email of 25 Feb 2016 David Hughes [IWS00000998_0054] told Mariem:

Noisy fan – We have liaising with the fan manufacturers to resolve the issue as this affects many flats. We can come and remove the noisy back draught shutters temporary but this will create a further issue of a draught as your fan has never been connected. Would you prefer to have the fan connected or removed?
18. It made no sense that a fan would be fitted that served no purpose.

My mother's health

19. My mother, Eslah Elgahry, had a complex range of health problems which resulted in difficulty walking and an inability to climb a high number of stairs without assistance and her hands were also affected, resulting in a lack of dexterity. Neurological problems meant she could not carry anything but light bags and would have to place a heavier bag on her wrist or forearm in order to carry it. The difficulties my mother experienced as a result of her disability were known by the TMO and a 'tenancy information' form dated 24 June 2015 (so just before the works got underway I believe) which I exhibit herein marked "AE1". This records that my mother had a physical disability; had support needs; and Mariem was her primary carer. It would have been evident that she could not climb stairs in the event of a fire. It appears that my mother was present when this form was filled in (see box 1 on page 2). As I have mentioned, my mother was a proud woman, who did not like talking about her disabilities and what she could not do. She does not appear to have said that she can only get to the upper floors if there was a lift, or at any rate the form has not been filled in that respect. She would have needed to use the lift, and I believe that must have been clear to the person completing the form.

20. She lived on the 22nd floor and liked doing so, but relied on the lift. If this was out of order she was trapped in the flat. At no point did anyone talk to my mother about what she should do or where she should go in the event of a fire. No plans appear to have been made.

Lighting and safety

21. Mariem was a confident and capable young woman but walking home alone at night she was concerned about the absence of sufficient lighting on Grenfell Road, particularly at the time of the works in 2016. Mariem paid for a parking permit and that would allow her to park nearer the Tower on Grenfell Road. Despite this spaces were often taken by others who did not have permits. Despite this no efforts were done to remove or fine cars unlawfully parked which meant Mariem was required to park further away from the Tower. At night there was a

lack of lighting and she felt unsafe. After complaints and even a visit to the TMO I recall she was given a refund for the permit but better still would have been proper care and enforcement in the area that would stop the problem. The concern was in part about trying to ensure her personal safety as lighting and access to Grenfell Road was poor in 2016-2017. When I used to drop off Mariem, I also made sure I waited until she was safely in the building and door closed behind her.

22. Before the works there was a concierge and this was someone that knew the area and Tower. The concierge was lost with the refurbishment and this added to Mariem's apprehension when coming back to the Tower as, if the concierge was working, someone would not be present to assist. I do not recall the concierge's working hours but know that this provided some assurance.

23. The concerns about personal safety extended to my mother in her flat. She asked me to put in a security camera. This gave my mother some comfort. This was because the security to the Tower was not good and it was possible for drinkers or homeless people to get into the stairwell. They would sometimes gather and this would be intimidating. It was not unusual for there to be evidence of this, for example the smell of urine; cigarette stubs and cans in the stairwell. My mother was near the top and feared people coming up. She wanted to feel safe and the camera helped. Initially, Rydon made us sign a disclaimer for the camera, however, when the refurbishment took place Rydon insisted this be removed. So while the camera remained installed outside the flat, it was disconnected from the recording system. I was frustrated that my mother could not even have this personal protection and they insisted it be disconnected.

Flat Door

24. When I used to visit my mothers flat she was concerned about the quality of the new flat door. She was specifically concerned about the loose door handle, which I would always tighten when I visited. But this caused me to check other parts of the door such as the hinges, which I noticed was also loose and the screws in this area would also require tightening. Furthermore, I remember the door latch did not click into position properly, meaning I also had to tighten the strike plate to bring this back into alignment in order to function properly.

25. When I lived in Grenfell, the flat front door we had prior to this replacement was strong wood with a letterbox. We personally never encountered any problems with it. It was more sturdy and solid. The new replacement door looked cosmetically better, but looked cheaper and appeared lighter in weight and hollow. It surprised me that a new door would require me to tighten hinges, the door latch and handles each week.

AFTERMATH

26. My first statement deals with the horrific events of the night and I do not want to speak here of the impact this has had on me and continues to have on my family and me. As outlined in my first statement I was in the cordoned off area and remained there. The police took my details repeatedly and allowed me to stay when they realised what was happening and why I was there. One police officer took my details and said he would get a Family Liaison Officer ('FLO') to contact me.

27. At some point, I left the cordoned area and met a friend of mine, who lived in the finger blocks. He let me stay with him for the first couple of days as I simply did not feel able to go home. He was a good friend I knew from the area, but got to know better in our University days. My mother knew his mother and the community was close.

28. I did not see anybody from the TMO or Council in this time and was not aware of any efforts by them to find me. Looking back it felt like people like me, who had our own house and who had our own funds, were invisible to the council and those dealing with the aftermath.

29. Within about 24 hours I was contacted by a police FLO, first Neil and then Helene. They became the main source of information and support to me. It took time for me to build trust but as this grew I relied on them.

30. I cannot say whether the council or TMO were looking for survivors or relatives but did not see or notice anyone searching or looking that night or in the 3 days afterwards. I was in the area for 3 days and did not go home. I was in such shock

from the fire that I may not have noticed. I was oblivious to help and support from community and went to Westfield to buy a change of clothes.

31. It was certainly possible to find me. On 14 June, the day of the fire, a journalist from a national newspaper visited my home. The journalist evidently knew of me. On arriving he spoke to both my wife and brother in law about meeting me and repeatedly said, 'we can help find your family'. I had no wish to speak to journalists but was surprised at how easily and quickly they were able to make contact, which was in sharp contrast to RBKC and the TMO. Unlike survivors, I had a home and access to funds and so did not need direct support but the result was a sense that we were ignored by RBKC and those who may provide answers to what happened.

Need for honest answers

32. My absolute focus was on identifying and recovering my family so that I could bury them. I was unable to leave the area around Grenfell Tower because my family was not identified. What mattered most to me was recovering and burying them and so helping the police, identify them with images, DNA, dental records and any forensic information was my priority. The FLOs came to my house on several occasions and were helpful. This period of waiting added to the trauma. I listened to my mother and sister die and knew where they were. Yet it was 2 months before they were formally identified and could be buried. My mother was identified in late July and my sister in August. The wait was agony and compounded my pain and inability to move on.

33. Accurate and truthful information was a priority to me. My FLOs let me know of a meeting at the Harrow Club about a week or so after the fire and I met Stuart Cundy, Alok Sharma MP, Nick Hurd MP and the Deputy Commissioner from the LFB. The police appeared shocked by what they had seen in the Tower and genuinely troubled and this recognition comforted me. At one point, someone from the LFB said they had reached the top floor, "We got to the top floor. We got to every floor". I immediately challenged him, which flat did the firefighters enter, what time did they enter those flats and how long did they stay in their? said, "Stop there. You did not get to the top". A huge question was what happened to those on the top floor and big question was whether the firefighters

reached the top floor or not. I had listened to my sister and mother for hours on the night and know that nobody came, nobody knocked and when asking the LFB, "Which flat? Which place?" it became clear that I was being misled. I did not welcome the LFB's exaggeration in contrast to Stuart Cundy's emotional honesty at the meeting.

No voice for the bereaved

34. Waiting to identify the bodies and bury my family was very hard and I could not move on. Meetings arranged for people were noisy and stressful and were no help to me, so I never attended a single public meeting. I wanted answers in quiet and for the bereaved to be spoken to. There seemed no clear way for this to happen and so after discussions with other affected bereaved families, I started a WhatsApp group of bereaved people. The aim was for the bereaved to speak to one another and share information. The group needed to be those who were directly related to those who passed away or those that had authority to speak for the relatives. I started with those I knew or were recommended by someone who could confirm they were genuine. I met or spoke with the majority of individuals who joined the group and from there it has grown to approximately 55 people representing almost 60 of our loved ones. It is made up of the nearest relatives. The group continues to this day and provides a chance for us to share information and experiences. The group has not had a single fraudster or false member. I was surprised over the months to see the number of false claims made for support and wondered what due diligence was carried out by the Council?

35. The failure to carry out proper checks eroded trust. An early example of this was the promotion by various government agencies of Ibrahim El Noor.

Ibrahim El Noor

36. My FLO told me that I should attend a meeting at the Westway. It was to meet Ibrahim El Noor who had somehow been appointed to establish a Grenfell Trust. I had no idea what it was about but this appeared to be some kind of official meeting and of importance. I attended in order to see and meet the bereaved.

37. The meeting soon broke down after it became clear that Ibrahim El Noor was not

who he claimed to be. He had been saying that his aunt had died in the Tower. On being asked a few basic questions by some of the residents, it was immediately apparent that this was not true. A number of red flags soon arose, as he could not give basic information about the Tower.

38. It was worrying that people like Ibrahim El Noor were being promoted by the police and public authorities, when it was obvious to the residents that he was a fraudster. I was later told that central government encouraged people to work with him and wanted him to head the BSRs. I was again surprised at the lack of basic due diligence and such events undermined trust in the services that were intended to help.

RBKC and TMO

39. The council would hold meetings but these would be open to the public, loud and noisy. I could not cope with this and the bereaved needed to meet in a quieter space. We just could not cope with noise.

40. At no point was I contacted by the RBKC or TMO. Although the Sun newspaper had been able to visit my home on the day of the fire, no contact was made by RBKC. My FLOs told me of a day at Holborn Bars at which I would meet various agencies and those with information. I was told that this was an approach used after the 7th July bombings. I was able to find out about support for my son that was badly needed. It was the first time I learned that I had a 'key worker' from RBKC. The key worker asked how they might help but did not offer or suggest anything. They were pleasant but not really of any use and I felt that for those in my situation who did not need a new home or possessions, they had no real idea of what to do or how to support. The first visit was to meet a keyworker, the second visit was to meet the different agencies and support for my son.

41. The bereaved wanted to meet with RBKC and I asked the key worker if this was possible and told that it was not. I explained that large meetings were very distressing for the bereaved and 10 or so families would like to meet more quietly but was flatly rejected. By chance, Hassan, who lost his family on the top floor, bumped into the leader of RBKC, Elizabeth Campbell at Radison Blu hotel in Edgware Road. He called me immediately and I finally spoke to her explaining the

difficulties I encountered. Now I was given the opportunity to ask her directly to meet with a small number of bereaved families in order to hear of their experience and she quickly agreed. The meeting took place the following week at Radison Blu and was more helpful as it was not large and noisy.

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:



AHMED ELGHANNAY.

DATE: 27 FEBRUARY 2020.