

Witness Statement of David Andrew Benjamin

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Exhibits:

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GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF DAVID ANDREW BENJAMIN

This statement is a factual statement prepared for Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry dealing with modules 3 and 4 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.

Signed: 

I, **DAVID ANDREW BENJAMIN**, will say as follows:

1. I am a survivor of the Grenfell Tower Fire on 14 June 2017.
2. I make this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. This statement addresses issues within module 3 (fire safety and communication with residents) and module 4 (aftermath) from the Inquiry's Phase 2 schedule.
3. My Phase 2 statement should be read in conjunction with my Phase 1 statement, which also touches on issues relating to module 3 and 4. My Phase 1 statement was signed on 29 June 2018 (URN: **IWS00000876**). I also provided three statements to the Metropolitan Police Service dated 22 June 2017, 13 September 2017 and 28 December 2017.

Module 3

4. Zoe Dainton was my partner at the time of the fire. We were together since 2009 and separated last year in 2019. I believe this was due to the trauma that we both suffered as a result of the fire, but I do not wish to provide further details about this in my Phase 2 statement.
5. Zoe lived at Flat 12 Grenfell Tower with her mum and sister. I did not live there, but I was a regular visitor. Further background information is provided at paragraphs 3-10 of my Phase 1 witness statement.
6. On 14 June 2017, I was staying overnight with Zoe at Flat 12 Grenfell Tower. Zoe's mum and sister were staying with her Nan in Ladbroke Grove.

Fire Safety

7. I deal with fire safety at paragraphs 32-36 of my Phase 1 statement. When I was staying at the flat, I do not remember Zoe or her family receiving any advice about what they should do in the event of a fire. No one came in an official capacity to speak about fire safety. I have no knowledge of any checks or inspections at the Tower. I did not personally make any complaints regarding fire safety to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) or the Tenant Management Organisation (TMO).
8. The only fire safety information I saw was on the signs by the lifts in the main foyer and on the fourth floor, which I describe in more detail at paragraph 34 of my Phase 1 statement. I do not remember when I first saw these signs. I assume they were on every floor, but I did not venture past the fourth floor, so cannot say for certain. They were in English.
9. I was not aware of any evacuation plan for the Tower or any assembly points. I do not remember any signs clearly identifying the stairwell as the only fire exit and escape route from the Tower.
10. As described at paragraph 21 of my Phase 1 statement, there were no sprinklers or fire extinguishers in the communal area. There was a dry riser on the fourth floor; I assume this would have been replicated on other floors.

Communal Area

11. Paragraphs 19-25 of my Phase 1 statement describes the communal areas at Grenfell Tower including the landing, the main stairs and lifts.
12. I describe a National Grid cupboard in the communal landing on the fourth floor at paragraph 19 of my Phase 1 statement. I think it was installed during the refurbishment. I am now not sure whether this cupboard was connected to the National Grid.
13. There were air vents in the communal area, which made a constant buzzing noise. When I first noticed this I thought it was a neighbour's washing machine, but upon further investigation I realised it was the air vents. You could also sometimes hear them opening and closing.
14. I had no issues with the lighting on the communal landing. Occasionally one of the lights would stop working, but it would be fixed within a couple of days. I do not remember any emergency lighting at the Tower.
15. There were only two lifts servicing all twenty three floors of the Tower. The lifts were in constant use, but were normally at their busiest, when people were heading to or from work and school. Often I would take the stairs as it would take too long for one of the lifts to become available.
16. At least Zoe and her family's flat was on the fourth floor, so it did not take too long for me to reach the bottom of the Tower. I was also physically fit and did not have any mobility issues.
17. I describe the lifts further at paragraph 23 of my Phase 1 statement. The lifts were not very reliable. I did not report any issues about them direct to the TMO; I always assumed someone else would have already reported the issue.
18. I do not know how quickly the lifts were repaired, but it would normally take at least a couple of hours, but sometimes it could take as long as 1-2 days.

19. In 2015, my son had an operation and was in a wheelchair for 6-7 months. When he came to stay at the Tower, I would take him to school in the morning and we would often wait ages for the lifts. There were times, when it was just easier to carry him up or down the stairs instead of waiting for the lift.
20. In 2017, I called the London Fire Brigade (LFB) because one of the residents was stuck in one of the lifts.
21. During the refurbishment, which I return to below, the construction workers started using both lifts to take their equipment up and down the Tower. This meant that the lifts were not available for residents and the lifts took even longer to arrive. When they did they were often full already.
22. The lifts also started breaking down more regularly. Sometimes both lifts would be out of service at the same time. I also saw workers propping open the lift doors, which would have led to them breaking down more often.
23. If the lifts were not working or taking too long, there was only one staircase to all floors running through the middle of the Tower. It was the only way in and out of the building and the stairs were not very wide. I describe the stairs in more detail at paragraph 20 and 22 of my Phase 1 statement.
24. The fire door on the fourth floor to the stairs did not always shut properly. I remember it would take ages to close and you would have to push it shut, otherwise it would stay slightly ajar. I think the hinges may have been damaged during the refurbishment. Prior to this, I would always hear the fire door slam shut behind me.
25. The door to the rubbish chute was solid and heavy; it would close behind you.

Flat 12

26. I describe Flat 12 at paragraphs 11-18 of my Phase 1 statement.
27. Paragraph 13 deals with the smoke alarms in the flat. I do not remember anyone coming round in an official capacity to test the smoke alarms when I was staying, but Zoe checked them on a regular basis.

28. Paragraph 14 of my Phase 1 statement deals with the front door being replaced. The new door was very light compared to my own flat door in Hammersmith. I remember you always had to pull Zoe's front door shut; it did not automatically close behind you. I remember telling Zoe and her family that this was wrong, but I do not know if any of them reported this to the TMO. The letterbox in the new door snapped back and had brushes inside it.

Communication with the TMO

29. Zoe or Jenny would usually call the TMO to make complaints and request repairs. There were also a few occasions when I called the TMO on their behalf. For example, I called the TMO after dirty water was coming out of the taps in May 2015.

30. Whenever I called the TMO they were usually really unhelpful and dismissive of your query or complaint. Zoe, Jenny or I would have to chase them a couple of times before they did anything.

31. When I followed up an issue with the TMO on the telephone, I would often have to explain the situation again because there was no record of the previous call, which was frustrating.

32. I was not aware of a formal TMO complaints procedure.

The Refurbishment

33. I touched upon the last refurbishment at Grenfell Tower at paragraphs 16-17 and 26-31 of my Phase 1 statement. I believe RBKC wished Grenfell Tower to match the aesthetics of the recently built Academy and upgraded Leisure Centre.

34. Rydon was overseeing the refurbishment on behalf of the TMO. I do not know if anyone from Rydon met with Zoe and her family at the start of the works to explain what would be happening.

35. As I have already stated in paragraph 30 of my Phase 1 statement, many residents felt that the refurbishment was being imposed on them and their complaints about the refurbishment were not being taken seriously. I did not feel that the TMO or Rydon

were working with residents or listening to them. I will expand on this in more detail below.

36. The Residents Association raised concerns about fire safety and the refurbishment including how contractors treated the residents. I remember letters being put through the door and they started petitions.
37. Throughout the refurbishment, residents were effectively living on a construction site. There was constant noise from either the contractors themselves or from the work being undertaken.
38. The refurbishment was scrappy and disruptive. When work started on the outside of the Tower at least the contractors knocked on the door to warn us that they were about to start working near the flat, but this stopped after only a couple of weeks. There was mess and dust everywhere.
39. It had been agreed with Rydon that work would only take place between the hours of 8am to 5pm, but work would regularly start before 8am, which I thought was disrespectful towards residents.
40. During the refurbishment, I intended to report any issues or concerns on behalf of Zoe and her family to Rydon (rather than the TMO). This was because Zoe and her mum both worked during the day, whereas I was on shift work, so tended to be around more.
41. My main point of contact was Lynda Prentice, she was often around the Tower co-ordinating the refurbishment. Lynda was friendly, but you never had her full attention. She seemed to be dealing with a lot of residents. I normally found Lynda in Rydon's temporary office at the bottom of the Tower and would then ask her to send a contractor to the flat if there were any problems. After Rydon had been on site for a while, Lynda gave us her telephone number to report issues and concerns.
42. I was not aware of Rydon pre-arranging appointments with either Zoe or her mum for work to be completed at their flat. My experience was that Lynda or a contractor would knock on the door and tell you that they would be returning later to carry out the work. It felt chaotic at times with different contractors coming in and out of the flat.

43. When cladding was being fixed around the outside of the Tower, I saw the contractors fitting what appeared to be cheap sponge behind this. I thought it looked dangerous. I recall saying to Zoe that if this accidentally caught fire that the whole Tower would go up.
44. I was at the flat when the new windows were installed. At first, I thought they were better than the old windows. The flat felt warmer, but then I began to notice a strong draught from the bottom right hand corner of the kitchen window. It was also stiff and difficult to close and there was a problem with the extractor fan, but I cannot remember what this was now. I believe these issues were reported to Rydon as they were still on site and they fixed them. There was also a constant draught from one of the bottom corners of Leah's bedroom window.
45. Zoe and her family felt bullied into having the new boiler fitted in the hallway next to the front door. I first flagged this at paragraph 17 of my Phase 1 statement. They wanted the new boiler to be in the same location as the old boiler, which was in the cupboard next to the kitchen. They were told this was not possible, but this was simply not true. Zoe and her family was really upset, when they found out that the TMO/ Rydon had fitted the new boiler in the cupboard for other residents.
46. As already stated in paragraph 26 of my Phase 1 statement, concierge was removed as part of the refurbishment. This was a real shame as they helped keep the building secure.

Gas Leak

47. Towards the end of 2016, there was a loss of gas supply in the Tower, which affected many flats including Flat 12. We were unable to cook and had to eat takeaways or have microwavable meals.
48. This led to National Grid/ Cadent having to install new gas pipes in the Tower as described at paragraph 20 of my Phase 1 statement. I was concerned that the main gas pipe was exposed in the stairwell, which was the only means of escape from the building in the event of a fire. I was worried that if something went wrong with the gas

pipes that residents would not be able to escape. I did not report my concerns to the TMO as I did not live at the Tower, but I discussed them with Zoe.

49. Shortly before the fire, I remember speaking with a contractor, who had started boxing in some of the new gas pipes on the landing, which ran into the six flats on the floor. He asked if there was any asbestos in the Tower, which I thought was strange as he should have known about this.

50. A different contractor dealing with the asbestos in the flat, which I deal with below, mentioned that the exposed pipes were dangerous in the communal landing and should be boxed in. I know he was not from Rydon or the TMO.

Asbestos

51. When new gas pipes were installed in Flat 12 to connect the cooker to the main gas supply, the contractor drilled into a panel above the cupboard containing asbestos next to the kitchen. I cleaned up the mess after he left around 9pm.

52. It was only when another contractor later attended to box in the pipes that he raised concerns about asbestos. Testing eventually confirmed that there was asbestos in the flat, which was really upsetting as we had all been exposed to this without knowing we were in danger. There was lots of back and forth between Zoe, the TMO and the company, who drilled into the panel.

53. Zoe and her family were forced to move out of their flat whilst it was cleaned. It felt that there was a lot of passing the buck with no one taking responsibility for what had happened. The TMO should have done more, once they knew we had been exposed to asbestos.

54. Zoe, her mum and sister only moved back into their flat shortly before the fire.

Module 4

55. I will never forget the night of the fire; it will stay with me forever. Paragraphs 59-98 of my Phase 1 statement details my recollection of these shocking and horrifying events on 14 June 2017.

56. I left the Tower with the clothes on my back and my mobile phone. I left my wallet in the flat. Although I tried to hold my breath until I was on the stairs, we both breathed in smoke as we were leaving the Tower and when we were outside. I return to my concerns about this at paragraph 91 below.

57. I have briefly detailed what happened immediately after the fire and the impact of the fire upon me at paragraphs 99-100 and 102 of my Phase 1 statement. I still find it incredibly difficult to talk what I saw that night; it brings back too many painful memories. I therefore do not wish to go into detail in this statement about how the fire continues to affect me every single day.

58. After Zoe and I escaped, I remember looking up burning Tower in a total state of shock and disbelief. I could not believe what was happening or how quickly the fire was spreading. I saw people trapped inside and there was nothing I could do to help them. It was my worst nightmare and I was scared. I felt completely helpless.

59. As I have already stated at paragraph 97 of my Phase 1 statement, Zoe was becoming increasingly distressed and upset (as was I). She was also coughing badly. Someone from the local community told us to head to the Latymer Christian Centre to get checked over by a paramedic.

60. We then went to a shop in Ladbroke Grove before heading to Zoe's Aunt's located nearby. I do not know what we would have done without Zoe's extended family and our friends, who supported us at this incredibly difficult time. They provided food, a change of clothes and other basics such as toothbrushes and a phone charger, so we could let everyone know we were safe. It also meant we had a place of safety to go to start to try and make sense of what had just happened.

Debris

61. I briefly refer to debris from the Tower at paragraph 77 and 98 of my Phase 1 statement. As the fire spread, I saw big and small pieces of cladding falling from the Tower. There was smoke and lots of particles in the air, which reminded me of dust. I remember vividly the smell of burning.

62. Later I saw debris from the Tower on the ground around the Westway Centre, the Methodist Church and Latimer Road. It took a couple of weeks for this to be cleared up by RBKC.

Relief Centres

63. Zoe and I heard through the local community that the Rugby Portobello Club had opened its doors to residents and was offering help and assistance. We headed there in the afternoon; I do not remember the exact time. It was a place for residents to be together and regroup. People were in shock and emotions were high.

64. It was chaotic at the Rugby Club as volunteers and charities bought food, donated clothes, toiletries and toys for the children. A few of us, including Mahad and Shah, started compiling a list of resident names and flat numbers on large sheets of paper, which we put on the wall. We were trying to work out who had made it out and who was still missing. RBKC should have done this rather than us, but they were nowhere to be seen.

65. Over the next week, the Rugby Club became more organised. It was run by volunteers and offered financial assistance for residents as well as clothes, toiletries and food donations to those affected by the fire and had lost everything.

66. I do not remember seeing anyone from RBKC or Central Government at the Rugby Club.

67. I never went to the Westway Centre or the Curve with Zoe or her family. Everything was provided for at the Rugby Club.

68. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) set up the Curve weeks after the fire. This was too little too late. Residents had already come together and were supporting each other at the Rugby Portobello Club.

69. There was also a difficult dynamic with many people blaming RBKC for the fire; yet they were now supposed to be supporting those affected. There was also a lot of anger and upset over RBKC's invisibility and lack of action immediately after the fire.

70. When setting up the Curve, RBKC failed to ask those affected what they wanted or needed. RBKC assumed that they knew best and this was wrong. Residents and the bereaved had already based themselves at the Rugby Club, who had been supporting us from the beginning. RBKC should have set up more services here.

Emergency Support

71. My impression from speaking with Zoe, her family and other residents was that RBKC did not place them in emergency accommodation fast enough. Zoe, her mum and sister were placed in a room with two twin beds, when there were three of them. This was not acceptable.

72. Initially, Zoe and her family would either eat in the hotel or at her aunt or nan's place. They were given an allowance by RBKC, but food was expensive at the hotel, so the money did not stretch far.

73. Some survivors including myself and members of the local community volunteered to go round to hotels to deliver donations to those that had lost everything in the fire. Staff at the hotel would let us leave donations at reception. We would also let residents know when we were there. I was in awe of how the community pulled together and the generosity of the general public. However, this was a service that RBKC should have been offering.

Communication

74. Immediately after the fire, people were walking around the community lost asking for information on their loved one, who were missing. Posters started to appear around the area, which broke my heart.

75. I have already described above how we came together at the Rugby Club to compile our own list of survivors and those missing.

76. As there was no information coming from RBKC, residents and the bereaved set up their own WhatsApp groups to share information about services and the support available, otherwise there was the Rugby Club. I do not remember RBKC setting up a telephone helpline or sending out leaflets or newsletters. However, I recently

discovered that RBKC sent me a few letters after the fire, but they did not have my correct address, so I did not receive them at the time. I cannot remember what these letters said.

77. I am aware that there were a couple of Facebook groups set up too.

Coordination and Leadership - Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC)

78. RBKC was nowhere to be seen on 14 June 2017. There was no leadership or co-ordination from them. It was shambles. I do not know what I would have done without friends and family and the support of the community and general public.

79. I heard from others that RBKC was difficult to contact and it was difficult to obtain any information from them, although I did not contact them directly. My impression was that RBKC was completely overwhelmed by the fire and had no plan. They did not have enough resources in place given the scale of the disaster and the number of people affected.

80. These failures by RBKC led to Grenfell United being formed.

Central Government

81. The government promised that everyone would be rehoused in a matter of weeks. I have known people with disabilities and children on the housing register for years, so I knew this was not realistic. It felt that this was being said for the cameras.

Assistance after the Fire

82. After the fire, I relied on Zoe and her family for updates and information, which was either provided through their key worker, the Rugby Club, WhatsApp groups or from talking to those affected by the fire.

83. I was not assigned a key worker immediately after the fire as I was not a resident of the Tower. This means that I did not receive information about services such as counselling, which would have helped me after the fire.

84. I was not offered any support by RBKC until 2018, when I was allocated the same key worker as Zoe and her family, but this was only after I requested this as I was struggling.

Unfortunately, I only met my first key worker once; she did not contact me again. The second key worker was much better and I felt more supported, but unfortunately he recently left his position.

Ongoing Impact

85. In the months after the fire, I had not been offered any psychological support. I eventually discovered through Zoe that counselling was available through the NHS Grenfell Health and Wellbeing.

86. The fire was a horrifying experience, which has changed my life in so many ways. I have not been able to return to work due to the trauma and it has led to the breakdown of mine and Zoe's relationship, although we are still friends. I have been diagnosed with depression. I suffer from flashbacks and cannot sleep at night. I have been self-medicating with alcohol to numb the pain to try to forget what happened that night.

87. I do not wish to provide further details in this statement about my mental state and how the fire continues to impact upon me.

Finally

88. This disaster would not have happened if RBKC and the TMO had listened to those living in the Tower during the refurbishment instead of dismissing their complaints and concerns.

89. It was really upsetting when fraudsters tried to cash in on this tragedy. Joyce Msokeri befriended Zoe's mum at the Rugby Club after the fire, she claimed that she lost her home and husband, but this was a lie. She is now in jail.

90. Since I stayed over so often at the flat, I kept a lot of my things there as it was my second home, which I lost in the fire. When Zoe and I visited Grenfell Tower on 9 September 2017, we discovered that there had been a theft and some of our belongings were missing. I was particularly devastated that my mother's gold bracelet had been taken. She died in 2011 and it had great sentimental value.

91. I knew that there was asbestos in the building following the fiasco with the contractor drilling into the panel above the cupboard when he was fitting the new gas pipes. This made me think about asbestos and other toxins being released into the air on the night of the fire and that everyone was breathing this in. I am worried that this could impact on my health and others in the future.

92. Immediately after the fire, resources were rightly directed towards those that needed them the most, but it is now over 2.5 years since the fire and I have received very little support to help rebuild my life, even though I was in the Tower on the night of the fire. I am really struggling.

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: 

Dated: 06/03/20