

Witness Statement of: Michele Chiapetto

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Exhibits: 0

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## GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

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### PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF MICHELE CHIAPETTO

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I, **MICHELE CHIAPETTO**, will say as follows:

1. 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. My first statement is dated 4 June 2018 [IWS00000679] and related to the night of the fire. I would like to correct one small error in that statement which should say I was born in Asmara, Eritrea. Here I outline my experience of the aftermath of the fire and address concerns experienced in the building.

#### **After the fire - homeless**

2. On the night of the fire I had no idea what had happened to Birkti and Biruk. I was desperate to find them and was anxiously searching for them. I visited the pub on Latimer Road where some survivors had been taken; went to the leisure centre and started going to hospitals from around 7am. I went to 5 hospitals all over London, visiting more than once. Each time I was told that Birkti and Biruk was not on the list. At one point, I was told someone had seen Biruk in an ambulance, and Berkti on the stairs. My heart would leap and I would have hope but misinformation seemed everywhere and there was just no source of reliable information. In the afternoon I went to HM Coroner's office in Westminster and was told that

they had not heard of Birkti or Biruk. It was desperate.

3. Following the fire, I lost my family and my home. I did not know where to go or who to speak to in order to get help. Nobody approached me or asked. I was homeless and had lost most of my possessions. For 3 days I slept with friends and family which was near the Tower. It was a terrible time of uncertainty and confusion; it was basically impossible to really sleep.
4. Although I was in the area and lived in the tower nobody approached me or signalled where to go and there was confusion. It was hard as my thoughts were about Birkti and Biruk. I had no news and was terrified of what happened and could not think about how I could now live or what I could do. It was impossible to work at this time and I felt lost.
5. I'd been around the Tower on the night frantically searching and saw nobody from the council or TMO asking about those who, like me, lived in the Tower. There was nothing other than police keeping people away from the tower. This was understandable because it was dangerous but it meant I did not know where I should go, what I should do or even who to ask. I was lost. Day after day I could see the Tower was still burning or smouldering. It felt like the people who were responsible for the fire could not be bothered to put it out.
6. In the first few days we heard rumours that people had been found alive in the Tower. When I heard such things my heart leapt and I would have hope only for it to be crushed. Yet nobody contacted me from the hospitals or coroner even though I had been there and pleaded with them for information. It was as if we were being emotionally tormented and the pain just continued and was made worse.
7. One of the hard things was the long wait to find Birtkti and Biruk. Normally I would expect a funeral within a few days but this was a painful time of

waiting. It turned into quite a long wait for the funeral. Birkti was found first and had we had to wait for Biruk to be identified. Although they were found I never really knew what had happened or why it took so long. I was told that they were identified through dental records because they were in the worst effected part of the Tower, where the fire was raging more strongly. This was painful and heart breaking.

8. I was talking to a friend called Saba, who took me to the Citizens Advice Bureau in Kensington. They made some calls to the council and arranged for me to stay in a hotel and I went to Holland Park Hilton. It was a time of complete chaos and uncertainty and although I was checked into a hotel I was not sure what was going on.
9. When I was in the hotel nobody came to see me. Although I had been around the tower all night breathing in the thick smoke and fumes nobody asked about my health. Nobody came and explained what was going on and although I had a room, it felt cold, lonely and empty. It was horrible being in the hotel room. I felt isolated. I was just left and it became clear that it was up to me to get out and find stuff and see what I could do.
10. Life in the hotel was very difficult and lonely. At one point I was asked to fill in housing forms and did this but felt unstable and uncertain what was going on and nobody helped me even fill the form in. The government said they would house us all in 3 weeks. The promise was made by the Prime Minister, Theresa May. It sounded nice but it felt like the government was pretending to do something when the truth was nothing was done that quickly. It seemed there was a concern about image, and wanted to sound nice and pretend to the rest of the country. It did not feel honest about what was real and practical. It felt like people played games and wanted to pretend it was all OK when it was not.
11. Neither I, nor others I spoke to from the Tower, believed them when they said they would house in 3 weeks or 'by September' or 'by Christmas'



which were all things that were claimed. These were promises but they were not speaking to me but sounded like they were trying to pretend to a wider public. It felt like we were being mocked.

12. I needed somewhere to stay and a hotel was needed. But it's hard to convey how the hotel did not stop the stress from the night. It felt like a hotel and temporary and everyday was a reminder of what happened. There was no privacy because it was a hotel and even the room was too small for people to visit and sit with me; the room had to be cleaned and at that point you had to leave; it was not possible to eat well and I could not cook. Eating is more than just food and should be about being together but there was nowhere to meet, sit and be together.

13. In the hotel it was hard to settle or really rest. At one point there was a leak and water from the room above and came into my room. It leaked through the electrical insulation and worried me and made me panic about further fire. It made me anxious, as did the fire alarm tests at the hotel. I am sure that such things had to be carried out but it meant that I was being constantly reminded and made to feel unstable.

14. It was over a year before I was provided with a place to live.

### **Rugby Portobello Club**

15. Immediately after the fire, information about what to do or what was happening was not clear and it seemed the council and TMO had vanished. I went to the Rugby Portobello Club and for the first time found somewhere that was actually trying to help the Tower residents. They were trying to help the people who lived in the Tower as well as the bereaved. I knew Rugby Portobello because I went there with Biruk for the homework club. It meant I knew it and was comfortable going there. They focused on people from Grenfell Tower and tried to help the actual residents rather than just anyone who appeared. They also kept the press away, which was a big help. It created a space where we could be without



lots of people. It was somewhere that understood what was going on and who wanted to help. At the time, the streets were full of people and were noisy and hard to be around. The press were trying to talk to us and get stories and there was no space to stop and work out what was happening but Rugby Portobello started to help.

16. It was at Rugby Portobello that I met many residents one of which was Shahin Sadafi who was taking names and trying to make sure the actual people effected by the fire could keep in touch. I also met Ed Daffern, Willie and a number I knew from the Tower such as Natasha. Shahin was the main person setting up a WhatsApp group for us. It was the first time I saw someone trying to help the bereaved, survivors and residents to keep in touch with each other. I wanted to speak to people that knew what we were going through and who understood me and who knew Birkti and Biruk. I wanted information and to be able to know what to do. Nothing was very clear from the council at this point and the people you met always changed. It meant that if I was speaking to someone I did not know if they would be there again soon. I found that I was having to repeat my story and situation again and again and so a place like Rugby Portobello was so important because they knew and understood.

17. Until Shahin and other residents did this we didn't have any where we could meet and talk and support one another. The formation of a WhatsApp group and meeting place where we could all turn and all understood the situation was very helpful and important. It meant we did not have to explain the pain and trauma of it all. They understood. They knew because everyone was going through the same thing.

18. I remember Shahin and Ed Daffarn writing names on a board and this growing as people confirmed which flat they were from. But through the day to day meetings we got to know each other better and could share stories and information. Rugby Portobello became a meeting place for the bereaved and tower residents. It was there that I found out about the

Westway. This was a sports centre but became a place to go for some help. I went there about a week after the fire but this was not much use to me by then.

19. I also went to the Clement James Centre. I went there on the night of the fire and people gathered there. I went back after the fire. I knew Howard who worked at Clement James and he knew Biruk. I had no funds or clothing and Clement James was able to help me practically with some of this. It was helpful because it was mainly residents who went there and they understood what we were going through. They were in touch with Rugby Portobello and it was part of the community.

#### **RBKC key workers**

20. Remembering the exact sequence of events is not easy because I was so devastated by the events of the night. After being booked into a hotel, perhaps some weeks later I don't know, I was assigned a 'key worker' by RBKC. This was not much use. The key workers, while meaning well, had little idea about what was actually going on. They did not seem to know much and had little understanding of what was going on. They seemed like council workers who had no sense of the gravity of the situation or just offered token sympathy. It felt like it was all about paperwork. It felt like we were 'tick boxes' and the council was trying to cover its back. One difficulty was that the key workers changed all the time. It meant that having explained my situation with one, I would then get another, who seemed to know very little. It was painful explaining my situation again and again. I had 8 key workers in all, each time having to repeat my story and situation. Just dealing with the administration and organisation was painful. I was reeling from the fire and loss of Birkti and Biruk and it felt like no effective support was provided even for basic administration.
21. It seemed that there was no real central system of notes or that key workers changed so quickly that they did not keep them or pass on details.

22. On a number of occasions, key workers called and asked about completing an assessment form and said that I was 'not a priority'. They thought I was a lodger in the flat and did not seem to know that I had lost my partner and unborn child and my step son. They got my name wrong and did not know basic details about my situation. I had to tell my story repeatedly and I found this painful; hurtful and lacked basic dignity.
23. It felt like I was suddenly having to justify my life and explain my relationship with Birkti and my care of Biruk. Worse still, the lodger, who had been in the flat for about 8 weeks, was treated as a 'bereaved' person which made no sense; it felt hurtful and lacked respect.
24. At times it felt like you were supposed to be grateful. Everything was met by suspicion. It was as if we were not given the attention as a victim but as if we were trying to 'get something'. A fire like Grenfell and the loss is so painful that it reveals how little possessions and property matter. The loss is of those I loved and shared my life with. They were the real loss. When given things there was an expectation that we should be happy and grateful but it felt like nothing because they were not what mattered. It was not easy receiving things and at no time did I ever ask for them.
25. Shahin seemed to quickly realise that the government and council were not there for us and it felt like we were in a vacuum. It appeared to me that the council was scared and knew that it was in large part their fault. They vanished and did not want to show up. It meant that we, as the community, had to start doing something because nobody else was.
26. Personally I had greater trust because Ed Daffern, Shahin and others were fellow residents and familiar faces. They were doing it because they cared not because they got paid. One of the hard things was that there was no space to grieve. I was in a single hotel room and had lost my partner, son home and all my possessions. My life was destroyed and everything went



and I was left in a strange single room. I moved from a loving, warm home to being on my own. The reality of that was very hard. I felt exhausted and could not grieve. It was chaotic and the constant change of key worker and absence of just one person I could trust made it feel like they were playing with people's feelings. I wanted someone to tell me what was going on. I wanted someone to understand what we were going through. I wanted some sympathy and understanding. It did not come.

27. It was the community that provided the information. Rugby Portobello became the main place to find help and discover what was happening. Clement James was a source of practical help such as clothing, which had been lost. I relied on these as nobody else seemed able to help or really know what was going on. Over time things got clearer, but I was in a hotel for over a year. My weight increased and at no time could I settle or rest.

28. The police assigned family liaison officers (FLOs). It felt like all they wanted was information from him and were not helping me in any way. Whilst I desperately searched for Birkti and Biruk the FLOs could not provide me with any actual information or guidance. I suspected that they knew a lot more than they told me and it felt like they were more about a police investigation of residents than there to help me with the loss of my family.

29. There is much more that I could say about the impact of the fire but have limited my comments to the most immediate aftermath as requested by the Inquiry.

#### **Refurbishment: Dealing with the TMO**

30. I lived in Grenfell Tower in Flat 155 with Birkti and Biruk from around 2011 and was there throughout the refurbishment. Birkti and I were busy working and trying to raise Biruk but were well aware of the TMO and its attitude. It felt like they looked down on us in the Tower and did not care

about how we were. I was on the same floor as Shah Ahmed and he often spoke to him about the problems he had with the Tower. I also spoke to Ed Daffern who would knock on doors and speak to people about what we thought of the refurbishment.

31. Our main worry we had was the replacement of the boiler before the refurbishment the boiler was in the kitchen, which is a usual place for a boiler, but the council wanted to put a new boiler in the hall. Birkti and I did not like this. It seemed crazy to us because it would take away a lot of space and would mean lots more pipes running through the flat. I could not understand why they didn't just place the new boiler in the same location.
32. At various times Ed Daffern and Shah Ahmed spoke to people about this and I remember being told of a meeting of residents. I shared the same concerns as them and was pleased that they were doing something for the residents. I joined some of the meetings of residents. Before the refurbishment we had a community room downstairs but when the work was being done we were allowed to use a room on floor 15. I attended a number of meetings. At one there was a large number of residents, perhaps 80 or 90 people, because we were fed up with what was happening. At later ones there were less people, perhaps 30 or 40, but most of the residents were frustrated by placing boilers in the hall and about the attitude of TMO and the contractors.
33. The main problem was the threats from the TMO and contractors. The council was bullying people through the housing management officer to gain access. They were insisting that they come in and place the boiler in the hall. I remember someone from Rydon knocking on the door and telling me that if the new boiler was not installed "your heating will be cut off". Most of the residents were worried about this and we decided not to let people in and kept asking why they could not just replace the boiler in the same location. There is an allocated space in the kitchen for a boiler.

There was a gap and space for it but they said it would cost too much to fit it there and instead said it must be in the hall.

34. The only reason that the council did not fit the boiler in the hall was because the residents got together. They were not listening to us and it seemed they did not care. It was threats of having no gas or hot water but when we got together and refused to let people in, the TMO finally listened and woke up to our concerns. We had the boiler fitted in the kitchen as before. This was better but the pipes were ugly and came in above the front door.

35. Although Birkti and I felt strong enough to stand up to the council, I know that other residents, such as my elderly neighbour, were worried. They were bullied into agreeing to things because they feared their gas and hot water would be cut off.

36. On one occasion, Birkti spoke to Linda from Rydon. It felt like we were being bullied to accept placing the boiler in the hall. Birkti was so upset by the conversation and Linda was so rude, that I told Birkti not to speak to her again and that if she ever called then I was the one to speak to her. Birkti was very stressed and upset by these threats. It was not easy facing this and this is why I was pleased to see people like Ed Daffern and Shah Ahmed helping residents. Without them I don't think we would have been able to stand up against the pressure and by acting together many people, like us, did have the boiler placed in a better place. But the frustration was how hard it was even dealing with this. The whole attitude and approach of the TMO was that residents were the problem. It seemed a basic thing to raise concerns about a boiler being placed in our hall and common sense that this was the last place anybody would want a boiler.

### **Power surges**

37. There were problems with power surges in our flat and this caused damage to various electrical items. The power surge caused the TV to stop working



and had to be thrown away. This was really frustrating and I heard that many people lost electrical items. These were expensive to replace and frustrating that the damage was caused by the building and not by anything we had done. Birkti and I asked the council about paying for damaged items but as usual with the TMO nothing went smoothly. They were slow to respond and seemed to be treating people differently. Although we lost our TV no money was ever paid to us for the loss.

## **Windows**

38. New windows were fitted during the refurbishment. When these were installed we noticed that the curtains were moving when it was windy outside. It was clear that a breeze was coming through the lower area of the window. This was a problem in all 3 windows in the living room. I contacted Rydon and the TMO about the problem and was told 'the work is not finished'. They suggested that there was more to do and that something would happen to make the windows draught proof. A contractor came and looked around at one point but did not actually do anything to the window itself and made no changes.

39. The windows were never fixed and remained draughty. I felt as if we had done as much as we could and you just had to put up with it. Calls and complaints were made, they came round, but the problem continued.

## **Cladding falling off**

40. About 6 months before the fire the TMO visited our flat because cladding was seen outside our flat and was in danger of coming loose. This came about because railway engineers at Latymer Road station noticed a cladding panel was moving around in strong wind. They presumably told the TMO and there was a worry that this was going to come out. The TMO tried to fix the panel from the kitchen window and came to our property

to try this. I remember speaking to them when they visited and being told the worry was that the cladding panel could 'blow off'. I was surprised that this happened so soon after the refurbishment.

41. At no point were we ever told about fire safety or what to do in the event of a fire. I do not remember any fire drills or advice. Birkti and Biruk died on the top floor. We lived on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor. I do not know why they went upstairs instead of down and can only imagine that coming down looked dangerous because of smoke but I am concerned that so little guidance or warning was given to them and cannot help thinking about the enormous difference this would have made.

#### **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: 

DATE: 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020