

Witness Statement of: Kelly Dowlut

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 1

Date of statement:

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF KELLY DOWLUT

I, **Kelly Dowlut**, will say as follows:-

1. I was a resident of 535 Barandon Walk. I am making this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry. This is my first witness statement to the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry.
2. 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 full experiences on the night of the fire or the impact that these events and the aftermath have had on me. This statement addresses the issues within module 3 (Communication with residents and fire safety within the tower) and module 4 (aftermath) from the Inquiry's stated Phase 2 schedule. I deal with issues relating to module 3 in paragraphs 6-21, and module 4 in paragraphs 22-50.

Background

3. I moved into flat 535 in Barandon Walk on 8 September 2008 ('the flat') although no longer live there as I moved to temporary accommodation on 1 May 2018. It was a studio flat overlooking the North side of the Tower. It was quite spacious; there was a hallway, a combined living, kitchen and bedroom space, with a separate bathroom. There was a lot of room for storage and a large window making it quite bright inside. There was no point however where I felt I could make the flat homely because of the issues, in particular with condensation, leaks and pests, which I will say more about below. This was deeply upsetting for me and meant that I wasn't able to invite people over or properly put roots down.
4. I didn't feel as though I had much of a choice in living in the flat as it was social housing. I did at one point, before I moved in, have serious doubts about signing the tenancy, and in particular this was because RBKC informed me that there was asbestos in the flat, which I will say more about later. I was told however that I would make myself intentionally homeless if I did not move in, and I didn't want to get into that sort of difficulty; I felt under pressure.
5. I was having a particularly hard time while I was living there at the beginning [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] this has never been investigated or confirmed by a specialist, however that does not provide me with much comfort.

Attitude of RBKC / TMO

6. From when I first moved into the property, I had numerous issues. I phoned the Housing Office frequently and would be left waiting for months before issues

were fully resolved. I would never be able to get back through to the same person, so would often have to explain the problem a few times.

7. I have seen a copy of the repairs data provided to my solicitor and this does not appear to be an accurate or complete copy. I identified two issues in particular with this data. Firstly, I would contact the TMO to follow up existing repairs that I had already reported; these follow up calls have not been documented. Secondly, when I would call and report a problem, and someone from the TMO did would attend and investigate the issue as if it was for the first time, when someone would have already been and done the same thing. This meant that multiple people were coming, investigating, making a report, and then no further steps were taken to resolve the problem. This also is not demonstrated in the repairs data.

Issues in the flat

Leaks

8. Starting in September 2008, there were issues with leaks, which were persistent and appeared all over the flat from the ceiling. The main leak was slightly off the centre of the main living space to the right, however leaks were also present in the hallway and in the right hand corner of the main living space. There was also a small leak on the left hand side of the living room.
9. At some point in 2015, this got so bad that some of the artex from the ceiling in the living room and hallway began falling away. Artex was always falling down from the beginning when I moved in, but the leak made it worse. The water coming down made a solution with the concrete forming a white residue which moulded almost like stalactites in a cave.

10. It was disheartening because I made efforts such as decorating with pink damask wallpaper, but this did not distract from the fact that there was so much disrepair to the ceiling.
11. Two men from the TMO came to repair this, they removed the artex, which exposed a bare wooden ceiling. I believe they were supposed to return and cover this up but they never did. People also came round to look at the condensation and we spoke about the issues with the leaks at that time, but nothing came of this.
12. When the TMO, or contractors sent by the TMO, did visit the flat to investigate the issue with the leak, I was told that the water was coming from the terraces of my two neighbours' flats directly on top of my flat. I was told on a number of occasions that the workmen would have to access those flats first in order to investigate and repair the origin of the leaks. I was informed that they were unable to gain access. However, when I subsequently spoke to my neighbours, they said that they were experiencing the same problem as me, that people would attend to investigate in their flats, but the repairs wouldn't get done. I continued to experience problems with leaks all over the flat until I moved out in 2017.

Asbestos

13. Although I had been informed by RBKC before moving in that there was asbestos in the flat, I had no instructions or information from RBKC at any point as to where it was, how to manage it, or how to keep safe.
14. As a result of the artex having become more disrupted during the leaks, a white powder became exposed, and started dropping down from the ceiling; I reported this to RBKC from early on and throughout the first few years of my tenancy, by telephone. Again, I have not seen this documented in the repairs data.

15. My grandad visited me often and encouraged me to get this disrepair investigated. A friend from university, who came to visit in the summer of 2015, then also separately encouraged me to arrange for someone to come and look at this as I had mentioned being anxious about the presence of asbestos in the flat. My friend was then very concerned about the situation that I was living in, even to the extent that he sent an email to the TMO on my behalf, and was reluctant to visit me in the flat again.
16. This made me feel really motivated to find out where the asbestos was in the flat, and to have the problem with the ceiling resolved, and I sent many emails to the TMO. I cannot recall exactly how I worded the emails, but I assumed that they would be aware of where the asbestos was, and was working on that basis. I was therefore surprised when I received a response from the TMO to say that an asbestos survey would be necessary in order to locate it in the flat. These exchanges took place in around August 2015.
17. The following month, in September 2015, a surveyor attended to do an asbestos management survey. I was subsequently sent an asbestos report which showed that asbestos had been identified all over the flat, within the artex of the ceiling, and within the flooring, and that some of that in the ceiling of the hallway and lounge required removal due to being broken. The artex was removed from the ceilings of the hallway and main room in December 2015. However, I had lost trust in the TMO and in the whole process by this time, in particular, as I had a neighbour who had to move out of his flat while asbestos was removed. I couldn't understand therefore why I hadn't been asked to move out; this was not explained to me and I was not kept updated or provided with any reassurance before the air test was carried out in January 2016, when I was told that the results were ok. At a later date, I informed the TMO that the artex was breaking away in the bathroom, and that I was again concerned about asbestos. However, no further steps were taken to investigate this in the time that I lived there.

Condensation and mould

18. There were very thin windows in the property; twice or three times throughout each year while I was living there, condensation built up which would lead to mould. This was made worse when the artex was removed and the bare wooden ceiling was exposed, without being recovered, as it meant that there was a permanent film of water over the top of it, which caused damp.
19. When a surveyor came to look at the asbestos, we also spoke about the condensation and mould. They subsequently sent someone to do a wash of the mould, but this did not fully resolve the problem, and the mould returned. The people that attended to do the mould wash also said that they would look into putting an extractor fan in the main room to reduce the condensation, however, again nobody ever got back to me about doing that, despite me following it up.

Fire safety

20. I don't recall seeing any fire equipment or signage in the communal areas. Having reflected a lot on things since the fire, it came to memory that there were exposed gas pipes lining the walls in the communal area, which is concerning.
21. There were certainly no drills or inspections in the time that I was living there, and there was no communication about what to do in the event of a fire. I don't remember any smoke alarms going off in the communal area. There were also windows in the communal areas which were supposed to close in bad weather, but they didn't and a pool of water would form. Before the night of the fire in the Tower, I had never heard of the 'Stay Put' Policy.

Aftermath

The night of 14 June 2017

22. At the time of the fire, I was working at a 5 star Residential, as a spa receptionist, and my shifts would rotate, so I would either start at 7am and finish at 3pm, or start at 3pm and finish at 11pm. On 14 June 2017, I was due to do an early shift, and so at the time of the fire I was therefore in bed asleep as normal, ready for an early start. I woke up in the early hours. While I was still lying on my bed, I saw a bright orange light out of the corner of my eye through the curtain. I opened my window and I heard people shouting, "*help*" and "*we can't get through*" and someone shouting something about their child; I heard a man's voice shouting, "*I've got babies*", and it sounded like he was asking for help. I would struggle to say what time this was as I was so consumed by what I was seeing. It was so terrifying and utterly shocking.
23. I left the flat to make my way outside to see properly what was happening. In the block corridor, I bumped into some of my neighbours who had already been outside. They told me fire was already on the other side of the Tower.
24. When I got outside, I walked to come to a stop on Station Walk. There were people there who were very distressed as they had just come out of the Tower. I stood there for a while and tried to take it all in. I wouldn't be able to tell you how long I was there for; it was as if time was frozen in a state of utter shock. After a while we were asked to move from there to make room for another fire engine coming through.
25. I then walked around to Silchester Road, where I specifically remember a policeman shouting that a helicopter was providing the police with information about where people in the Tower were.
26. From there, I can recall that I walked around to Grenfell Road. A big crowd of my neighbours and other onlookers had congregated there, and there were a vast number of people. On this side as well, the atmosphere was chaotic and the police were yelling at people to keep back I overheard from some very distressed

people standing nearby that their relatives had run into the Tower, to rescue others, believing that the fire brigade were being ineffective, however I did not see this happening for myself.

27. The fire brigade were collating information from those of us standing in the crowd, asking, for example, if we knew anybody in the Tower and what floor they had lived on. I saw some people running between the side of the Tower that we were standing on, to the other, relaying information to the police officers and the fire brigade on the other side, and with retrospect, I wish this is something that I had thought to do at the time.

28. I remember vividly that the Tower made a ghastly noise, like the sound of crackling from a fire, but also a creaking noise, as if it was very unstable and was going to collapse.

29. It was so nerve wracking and overwhelming that I decided that I wanted to return to my flat to gather my thoughts, and be away from it all as I couldn't bear to overhear people so distressed. Though I felt helpless, I couldn't pretend it wasn't happening and so I continued to watch what was unfolding from my bedroom window.

30. I will never forget seeing people moving around in a room towards the top left of the Tower, which was on fire; as the fire moved towards them, they moved away. I know that they must have died. I also remember seeing a gentleman towards the top of the Tower, more central. I remember wondering what their thoughts could possibly be in that moment when they knew that they were going to die. I realised at this point that nobody was going to be rescuing those people that I could see. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and that this was happening; it was beyond belief and I was in total shock

31. At around 4am, my neighbours knocked on my door and told me that I needed to

leave the flat. As I was leaving, I packed a suitcase which had my work uniform in it, but I can't remember what else. I didn't have the presence of mind to think about what I was packing. I didn't take any money with me, just my phone. I think I believed that I would be returning to the flat. As I exited from the front entrance, I saw that the police were evacuating everyone from the block.

32. The atmosphere around the Tower everyone was one of chaos and I was unclear of where I should go or what I should do.

33. By that time, I had been texting my cousin, who was aware of what was happening; she lives in a Tower close by, just opposite the Harrow Club, overlooking the Tower. One of my cousin's friends who lived in Grenfell Walk had already gone to my cousin's house, and so it felt natural for me to go to see them as well to seek safety and to process together what had happened.

34. When I got to my cousin's house, there were quite a large group of people gathered there, who had either come from the surrounding area, or were guests and staying the night there already. I am not sure exactly who they all were. A lot of these people were outside on her balcony watching the fire. I went out onto the balcony but it smelt terrible, pungent with the smell of chemicals; a smell I had never experienced before. I remember a lot of dark smoke too but I cannot recall now exactly what I could see from that balcony. I was so mentally consumed by everything that was going on. I went back inside and eventually tried to have a sleep for an hour in my cousin's bedroom, but I couldn't get the burning Tower out of my mind. It was probably about 6am when I got up.

35. I remember finding it difficult to be around some of the other people in her flat as they had not been so close to the events and affected as I was. I can't recall very clearly what happened for the rest of the morning. I tried to talk to my cousin a little bit about what I had been through, but was in terrible shock about what I had seen and felt very down and depressed.

Relief Centre

36. My cousin and I went to the Westway the following day at around 12pm or 1pm. I went along originally because I wanted to volunteer but there were loads of people there already volunteering. I probably only therefore stayed for about an hour before leaving as I didn't feel I could help. Again, the atmosphere was very busy and chaotic. I only returned to the Westway on one occasion after this to speak to a counsellor.

Emergency accommodation

37. I tried that afternoon to get back into my flat, probably at around 3pm or 4pm, and then again at about 6pm. There were people there manning the doors to the Walkways, and they wouldn't allow me even to go in to get an overnight bag; they were not policemen but I could not say who they were. When it dawned on me that I couldn't re-enter my flat, I then went to the Harrow Club very briefly to get a tooth brush and then onto my grandad's house, a 20 minute walk away, to spend the night. At one point, I remember my sister and my mum came over to his house and I tried to put into words what I had experienced. I think this was on the first day after the fire, but it may have been later. I was also showing them the videos that I had taken when the fire had first started.

38. Between Thursday 15th June and Saturday 17th June, I returned again to the Walkways, and there were police officers standing outside, who informed me that I still wasn't able to enter my flat until they could confirm that it was safe to do so, as they were worried that the Tower could collapse. The police did not say how long it would be before I could get back in to my flat. I returned to the flat the following day again to see if there was any update, but the police still could not tell me anything. I stayed at my grandad's up until the end of the first week of the fire.

39. Eventually I was allowed back into my flat just over a week after the fire. I was shocked and felt desperately guilty when I saw that there were people actually

sleeping on the grass by the Walkways close to the Tower. As I was walking up to the front door, I saw my neighbour, who mentioned something about dangerous toxins possibly being in the environment immediately around the Tower. The Tower was still smouldering and especially after hearing this, I felt really nervous about being close to it.

40. The following morning when I went to have a shower, I realised that there was no hot water. I had not been told about this. I believe that others in the block were also without gas, but I was not impacted by this as I had an electric cooker.

41. I believe that I then spent a few nights at my own flat. After a few days there, I spoke to Jo Delaney who told me that other residents had gone to stay in hotels. I had not realised that this would be a possibility for me. This was something that I desperately wanted to do as I felt fearful having been told by my neighbour that there were toxic gases in the area. Seeing the Tower was also very difficult. I wasn't able to get any sleep. I literally couldn't escape the thoughts, feelings or memories of the night. It is really hard to verbalise how it felt now. I could not think straight, I could not focus as my attention was bad, I could not connect with people other than those who were consumed in the same way, and I could not think of anything else other than the fire.

42. Jo Delaney gave me an emergency number to ring. I spoke to someone from RBKC on the phone who helped to book a hotel for me. I explained that I only wanted to stay in a hotel for a week to have a break away from the chaos, and to let my mind settle.

Debris

43. After the fire, on returning to the site, I can recall seeing lots of big, thick, burnt pieces of material, which looked like foam. I assume that these were pieces of cladding, though I cannot be sure. There was also lots of ash around on the

pavements as well. This could have been elsewhere too, but I only remember seeing it on the pavements in the area immediately surrounding the site. It blew everywhere.

Emergency accommodation

44. I was homeless and originally placed in the Holiday Inn in Fulham. This was towards the middle of the second week after the fire. I can recall that I arrived there in the evening. I checked in and they already knew my circumstances, and I was given a room on the first floor with two single beds.
45. Although I originally only wanted to stay in a hotel for a week, this changed as I realised I was not able to return to the Estate, as I was still feeling so low and stressed. Staying in the hotel was quite uncertain however because we never knew how long we were going to be able to stay there for. Nobody ever provided confirmation of how long we would be able to stay. I was hopeful that I could return to work at this time, and so I wanted to be closer to my workplace. I contacted RBKC to request to move. I believe it was in early July 2017 when I was moved to the Thistle Hotel. I cannot recall a lot about this hotel, I believe due to the amount of stress that I was under at the time. I do remember that the exterior of the hotel building had the appearance of cladding and the fire alarm went off on a few occasions meaning we all had to evacuate. After the evacuations, we were told that this was due to someone having been smoking in the wrong place, but it didn't stop this from being triggering and distressing for people from the Walkways and the Tower at the time.
46. For these reasons, I sent emails to RBKC in late July 2017 and another in October 2017, to follow up, requesting to move. In the beginning RBKC were quite helpful and accommodating but at around this time, they stopped engaging so much, and did not respond to me about this.

Food

47. I did not attend any of the relief centres for food.

48. The Holiday Inn always provided breakfast, but beyond that, I wasn't provided with any meals, or given any help with money for food initially. I did find this stressful because I wasn't earning money from work at the time, and so I had very little money to afford to go and do shopping. When I was at the Holiday Inn, few weeks after the fire, we got a letter, which, oddly, was dated 13 June 2017, and set out the restaurants close by that we could have vouchers to eat at.

49. I believe there may have been an issue with inconsistency in respect of the arrangements for meals at the hotels for residents, as I am aware that some people were provided with all of their meals, and others, like me, only had bed and breakfast. Twice within the first few days, a friend, who I knew from living in the Walkways kindly invited me to dinner at her hotel. Otherwise I was spending my own money buying lunch and dinner for the first few weeks until we got vouchers.

50. At a later time, perhaps a month or more after the fire, arrangements were then made through Deliveroo and it became possible to eat a wider range of food. This was an improvement but we all just wanted to have control of what we cooked and ate. It was not take away food that I needed and wanted to eat more healthily and get other things I needed.

51. In around the second week of August 2017, I got a pre-paid card for food. This was more helpful and allowed me access to healthier food but it was necessary to chase RBKC to remind them to top up the card sometimes.

52. There was a time when I was not able to get food because I was unable to get through to the keyworker, who had left without this being communicated to me.

Clothes and toiletries

53. At both hotels, there were rooms which stored clothes which had been donated by volunteers. I did not take many beyond essential items as I had been able to pick up some things from my flat when I returned initially, or buy new things, and really, I thought these were for the Tower residents who had lost their homes. There were laundry facilities at the hotel to clean clothes.

54. I did not feel able to return to my flat after doing so initially to collect further items. I was very nervous of going back to the area, as I wasn't sure what I might be breathing in, or if it was safe to be around the Tower.

Key worker

55. On around 21 August 2017, I was allocated the first key worker, Colin. I tried to call him fairly early on and was told by one of his colleagues that he was unwell. I emailed him to make sure he had my details and to wish him a speedy recovery. He never responded to that email, and I later phoned again to follow up and was told that he had left.

56. On around 31 August 2017, I sent an email to request support and ask if I could be allocated a new key worker. It was some time before I heard anything back about the key worker, and I was constantly calling. I eventually was allocated a new key worker called Scarlet. She was very young and she wasn't very helpful and I found her to be quite unprofessional as she was often talking about other residents of the Tower and Walkways who she had also been a key worker for. Finally I was allocated a key worker called Yvonne, who was very good.

Support with mental health

57. In the beginning, there were counsellors in the Westway, so in the first week of

the fire, I spoke to one there directly. The counsellor that I spoke to recommended to me that I go to the St Charles Health and Wellbeing Service. I was experiencing problems with sleep paralysis and being unable to distinguish between what could be quite violent dreams, and reality. I saw the same person, Alison that I had spoken to in the Westway at St Charles. She then referred me to someone else at St Charles, who I saw for a few sessions but I didn't find that hugely constructive and didn't carry on for very long.

58. At a later stage, when I moved, there were counsellors at the Thistle Hotel, who recommended that I should try the Oremi Centre. I was having particularly challenging thoughts at that time. I had a few sessions there which I was finding useful but then there was an issue with funding and I wasn't able to have any more.

59. I waited for some time to see if the counselling would be extended, but it took too long and so I ended up asking for my GP to refer me.

Public communication

60. We did get some newsletters through the doors of the hotels, but for the most part we just relied on each other to share information.

Impact

61. I did return to work and did one full shift on 16 June 2017. When I returned the following day for my shift starting in the afternoon however, I could only manage one hour and then had to leave because I found it too difficult; I hadn't slept since the fire, had an awful headache and felt overwhelmed and unable to concentrate. I was feeling desperately low. I felt unable to relate to other people's problems, which, I couldn't help but feel were superficial in comparison to the catastrophe that I had witnessed and been part of. In addition, my

colleagues that I worked with closely were exceptionally unsupportive and didn't understand, which made it too difficult for me to continue in making such a big effort to get back to my normal routine.

62. I made an appointment with my GP on around 29 June 2017, who gave me a sick note and I was diagnosed with PTSD and prescribed antihistamines to help me sleep. I emailed work on about 11 July 2017 to ask if I could return and go part time. The senior manager said that I could go part time, but only for 2 weeks, after which I would then have to go full time, or leave. After those 2 weeks, I did go back full time, but not for very long before leaving.

63. I remain having counselling and am still suffering with having sinister dreams and am triggered by certain things, noises in particular, such as helicopters, fire alarms, sirens and also smoke. I still experience depression and anxiety, as well as disturbed sleep and nightmares. I have not been yet been able to return to my normal life, the way it was before the fire. The guilt that I experience since the night of the fire makes it even more difficult for me to settle and move forward.

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.

Signature: 

Date: 