

Witness Statement: Richard Fletcher
Statement No.:2[Statement Number 1 [IWS00000913]

Exhibits:0
Date:28 February 2020

THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RICHARD FLETCHER

FLAT 131, 16th FLOOR

I, Richard Fletcher, formerly of Flat 131 Grenfell Tower **WILL SAY** as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. I am a Core Participant in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, and a survivor of the fire on 14 June 2017.
2. I have already submitted a Witness Statement(s) dated 25 May 2018 and this is recorded as document [IWS00000913].
3. I make this statement on behalf of myself and my daughter [REDACTED]
My wife Hime Haymanot Gashaw AKA Haymanot Gashaw, who is the mother of our daughter [REDACTED], has made her own witness statement on her own behalf as well as also on behalf of our daughter.
4. I have made a statement to the Metropolitan Police and I confirm that I consent to any police statement I have made being disclosed to the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry.

Module 3

(Active and passive fire safety measures internal to building, management of building, compliance RRO 2005, fire risk assessment, including complaints and communication with residents)

Fire Safety Systems

5. Please address any issues that you were aware of in relation to the following topics at Grenfell Tower. When you do so, please include whether you reported the issue, the person or organization you reported the issue to and what happened as a result of your report as far as you are aware. Please set out the date of approximate timing of any of the above actions as far as you can recall.

(a) Lifts;

I would refer to my previous witness statement where I said:

“Lifts.

118. There were 2 lifts serving the 23 floors of flats. At least one lift would often not be working and they would be repaired within approximately a few days to a week.” [IWS00000913_ 0022]

Further, in addition to my previous comments I would add the following points in relation to the lifts:

Issues

- i) The lifts were constantly breaking down. At least one of them would not be working fifty percent of the time and sometimes even more often. It felt as though there was only ever one lift working. This was not viable for a place the size of Grenfell Tower with so many residents. The situation was made even worse

during the refurbishments because there was a large increase in the use of the lifts, because the construction workers carrying out the refurbishments were also using the lifts to move their materials. This meant that there was always a long wait for a lift to come. It would often take up to twenty minutes to arrive, which meant it was sometimes quicker to walk. However, I was more reluctant to walk up than down due to it being much harder to go up than down for obvious reasons.

Reporting Issues

- i) I reported these problems to Rydon's when I saw the Rydon's representative, which was a lady. I would bump into her in the lift and would ask her to stop the workman from blocking up the lift. She said that the lift was not Rydon's responsibility but she would pass on the concerns; and that she would speak to the workers to not block up the lift. Despite such assurances none of the actions she said would be carried out appeared to happen as far as I am aware.

(b) Flat doors, including the self-closing devices and smoke seals/strips;

I have split the doors of our flat into the front door and the internal doors.

Issues

- i) Front Door

As stated in my previous statement:

“ Doors

113. I would mention that the automatic closer on our front door had broken a couple of months before the fire. RBKC came and removed it due to us reporting it being broken but they did not replace it resulting in us not having one on the night of the fire. This was the door that RBKC had replaced previously when they carried out the refurbishments. The new door had a glass window whereas the old door didn't. The letter box on the new door would spring shut as required and did not stick.” [IWS00000913_0021]

ii) Internal Doors

*“114. Inside the flat the bathroom door would not close as it was swollen.”
[IWS00000913_ 0020]*

Reporting Issues

i & ii) I reported both doors to the TMO person who visited us.

Response

i & ii) See above under issues.

(c) Communal doors throughout the building (including the stair doors), including the self-closing devices and smoke seals/strips;

I do not remember any problems with the communal doors on a day to day basis and did not notice any problems on the night of the fire.

(d) Windows, including the window reveals and kitchen extractor fans;

Issues

i) I do not recall there being any problems with the windows.

ii) However, there was an issue with the two extractor fans in the flat as stated in my previous witness statement:

“Extractor fan

117. There was an extractor fan in both the bathroom and the kitchen. Due to the extractor fan not being installed correctly there used to be a draught which came through it.” [IWS00000913_ 0022]

Reporting Issues

- i) Not applicable
- ii) I reported the issue of the extractor fans to the Rydon Representatives and the person who I had spoken to about the doors. I believe I only reported the problems once or maybe twice.

Response

- i) Not applicable
- ii) I received no response although when I told them I was informed that the problems would be fixed.

(e) Fire safety signage;

I would refer to my previous witness statement where I said:

“102. In addition to these two concerns, my wife and I had a further concern when about two months prior to the fire, signs were put up next to the lifts by RBKC/TMO stating that in the event of a fire, residents should stay in their flat. I have mentioned this briefly above in this statement. I remember saying to my wife that if there was a fire we would just ignore such stupid advice and leave. Such a belief was based on common sense that the best action would be to try and escape. The fact that we had this discussion shortly before the fire probably ensured that we left our flat when we did rather than discussing what to do at the time of the fire itself. We had already agreed to ignore the sign. If we hadn't discussed it prior to the fire, then we may not have left when we did. This was in part from speaking to Edward.” [IWS00000913_ 0019]

Issues

- i) The only signs I saw were in the communal hallway on our floor, just in front of the lift which said that in the event of a fire do not use the lift. I do not remember seeing any other fire safety signage. I think that the communal space outside of our flat was taken up with

some sort of compressor. There was one on each floor causing the surrounding space to be reduced by about thirty percent. I believe that the compressor may have been to do with the heating system. The result of the installation of the compressor was that where there were walls and space before, there was now none, so it may have been there were signs before, but I cannot remember.

Reporting Issues

i) This is not applicable.

Response

i) This is not applicable.

(f) Escape routes;

I would refer to my previous witness statement where I said:

“120. The stairs were made of concrete.” [IWS00000913_0022]

Issues

- i) We knew that if there was a fire you could not use the lift so would have to exit via the stairs. However, there was only one set of stairs. The stairs were very narrow so you could only fit two thin people abreast each other which meant only a very limited number of people could escape at the same time.
- Further, the floor numbering on each landing was incorrectly labeled. We were originally the 13th floor but following the refurbishments our floor numbering changed to the sixteenth floor.

Reporting Issues

i) I never reported these issues.

Response

i)Not applicable

(g) Emergency lighting;

I would refer to my previous witness statement where I said:

“119. The lighting in the hallways worked more often than not.”

[IWS00000913_0022]

Issues

i) On the night of the fire there was no light in the communal area when we left our flat to escape. However, there were lights on the stairs at the time we left.

Reporting Issues

i) I never reported these issues.

Response

i)Not applicable

(h) ; Smoke control or ventilation system

I was not aware of the system but just believed that it was an air circulation system. I was not aware of any issues with it.

(i) Smoke alarms;

Issues

i) As I stated in my previous witness statement:

“101 Secondly, we had concerns as to whether the smoke alarms in the hallway of the lobby near the communal lift worked. I asked the lady who worked in the Customer Service Lobby (the same lady I described above) and she informed

me that they did work. This was an oral conversation towards the end of the refurbishments". [IWS00000913_0018]

"Alarms

110. We believed that there was a fire alarm system in Grenfell Tower since RBKC had spent £10m on refurbishments and so assumed that any responsible council would include such a system

111. We had a smoke alarm in our kitchen and possibly in our hallway, but I do not know if they were linked together or who fitted them. Nobody ever came to check them. I believe that none of the smoke alarms went off on the night of the fire and it was the sound of popping which I believe came from the burning cladding that woke me.

112. It was only when we were leaving the flat and opened the door that I believe the fire alarm went off in our flat. I do not remember the smoke alarm going off in our flat." [IWS00000913_0020 to 0021]

Reporting Issues

i) As stated above.

Response

i) As above.

(j) Gas works carried out by Cadent Gas/tRIIO at Grenfell Tower.

I was not aware of any gas works being carried out.

(k) Power Surges.

I would refer to my previous witness statement where I said

“Power surges

115. The other problem we encountered with the flat prior to the fire was in approximately 2016, when there was a power surge. This caused a power cut and after that when RBKC were trying to rectify the problem there was a great deal of confusion as to where the fuse boxes were and whose flat was linked to which box. The electricity board came a number of times to check the electrics and to try and establish which power unit was which, but I do not remember when or any further details.

116. My wife wrote to EON on about 10 occasions about the power surges. She has the emails she wrote.” [IWS00000913_0021]

Fire Safety Checks/Inspections

6. Please outline your knowledge of fire safety checks/inspections that were carried out at Grenfell Tower.

I am not aware of any such checks. However, I work full time so would have been at work when any such checks or inspections would have been carried out.

Fire Safety Advice

7. Please outline your knowledge of the “stay put” strategy at Grenfell Tower including whether you were made aware of such a strategy before 14 June 2017 and how you were made aware of such a strategy.

With regard, to the Stay Put policy I would refer to my previous witness statement where I said:

“Stay Put Policy

108. When we moved into Grenfell Tower about ten years ago as tenants the flat required decorating. On moving in we were not given any information

There are so such issues.

Fire Safety Complaints

11. Please outline any complaints you made to TMO, RBKC or Rydon about fire safety. Please detail how and to whom such complaints were expressed and whether anything was done in relation to those complaints. Please detail your view of the adequacy of the response to those complaints.

I would refer to my comments in my previous witness statement as follows:

“CONCERNS ABOUT FIRE SAFETY PRIOR TO THE FIRE

95. I had many concerns about fire safety in relation to the Tower prior to the fire. These were mainly raised through Edward Daffyn who was also a resident of the Tower and would often speak on behalf of himself and other residents to RBKC. He was our neighbour and started the Residents Action Group that raised concerns and made complaint to Rydon and the TMO on behalf of residents.

96. The first issue of concern raised by us through Edward Daffyn was opposition to RBKC's plans to fit boilers in individual flats just inside the front door of the of the flats. The boilers were intended to be situated above the electric panel/board. His point and mine was that it was common sense that you do not place a boiler at the only exit of a flat in a Tower block and you don't put water above electrics.

97. If a boiler were to explode and catch on fire, then it could cause the Tower to catch on fire whilst at the same time blocking the only exit out of a flat. I thought it was a dangerously stupid idea to locate the boiler just inside the entrance door and would not agree to it.

98. I spoke directly with Rydon about this. I spoke to the Customer Service lady, but I do not remember her name, but I can describe her. She was a middle aged English lady with blond hair. It was commonly known that Rydon and RBKC had threatened residents with eviction if they would not

The communication was not by specific email but by word of mouth We refused to let them undertake the work and Rydon said they would take us to court if we did not consent. This was said to all the tenants generally. The matter went back and forth but eventually they gave in to us. We were not the only people refusing to let them undertake the work. About twenty other residents were saying the same thing about the boiler and pipes. My view was that Rydon would not really want to take twenty residents to court over the piping. This attitude to the residents on this occasion was indicative of the attitude generally towards us. Nobody listened to us but simply told us what was going to happen.

106. I also recall discussing with Eddie about a proposal by Rydon to run gas pipes along the staircases following them all the way down. Eddie pointed out to me that this was crazy as the stairs were our only escape route and to have gas pipes carrying flammable gas would be a death trap.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

107. I would like to make a number of other comments regarding my knowledge of various matters relating to Grenfell Tower, which I believe maybe relevant at this stage.

[IWS00000913_0019 to 0020]

12. Please outline your knowledge of any provisions that enabled those with language or other special needs to send and receive communications to the TMO, RBKC and Rydon about fire safety and safety more generally.

I did not receive any such communications.

Complaints of Disrepair

13. Set out (briefly) a list of any complaints of disrepair made to RBKC/TMO [e.g. leaking, damp/mould, pest infestation]. Refer to any exhibits if contained in housing file. Comment on whether information withheld in housing file.

I did not have any such problems at Grenfell.

Disability/Personal Emergency and Evacuation Plan (PEEP) and Other Related Information NA

14. We did not have any family members with such disabilities although we do have a child.

Additional Questions

15. Did you complain about the building.

As set out above.

16. Did you express your concern about the poor energy efficiency of the building (hot in summer, hard to heat in the winter).

We spoke about it as a family but never expressed our opinions outside of the family.

17. Did you have any knowledge of the Urban Initiatives Reports.

I do not have any knowledge of the Urban Initiatives Reports.

18. Do you know who the members of the resident's groups were within the Tower and what views those groups have about the building and what complaints or issues did they put forward.

My wife and I knew some of them as I mentioned in my previous witness statement but not all of the members. We knew some of the issues as detailed above in this witness statement under the heading concerns.

19. Were you ever informed that cladding would be placed on the outside of the Tower.

I think we may have been told by the Rydon representative about cladding and possibly correspondence through the post but I cannot be certain.

20. What information were you given about the cladding.

The information that we were given was in relation to the choice of colours for the outside of the tower. I cannot remember the colours offered. They also showed us the colour of the school cladding and whether we wanted it to mirror that or not. At the time I was not aware of the significance of cladding and do not specially remember any mention of it beyond being offered a choice of colours.

(Aftermath) (Module 4)

Emergency Shelter and Accommodation.

In addition to the new comments set out below I would also refer to my previous witness statement in which I said the following:

“THE EVENTS DIRECTLY AFTER THE FIRE

In the days that followed the fire, we remained at my mother-in-law's home for the Wednesday and the Thursday. We were receiving hundreds of calls from people, even people we had not heard from for years."

[RNS00000913 0013]

“HOUSING

80. We initially stayed with my mother-in-law. My wife and I slept on the sofa and my daughter slept with her grandparents. The fire continued burning for a couple of days. On the Friday we took our daughter to school and then made our way to the Westway Centre to provide our details to the authorities and to register in order to receive support and housing.

81. With regard to housing it has taken a great deal of effort, stress and complaints to finally be moved out of a hotel. We spent almost a year living in a hotel.

82. It may sound glamorous to be staying in a hotel, but it really is not. A hotel room simply has a bedroom and a bathroom. They are not designed or expected to be used for living in but simply for staying in during a short stay to visit somewhere.

83. *Even the simplest of things you are not able to do. You couldn't cook a family meal and sit down at a table and eat it. Most people who have had to stay in a hotel for even a few weeks will crave to get home and back to normality, especially if they have children. However, we were stuck in this nightmare of temporary living. You can't even put your clothes in to wash. I remember saying to my solicitor that we had to get our socks dry cleaned. We were eventually signed a tenancy agreement with RBKC in October 2017. Even though we signed the tenancy agreement we were not able to move in straight away due to a catalogue of problems with our new place.*

This included most worryingly electrical problems including water pouring down the electric light cable, flooding, mould as well as other issues."

INITIAL SUPPORT

85. We had been wearing the same clothes for three days. In terms of food, drink, clothes and the essentials we were told by the volunteer help points that had been set up, to take whatever we needed.

87. We were also given food as well as accommodation. The food was in the form of a voucher, which from memory was for use in the hotel. We were also given £50 in cash and asked if that would be enough to get us through the weekend.

Therefore, we went back to the Rugby Portobello Trust on the Saturday and said that we needed to be closer to the area surrounding the Tower. At the centre there was a long queue of people. They also gave us about £250 in cash. It took about 2 hours to be seen. The same man who gave us the money also told us he had a hotel room in Tara Copthorne in High Street Kensington, which he said it was nice and a premiere room.

21. Please provide details of any relief centres you visited including details of what emergency relief was provided to you, by who and in what time frame. Specifically, please outline your experiences of:

(a) The initial relied centres (such as Rugby Portobello Club, Clement James Centre, Al Manaar Mosque, Latymer Community Church, Notting Hill Methodist Church and the Harrow Club);

We went to the Rugby Portobello who were dealing with the accommodation side of things. We went to here after visiting g the Westway. At the Rugby Portobello we were handed £50 cash for the family from a suitcase of cash. It felt very unorganized.

(b) The Westway centre;

We went to the Westway before going to the Portello. As stated in my previous witness statement:

“On the Friday we took our daughter to school and then made our way to the Westway Centre to provide our details to the authorities and to register in order to receive support and housing.” [RNS00000913 0014 and 0015]

(c) Placements in hotels:

As I stated above, we were moved into a hotel on the first night. The first hotel was the Premiere Inn at Hanger Lane, where we stayed for one night. We were not happy here as it was too far away from our family and friends but also from where all of the support was been given to survivors. Therefore, we went back to Portobello and spoke to someone from RBKC. They made a few phone calls and arranged for us to be moved to the Copthorne Tara Hotel, in High Street Kensington, where we stayed for about seven to eight months.

As I stated in my previous witness statement:

With regard to the provision of food in the hotels, the first and second hotels had a buffet system for breakfast. After a couple of weeks you become so tired of the same food that we ended up after a few weeks buying bits and kept what we could in a small mini bar size fridge. This meant we could eat in our room which was not nice but gave some privacy as a family. We were initially in one room with one bed but later we were moved in to two connected rooms so we could combine two tables. After a few weeks of complaining by survivors, RBKC introduced a prepayment system which meant that we could eat in other food places such as Leon. However, after a short time you are just desperate to cook your own food and eat at a family table.

Basic Provisions and Financial Assistance

22. Please outline your experiences of the provision of financial assistance and basic provisions. Specifically:

I would refer to the following comments made in my previous witness statement:

“INITIAL SUPPORT

84. In the days following the fire there was no support. Nobody knew anything. RBKC were clearly making it up as they went along. There was no contingency plan. Once we had provided our details at the Westway we did not receive any specific support. The help was mainly coming from donations made by people and organisations outside of RBKC including the Red Cross.

85. We had been wearing the same clothes for three days. In terms of food, drink, clothes and the essentials we were told by the volunteer help points that had been set up, to take whatever we needed.

86. The relief effort was dotted around the Tower for various things. After visiting the Westway, we were sent to the Rugby Portobello Trust, where we were given accommodation for one night which was a hotel room in the Premiere Inn at Hanger Lane.

87. *We were also given food as well as accommodation. The food was in the form of a voucher, which from memory was for use in the hotel. We were also given £50 in cash and asked if that would be enough to get us through the weekend.*

88. *The hotel we went to was on the Friday night, was a long way from the relief centre. We wanted to be near the school, the relief centre etc. Therefore, we went back to the Rugby Portobello Trust on the Saturday and said that we needed to be closer to the area surrounding the Tower. At the centre there was a long queue of people. They also gave us about £250 in cash. It took about 2 hours to be seen. The same man who gave us the money also told us he had a hotel room in Tara Copthorne in High Street Kensington, which he said it was nice and a premiere room.*

89. *He told us to make our way there which we did. We packed up our plastic bag and headed to the hotel.*

90. *We didn't know how long we would be there or whether we would have to move again. Nobody really knew what was going on. He told us breakfast was included but we didn't know if other food was included or whether we had to use the £250. There was a serious lack of communication between us and RBKC.*

91. *The rumours then started that we may have to go and stay in the gym at the Westway. This was from residents saying they had heard people were to be moved out of hotels and into there. This caused even more stress, as even though the hotel was not perfect it was better than our daughter having to sleep on the floor in a gym with hundreds of other people.*

92. *We spent the weekend at the hotel and on the Monday my wife went back to work in order to achieve an element of normality that was seriously lacking in our lives.*

93. *She initially went back to work on a half day basis. Rumours started to circulate about what was available in terms of housing but there was no information coming from the council. It felt like we were in a third world country following a disaster and the authorities were doing nothing.*

94. Everyone was walking around the area in the clothes and shoes donated by companies. This meant that you could tell who was from the Tower as they were dressed identically.

THE MONTHS FOLLOWING THE FIRE

In the months following the fire the main issue for us as a family was housing. Nobody knew what was happening and then Teresa May said that everyone would be housed within a certain period of time. The government also said that everyone would receive money. You had to attend a centre and give your details including ID. Luckily, we had ID so attended and then had to go to a post office, whereupon they would transfer a certain amount of money to our bank account.”

[IWS00000913_0015, 0016 and 0017]

I would add that there did not appear to be a central point of information in the first few weeks following the fire. The information tended to come from bumping into people we knew who would mention a particular support service, or help that was available. We would then go to the relevant help point. In terms of government and local government involvement it was completely disorganised.

Psychological Support and Physical Injuries

23. Please outline your experiences on the provision of psychological and mental health support services. This may include access to social workers, key workers, counselors or other support services.

Firstly, I would refer to the comments I made in my previous witness statement where I said the following:

“INJURIES SUFFERED

122. I didn't suffer any physical injuries, but my daughter said she was having problems breathing but not anything serious. I thought it was best to just to sleep and to act as normal as possible so as not to stress her out any

(a) Online through social media/website updates;

We didn't use or check these. They tended to just show pictures of the fire so we didn't want to look.

(b) Leaflets/newsletters;

We would have leaflets given to us providing updates on where to go for support.

(c) Telephone helplines;

We were not aware of any.

(d) Voluntary relief centres.

We were not aware of any other than as set out above.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I confirm that I am willing that the statement forms part of the evidence before the Inquiry and may be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed.....

Richard FLETCHER

Dated.....28/2/20.....