

Witness Statement of: Brahim El Amine

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 2

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GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF BRAHIM EL AMINE

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 (and my family).

I, **BRAHIM EL AMINE**, will say as follows:

1. I make this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry. This statement is an account of my personal experience of fire safety in the Walkways and of dealing with the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation ('TMO') (**Module 3**).
2. This statement will also provide a brief factual account of my experience in the aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017 (**Module 4**). As this is my first statement to the Inquiry, for context I will also provide a brief account of my experience in the early hours of 14 June 2017.

Background

3. I am originally from Morocco and I moved to the United Kingdom in February 1993. I work as a Black Cab driver. After separating from my wife in 2002, I was placed by RBKC in temporary accommodation and was on the waiting list for 5 years before

being offered permanent accommodation at Flat 106 Grenfell Walk. I signed the secure tenancy for the flat on 16 November 2009.

4. I was very pleased to be offered the flat at Grenfell Walk because the temporary accommodation I had been living in was in the same local area. I had already built ties and put down roots in that area and within the large Moroccan community based there.
5. When I first went to view the flat, I was shown around by the Caretaker who worked for a private cleaning company. It was not his job to do that, someone from the Council should have come to meet me. My Solicitors have recently received a copy of my housing file from RBKC and it appears that someone from the TMO should have carried out the viewing with me and completed a form as we did so. They were supposed to go through the form with me and I was supposed to confirm that everything was in good condition but this never happened. Instead, it seems that someone just ticked the boxes on the form and left it on my file unsigned. I exhibit a copy of the form as **Exhibit BE/1**.
6. After showing me around, the Caretaker sent me to the Estate Office, which was based at the bottom of Grenfell Tower, to sign the contract. When I signed the contract they told me that the heating in the building was communal, but because I had not lived somewhere with communal heating before, I did not understand what that meant. The Housing Officer then gave me a small budget to redecorate but I was not given any other information about the building or my flat or any safety advice.
7. No one had checked whether the flat was in good condition and ready to be moved into. So when I moved in there was no hot water and no locks on the window. When I moved in, they should have sent someone in with me to explain everything. I went down to the Estate Office to complain about the lack of hot water in person. I think that it was only at that point that I was provided with the contact numbers for the repairs department. It took them two or three days to send someone to check the hot water. I was told by the plumber that the water was probably turned off after the last tenant moved out and no one had bothered to turn it back on. The Caretaker fixed the locks on the windows.

Fire Safety

8. No one ever advised me about the escape route or the assembly point for the building. I was never given any information about the fire strategy for the building and I do not remember anyone carrying out any fire safety checks.
9. Although I never received any fire safety advice from anyone official, I had planned in my head what I would do if there was a fire in mine or my neighbours' flats. I liked to be prepared. I had all my identification documents including my Moroccan identity card and my passports in one place ready for me to take quickly. I knew I could not use my balcony as an escape route because there's two floors below me, so I planned to use the main entrance to evacuate the building.
10. The TMO never listened to complaints regarding safety. My neighbour [REDACTED] [REDACTED] had at least 50 plant pots in the hallway outside our flats, which you could not even move because they were too heavy. I remember when I first moved in; the furniture movers really struggled to get into my flat because of the pots. I reported it to the TMO on many occasions, I told them that if there was a fire it was dangerous; they told me that I should ignore it. Five years or so later, I do not know what happened but the pots were taken away. I'm not sure but I think someone from RBKC must have ordered it.
11. In the communal parts of the building, there was a fire exit sign at the main entrance and one at the back door to the garden, but I do not remember seeing any other signs. I think that the back door was a fire door because you had to push a metal bar in order to open it. You could exit through the back door, but not enter because the fob panel was broken. The back door to Grenfell Walk also on an electronic fob system but it never worked which meant that you would need to manually open and shut it. It was really difficult to do this because it would also get stuck on the tarmac behind it. You really needed to be fit and strong to be able to push hard and with extensive force to open and shut it.

12. The main entrance door was heavy and would close behind you, but I'm not sure if it was a fire door.
13. The lights on the staircase would often be out, for some reason the bulbs would not last, it would take them weeks sometimes months to replace them. It made it a safe haven for drug dealers and drug addicts, before the refurbishment of the Tower, there were security guards based on the ground floor of the Tower. We would call them and they would come and scare the addicts and dealers away. After the refurbishment, the security guards were removed and people started using the stairs to smoke, take drugs and urinate, it made me feel very unsafe.
14. There was one fire extinguisher by the main entrance to the building but I cannot remember any others. I do not remember seeing any other fire safety measures in the communal parts of the building.
15. When I moved into my flat, I only had one smoke alarm in the flat. It was in the corridor next to the bathroom. Someone would come to check the gas once a year but no one ever checked the smoke alarms. In 2014 after five years of living at Grenfell Walk, I received a letter telling me that someone was coming to change the electrical system in the flat. I did not understand what that meant, but when the engineer came he installed a smoke alarm in the kitchen and one in the bathroom. Once he did the work, he said they were working but I'm not sure if they were. I never cooked or smoked in the flat so I never heard any of the alarms in my flat go off in the 8 years I was living there.
16. My front door was very weak, it was basically was two pieces of wood filled with sawdust in the middle. The door had an arm on top, which joined it to the doorframe, I think this was supposed to be a self-closing mechanism but it didn't work, the door didn't automatically close, I would have to physically pull and push it shut.
17. The notice board for the block was positioned directly behind the main entrance door. When the door was wide, open it would block the notice board so anything posted on it would be easy to miss. I remember seeing a notice, which told you to follow the exit signs in a fire, but I don't remember it giving any other information. As I said it was easy to miss, you would not see it unless you were looking for it.

Dealings with the TMO

18. The TMO as an organisation was only interested in profit. If you did not pay your rent on time they'll be standing outside your door threatening you with eviction, but if you needed something from them they're not interested. When it came to repairs, you had to chase them for at least a week before they sent someone out.
19. I would often fix things myself because I did not want to have to spend days chasing the TMO. The taps in my bathroom were regularly broken I would fix it myself but I eventually gave up, at the time of the fire, only the hot water tap in the sink was working. From around early 2015, I had to use a bucket to collect cold water from the kitchen sink, to mix with the hot water in the bathroom just to have a shower every night before going to work. There was always also issues with the hot water pressure in the flat because the water was stored in a tank and did not directly from the boiler. The boiler for the block was based at the bottom of Grenfell Tower.
20. I had two or three floods in my flat during the time I was living in Grenfell Walk. I was given a number to call when I had emergency such as a flood, it was supposed to be a 24-hour service but they were never there, the line would just carry on ringing.
21. The last flood in my flat happened during an evening in 2016. I had called the emergency repairs number but unsurprisingly there was no answer. The next morning I kept calling and eventually, after speaking to at least four different people, I got through to a manager who sent someone out to inspect the flood. They found that the flood was coming from a leaky pipe in the flat on top of mine but they could not fix it on that day and had to return the following day. It took them two days to fix the leak from the flat above, which caused a lot of damage in my flat. It damaged the ceiling, floor and bed in my bedroom and there was also damage to the ceiling in the corridor
22. I was aware of the formal complaints procedure, but I did not bother with it. I work nights so I slept during the day and would wake up at lunchtime, I did not have time for that. I knew it would involve several letters and emails, which would take forever. It was already bad enough having to chase them up on the phone - who has time for that?

23. There were also days where I would just sit there for days without heating, because the boiler was off. The TMO would turn it off at least three times a year. There was one occasion where we spent three days without heating or hot water; I think it was when they were refurbishing Grenfell Tower. The TMO sent a letter on that occasion apologising for the inconvenience but it was pointless. On the many other occasions when the boiler was turned off for a few hours, they would not even bother telling us. The TMO would just take the phone off the hook so even if you called to report it, you would get a busy tone.

24. The TMO's general communication with residents was bad. I only received and heard of the 'LINK' magazine when I was in temporary accommodation after the fire.

Aftermath

14 June 2017

25. On the night of the fire at Grenfell Tower, it was Ramadan. After I had my last meal for the day I went to bed at around 11.30pm on 13 June 2017. I usually sleep with earplugs in because the neighbours are noisy. I could hear noises in the background but I thought it was drug addicts fighting so I did not get out of bed. I must have fallen asleep but at some point, I got up and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. My window looks on to the 1st and 2nd floors of Grenfell Tower only, so I didn't see anything unusual.

26. I went back to bed and started to fall asleep again. Then, all of a sudden, I heard a loud 'boom' and someone shouting "Police!" It jolted me out of my sleep. I asked myself what I had done for the police to knock my door down and come into my flat. I went into my hallway and I saw three police officers dressed in riot gear, they had a battering ram. I felt fear and panic, I was shaking and I could not speak. I was very worried that I was going to be accused of something I had not done.

27. The Police Officers were led by a female Officer. She then reassured me that I had not done anything wrong. She told me that there was a fire and to look at the Tower, I did not believe her and so I looked outside and I could then see shadows of a fire on the ground. It must have been around 12.45am. As soon as I saw the fire I was terrified

for the safety of my friends in the Tower. I was shaking and panicking. I did not know what to do. The Officer told me that I had 5 minutes to put on my clothes and get out.

28. It was a warm night and I was wearing shorts, a T-shirt and the flip-flops I use in the house, so I just grabbed a light jacket. As I was leaving the flat, the Police Officer asked me if I had taken my mobile and wallet. I said I had. I asked if could go back to get my documents but she said no, there was no time. As I exited my flat I turned right, as I usually do, but I was told by the female Police Officer to turn left and use the exit leading to the green between the walkways. This is a fire exit but the door is faulty and usually stuck.
29. As I was leaving the block, I could see a mixture of large and small pieces of burning material falling from the Tower, like rockets. A piece landed on the glass roof of our communal corridor, I could smell plastic burning. Some of my other neighbours were leaving the building at the same time. The police directed us to the back garden, on the side of the Tower near St Clement's Church, in between the Walkways. From there we had a clear view of the Tower.
30. There were a lot of people gathered there. I was very worried for those still in the Tower. The police pushed us back towards Sirdar Road, away from the Estate. I stayed until about 7am and spoke to neighbours from different blocks in the Walks, we were all just watching the fire - there was nothing we could do.
31. When I saw the Tower on fire, I knew that was it; not everyone was going to be saved. I saw people screaming from their balconies. The picture I cannot get out of my mind is of an elderly man on the 8th floor, he was waving his towel from the window and eventually he tried to get down from his balcony. He was trying to jump on to a ladder, which the fire brigade had placed against the wall of the Tower. The top of the ladder only reached the 7th floor but it was his only chance, the officers from the fire brigade were shouting at him to go back to his flat. Eventually he listened and disappeared from view. He was the last person I saw alive in the Tower. This was sometime between 6.30am and 7 am.

32. My very good friend Abdelselam Sebbar lived in Grenfell Tower. I had known Abdeselam since I moved to the area in 2002; he was also Moroccan and we had a lot of friends in common. I also saw him two or three times a week at Al Manaar Mosque, where we had first met. We were good friends. Abdelselam was elderly and I knew that he that he would have needed help to get out of the Tower. As I watched the fire spread across the Tower, I was very concerned about Abdelsalam. I called him many times during that night, wanting to see if he got out but his phone was engaged. I later found out that he was on the phone to his son Hanid until he finally collapsed. If they had woken me up at the start of the fire, I would have run into the Tower to get him out, but by the time I got there, there was a police cordon preventing us getting near to the Tower.
33. I was also concerned about Omar Alhaj Ali, we had been friends for 3 or 4 years, we'd always stop and talk to each other. We would sometimes meet in a local Moroccan coffee shop. I would see him about once a week.
34. When I was watching the fire, I was wondering whether it was real or not and how this could be happening in Britain. If we were in Morocco, people would have helped the fire brigade to evacuate people.
35. I left the area around the Tower at some point after 7am. I took my Black Cab which was parked near my GP surgery and went to a coffee shop on Golborne Road, trying to kill time. I did not know what I was waiting for, I was still in shock walking around wondering if it was real or not.
36. After spending the day around Goldborne Road I went back to my local area at 5pm to try to get access to my flat so I could get my passport. I usually spend the last few days of Ramadan with my family in Morocco so I already had a flight booked for 20 June. After the fire, I felt that it was even more important that I visit my family. However, the Police did not allow me into my flat, they said they would get someone from the TMO to come down to speak to me. A few minutes later a lady from the TMO came over from by the leisure centre, she was wearing a badge identifying her. She said that whether I could go back to my flat was not up to her, it was a decision for the Police, and they said no. She could not tell me when I would be allowed into my flat. She told

me that if I needed somewhere to sleep that night they had an emergency shelter set up at the Westway Sports Centre ('Westway'). That was the only person I saw from the TMO or RBKC that day.

37. I had already called a friend earlier that day to see if I would be able to stay with him in his flat in Paddington. I was lucky because he travels a lot and was traveling to Morocco two days later. My friend was a council tenant and I did not want to cause any problems for him by staying, especially as I didn't know how long I'd need to stay with him so we went to his Estate Office and asked for permission. I showed them my driving license as my proof of address and they agreed that I could stay with him until RBKC arranged accommodation for me. The only requirement was that I did not pay my friend for my stay or provide him with any other benefits for letting me stay.

38. As I had my wallet with me, I was able to buy clothes and essential items.

39. A friend gave me the details of a volunteer who was helping mediate between residents and RBKC/TMO – I cannot remember her name. I called her and told her that I wanted to arrange a visit to my flat to collect items that I had left there. When I finally got back into my flat I only got 10-15 minutes inside. The balcony door was open, the fridge had been moved and the flat itself looked like it had been ransacked.

Relief Centres and accommodation

40. Three days after the fire, I went to the Westway Sports Centre for the first time. I went with a friend who lived in the Walkways. When we arrived at the entrance, they asked for our address and gave us wristbands. One side of the centre was full of organisations providing different services: passport and document replacements, housing and clothes. On the other side, there were 200 or so thin mattresses on the floor with kids, woman and elderly people sitting around; it looked like a refugee camp. I was shocked and upset by what I saw and had to leave.

41. Before I left the Westway, I spoke to a volunteer and asked her why all those people were still sleeping there, three days after the fire. She told me that they were waiting for the person from the Town Hall who was responsible for putting people in emergency accommodation and providing money. I felt very lucky that I was able to stay with my

friend, as I would not have been able to cope with sleeping at the Westway. I did not know they were already putting people in hotels.

42. A few days later, I heard from a neighbour that RBKC were rehousing people and were giving people financial assistance. I did not want to be a burden on my friend. I knew that he might be returning to the country with his family and that I would not be able to stay there much longer.

43. I went back to the Westway. When I arrived I saw two or three tables with TMO and RBKC signs on them but there were no staff. I found out later that it was because they were receiving threats; people were shouting and swearing at them so they left it to other councils and police to deal with their residents.

44. I saw that there was another table with people providing financial assistance. They did not identify which organisation they were from but I thought maybe it was a charity. I told them that I needed help, I was homeless and I was not able to return to work after the fire as I had lost my cab licence in the fire and felt far too traumatised by the friends I had lost to think about working. The man at the stand asked for my address and asked if I wanted £50. I felt that this was ridiculous; I was made to feel like a beggar because I needed more than that. They asked how much I needed. I explained that I had just spent £200 on clothes. They then gave me £100. The whole experience was embarrassing and felt like an insult. I later found out the £100 was not recorded by the council as being given to me.

45. A volunteer then directed me to another stand to deal with housing. I spoke to a Housing Officer from Haringey Council who then got in touch with RBKC Town Hall. Within 10-15 minutes they called her back. I was told that there was a room for me at Dorsett House Hotel, Shepherd's Bush but that I would only be able to stay there for a week. I asked where I was supposed to go after that week. The Housing Officer told me not to worry: they might re-book my room or send me somewhere else and someone will be in touch to let me know. This was incredibly distressing for me and the Housing Officer did not seem to realise this.

46. I checked into the hotel that same day. I had been given a very, very small room. Breakfast was included but it was at a set time; I had to buy my own lunch and dinner.

As it was Ramadan the eating arrangements were completely unsuitable for me. For the last seven days of Ramadan, I went to a Mosque in Paddington for Iftar and would buy my own food to eat early in the morning before starting my fast.

47. At the end of the week at the hotel, no one contacted me to say that the room was re-booked or where I should move to, or even that I had to move out - so I went back to my friend's home to stay. Four or five days later, someone from RBKC Housing called and asked me if I was still in Dorset House. I told him that of course I wasn't, the room was only booked for one week. I told him that I was staying at my friend's and it was fine for the moment because my friend was away, but that he and his family would be back in about a week, so I would need somewhere to stay.
48. Two days before my friend and his family were due to return to the country, I went to the Westway for assistance with housing and expenses. I searched the hall and saw a housing sign on a table, but the staff standing at the table did not identify which organisation they were from. They asked me where I was from and where I had been living for the past few weeks. They then arranged a room for me at the Hilton, Kensington. I had found out from my neighbours that Key Workers were assisting people and providing information and so I also asked for a Key Worker.
49. In late July, I met with the Key Worker assigned to me, who was from Westminster Council. I found her assistance helpful because she arranged for me to receive £300 a week for my expenses. Up until that point, I had been paying for my own food, which was very difficult because I was too emotionally distressed to return to work, as I am self-employed, I was having to use my savings. With the assistance of my Key Worker, I applied for reimbursement of my expenses during those first six weeks after the fire; my claim went to the ombudsman. I was told that I was not entitled to a reimbursement because I chose to stay with my friend rather than staying in a hotel.
50. I stayed at the hotel for about 9 months before I was re-housed. The hotel was a nightmare; there was no peace, no routine or stability and I was desperate to move. We were living with tourists and people on holiday, the other guests of the hotel were generally quite inconsiderate. There was a lack of privacy, I had my own room but there were loud noises in the hotel and these would take me back to the night of the fire and the moment the police banged my door down. A stay in a hotel is only intended to

be for a few week at most, not months. After a few months at the hotel, my Key Worker arranged for me to go back to my flat for half an hour. I collected more documents and some books.

51. It was more than two years until I was offered permanent accommodation and even that process was a real struggle. RBKC had offered me a flat, which was not ready for anyone to move into because of the amount of disrepair, but I had been given only two weeks to sign the contract and move in. Based on my Housing Officer assurance that the flat was ready, I signed the contract and was given the keys. When I visited the flat, I found that there was no hot water, no heating and a blocked bathroom sink. There were also issues with the intercom, washing machine, the extractor fan above the cooker and the key to the letterbox was also missing.

52. I refused to move in until all the issues with the flat are resolved and, as with the TMO, it was left down to me to chase them until this was done. I had to chase RBKC, my Key Worker, my Housing Officer as well as, the contractors to sort out all the outstanding issues. I had to attend every single appointment with contractors to let them into the flat as I had the keys; it took about eight weeks for the contractors to resolve the issues with the flat.

53. I should never have been offered a flat that was not ready for me to move into. I was already struggling emotionally and after two years without a permanent home I wanted to start rebuilding my life. The process of having to chase RBKC caused unnecessary additional stress. I made a formal complaint about the difficulties I experiences and it went all the way to the Independent Adjudicator who upheld my complaint against RBKC (**Exhibit BE/2**). I received £200 compensation and an apology from the Housing Manager at RBKC.

Emotional impact/Counselling

54. On 14 June 2017 I learned from others in the community that Abdeslam and other people I knew had passed away. I asked a neighbour if he knew whether Abdeslam had made it out of the Tower and all he said was “Allah yarhamo” which is Arabic for god forgive him, which is what we say when someone has died. I started crying straight away. The same person told me about another friend, Omar (I did not know this man’s surname, it was not Omar Alhaj Ali), his wife and two of his daughters including a

toddler also passed away, with only his eldest daughter surviving. I was sad and shocked.

55. Abdelrahman was also a Black Cab driver and lived in the Tower. We would greet each other whenever we met, and I remember his children playing in the local area. I asked a Somali friend who works at Al Manar Mosque if he had any news about the Somali taxi driver who lived at the Tower; he replied that he and his entire family passed away in the fire. I was upset by the news and had tears in my eyes, to this day I still can stop thinking about his children playing outside near the Tower.
56. Four or five weeks after the fire I received a call from the police checking to see if I was alive. A Black Cab had been parked by the Tower and no one had moved it - they thought it was mine. I knew that it must have been Abdelrahman's cab. Things were still unsettled - no one knew who had survived.
57. Whilst I was watching the fire spread across the Tower on 14 June 2017, I remember thinking back to a conversation I had with my neighbour Joseph, during the refurbishment of the Tower. He was an architect who worked from home and watched the contractors carry out the work. I remember him telling me that the cladding, which was being installed at the time, was a disaster waiting to happen. He said everything they put on the Tower would be illegal in another country; he could see that they were cutting corners. I did not take him seriously and just said that it looked better than it did before. About a month after the fire, after they allowed us back into our flats for a few minutes to collect important items, I saw him again and he reminded me of that conversation.
58. My Key Worker put me in touch with the counselling service that was available at St Charles Hospital. I attended weekly individual sessions. I was diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. I attended about 20 sessions. I found that even after this treatment as soon as someone mentioned Grenfell, or if I saw the faces of the people who had died, it took me straight back to that night. I was not able to work for almost a year after the fire.

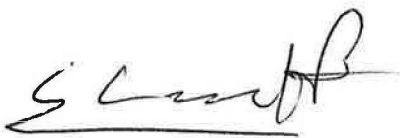
59. To this day whenever I have to drive past the Tower, I see Abdeslam, Omar and Abdelrahman's faces. I still have ongoing trauma.

60. I did not feel supported by RBKC; if anything, they prolonged the uncertainty and suffering of people.

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: 04 / 3 / 20 20