

Witness Statement of: Jackie Blanchflower
No. of statement: 1
Exhibits: 2
Date of statement: 27 February 2020

GRENfell TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF JACKIE BLANCHFLOWER

I, JACKIE BLANCHFLOWER, will say as follows:-

1. This is my first statement to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. Both statements I have provided relate to Phase 2 of Inquiry.
2. I have been asked to provide this statement dealing with my time as the secretary to the Lancaster West Residents Association (LWRA) in the years immediately preceding the Grenfell Tower Fire ('the fire'). This statement is structured largely as a response to a list of questions asked of me by the Inquiry in a letter dated 20 December 2019, with some additional background about my own experiences as a resident on the Lancaster West Estate.
3. In addition to my Inquiry witness statements I have provided a statement to the Metropolitan Police. I have reviewed the contents of this statement but do not wish for this to form part of my evidence to the Inquiry.

Background

4. I have lived in Verity Close on the Lancaster West Estate ('the Estate') since September 1997, but I have known the area since 1986 when I moved to West London and became a member of the Latymer Christian Centre (now Latymer Community Church) on Bramley Road. My links to the local area are very strong. As well as my involvement with the Residents Association, I am also a lead volunteer at the Latymer Community Church and I undertake extensive community work. My husband is similarly involved in local issues. He is a school governor at

Thomas Jones School and is the Chair of Trustees for the Latymer Christian Fellowship Trust which oversees the work of the Latymer Community Church. We have both given much of our lives to the community.

What were the purpose and objectives of the Lancaster West Residents Association (‘LWRA’)?

5. I have had two periods of involvement with the Lancaster West Residents Association. The first began in the late 1990s, a year or so after I first moved to my current home in Verity Close. During that time I attended meetings and became a Committee Member on the Association, although I did not fully understand at the time that I had formal role. The LWRA was great as a listening ear for people living on the Estate, but I am not sure how much it was able to hold the Estate Management Board ('EMB') and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Organisation (TMO) to account. At that time the EMB was responsible for the management of the Estate and the LWRA focused more on the social side of the community. We did good work, but I don't think that the Residents Association was as important then as it became when I was involved again later. I remember that we used to do a "summer fun day". There was a lovely guy called Keith Miles who chaired the Association at that time.
6. I cannot remember exactly when I left the LWRA but it became increasingly difficult for me to find the time to attend meetings and so I left sometime I think between 2005 and 2010. I had certainly left before 2011. I did not get back involved until September 2015.

We understand that you re-joined LWRA in 2015 after some time away from it. Can you confirm whether prior to 2015, LWRA was still active as a resident's association?

7. I am not sure what was happening with the LWRA between my two periods of involvement, but I understand that there was still a Residents Association on the Estate. I know that for some time during that period Christine Richer was the Chair, but that she became unwell. Although I attended the elections for the 2015/16 LWRA Committee in September 2015 I have no recollection of reports from the outgoing committee being presented. .

8. My decision to become involved with the LWRA for a second time was largely prompted by the work of Amanda Walters of the organisation West London Citizens. West London Citizens are a local activist group who had been knocking door to door on the Estate to identify 4 or 5 people who were willing to get more fully involved in the Residents Association with a view to using it as a vehicle to hold the Council and TMO to account. She encouraged us to see the opportunities that the Residents Association might offer to improve standards on the Estate and to raise issues of disrepair and living standards with RBKC and the TMO.
9. There were four of us who agreed to get involved by standing as officers of the committee. In some ways we thought of ourselves as a group. Our objectives were to strengthen the LWRA committee; to increase active participation in the LWRA so that we could become a stronger voice to represent the Estate to the Council and TMO where necessary; and to provide a more cohesive community by putting on social events and activities.
10. Much of the impetus to our decision to get involved came from an awareness that RBKC and the TMO were making plans for the future of the local area. They had begun talking about regeneration and had produced documents such as the Latimer Consolidated Local Plan. At the time the neighbouring Silchester Estate was being consulted regarding regeneration plans which I knew about because Latymer Community Church had been used as a venue for some of the meetings. The proposed regeneration was huge, they were going to change the whole street layout. I and other residents who I knew were all extremely suspicious of what they had planned and knew from experience of how RBKC approached these things that residents' views might not be listened to. I and other residents thought that Lancaster West Estate might be next on the Council's plans for regeneration so we thought it was important that the LWRA was strong so that residents' voices could be heard in any subsequent consultation. This was my motivation for standing for election to the committee in 2015.
11. In September 2015 the TMO called the Annual General Meeting of the Residents Association. As far as I am aware the only notice for this meeting was contained within a letter from the TMO inviting people to find out about a social enterprise initiative. Residents may therefore have not known there was a LWRA AGM

taking place. It is strange that the outgoing committee did not call the meeting as several of them wanted to remain on the committee and did indeed become members of the 2015/16 committee.

12. As an RA we got a small annual grant from the TMO, and there were funds already available when I joined the management committee in September 2015. We would carry out fund raising for specific events such as the seniors' Christmas party and other events and would apply for extra money from funds administered by our local Councillors for special events. This fundraising meant that a lot of the things that we did did not require us to draw down too much on our reserves. We did later apply for some money from the Peoples' Health Trust to do some specific community engagement work around health and wellbeing. This was from the end of 2016.
13. The number one issue for residents was always repairs. Getting them done usually required a lot of chasing. I personally didn't get too involved with repairs for individual residents' flats; Andrea and Claire did a lot of work helping residents to get things done. I was more involved in trying to push through repairs which affected the communal areas of the estate, which I became aware of generally through our committee meetings or on the Estate walkabouts with representatives from the TMO Neighbourhood Estate Office. It felt like the TMO was a black hole, communication would just disappear into them and never come out and it was always incredibly difficult to get things done. Often the only way to get a problem looked into or to get a reply was to simply give up trying to deal with the TMO directly and involve our local Councillor, Judith Blakeman, who they seemed to be more responsive to.
14. Members of the RA would walk the Estate on a regular basis, identifying maintenance jobs that needed carrying out. We would have a long list of outstanding repairs and achieving even one small item on the list would feel like a success. I can remember feeling that we had achieved something when we managed to get the TMO to put a bolt on a paladin bin store. From this my motto became: 'changing the Estate one bolt at a time'.
15. When I re-joined the LWRA there was some confusion about the status of the

differently. Quite simply, you paid 50p and that made you a member so you could vote at their AGM. The TMO actively encouraged residents to become members so lots of residents were.

19. The main problem was the culture of the TMO, and the organisation's attitude towards the people who actually lived in and used the properties that they managed. Some individuals such as Nicola Batholomew, the Neighbourhood Estate Management Team Leader, I felt really did try and help, but frankly it seemed that there was little support whenever support or services were needed from the TMO hub at Kensal Road. It felt like staff there simply didn't care.
20. An experience of my own that I think illustrates their institutional failings was when I got stuck in a lift in a TMO managed property on a Sunday night in September 2015. The lift broke down between floors, leaving me trapped inside. I pressed the alarm but all that happened was that a bell rang in the corridor outside. Fortunately I had my mobile phone with me and so I was able to call the out of hours TMO telephone number. I managed to reach someone and they told me that they would call an engineer out. They said they would call me back to confirm that someone was on their way. I waited for 40 minutes but no one came and no one called. I phoned back and a different person answered, who wasn't even able to find a record of my first call. You simply could not trust that they would follow up on any contact you had with them, even when you were stuck in an emergency as I was.
21. After this happened I used the TMO online form to submit a formal complaint. I never received a reply. Sadly this did not surprise me. There was always a total indifference to complaints of residents.
22. This was the case even when you raised issues of health and safety. In January 2016 I wrote to the TMO to complain about the condition of the community rooms where we were meeting. The rooms are below Barandon Walk and were used by various community groups including an Arabic supplementary school for children. The LWRA officers used to call it the dungeon because the rooms were in the basement and there was very little natural light. We had met in the same room on 3 December 2015 and there was water leaking through the ceiling. Janice Jones

who was a TMO Housing Officer based in the Neighbourhood Office on the Estate had attended the meeting and seen the problem, so I assumed that she would report the issue and ensure that the leak was dealt with.

23. When we used the room in January 2016, the leak had not been dealt with and the situation had worsened. Water was dripping through the ceiling, but the electricity was still on and the lights in use, creating an obvious health and safety risk. I was concerned that there was a risk of fire. I was appalled and emailed Sharon Baah of the TMO on 7 January. I have exhibited this email at **Exhibit JB/1**. Councillor Judith Blakeman also helped raise the issue and forwarded my concerns on to Robert Black the CEO of the TMO. In response to my email the TMO did then explain how they were dealing with the situation but I was not convinced that the rooms should be being used whilst water was still coming in. In my experience, the TMO were never proactive in dealing with issues, even when there were implications for Health and Safety. Even if they knew the room had a leak and why it was leaking they did not pay enough attention to the current health and safety implications.
24. Another example was insurance for events. The LWRA had always understood that RBKC/TMO insurance would cover any events that we held such as parties and community fun days. Since I had re-joined the committee we had already run a seniors Christmas party.
25. The issue only came to light because a member of the Silchester Estate Residents Association, who I knew through the Church, had raised it in relation to an activity that they were planning. Again Cllr Judith Blakeman helped us chase up the request for clarity regarding insurance cover and eventually we received a response from Fola Kafidiya-Oke who was the Head of Governance at the TMO. She informed us that the Resident Associations had never been covered by the TMO's own insurance.
26. The point is again that this was what it was like dealing with the TMO. It was clear to me that as part of our induction to the officers' roles within a Residents Association officers should have been briefed on important Health and Safety matters. It should not have been for us to have raised the question ourselves. The

nature of a Resident Association is that there is a turnover in committee membership over the years. This means that there is always a danger of assumptions being made on issues like insurance. If the TMO are encouraging community activities by Resident Associations, as they were, there needed to be a greater degree of support to ensure that these issues were brought to the awareness of committee members. Samantha De Haan, from the TMO's Community Engagement Team, had attended committee meetings where we had discussed the seniors' Christmas party and knew we were planning the Summer community fun day, but never raised the issue of insurance.

27. The LWRA was an official organisation, made up of people who have experience dealing with bureaucracy, who had some knowledge of the structure of the TMO (though I was never given a copy of the TMO's organisational chart despite asking for one on several occasions, the response was always that it was being updated/amended). The LWRA also benefited from the support of an elected Councillor, yet still it was very difficult for us to get responses to our emails, let alone prompt action to resolve a problem. If things were this difficult for us, ordinary residents had virtually no chance. It was clear that people got beaten down by the TMO's inertia. We ended up having to just pick our battles.

Fire Safety Complaints

Was it possible for residents to raise concerns or complaints over fire safety through LWRA?

If so can you outline how residents did this and how LWRA then took the concerns and complaints forward. If that was done through contact with individuals at RBKC or the TMO then, if you are able, please identify those individuals and their roles.

28. Residents were able to raise anything that they wanted with the LWRA, this included fire safety issues. Communication was mainly by email. The LWRA had its own gmail account that people were free to contact to raise any issues they wished. Posters were displayed on the Estate noticeboards giving phone and email contact details, as well as the dates of committee meetings. Annual General Meetings and General Meetings were also advertised.

From the list below, please identify any issues or issues about which residents of the Grenfell Tower or the Walkways raised concerns or complaints with LWRA. Insofar as you are able, please explain the nature of the complaints, which resident made the complaint to LWRA and when, who it was then reported to and the outcome so far as LWRA was aware:

Lifts;

29. On 9 February 2017 Peter Maddison, Director of Assets and Regeneration at the TMO, attended an LWRA general meeting to discuss future work. During the question and answer session following his presentation a resident from Grenfell Tower expressed a number of concerns about fire safety in Grenfell Tower and asked specifically about how the lifts were maintained, as they were breaking down very frequently. Peter Maddison agreed to provide evidence of monthly servicing and details of the recent breakdown history of the lifts. I have exhibited the email he sent me providing this information with the attachments at **Exhibit JB/2**

Flat front doors – including self---closing devices and smoke seals/ strips;

30. I have no recollection of discussion about these things.

Communal doors throughout the building – including self---closing devices and smoke seals/ strips;

31. In February 2017 the front door to Grenfell Tower fell off for a second time following the refurbishment, and narrowly missed injuring someone. I was concerned about this and raised the issue with Peter Maddison by email. Although he replied to other items I had raised in the same email, this issue was never addressed.
32. The same month the LWRA conducted a survey of residents to establish people's principal concerns on the estate. Four out of the twenty respondents expressed concerns about external doors, which were viewed as either: broken, never really working properly, or needing to be renovated.

Windows including window reveals and kitchen extractor fans;

33. I have no recollection of discussion about these things.

Fire safety signage;

34. I have no recollection of discussion about these things.

Escape routes;

35. At the LWRA meeting on 1 June 2017 a resident raised the issue of evacuation of disabled residents from the Walkways. There was discussion around the possibility of installing some sort of portable lift and the resident raising the matter passed information on to Nicola Bartholomew. From my recollection we also discussed the possibility that evacuation chairs might be positioned around the Walkways near to where disabled residents lived. The minutes from this meeting were never finalised because of the disruption caused by the fire.

Emergency lighting;

36. I have no recollection of discussion about these things. I am aware that at times external lighting has been poor due to lights not being maintained or repaired promptly.

Smoke control or ventilation systems;

37. I have no recollection of discussion about these things.

Smoke alarms.

38. I do not recall specific discussion of these issues. I know that the fire service carries out checks in people's homes, but cannot recall having discussed it through the LWRA.

During your time as secretary, was LWRA made aware of any fire safety checks/inspections carried out in Grenfell Tower or in the Walkways and, if so, did LWRA have any involvement in any such checks/inspections?

39. At a LWRA meeting on 9 June 2016 Nicola Bartholomew informed us that the TMO were undertaking a major project regarding storage on balconies. She explained that there were concerns about the health and safety implications of

excessive material causing potential fire risks.

Insofar as you have not been able to address the issue by answering an earlier question in this list, please outline any complaints made to LWRA about fire safety in Grenfell Tower. Please explain the nature of the complaints, whether LWRA passed them on to RBKC or the TMO (and if so to whom) and whether the response was made known to LWRA.

40. By the time I re-joined the LWRA in 2015 I understand that Grenfell Tower had a compact and so I am not sure that residents would have come to us with these complaints. Clare Dewing, and I think Andrea Newton, tried to reach out to some of the Compact leaders to discuss how we might work collaboratively, but I do not know the content of those discussions. A leader of the compact did come to the general meeting arranged by the LWRA in February 2017 at which Peter Maddison spoke, and he raised the issue of the Grenfell lift breakdowns and maintenance.

Fire Safety Advice

During your time as Secretary, was LWRA as an organisation aware of any fire safe advice provided by RBKC or the TMO to residents of Grenfell Tower and/or the Walkways before 14 June 2017?

If so, how was LWRA made aware of such advice and by whom?

41. I was not aware of any such fire safety advice.

During your time as Secretary, was LWRA made aware of any issues or difficulties as regards how this fire safety advice was communicated to residents? In particular was LWRA made aware of any provisions being made for such advice to be made available to residents with language or other special needs.

42. No

Statement of truth

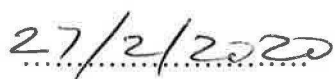
I believe that the facts stated in this statement are true.

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:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'J. Blanchflower', written over a dotted line.

Date:

A handwritten date '27/2/2020' written over a dotted line.

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

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Exhibit JB/1 – Email from Jackie Blanchflower to Sharon Baah regarding health & safety risk in the Community Room on Lancaster West Estate

Exhibit JB/2 – Email from Peter Madison to Jackie Blanchflower regarding lift maintenance

Jackie Blanchflower