

Witness statement of: Nicholas Coombe

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 19

Date of statement: 25 June 2020

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF NICHOLAS COOMBE

I, NICHOLAS COOMBE MBE will say as follows:

1. I give this statement following a request to the London Fire Brigade (“LFB”) from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (“GTI”) dated 27 April 2020. I have followed the question numbering as set out in the GTI’s request.
2. The documents that I have exhibited at the request of the GTI, and also those that I have referred to in order to assist my recollection of events or to assist the GTI by providing further information, are identified in the attached schedule of exhibits.

Role and Responsibilities

Question 1: Please provide details regarding your role/s in the LFB between 2009 to 2017

Question 2: Please provide the dates of when you held each rank and role. Also, please explain to whom you reported, the details of the department/s, groups and/or boards relevant to your role and, if you were responsible for any persons or departments, the names of those persons and/or the departments.

3. By way of general background, I have been in the London Fire Brigade for nearly 40 years, initially joining as an operational firefighter before moving to fire safety in

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1994. I have carried out many roles, including Inspecting Officer, head of Fire Safety Training, Enforcement Manager and Head of Fire Safety Policy.

4. Between 2009 and 2011 I held the rank of Group Manager and was the Head of Fire Safety Policy. I reported to Area Managers Christopher Crooks, John Bradbury and Lee Philpotts at various times. With the passage of time, I cannot recall the exact dates during which I reported to each of those Area Managers. I believe I was part of the Operations, Prevention and Response Department led by 3rd officer Dave Brown and reporting into Deputy Commissioner Rita Dexter, who was the Deputy Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning. I had a team of about 6 to 8 people reporting to me. I cannot recall all of their names but I recall working closely with Richard Nye and Chris Lloyd-Williams. I was responsible for the Department's own fire safety policies and the organisational policies for which fire safety was the lead, including PN 120 (Phased Evacuation of Office Buildings); PN 399 (fire investigation), PN 501 (Notification of incidents at petrol stations and attendance at incidents involving petrol), PN 509 (fire safety on LFEPA premises; PN 513 (premises information box systems), PN 784 (stations – notification of fire safety information); PN 795 (fluke volt alert 1AC-E voltstick and fluke TF-1000 electrical tester), PN 848 (charging for automatic fire alarms); PN932 (establishing formal FAMO call handling arrangements through the Connection Agreement).
5. Between 2011 and 2012, I was the temporary Deputy Head of Fire Safety, reporting to Lee Phillpotts. I was responsible for Delivery (the inspecting and enforcement arm of the Service), Policy, Fire Engineering, Transport and Administration. As Deputy Head, I was responsible for the day-to-day running of the department, which included 300 staff, with 8 people reporting directly to me.
6. I retired operationally in 2012 but was reemployed in a newly created role - Technical Support Officer, reporting to Assistant Commissioners Steve Turek, then Neil Orbell and, finally, Dan Daly. This role involved providing the Commissioner and LFB Senior Managers with Fire Safety technical and policy advice. My role was re-evaluated and expanded in 2016 and, under the title of Strategic Technical Advisor, I also became responsible for auditing the fire safety function. This

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involved assessing whether fire safety inspecting teams were adhering to policies and also evaluating the competence of inspecting officers. The purpose was to identify trends to feedback to learning and development. This function and the processes involved are governed by a series of policies, which I list below. I exhibit the versions of those policies in force at the time of the Grenfell Tower fire:

- FSRP800 (Audit & Performance Policy) (Exhibit NC/1);
 - FSIGN 801 (Vetting of Fire Safety Regulation Work) (Exhibit NC/2);
 - FSIGN 802 (Auditing the fire safety function) (Exhibit NC/3);
 - FSIGN 803 (Customer Service Questionnaire) (Exhibit NC/4);
 - FSIGN 804 (Customer Care Standards) (Exhibit NC/5);
 - FSIGN 805 (Fire Safety Regulation Performance Management) (Exhibit NC/6).
7. I was also responsible for providing managerial support, which involved managing budgets, department establishment and administrative support (i.e. ensuring vacancies were identified and filled and creating new roles as necessary). I had about 50 staff working for me. I held this role until 2017 when I was seconded to the Home Office and then the NFCC after the Grenfell Tower fire.
8. From 2004 to 2017, alongside my various roles at the LFB, I was the LFB national lead on Fire Safety. In that capacity, I represented LFB on a number of national working groups, including the RRO (The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005) working group to develop training packages and introduce the RRO to fire services nationally. I was also on the Audit and Enforcement working group, which was involved in developing a suite of guides and templates to assist fire services in understanding how to enforce the RRO, the current versions of which are listed on the CFA website. I exhibit the relevant webpage as Exhibit NC/7. I was also involved in writing technical guidance such as the CLG guide for residential care

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premises (Exhibit NC/8), the LACORS “Guidance on fire safety provisions for certain types of existing housing” (Exhibit NC/9) and the LGA’s Fire Safety in Purpose-Built Blocks of Flats Guide (“PBBF Guide”) (Exhibit NC/10). In 2010 I was the CFOA enforcement lead representing fire services on enforcement issues. This meant that whenever fire services or the CFOA received enquiries about enforcement issues, they were referred to me. That same year, I also became chair of the CFOA Enforcement group, which was the group that led on all fire safety issues nationally.

9. In January 2019, I was awarded an MBE in the New Year’s Honours List for Services to Local and National Fire Safety.

Question 4: Please provide details of your current role and to whom you report and for whom you are responsible in the LFB.

10. Following the Grenfell Tower Fire, the then Commissioner, Dany Cotton, offered my services to the Home Office to assist them with fire safety issues arising from the fire. This has since expanded to a national role and I am currently seconded to the NFCC on a full-time basis to lead the Building Safety Programme (BSP) Team. The BSP team was formally established on 1st March 2019 and is made up of members from a diverse range of FRSs around the country, each with their own area of expertise including fire safety and operational experience. The team provides support and technical advice to the Government’s Building Safety Programme, which was established in the wake of the Grenfell Tower Fire, and includes work to pursue the recommendations of Dame Judith Hackitt’s Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety. The BSP Team also engages closely with FRSs by representing their views and providing professional support and guidance on fire safety matters.
11. I lead a team of 9 people and our role is to help implement the new building safety regime and help with the changes to the fire safety order. This has involved responding to a number of key Government and industry consultations, which will form the basis of an improved building safety system. These include:

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- Raising the Bar (Interim Report): Improving competence, building a safer future – The Competence Steering Group;
- Call for Evidence: Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 – Home Office (1 August 2019);
- Building a Safer Future: Proposals for reform of the building safety regulatory system – MHCLG (1 August 2019);
- British Standard 8629: Code of Practice for the design, installation, commissioning & maintenance of evacuation systems for use by FRSs in buildings containing flats of maisonettes (21 July 2019);
- Call for Evidence: Technical review of Building Bulletin 100 – Design for fire safety in schools (31 May 2019) Call for Evidence: Technical Review of Approved Document B (1 March 2019).

Mass Evacuation Presentation

Question 4: At a meeting of Borough Commanders on 10 November 2011 [see agenda LFB00086509] you are listed as giving a presentation entitled, “Mass evacuation from high rise”. Please provide the following information:

a. Why ‘mass evacuation from high rise’ was chosen as a presentation topic for this meeting?

12. I have no recollection of attending this meeting or giving a presentation, which I note was scheduled to last only ten minutes. I have been shown an email chain, which I exhibit as Exhibit NC/11, which shows the relevant context and the impetus for the presentation. I note in particular that Peter Cowup had raised a concern regarding a particular high-rise incident involving the unnecessary evacuation of residents by the MPS. I have no recollection of this email correspondence or the issues discussed within it.

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- b. Why you were asked to give the presentation; did you have any particular experience in this area?*
- c. With reference to the meeting invite [LFB00086508], please confirm who was in attendance at the meeting;*
- d. A copy of the presentation*
- e. Your notes of the presentation and any notes/slides or handouts that were provided at the presentation;*
- f. Any feedback that you received following the presentation;*
- g. Any action points that arose from the presentation;*
- h. Whether you or, to your knowledge anyone else, gave the presentation at any other meeting*

13. I am unable to answer these questions as I have no recollection of ever discussing, preparing or giving this presentation. Beyond the Agenda, the meeting invite and the email correspondence exhibited as Exhibit NC/11, I have not been able to locate any documentation relating to the scheduled presentation.

Meeting on 8 November 2012

Question 5: *In an email dated 14 September 2015 [LFB00001610] Janice Wray (of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation) references a meeting that she recalls took place on 8 November 2012 and was attended by Andy Jack, Nick Comery, Carl Stokes and yourself amongst others. At this meeting it is Janice Wray's recollection that the following issues were discussed: "LFB position on whether self-closers were required on existing flat doors" and "what would constitute a "nominally fire rated door" - - what standards were being applied". Please explain the following:*

- a) Did you attend this meeting on 8 November 2012?*

14. The meeting sounds familiar but I do not recollect whether I attended it. I note that the email chain referenced by the GTI (LFB00001610) includes my email to Rebecca

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Burton on 2 November 2015, in which I say that I think the meeting in 2012 took place but that I do not think I attended it.

b) Please provide any notes of the meeting or references made to it;

15. I have not been able to locate any notes or records of the meeting, beyond the email correspondence referred to by the GTI and an email from Andy Jack on 16 August 2013 about the meeting in November 2012, which I exhibit as Exhibit NC/12. In response to Andy Jack's email, I suggested that the LFB position, as established in that meeting, be communicated to all Team Leaders/Group Managers through Call Point, the Fire Safety newsletter, which was generally circulated monthly, and reflected in an update of FSIGNS 420 (Purpose Built Blocks of Flats) and 421 (Sheltered Housing). I exhibit the relevant Call Point issue as Exhibit NC/13. I exhibit the updated FSIGN 420 as Exhibit NC/14 (see section 5 re: flat front doors) and note that this was the version in force at the time of the Grenfell Tower Fire. I exhibit its predecessor as Exhibit NC/15 (see section 4 re: flat front doors). I exhibit the updated FSIGN 421 as Exhibit NC/16 (see section 6 re: flat front doors) and its predecessor as Exhibit NC/17 (see section 5 re: flat front doors). For the sake of completeness, I note that FSIGN 421 was updated and incorporated within FSIGN 422 (Care Homes and Specialised Housing) in December 2016 and this was the version in force at the time of the Grenfell Tower fire. I exhibit FSIGN 422 as Exhibit NC/18.

c) What is your recollection of any advice given by LFB regarding self-closing doors and what would constitute a "nominally fire rated door" and the standards that applied?

16. As I cannot recall being present at the meeting, I cannot comment on the advice that was given.

17. However, having been involved in the writing of the LGA's PBBF Guide (Exhibit NC/10), I can say in general terms that any advice regarding flat front doors is that the self-closers are the most important component. See, for example, page 25 and

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page 39, paragraph 29.2 of the PBBF Guide. This explains why I made the comment to Rebecca Burton in my email to her regarding Janice Wray's understanding of the advice given by LFB: "I doubt whether Andy [Jack] or Nick [Comery] would have accepted this."

18. A nominal fire door is a door that satisfied the standard applicable to fire-resisting doors at the time of construction of the building or manufacture of the door, is a good fit in its frame and in good condition. However, the PBBF Guide sets out the circumstances when these should be upgraded (pages 97 to 100).

Correspondence with Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (Australia)

Question 6: On 9 June 2015 you contacted Robert Purcell, Acting Deputy Chief Officer of the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (Australia), with an offer to discuss stay put [LFB00024196]. On the same day, Mr Purcell emailed you enquiring about the LFB's 'stay put' policy. He referred to the recent high rise fire in Melbourne caused by "poor housekeeping and non-compliant cladding on the outside of the building " and noted that " this type of fire is not isolated to Melbourne as several fires have occurred across the world recently as a result of this cladding including in China and Dubai," and concluded that he would be happy to provide any information of a similar nature that would assist you. You replied the following day with a description of the stay put policy. Please explain the following:

- a) Who put you in touch with Robert Purcell? Why would a query of this nature have been directed to you?*

19. I have been shown email correspondence between Emma Francis, Chris O'Connor and others, which I exhibit as Exhibit NC/19, which shows that Emma Francis was Robert Purcell's initial point of contact at the LFB. I have not been able to locate any further email correspondence but I believe that Chris O'Connor is likely to have forwarded the email to Steve Turek. I believe that I would then have picked it up as I had access to his email inbox and routinely dealt with any technical queries that were raised.

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b) Did you forward the email to anyone within the LFB or pass on the information it contained? If yes, to whom? If no, why not?

20. . I do not believe that I did because I was only answering questions on stay put.

c) What was the document “with lots of useful information” that you referred to in your email? Did you forward this to Robert Purcell? Please provide a copy of this document

21. I believe I was referring to the LGA’s Fire Safety in Purpose-Built Blocks of Flats Guide, which I have already exhibited as Exhibit NC/10.

d) Did you receive a reply to your email? If so, please provide a copy

22. As far as I am aware, I did not receive a reply.

e) Did you have any further correspondence with Robert Purcell in relation to the issues raised in these emails? Please provide copies of all correspondence you had with Robert Purcell in relation to these matters.

23. No.

f) Did you have any further correspondence with anyone else, either internally in LFB or externally, in relation to international cladding fires?

24. Not as far as I am aware.

High Rise Forum Meeting

Question 7: The minutes of the High Rise Forum meeting on 27 November 2016 [LFB00000260], which you chaired, record at page two that the “Chair confirmed that the LFB had made changes to the way it responds to high rise incidents after taken [sic]

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Shirley Towers into account. He said that there was now a lot more information sharing between UK fire and rescue services.”

a) What were the changes to which you referred that LFB had made as a result of the Shirley Towers fire?

25. I believe that I was referring to the review of LFB’s high rise policy and particularly the introduction of cable cutters, which was one of the key learning points from Shirley Towers.

External Cladding

Question 8: *On 7 December 2016 you e-mailed Colin Todd, Managing Director of C.S.Todd & Associates Ltd [LFB00001174] regarding the next update of PAS 79 and “the section on assisting external cladding systems” as you were “trying to put something together to write to London Boroughs about doing this when reviewing the FRA.” On 21 December 2016, Colin Todd replied to you setting out a proposal put together with Brian Martin and Steve Daws.*

a) What prompted you to email Colin Todd in relation to this issue?

26. I have known Colin Todd for many years in both a professional and personal capacity. We met many years ago and have worked on numerous projects together, including the PBBF Guide and the development of PAS 79, which is the approved document for fire risk assessments. We have become friends over the years and talk regularly in person, on the telephone and by email.

27. I believe that the Shepherd’s Court fire was the prompt for this particular conversation and I understood that Colin was working on an update to PAS 79, which I thought would include a reference to EWS (external wall systems) along the same lines as what is contained in the PBBF Guide. Section 72 of the PBBF alerts the reader to the hazards of combustible cladding but notes that assistance is required from specialists to determine whether the external walls are satisfactory. It is my understanding, based on my involvement in fire safety policy and guidance at a local

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and national level, as well as my practical experience, that the EWS is not covered by the RRO for residential premises. Rather, any health and safety issues associated with the EWS are covered by the Housing Act. However, if there is an awareness or concern on the part of a Responsible Person that the EWS poses a risk to the common parts of the premises, then they should be considered in the fire risk assessment. This is what I wanted to communicate to London Boroughs and I was asking for Colin's assistance with the wording, so that it aligned with the review of PAS 79, which I thought he was working on. As it transpired, that review never took place at that time but it is now being carried out. I am on the steering group for that review and, in the light of the changes to the RRO, the FRA will now need to evidence that the RP has been provided with information to show that the EWS is compliant with the applicable standards.

b) What is the document you refer to that you were 'trying to put together...for London Boroughs?' Did you write this document? If so, was it sent out? If not, why not? Please provide a copy of this document. If it was drafted but not sent out, please provide a draft copy.

28. I believe this was the letter that was sent to all London Boroughs by Dan Daly in May 2017 and that this has previously been provided to the GTI [LFB00000224]. I believe that I was involved in the drafting of this letter but have not been able to find any email correspondence to show the extent of my involvement.

c) What did you do with the information that you received from Colin Todd? Did you forward it to anyone else or take any further action?

29. I cannot find any evidence to show that I did anything with the information. Colin Todd's email reflected my own understanding of the position at the time, namely that the RRO did not cover the EWS but that if there was an identified risk posed by external cladding, it was advisable that this be included in the fire risk assessment. This was the advice circulated in the letter to London Boroughs in April 2017.

High Rise Buildings in London Report

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Question 9: *In an e-mail dated 11 November 2016 to Dave Brown [LFB00089022] you attached a document entitled 'High Rise Buildings in London,' (LFB00089022.)*

a) Did you write this report?

30. Yes.

b) Who commissioned you to do so?

31. AC Dave Brown asked me to write it. I have not been able to locate any email further email correspondence about the circumstances of the drafting of the report. AC Brown's office was on the same floor as my desk and I was regularly called in to see him to speak about fire safety issues. I believe that I would have been asked to go and see him and that he would have asked me to prepare the report.

c) What was your understanding of the purpose of the report?

32. Again, I have not been able to locate any email correspondence about the circumstances surrounding the drafting of this report or the purpose for it. I believe that AC Brown would have briefed me about it but I do not recall who the report was for or what its purpose was, save that I needed to prepare a report demonstrating the changing landscape of London.

d) Who was the report presented to?

33. I did not present the report and do not who it was presented to. I have not been able to find anything in my email correspondence to assist.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I confirm that I am willing for the statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and be published on the Inquiry website, save for redactions applied by the Inquiry.

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Signed: 

Print name: Nicholas Coombe

Date: 25 June 2020

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