

**WITNESS STATEMENT**

Criminal Procedure Rules, r27.2; Criminal Justice Act 1967, s.9; Magistrates' Courts Act 1980, s.5b

Statement of: COOMBE, NICK

Age if under 18: OVER 18 (if over 18 insert 'over 18')

Occupation: FIRE SAFETY REGULATION, LFB

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This statement (consisting of 5 page(s) each signed by me) is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and I make it knowing that, if it is tendered in evidence, I shall be liable to prosecution if I have wilfully stated in it anything which I know to be false, or do not believe to be true.

Signature: N COOMBE

Date: 07/10/2020

Tick if witness evidence is visually recorded ☐ (supply witness details on rear)

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This statement is being given to the Grenfell Investigation Team in relation to my roles within the London Fire Brigade (LFB) and my recollections of attendance at the BSi 7th Annual Fire Safety Conference in 2014.

In this statement I will refer to the following people. Dany COTTON, Roy WILSHERE, Ron DOBSON, Sir Martin MOORE-BICK and Arnold TARLING

On Wednesday 9th September I met with pc Richard GREENGRASS and CIV David BRATHWAITE at the LFB Headquarters in London.

I joined the London Fire Brigade in 1981 and retired in 2012 as a Temporary Deputy Assistant Commissioner then came back to the LFB as a Strategic Technical Advisor, as my specialism is in fire safety, as I joined fire safety in 1994. I then worked in that Strategic Technical Advisor role until the Grenfell Tower fire happened and I was then seconded to the Home Office to assist in helping after the event and now I'm seconded to the National Fire Chiefs Council as the lead for the Building Safety Team. The NFCC is the voice of the Fire and Rescue Service, it has a number of committees one of which is the Protection Committee, which deals with fire safety and I am the Vice Chair of that committee. I therefore lead the building safety programme, which means that I lead on anything post Grenfell, that is going to

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change the landscape going forward including all of the remediation that is going on with the other blocks.

As far a training around high rise is concerned, operationally, I had very, very basic training in my career as a firefighter, although I attended numerous high rise fires, when based in places like Brixton, Peckham and Old Kent Road. I have never been to Grenfell Tower, either operationally or non-operationally. As a senior officer, after the Lakanal House fire, I got some training on the operational stuff around the high rise back in 2010 / 2011.

In November 2014, I attended the BSi (British Standards Institute) 7th Annual Conference at Drummond Gate, Pimlico and at the time I was the Strategic Technical Advisor to the Assistant Commissioner here at LFB headquarters. At that time, my main role was to advise the Assistant Commissioner and sometimes the Commissioner, who at the time was Ron DOBSON, on any kind of fire safety technical matters. The circumstances surrounding my attendance at this conference were twofold; mainly CPD (Continuous Professional Development), because the BSi is the main standards committee that produces standards around building safety and I would have wanted to listen to what was going on and because I spoke at that conference in relation to Primary Authority Partnerships, which were new to FRS in 2014.

A Primary Authority Partnership is for example a large company (for want of a better word) entering into a partnership with one enforcing authority, for example a fire and rescue authority for the fire safety order or the local authority for trading standards. So, as the fire service, I would look at them as a company and their policies and procedures, to make sure they comply, but also to ensure that any advice is not challenged in other parts of the country. An example nationally would be Toys R Us were having a lot of trouble with people stealing and getting away through fire exit doors. They wanted to have a system whereby all of the fire exit doors would be locked magnetically, so that if the alarm sounded, the doors would open, but if the alarm wasn't sounding, they would be permanently locked, magnetically, not physically. What they wanted was a fire service to approve that and because they are such a big company to ensure that they are safe, but also to ensure they don't have to do things 45 different ways because of the 45 different fire and rescue services there are. It's statute and there is legislations around it. We don't physically inspect their premises in other areas, so they would outline the concept and we would say that's fine on this particular area. Toys R Us all work on the same model, so if it works in one, it would work in

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the others across the country. We don't confer with other fire and rescue services, but once we have made a decision, there is a register showing where these decisions are made. For example if London are going to visit a Toys R Us as an inspection regime, they go onto the primary authority register and note where there the primary authorities are and don't question those areas unless issues are identified during an inspection. We don't have to get things approved nationally and Fire and Rescue Services are quite risk averse, so unless we know it's going to work, we don't do it.

As far as the conference was concerned, I gave a talk around the advantages of primary authorities, which was for fire and rescue services and businesses themselves. It was titled 'Primary Authority Scheme what does it mean to you?' I tried to recollect, what happened then, so I found the programme and I know I there were speakers in the afternoon that I didn't hear, so I must have left after lunch. I believe one of my colleagues, Adreena gave a speech, but I cannot recall any other colleagues. I know I wasn't present at Arnold TARLING'S presentation, as I know him and I know I wasn't present for that. I don't recall seeing any presentations around cladding, but I am aware of the fire at Roubaix in France, having seen news reports, social media and through groups I belong to, because external wall fires are very, very visual, you tend to get to hear about them. Within the LFB we don't tend to sit around and talk about them, but as a fire professional, they're interesting to us, but at the time, we hadn't had any of those in country of significance.

I am aware of the fire in Greenock Court in the 90's, but it didn't look anything like The Torch in Dubai, or Grenfell, so the key thing for us is as a fire and rescue service, we are not consulted on the building stage around the external wall system and we believed our fire safety order didn't cover the external walls in residential buildings. So although we might have known about them, we didn't think it was our issue. At design stage or construction stage, we are not allowed to say anything about it because it's a building control issue and rarely do we get information on external walls then when it's built, it still doesn't come under us under our fire safety legislation, so in a sense, we can't do anything about it, so that was our thinking at the time. The Torch is a building in Dubai which had similar cladding to Grenfell and had that spectacular (I hate using that word) fire from floor to ceiling or floor to roof. It's still rare, even though there has been a number around the world, it's not an everyday occurrence, whereas London Fire Brigade or fire and rescue services go to fires in flats every single day and they don't all go like that.

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I'm sure our fire engineering department have conducted some CPD's and probably used images from the one in France and the one in Dubai, to talk about these kind of fires, but for me as an enforcing officer, it wasn't covered by my legislation, so it was very difficult for me to influence anything about that.

I wasn't given any information to take away, but they would have been made available and it's usually provided on a stick, or available on a site on a later date. I would not have seen them, even though I didn't stay the whole day and I wouldn't have given feedback on any of the presentations I saw, unless I saw something like a new product, I might feed that back into one of our teams. I can't think of anything on that day that I would have come back and said something about.

There are a number of fire safety conferences each year, run by various organisations, including the BSi, the IFE (Institute of Fire Engineers), FPA (Fire Protection Association) and I tend to attend near enough all of them and I tend to be asked to speak at quite a few of them, but I don't. I can't recall any presentations pre-Grenfell around cladding fires that I thought were really interesting, although that isn't to say that there haven't been images in presentations, but none of the presentations have suggested cladding fires, we have a problem. It hasn't been a significant as that.

The IFE is a membership professional body, with a range of memberships and the FPA is more of an organisation that provides training and advice. All chartered fire engineers and fire engineers will be registered with the IFE, through the engineering council and then there is a range of memberships from student up to fellows. I am a Fellow of the institute. IFE is international, worldwide professional body with branches all around the world. I would have seen some of their conferences and would have seen images of some of their fires, but I don't ever remember that kind of presentation that was solely about cladding fires. Possibly talking about tall buildings and what they did, but the presentation would have then moved on to something else in a tall building, like smoke control. I don't ever remember pre Grenfell, going to a presentation anywhere solely around cladding fires.

In the past, I have given feedback to departments in the LFB and the wider fire and rescue service around risk and matters I felt needed dissemination, such as incidents around door releases failing in the lock position, issues with smoke control systems and matters such as these. I would have disseminated these information circulations through something called FINDS messages, which was the old way similar to

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sending an e-mail nationally, or through a system called WORKPLACE which is a kind of internal social media used by the NFCC and LFB to pass out information. But what we now have is National Operational Learning, which is predominantly around operational procedures. However, there have been some fire safety circulations through this system and what we are trying to do now, moving forward, is to have National Protection Guidance and National Protection Learning, which is an offset of NOG (National Operational Guidance) and NOL (National Operational Learning), but solely for protection. This means that where there are issues that need to be circulated wider than our own service, there are facilities to do this. How successful the FINDS system is, however, I do not know, as it is not my job to check if another service has picked that information up, or done anything with it and that is where the loop is fairly loose at the moment. If there was information, such as an operational risk, that I felt LFB crews needed to know, we have Ops policy through Ops News. We submit information through Ops News, however, the issue there is someone else who runs that department decides what goes into Ops News and when, as there is a queueing system for information and they did not want to do was overload information to firefighters. Ops News only came out 3 or 4 times a year, so they wanted to produce hard hitting information. Post Grenfell there has been a lot more information being sent out, but pre Grenfell, I know we sent out information to the LFB.

Having knowledge of cladding fires, through seeing The Torch fire and the one in France, I was aware of the dangers of cladding and potential risks, but naively now, I assumed that our building regulations wouldn't have allowed that stuff on buildings in the UK. Also we hadn't really had any fires similar to The Torch and the one in France and there have been others similar, but I am expecting the building regulations in this country are robust enough to ensure those kind of materials do not end up on our buildings. I now know that that's wrong, but prior to Grenfell, I genuinely believed that, although we had issues with compartmentation, we did not have an issue with, what we call B4, external walls in this country.

Prior to the Grenfell Tower fire, I was involved in the post investigation at Lakanal House, although I did not attend the incident and I was called to look at the sister blocks, as they were exactly the same as Lakanal House and we had to do something about Marie Curie House, so I assisted with decanting that block and other things and following that, I was involved quite a bit with the investigation afterwards. I was the Group Manager in charge of fire safety policy and I was still in that role in 2011, when the

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coroners' recommendations came out, meaning that I was responsible for implementing the recommendations that affected my area of fire safety. We know that the spandrel panels were involved in the fire at Lakanall House and at the time we wrote to CLG (Communities and Local Government) and we received a reply stating the external walls were not part of the fire safety order. Although they were involved, it was nothing like Grenfell Tower, in that sense, as the main cause of fire spread at Lakanall House was internally, rather than externally. I cannot recall all of the recommendations or policy changes that I was involved in, but I can obtain that information at a later date, if required. Although our biggest policy change, post Lakanall was our attention to purpose built blocks of flats. Prior to Lakanall, as an inspecting regime, we didn't go into things much, as we only had the common parts, all of the risk was behind the front door and post Lakanall we realised we needed to step up a bit more and I think that was across the whole of the fire and rescue service. We then had the memorandum of understanding and the LACoRS Guide, which said who takes the lead in which type of premises, which we hadn't had before, so that gave us a bit more direction. This would have been under our audit policy, which is in the FSIGN 200 series now (Audit), but I can't remember if we changed to F Signs by then, as we had a massive restructure of our policies when I was the Group Manager. The policies used to be just numbers and you could never find anything, so we restructured things into what we called F Signs. So FSIGN 200 series is about audit enforcement, FSIGN 300 series is about the enforcement, so things sit nicely now.

I was about when Farynor came in, but it's an IT based system, but I would have had some input in a focus group, about the kind of things we would like it to do, but it's more of an IT driven exercise. It's a database, but does it do everything you want it to do? No it definitely doesn't. Is it intuitive enough to change quickly enough? Definitely not. In hindsight, we would have asked it to do a lot more things than it did at the beginning and probably still now, because you are always learning and our problem is, we don't control the system. This system is controlled by a provider and like most things if you want to add something, it's more money, so there is a cost to benefit consideration. What we need in the LFB is for the number of database systems that we have need to talk to each other better. They are better now, whereas years ago and definitely at the time of Lakanal, they didn't and they were all in isolation, unless you could access them all and had the permissions to access them all, there was information all over the place.

As mentioned, I am seconded to the NFCC and I have been, since 2017, post the Grenfell Tower fire, since 2017. I am not part of the Grenfell investigation, but I am involved in trying to ensure it doesn't

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happen again and with all of the buildings that have got the same problems that we now know. I was put into this role by Roy WILSHERE, who is the chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, after Dany COTTON sent me to the Home Office and was here for at least a year and because I have a national reference of fire safety anyway, Roy WILSHERE advised that I may as well do the role of NFCC, from March this year, I have been paid from the NFCC, but I am still on the LFB's books. I was funded by the LFB, but now the NFCC pay them back, so there has been some crossover. Initially I was dealing with the other buildings, as I mentioned, that we now know have got problems and although I am not of the expert panel that was set up, but I provide the technical advice to Roy WILSHERE, who sits on the panel. So any of the advice notes that have come out of this, I have had some input and I also help write the simultaneous evacuation guidance, I chaired that panel and now there are changes being proposed to the fire safety order and there is a Joint Regulators Group which contains HSE, Fire Service and Local Authority Building Control and I am there to help the Home Office with changes to the fire safety order. For example, a consultation is out now on the Phase 1 recommendations and some of the Phase 1 recommendations are not as Sir Martin MOORE-BICK wrote, word for word, but we are going to meet the spirit of it and some of those changes have been influenced by my role from a protection point of view. These things will be put into legislation, with the plan that there could be feedback from operational crews. I am only looking at the Phase 1 recommendations that are around protection, such as those that suggest the owner or manager of a high rise building should do X, whereas those that are recommendations to Fire and Rescue Service or the recommendations to the government, I won't have anything to do with. I am basically dealing with those recommendations that have to be implemented in law and that Sir Martin MOORE-BICK said every owner and manager by law should send all of the details about external wall systems and or put forward information about evacuation plans, I am dealing with those specific recommendations, not the full Phase 1 recommendations. So all the work that the LFB are doing to improve, is nothing to do with me.

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