

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF YVONNE BIRCH

I, YVONNE BIRCH, WILL SAY AS FOLLOWS:-

1. I make this statement voluntarily to assist the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. I understand that I may be called to give evidence to the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry in relation to the matters raised in the Public Inquiry's letter of 5 June 2018. I am committed to supporting the Inquiry team in any way I can.
2. The matters in this statement cover the period during which I worked for the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation ("TMO"). This statement is to be read in conjunction with my earlier statement to the Inquiry, dated 18 March 2019.

Background

3. At the time of the fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017, I was the Executive Director of People, Performance and Governance at the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation ("TMO").
4. I joined the TMO in 2009 and left the Organisation on 4 March 2018. Reporting to me was the Head of Resident Engagement, Janet Edwards, the Head of Human Resources, Jenny Lester, the Head of Communications, Peter Griffiths, the Company Secretary, Sinead McQuillan and the Assistant Director of Strategy and Performance, Stuart Hill.

Grenfell Tower's original design, construction and composition

5. I have no knowledge of the design, construction and composition of Grenfell Tower on completion in 1974.

6. I also have no knowledge of the relevant contemporaneous building regulations, fire regulations, other legislation, guidance and industry practice in place at the time that the Tower was constructed and it follows that I have no knowledge of whether Grenfell Tower as originally constructed complied with these.

Subsequent modifications prior to the 2012-2016 refurbishment

7. I have no knowledge of any modifications made to Grenfell Tower between its construction and the refurbishment project of 2012 to 2016, other than that I am aware that there was a fire door replacement programme throughout the RBKC's stock, including at Grenfell Tower. However I was only aware of this programme through my place in the Executive Team and I had no responsibility or oversight of this project.

Modifications to the building between 2012 and 2016

8. I am aware that a refurbishment project took place at Grenfell Tower between 2012 and 2016. I visited the Tower a handful of times during this period to show Board members the new flats.
9. I have no particular knowledge of the modifications made to the inside or the exterior of the Tower. My knowledge of the project came from the general updates we received on the project during Executive Team meetings. I had no specific role in the project, nor was I ever allocated any project related tasks following these meetings. I only attended one resident engagement meeting in relation to the project, which concerned the placement of the Heating Interface Units. I recall that the MP for this area was also in attendance at this meeting.

The fire and safety measures within Grenfell Tower at 14 June 2017

10. I have no knowledge of the fire safety measures in place at Grenfell Tower at the time of the fire. It would not have been my job to know this type of information. It follows that I have no knowledge of whether these fire safety measures were compliant with relevant building regulations, fire regulations, British Standards and other legislation, guidance and industry practice.

11. I am aware that the TMO had a Fire Risk Assessment programme that included Grenfell Tower and would have been ongoing during the refurbishment project.
12. We would occasionally discuss FRAs in general at Executive Team meetings however I do not recall ever reviewing an actual risk assessment document, with the exception perhaps of the FRA for Adair Tower. I believe we may have discussed this particular FRA at Executive Team level following the fire at Adair Tower.
13. I have no knowledge of the ways in which Grenfell Tower was intended to be resistant to fire spread or what was assumed about the resistance of Grenfell Tower in relation to fire spread.

Inspections

14. I have no specific knowledge of any fire and other relevant inspections carried out during the 2012-2016 renovations at Grenfell Tower, however I do recall being made aware at Executive Team meetings that the London Fire Brigade had attended the site on a number of occasions. As stated earlier, the FRA programme was also ongoing throughout this time.

Governance/Management

15. I have been asked to set out my knowledge and understanding of any other fires that occurred at Grenfell Tower or other buildings under the authority of RBKC.
16. The only fire I can recall in the stock was the fire at Adair Tower. I may have been involved in obtaining information about the fire for the purposes of keeping the Board informed. I also recall that after the fire we reviewed the Emergency Plan at Executive level together with the RBKC. Because the two organisations' emergency plans overlapped, we wanted to ensure that everyone involved understood their respective roles and responsibilities.

Communication with residents

17. I have been asked to set out my knowledge of what systems there were for Grenfell Tower residents to express their concerns and views about fire safety.

18. The TMO distinguished between complaints and concerns. Complaints were expressions of dissatisfaction with a service provided and were resolved through a formal three-stage complaints procedure.
19. A specific complaint that I can recall came from a resident called Edward Daffarn, who felt that he was bullied into giving Rydon contractors access to his flat to carry out works during the refurbishment. This complaint went through all three stages of the complaints procedure however it was not upheld.
20. By contrast, if a resident was concerned about something unrelated to a service provided, this would not typically go through the complaints procedure. Instead, the concern would be referred to the correct person within the TMO who had the relevant information. By way of example, I recall that some residents raised concerns during the Grenfell Tower refurbishment project about the positioning of the new Heating Interface Units.
21. I also recall that some residents made complaints following the power surges at Grenfell Tower in 2013. However, these surges were investigated and it was found that the surges were not the TMO's fault. I recall that the TMO nevertheless offered compensation for losses suffered by residents.
22. I have been asked if I have any knowledge of concerns, warnings and other statements expressed about the fire safety of Grenfell Tower by its residents or any other person before, during or after the 2012-2016 renovations.
23. The only concern raised I can recall which related to fire safety arose in 2016 when National Grid gas installed a new gas riser at Grenfell Tower. This required them to place gas pipes in the stairwell and residents understandably raised concerns about this arrangement. My understanding is that the TMO escalated these concerns to National Grid. I was not allocated this matter to deal with and the detail is better sourced elsewhere however I am aware that Janice Wray investigated the issue thoroughly. We very much understood the concerns raised by residents.

Fire advice given to residents between 2012 and 14 June 2017

24. I have been asked what knowledge I have of the advice given to residents about fire precautions.
25. I never gave fire advice to residents as it was not my role to do so, however I was aware that the fire strategy communicated to residents in the TMO's high-rise blocks was to "Stay Put." My understanding is that this advice was the general advice for high rise blocks from the London Fire Brigade.

I confirm this statement to be true to the best of my knowledge and belief

Signed:

y Bunt

Dated:

13/8/2019