

## **THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY**

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### **OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF G10**

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1. This opening statement is made on behalf of the deceased, survivors, families and victims in the group known as G10.
2. We want this inquiry not to lose sight of and to focus on 1) refurbishment of and cladding of the building and 2) inadequacy of fire safety measures, gross mismanagement of the building by the TMO and 3) the treatment of ordinary citizens. There may well be criticism of the Fire Fighters' capabilities, but we must not lose sight of the primary issues.
3. Not only was there the tragedy of death, but also let us not forget that many people were injured both physically and mentally and an entire community became homeless from this building. There are many important questions that arise.
4. Needless to say, it is absolutely imperative that this inquiry identifies the failures that caused the loss of life and terrible harm to many other lives. Equally important, all those responsible must be held to account.
5. The role of Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation [KCTMO] is significant to this inquiry– it had an accepted role and was funded by the local authority, in keeping with the recognition of the right to proper housing for all, which included the provision of social housing for ordinary people.
6. The failure of KCTMO to engage with the residents of Grenfell Tower and action their concerns about safety of the building exemplifies this erosion of the state's social obligation to the residents. In March 2018, Shah Ahmed, the chair of the leaseholders association asked

that RBKC conduct a full health and safety audit of Grenfell Tower and delivered a full dossier to RBKC just two weeks before the fire.

7. The failure of the KTMO to engage with the residents of Grenfell Tower continued in aftermath of the fire as was borne out in the first tenants' meeting after the fire.

8. There is no inherent problem with tower blocks – they are the foundation of many strong neighbourhoods and communities. People enjoy living in them. Grenfell Tower was part of a strong and vibrant community in Lancaster West Estate and North Kensington.

9. The problem is poorly maintained tower blocks.

10. We want to be clear that it is important not to stigmatise social housing or the people who live in social housing. Social housing is necessary for the provision of accommodation in this country and the notion that, the residents of Grenfell Tower deserved less and they were lesser citizens because they lived in social housing to be debunked.

11. This stigma, which undoubtedly exists, reflects recent political attitudes towards council housing and council tenants.

12. In 1975, council housing housed more than a third of the population. This was a major achievement of post-war reconstruction and improvement of pre-war housing conditions. It benefited the lives of many people.

13. By the 1980s a rise in home ownership was promoted by the introduction of the tenant's right to buy council housing, which was of itself unproblematic. However, the sale of council housing was accompanied by the simultaneous imposition of serious restrictions on the ability of councils to replenish their stock.

14. That process continued with the forced privatisation of much council housing across the country and the increased commodification of housing generally. Owning one's home was

no longer enough – one had to also get onto the “housing ladder.” A home has become not only a place in which to live but an investment opportunity, transfer of public housing stock into private hands, and simultaneously making the remaining council housing less well supported and appealing as an option.

15. Of course, the inquiry will know that this stereotype does not match the reality of Grenfell Tower. The Inquiry knows that the occupants of Grenfell Tower and the estate of which it was part were mixed and as varied as the population of the great city in which they lived. A significant number of people owned their own homes.

16. But the perception was there: council housing is for those who have failed in life. People who need to be managed, not embraced or admired. Desperate people without the agency to improve their lives: the destitute, disenfranchised, vulnerable and voiceless. Descriptions not of the people themselves, but of what society has done to them.

17. This attitude and stereotyping is what allowed the cost cutting and the use of deadly materials to become normalised.

18. It also led to some appalling and false media reporting after the event which exemplified the prejudice against those some people were willing to believe live in council tower blocks and social housing.

19. It is imperative that the inquiry does not even inadvertently confirm the stereotypes around council housing, even when expressing sympathy with victims of the fire. They were not helpless, they just weren't helped.

20. In concrete terms the inquiry can also contribute to minimising the impact of socio economic disadvantage by recommending that s.1 of the Equality Act 2010 is finally brought into force (the “public sector socio economic duty”). Had it been in force at the time of the refurbishment it would have required the public bodies involved in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower to explain *at the time* why it was considered acceptable to recklessly cut costs

when refurbishing a publicly owned building in the richest borough in the sixth richest country in the world.

21. The inquiry's legacy can and should go beyond a focus on fire safety in tower blocks, essential as that is. The inquiry stands in a unique and unprecedented position to recommend that the right to adequate housing is enshrined in our law. It is a fact that the residents' concerns about the building in which they lived were not reflected in their legal rights. This must change.

22. More than anything the Grenfell Tower disaster was a profound breach of the universal human right to an adequate home.

23. An "adequate home" is one that is not only in a state of repair but also where the physical safety of occupants is guaranteed. There can be little doubt that had the residents of Grenfell Tower been able to directly enforce their right to an adequate home in court then at least some of the fire risks that now we know were present on 14 June 2017 would have been identified and rectified before they came to pass with such awful consequences.

24. Additionally, it is important to remember that the people who live in a tower block are not members of a homogenous group. They are reflective of the wider society and hard-working people who make a valuable contribution to our society. They included security guards, cleaners, junior doctors, architects, university students, make-up artists, hairdressers, taxi drivers, hotel workers, artists and the retired who had worked all their lives - That was the beauty of this 'vertical village'.

25. The spirit of the Notting Hill Carnival following the fire and when going through 999 calls on the night – the sense of community is clear. They came together, that community sought refuge in the block to the end.

26. Yes, it is appropriate for this community to be described as a "vertical village", a safe place which was not only home but where people were looking out for each other – that is

even clear from the 999 calls made on the night. Many people were trying to come through it and help each other.

27. The term “community” is used with the positive and not negative connotations of synonymous with “disenfranchised”. The concept of a vertical village we suggest is apt because it simply means what we remember from a bygone age of an old fashioned “community”

28. Grenfell tower was a mirror of our society – particularly in our great capital city. It is not about one particular ethnic group or class group – Grenfell tower fire is a tragedy that has affected a wide range of ordinary people.

29. The big question that we want this inquiry to at least consider is did the fact that the residents were predominantly poorer members of the borough, contribute to the incident.

30. The residents of Grenfell Tower and the Lancaster West Estate were left isolated by the central government after the fire.

31. It should also not be forgotten that many people are still not housed and remain in temporary accommodation battling with the authorities to be appropriately rehoused – they are still being ignored.

32. Additionally, many of the residents and survivors of the fire are continue to suffer the mental anguish and effects of post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the horrors of the night and the aftermath of the fire.

33. Our clients - victims residents, the bereaved and survivors, are dignified people who have maintained this dignity, despite their tragedy.

34. They are seeking answers from this inquiry which will involve the asking of difficult questions, but the asking of such questions is the very nature of the beast and purpose of the public inquiry.

35. It is important to recognise that this fire occurred at a time when there are issues with legal aid cuts, a time when there is an assault on rights to even the enforcement of rights in any event. The contract between the individual and the state is based upon enforceable rights, the method of enforcement has been lost to many less wealthy individuals.

36. The very risk of fire is a very emotive thing for everyone – that is why this tragedy hit home for so many people, up and down this country – there was nothing the residents could do. The tower was meant to be building regulation compliant but it so obviously was not.

37. This incident raises issues across the country on every building where this such cladding is being used. Doubts are now expressed about safety.

38. As part of its legacy the Inquiry must seek to ensure that a **zero-risk** approach to fire safety in tower blocks prevails.

39. Some of the residents on the top floors of Grenfell Tower had disabilities. Why were persons with disability, which affected their mobility housed on the top floors, where in the event of fire there were no means of evacuation in the event the lifts failed. Additionally, in terms of fire-fighting response, there were no fire hoses long enough to extend from the ground to fight fires on the upper floors.

40. Important questions to consider are why the refurbishment was needed and why was it conducted without the consultation and input of the residents of Grenfell Tower. Do not misunderstand what we say about this. Everyone is entitled to a more aesthetically pleasing environment to live in. However, the question must be asked whether the refurbishment was simply about beautifying of the tower, it not being lost that the building in its previous form may have been considered an eyesore to some of the wealthier residents in this borough. It is

a legitimate question to ask whether the money spent on the tower was not for the residents but for more wealthy people living in the borough, so that the tower was more aesthetically pleasing to them. This is not to suggest, that poor people should live in ugly blocks, but the point is beautifying at what cost? Were the materials used second rate? Yes, – everyone deserves to live in a nice home, but the way it was refurbished shows that it was not done with the welfare of the residents in mind.

41. One of our clients was retired, elderly and blind. He lived on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, which was the 8<sup>th</sup> floor before the refurbishment, and had lived there for 36 years. He could work his way around prior to the refurbishment. However, there was no consultation with him about his needs, signage or allowances for him and his disability as a part of the process of the refurbishment. On the night of the fire when his daughter in law rang 999 she was told to tell him to get out if he could. He could not as it was. Let us reflect upon what that means, he was condemned to die.

42. Another of our clients has said that the refurbishment took the building from being an ‘ugly and safe council block’ to a “death trap that looked like a pretty private block”.

43. Were cheaper cladding and less safe material used? If so, who took those decisions and why?

44. We would expect the inquiry to investigate whether the Fire Service lacked adequate resources and direction when they attended this fire. Have cuts to the fire service, or deregulation contributed to what happened on 14 June 2017?

45. Take the following namely the National Fire Training Centre, Call Centre and Building Control – all of which were examples of the effects of deregulation which played out on the night.

46. If it be subsequently shown to be true that deregulation had an impact and contributed to the Grenfell Fire then everyone can understand that, it adds to the outrage, of the voiceless,

their frustration and its foreseeability. People loved living at Grenfell Tower there and they were entitled to feel, and to be, safe there.

47. Fire fighters do an important job, and often put themselves at serious risk in doing it. But if we are going to expect them to put their lives on the line, then the public can expect them to be trained and organized to a high standard. The public can also expect that landlords use proper building materials, and that residents are kept as safe as possible. There will always be accidents involving fire but we can and must do more to minimise these risks. Every effort should be made to ensure that deaths by fires in these blocks can be avoided.

48. The public and our clients have the right to know that these deaths and loss have not been in vain. They want this so that at the very least they can know that lessons have been learned. Out of this tragedy some good may occur and hopefully prevent others suffering the pain they have suffered.

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18 May 2018