

Witness Statement of: Hélène Hartley

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Exhibits:

Date of statement: 30 May 2018

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HELENE HARTLEY

I, HELENE HARTLEY, will say as follows:

1. This statement is my account of events that took place on 14th June 2017. I make this statement for the purposes of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. I wish to make a further statement as part of Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Background

2. I live at [REDACTED] Hurstway Walk. I am a part-leaseholder through a shared ownership scheme with Notting Hill Housing Trust. I have lived here since 2000. It is a three bedroom maisonette on two floors, which is on the ground and first floor, with garages underneath.
3. I live with my son who is now [REDACTED] years old. He was [REDACTED] years old at the time of the fire. He was a student at [REDACTED] at the time of the fire, which is very close to Grenfell Tower.
4. I work as a [REDACTED].

Proximity to Grenfell Tower

5. Our flat backs onto a communal garden and all of my windows look out onto the garden and I have a view of the South and West sides of Grenfell Tower. We live about halfway along the first block on Hurstway Walk.
6. The Tower is a significant presence in the area and it feels close to my property.
7. There are matters that I would like to say about the background and culture of the council as well as the wider response and aftermath of the fire. This statement however concerns the night of the fire only and I will write separately about the wider issues and the awful impact this fire has had on me and my family as part of Phase 2.

14 June

8. On the night of Tuesday 13th June 2017, my son and I were both at home. I went to sleep at about midnight. At 1.15am I was woken by voices in the communal garden outside my window. I checked the time on my phone and I assumed it might be people coming back from or leaving after a get together for Ramadan.
9. I quickly went to the lavatory and got back into bed and closed my eyes, but then realised I could still hear ladies' voices in the garden and that they were closer to my window than would be normal if they were just walking to or from the communal door. Their voices did not sound calm and they were starting to sound shrill.
10. I then noticed that I could hear what I thought was a very loud alarm or a number of loud alarms at a distance. The noise was echoing around the garden. I got up and pulled my curtain aside to see what was happening. Three women were stood on the garden path opposite my window and they

were looking up at the Tower to my left. One shouted out in panic ‘What do we do?’

11. I looked left towards the Tower and I saw an orange hue coming from behind the top half of the Tower. I could see it was a fire and I realised from the amount of light there was that something serious was happening. I was alarmed by what I could see.

12. I went into my son’s room and he was still fast asleep. I quickly got dressed and went out of the flat and down the communal corridor and onto Grenfell Walk.

13. It was about 1.25am by now and there were already three or four people out there, looking up at the Tower. It looked as though there was a fire on the side of the Tower facing the school, which is the North side. It seemed already to be more than fire coming out of one flat’s windows. The fire seemed to be at least three floors high. The fire looked out of control and as though it was spreading up the building. I was very concerned about what I could see and for the people inside the Tower.

14. I went back to my flat because I was worried my son might wake up alone and become anxious because I was not there, or because of what he could see or hear. I checked on him but he was still asleep.

15. I felt so worried by what I had seen and I felt that I had to go back out to find out what was happening. After some hesitation I decided to wake my son up. I told him, as calmly as I could, that there was a fire in the Tower, and I asked whether he wanted to come outside with me to find out what was happening. At first he said no and closed his eyes again, but a second later he put on a jumper and shoes and followed me out.

16. It was about 1.40am. There were now maybe a dozen people on Grenfell Walk outside our communal door, looking up at the Tower in a state of utter shock and fear. The orange glow and flames on the side facing the

school had already increased significantly and there was smoke above the Tower coming from the far side from us, which is the side facing Grenfell Road. This confirmed to me that the fire was spreading uncontrolledly.

17. There were a lot more people gathered at the far end of Grenfell Walk, so we went over to see what they were looking at. The top half and the right-hand side of the East side of the Tower was covered in flames.
18. My son and I were horrified by the extent of the fire and the ferociousness of the flames. I was shocked by the extent of the surface of the building already covered in flames. It was horrific.
19. I felt powerless to help. I could not believe the size of the fire and how violent it looked. There were blue flames jetting out from half way down the side. I thought the blue flames might be gas.
20. There was a glass front on the lower levels of the Tower and I saw a row of firefighters on the landing of the lobby. They were lined up. They appeared to be waiting for something. Their backs were turned to us but they seemed to be composed.
21. I was surprised that I could not see anyone coming out of the building or standing on the green having come out. I wondered where everybody was. I did not at that stage think that they were dead, because the fire seemed to be on the exterior of the building, but it seemed strange that people were not pouring out of the building and gathering outside.
22. I tried to make my son come back to our end of the walkway. It felt both dangerous and insensitive to be staring at the Tower. I think we were in utter shock and bewildered by what we could see just meters away. My son insisted on staying a while longer, but after about 10 minutes we went back to our end. We carried on watching from our end of the walkway, crossing back once or twice.

23. At first, many flats in the Tower did not have any lights on, but gradually the lights started turning on. People were standing at their windows looking out at us. I realised that they may have no idea what was happening on the outside of the Tower, or if they did know there was a fire they may not know how bad it was on the other side of the building. I felt terrified for them. People beneath the Tower and on Grenfell Walk called up to the people in the windows to tell them there was a fire. However the faces of residents stayed at their windows.
24. I saw and heard people in the Tower calling out again and again from their windows for help. People near me called back up and told them that the firemen knew they were there and were coming. Some people were asking the residents in the windows what flats they were in.
25. I could see people in the Tower waving towels from their windows and flashing lights to signal their presence. They clearly felt trapped in their homes now. They must have been scared. They knew that they needed help but they were not getting it.
26. My son and I were dumbstruck. There was nothing we could do to help. We did not know what to advise people to do, other than to assure them that the fire brigade were doing what they could to help. I felt powerless, shocked and distraught. It was devastating.
27. At some stage the police arrived and kept us back, away from the end of the walkway closest to the Tower. There were more police downstairs, moving people back onto the path around the playground.
28. The heat from the Tower was getting very intense. You could feel it on your skin.
29. I tried taking my son back into the flat. I was worried about his physical and emotional safety. I felt uncomfortable staring at these people's desperate torment and not being able to do anything to help them. My son could not stop watching, and to be frank neither could I. I think this was

the shock and horror of what was right in front of us. We were standing with neighbours, including some staff from his school and could see people trapped inside the Tower.

30. At this stage the West side of the Tower was not on fire, and neither was most of the South side, but the flames were starting to show on the corner of the South side and burning cladding was starting to burst and fall off the walls of the Tower like small fireworks and fiery rain.
31. Eventually the police moved everyone off Grenfell Walk and moved us back into Hurstway Walk. Everyone went into the block, but most people stayed in the communal corridor by the door, talking and trying to see through the windows. The flames were moving round onto the South side above us. Occasionally people tried opening the door onto Grenfell Walk, but the police were outside and stopped people going out.
32. I left my son in the corridor with people he knew and went into the flat and looked at the Tower from my bedroom window. The flames were coming round the corner of the West side, covering the whole height of the building.
33. At about 2.30am, I decided that we needed to get ready in case we had to leave the flat. The fire was spreading and I was worried falling debris might spread the fire towards the Walkways and that there was the possibility the Tower could collapse. I went to get my son and told him to start packing what he needed.
34. I took photographs of the Tower from my bedroom window. The flames were licking around the corner of the South side and engulfing the first two columns of windows along the whole height of the building. I have already given the police the photographs I took on the night.

35. I started filming. At 2.42am, as I was filming, the police banged at my door very loudly. By the time I got to the door, they were banging on the next door calling out to evacuate the building.
36. My son and I grabbed our bags and followed others out of the corridor, along the next corridor and onto Bramley Road. We crossed the road by the tube station where we started meeting neighbours, including neighbours from Grenfell Walk who had been evacuated just before us. There were police outside my building but there were no fire engines or ambulance at that stage.
37. At about 3am I saw a troop of about nine or 12 riot police jog past us in formation, on Bramley Road, coming from Lancaster Road side and going under the railway bridge towards Whitchurch Road. I wondered what their purpose was. They had helmets with visors and plastic shields up in position shielding their bodies. I could not understand why they were there. There was no riot, no bad behaviour or any crowd problem. People had done what the police had asked of them and were still just gazing incredulously and heartbroken. It felt inappropriate for them to be there.
38. By this stage, the fire was spreading across both the East and West side of the Tower, but we could still see people at their windows on the South side, waving towels and flashing lights.
39. Bit by bit, the faces of people in the windows disappeared and the lights in their flats went out. It was chilling to see people disappearing from the windows. It was incredibly upsetting to watch.
40. The fire crept around the East corner and gnawed away at the façade as though it were cigarette paper. At the top right-hand corner of the South side, I could still see a face at a window, then two faces, and then three faces. Then the lights dimmed in the room as it filled with smoke. I then saw one face disappear, then the second face disappear, and then the third face disappear. I knew that I was watching people dying there and then.

41. By 3.30am, the flames had eaten through the outer walls and the insides of the whole of left half of the South side and the fire was working its way across what remained of the South side, advancing fast at the top. There was just one light left on in the tower, under the middle of the right-hand side. As far as I could make out, there could have been no one left alive in the tower at that stage.
42. We started walking to our friend's house on [REDACTED], on the other side of the Tower. We saw that the fire had penetrated right into the core of the building from top to bottom. There were red and white flames deep inside the Tower, and black smoke billowing out from the top, going straight up into the sky as there was no breeze.
43. There were police dotted about preventing access to any paths towards the Tower. I saw only one fire engine on Bramley Road, by the tube station before I left, and one ambulance. There was no way for the emergency services to get any access to the tower from the South and West and North-west, the route we took on foot. The only road access from the south is Whitchurch Road, but that had been closed for weeks: the road sign said it was for "emergency" gas works.
44. We stayed with my friend that night on [REDACTED]. We stayed up all night, shocked and shaken, watching the fire ravage through the core of the Tower, from her bedroom window and on television.
45. I sent texts to my brother, my son's father and my boyfriend, reassuring them we were both fine before they woke to the news. I waited until 6am to catch my mother before she switched on the breakfast news.
46. Later my son and I decided that we would try to get back to our flat and see if we could get in, to pick up some clothes and schoolbooks. We left about 11.30am. There was a policeman on Bramley Road entrance, and we

asked if we could get into our flat. He said he did not know whether or not we were allowed in so he didn't let us go past him.

47. We went around the building through the garden and found another police officer. He said he did not know whether we were allowed to go in either. He said that if we could manage to get access to the door then we were allowed in. We got access through the garden door and picked up some things. Then we went out to Latimer Road and my son's father picked up my son, while I went to my mother's flat.

Aftermath

48. My son's school was closed for two days. It reopened on the Friday, at the [REDACTED]. The day the school reopened was the first time we started to find out who had survived.
49. Over the next week it emerged that my son had known four of the children who had died in the Tower: one who he would walk to school with, one who he sat next to in some lessons, one of the girls from a debate club that he was in, and another one who he knew less well.
50. The fire has had an enormous impact on me and my son. We were evacuated from our homes. We went back after five or six days. We had no hot water or gas, but it was better than being away from home. We did not have any hot water for months, and there was never any information about when this would be sorted out.
51. After the fire the entrances to my building were cordoned off, there was a constant police presence, and there were distraught people everywhere. We had no access roads to get to our flat, no tubes were running from the underground station: no one could get to us and we could not get to anyone. I still have no front door and no intercom.

52. About a month after the fire everything became too much [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. I was overwhelmed by all the practical issues, like getting the gas and council tax suspended. We could only shower at the sports centre. Even getting food was difficult, because there was no bus home from the supermarket. I was exhausted. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

53. I knew a couple of people by face from the Tower, but no one closely. There are lots of former Grenfell Walk residents whose paths I have always crossed since my son was a baby, and I now have no idea where they are. It is like my village, which has seen me and my son grow up, has gone.

54. I would like the Inquiry to establish the physical causes of every stage of the fire and its spreading. I would also like it to establish how such bad decisions were made at every level, in the face of pre-existing evidence of the dangers of those decisions. I want to see proof that this bad decision-making was allowed, and how it will be prevented from happening again. I believe it is partly to do with government funding and industry standards, but also a certain ineptitude in local government – and I think we need to investigate the attitude of the council to council property. There seems to be a long history of bad decision-making, which prioritises cost and legal risk over quality of life

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:



Dated:

30 / 5 / 18

Helene Hartley