

**Witness Statement of: Sarah Mensah**

**No. of statement: 1**

**Exhibits: 3**

**Date of statement: 5 May 2018**

## **GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF SARAH MENSAH**

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I, **SARAH MENSAH**, will say as follows:

#### Background

1. I was born on [REDACTED]. I am a Core Participant to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and make this statement about the events of 13 and 14 June 2017. I do wish to make a further statement to address issues falling within Phase 2 of the Inquiry.
2. This statement is about the night of the fire. There are other things I would like to say about the history with the TMO and the RBKC Council and further background but I do understand this is not the focus of the Inquiry right now. I understand that I will be able to talk about these issues in Phase 2 of the Inquiry.
3. I was on maternity leave on the night of the fire but prior to my maternity leave I was working as a customer advisor [REDACTED]
4. I lived in Flat [REDACTED] in Testerton Walk. I have lived there all my life. The flat is on the first floor of Testerton Walk. When you look outside the balcony it is facing Whitchurch Road. Barandon Walk is on my left and Hurstway walk to the right.
5. I lived in the flat with my dad, Andrew Mensah [REDACTED] my husband, Michael Kumi [REDACTED] and my two daughters [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. My father has lived in that flat since 1978. My dad is a leaseholder of the flat having exercised the right to buy.

6. I felt so safe around Lancaster West Estate. I grew up there and know the area and community really well. People around the estate watched me grow up and there was a real sense of community. We would leave the door to our flat open and when my mum was alive, people around the estate would help her with her shopping from Latimer Road station. Everyone was so friendly.
7. There was a very strong Moroccan community in the area and most of my friends from the walkways had friends or family who lived in the Tower. Many of my customers at work lived in the Tower and, unless I was carrying out a transaction for them, would know them by face only. However, they were so friendly and quite often, we would walk back together and put the world to rights.

#### Gas works

8. On the night of the fire, there were gas works on Bramley Road just before you would turn right to go down Whitchurch Road. If you were driving from Shepherd's Bush up to Bramley Road you would be unable to continue down Bramley Road to turn right at Whitchurch Road. Instead you would have to reverse and go all the way round to access the Tower which would have taken at least 10 to 15 minutes depending on the time of day. Those driving could only access the rest of Bramley Road (by Latimer Road Station) and Whitchurch Road from the Ladbroke Grove side. On the night of the fire, I coincidentally thought about how a fire truck would get down Whitchurch Road as it is such a narrow road. The gas works were only supposed to be happening for four weeks but it ended up going on for six to eight weeks. I remember this because I made a complaint to the council as my car got scratched three times when bigger cars were trying to drive Whitchurch road when they shouldn't have.

#### 14 June 2017

9. My mum passed away on 8 June 2017 and so my sister and her two children were staying at the flat at the time of the fire. I had taken my niece to school and then took my daughter [REDACTED] to nursery. I went shopping to buy food and drinks and had been cooking later that day. Me and my family all had dinner together.
10. At around 11pm, I put my youngest daughter to bed. I then lay in bed dozing on and off until around 1am when I turned over and saw a shadow by the window. It was my

husband just staring out of the window. Our bedroom window looks out to Whitchurch road. I asked him what was going on. He said he could see four or five fire trucks on Whitchurch Road trying to drive round the corner. He said there were too many cars parked around the bend so the trucks couldn't get passed. My husband said to me 'somethings wrong'. He looked on his phone and then just said 'Grenfell Tower is on fire'. I was half asleep and just responded saying 'don't be stupid.' I just couldn't believe that the Tower could be on fire. I thought he must have been joking.

11. My husband could hear more fire engines and just said to me 'no seriously. Grenfell tower is on fire'. I grabbed my phone and google searched 'Grenfell tower twitter.' I started looking on twitter and could see that my husband was right. Grenfell Tower was on fire. I was shocked to see on Twitter that there was a fire in the Tower but I didn't know how serious it was at this point.
12. I jumped out of bed and looked out of my bedroom window. From my window, I could see about four of five fire trucks and people running up and down Whitchurch Road. I thought it might be quite a bad fire as there were so many trucks outside but I was not too worried as it wasn't I thought the fire would be contained to that building. I could see people running towards baseline studios and from there directing the fire trucks to try and get them round the bend as they were stuck. It took about 10 minutes for all the trucks to get around the bend of Whitchurch Road. I have marked where the fire engines were stuck in exhibit **SM/1**.
13. I then rushed upstairs so I could have a look outside the balcony to see what was going on. My balcony faces Whitchurch Road and can see the entrance of Hurstway Walk but I can't see Grenfell Tower from my balcony. When I opened the balcony door and looked out, I could see people stood outside their balcony on Hurstway Walk and Barandon Walk. I heard someone shouting 'fire, fire!' My neighbour at Flat [REDACTED] had only moved in a couple of months and so I didn't know his name. He was on the balcony next to me and he told me that someone in Barandon Walk who was closer to Grenfell Tower could see the fire and that the floors above the third floor were on fire.
14. At this point, although I was concerned, I still wasn't too worried and didn't think it was that serious as I thought the fire could be contained and just put out quickly by

the firemen. I never imagined that anyone would die from the fire. My next door neighbour and other neighbours in my walkway seemed somewhat relaxed too.

15. I went into the room where my sister was sleeping and told her that we needed to get out of the flat because Grenfell Tower was on fire. She just told me to 'shut up' and closed the door to go back to sleep. She didn't believe me or at least didn't think it was serious.
16. I then went into my dad's room and woke him up. I tried to stay calm but told him that there was a fire at Grenfell Tower and that if it was important, then I would wake him up again. He was half asleep when I told him this so he just mumbled and stayed in bed asleep.
17. I continued to check twitter for live updates and around 1.20am I went back downstairs to my bedroom. My husband was becoming more concerned, which alarmed me. He said this could be a bad fire as there were so many fire trucks and that we needed to get out of the flat. I went back upstairs and woke up my dad, sister and her kids. I told them to put warmer clothes on as we needed to leave the flat. I started putting on my robe and slippers. I put some clothes on [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] whilst they were still asleep. I was becoming quite anxious at the thought of those in the Tower. I kept thinking of the amount of little children who live there, all my customers and my friends' who had links to the Tower. I knew it was a big incident but still thought we would be coming back to our flat shortly.
18. My neighbour, [REDACTED] who lives in Testerton Walk knocked on our front door. My husband answered and I was stood next to him. [REDACTED] explained that smoke was coming into our walkway from the side nearest to the Tower and told us that everyone needs to get out of their flats. I looked outside the flat into the walkway corridor but we couldn't see that far down. I was started to panic and wonder if the fire was going to spread or if the Tower was going to collapse onto our walkway. I was worried about my and my family's safety. I thought we should prepare to be out for the night now just incase. I went back inside and changed into warmer clothes. I put [REDACTED] in a snow suit and told my father to put on warmer clothes.
19. I had stopped checking twitter so not sure of the time but I am guessing it was just before 2am that we all left the flat. All I had on me was my phone and the keys to the

flat and car. I still believed the fire would soon be under control.

20. To get to the exit, we had to walk down two flights of stairs. We exited by the ramp facing Hurstway Walk. As soon as I walked out and looked over to my right, I could see the Tower. There were large orange and red flames on the corner of the North-West facade. I couldn't count the floor numbers where the fire had started from as the bottom of the Tower was blocked by Grenfell Walk and there were trees further hindering the view but it looked like it had started just above the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. There were people screaming for help. I have never seen a fire like this before, and when I think of a fire I think about a gas cooker and what the fire looks like on that. This was so much fiercer. This was the moment I realised how serious the fire was. I was in complete and utter shock. I was speechless. It looked like a horror film. I have marked where I was stood watching the fire at **SM/2**.
21. There were at least 15 other families I knew from the walkways stood outside on the ramp and more families just kept coming out to find out what was going on. I just couldn't understand why the Tower was burning so much and so quickly, especially given how big the flats were. We had only been out about 10 minutes and the fire had spread up and across the top of the west façade of the Tower and then arched over the top like a C shape. It looked like someone had thrown oil on it because of how much it had gone up. It looked like the fire was erupting. It just kept going and going and going up the Tower. I stood there shocked as I watched it surround the Tower. I kept trying to reassure what had happened kept intruding my attempt to rest. I kept hearing the screams to God and seeing the distraught fireman. It was haunting.
22. Over the next few days I was getting news of those who didn't make it out of the Tower, including about 15 of my customers [REDACTED] who didn't make it out. When I saw their faces on the internet I felt broken. It was horrible to see this and devastating knowing that I would never see them again. I had recently lost my mum and so my grief was heightened by all the other lives lost.
23. The Friday after the fire was the one week anniversary of my mum's death and in our culture we are supposed to have a ceremony and then a three day funeral service. My house was always the meeting point. Friends and family would also use it as their base and often stay over. My brother already flown in from New York and had no

where to stay. I was trying to coordinate everyone but it was overwhelming. News of the fire had also hit international news so friends and family were continuously calling to see if we were alive. I didn't know what to do or say to reassure them because I already had so much on and felt so overwhelmed but because they were elders, I was not able to just shut them off. I had to respect what they were asking and continuously relive the night.

24. We stayed in the Premier Inn until 31 July 2017. The whole time I felt in limbo. I was barely eating because of the stress from the fire and having to live in the hotel. Because I wasn't eating, I couldn't produce any breast milk for my baby who was three and a half months old at the time. There were no facilities to cook and the hotel wouldn't let us have a fridge in the room to store baby milk. In the end, we had to move to another Hotel, which is where we stayed until being placed in temporary accommodation on 23 March 2018. My mum's funeral ended up being delayed until 27 July 2017. There were delays because we used the local church and residents who died in the Tower were having funerals too. I remember having a conversation with the funeral directors about where the funeral procession would start from. Although I wanted it from mum's home, it didn't seem right with the aftermath of the fire. However, it was a private affair and I did not want to start it outside the hotel, on a busy, main street in Hammersmith. I reluctantly told the funeral directors that it would have to be from our flat. I got off the phone and went into the lift in the hotel. I just broke down in tears thinking how terrible this whole situation was. On the day of mum's funeral, the burnt out Tower was an awful sight and a constant reminder that we may also still be in danger. We still didn't know if it was likely to collapse. The stress of this , was so overwhelming. I was grieving for my mum and the people in the Tower but having to relive the memory of that night because I couldn't be rude to my elders was too much. It was the worst day of my life.

25. For the first four months I was unable to eat, despite trying to force myself so I could feed my baby. However, over the past 8 months , I have gone completely the other way. I comfort eat all of the time and have put on three and a half stone since the fire. I used to just sit in the hotel room and order junk food or binge eat. I barely went downstairs to the canteen because I don't like seeing other people and having to put on a smile or brave face. I stayed up most of the night just eating rubbish. Since moving

into temporary accommodation in March, this has got a little bit better because I am able to cook at home but I have no passion anymore and still often find myself binge eating. Since the fire, I barely sleep at all. I just stay awake thinking about what happened that night and what I saw. I have an overwhelming feeling of guilt which I can't shift. I have nightmares most nights about the fire. There is one recurring nightmare which is of the firefighter that I saw by the school gate crying. I can't help but think what I could have done to console him and worry about him so much. I feel so bad and guilty because I couldn't console him. I think he wanted to do more and was so upset and traumatised by this. I hope he's ok.

26. My migraines have also become a lot more frequent. When I get them, which is most days, I also feel really sick. I don't like being in rooms with bright lighting and need to usually lie in a dark room when I can. I started taking strong medication for my migraines just after the fire but I have now tried to stop taking them as I don't like taking medication. I am looking into herbal remedies and mindfulness, which I am hoping might help.
27. I was diagnosed with alopecia when I was at university around 12 years ago. My hair was growing back before the fire but because of the stress since the fire, my condition has got a lot worse and I have now lost most of my hair. I have to wear a wig which doesn't help with my confidence.
28. Wherever I go, I immediately look for the fire exits. In the hotel we were staying in, I knew exactly where the closest fire exits were. I read the fire safety maps at the back of the hotel door which I previously would not have paid any attention to. We were right by the stairs in case of a fire.
29. After the fire, I went to visit my GP who referred me for counselling. From around August or September 2017, I have had counselling once a week. I had never had counselling before. I still struggled with day to day functioning and around November 2017, I was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. My counselling sessions were subsequently increased to twice a week. Since March 2018, I have started a new programme which includes EMDR. I am finding this programme beneficial and hope that it starts to improve my symptoms which still permeate every aspect of my life.
30. From the start of 2018 I began experiencing an overwhelming feeling of guilt. I feel

guilty that I was unable to save anyone in the fire. I feel guilty that I haven't been able to be the mum and wife I was prior to the fire. I also feel that I have let my mum down by not being able to follow our usual traditions.

31. Following the fire, my eldest daughter, [REDACTED] started drawing fires at home and at nursery quite often. She was also waking up in the night having had nightmares about the fire coming to get her. I felt guilty that I wasn't able to protect her from the horrors of that night and it worried me that she might be as traumatised as I felt. I tried to reassure her but I knew because of my own trauma that I wasn't able to give her all she needed. I spoke to my counsellor who referred her to Parkside Health to see a counsellor. She attended a few sessions and has now been discharged on the reassurance that, in view of the circumstances, she is doing ok.
32. I feel like my relationship with my youngest daughter, [REDACTED] is not as good as it should be. I have an overwhelming feeling of guilt with her too. I feel so bad because all the while we were in the hotels, I was unable to make her a decent meal. All I wanted to do was cook her good food and not to feed her processed baby food. When I found out the canteen had mashed potato I couldn't wait to feed it to her. I feel like I have failed her as a mum.
33. My father is usually a very calm and chirpy man but since the fire he has been stressed. He tries to smile through it but I know he is frustrated and doesn't like to talk about his feelings.
34. I was on maternity leave on the night of the fire. I was supposed to return to work on 8 March 2018 but the fire has had a dramatic impact on my health and ability to continue as before. I have been signed off work and have been given unpaid leave for over a year. The ongoing impact to my life and health has been huge. Also, part of my job is to talk to people and working around the Ladbroke Grove area just makes it really hard to go back. Not being able to return to work has meant we have had to dip into our savings. It has put a financial strain on the family and meant that we can no longer provide for the children like we did before. One of my daughters wanted to start swimming lessons and gymnastics but we cannot afford it. It is an awful feeling and makes me feel even more like I am failing my children.
35. I go back to our flat at least once a week. I don't want to but I have to go and clear out



my mums stuff from the flat because in Ghana the tradition is to get rid of everything within a year of someone's death. I don't think it is good for me to go back to the flat and I don't want to go back there permanently. Whenever I go back to the area, I can still smell the burning skin. When I leave there, it quite often hits me that we no longer have a place to call home.

36. Overall, I just feel a lot less sociable then I was before the fire. I go out a lot less and just feel so alone. Quite often, I can be inside for a whole week without going outside. I used to be able to control my emotions but now I can't and I just don't know when I am going to have a somewhat ok day and when I'm going to have a bad day. It's a horrible feeling living in limbo.

37. The memory and horror of that night has stayed with me and it has impacted me and my family in so many ways. You don't think you will ever see anything like this in your life and I am still trying to make sense of it so to explain how it has affected us is nearly impossible to put into words. There is much I want to say about the impact of the fire and the aftermath but I understand this is to be dealt with in Phase

#### **Statement of truth**

I confirm that this statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief. I confirm that I am willing for the statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and published on the Inquiry's web site.

Signed:   
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Dated: 5 May 2018