

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: HOWSON, CHRISTINE

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

Occupation: CONTROL STAFF

This statement (consisting of 7 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: C. HOWSON

Date: 27/10/2017

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

This statement is my account of the Grenfell Tower fire that took place on Wednesday 14th June 2017.

I joined the London Fire Brigade in 2004 taking up the role of a Control Room Officer (CRO). Prior to joining I had previous experience in business related work. When I started with the London Fire Brigade in 2004 I had ten weeks of initial training. Over the ten weeks of training we had weekly assessments to test our knowledge and understanding of the procedures and systems. After our initial training, we were put straight into the Control Room to answer calls. I was mentored by more experienced staff for a number of tours. Having somebody working with me and monitoring my work was to ensure I was suitable for the role. Following several mentored shifts, my mentor had a verbal conversation with my manager as to my suitability. From that point onwards I was answering calls myself and mobilising units as a full trained Control Room Officer. I was initially based out of our command centre in the Isle of Dogs, London. This shut down a number of years ago where we moved to our current Command Centre in Merton, South West London.

I will now describe our control room setup. We have a minimum of eleven staff on duty for a shift. There is one Operations Manager (OM) who is in charge of the control room. This person is supported by two Assistant Operations Managers (AOM). The remaining staff members are Control Room Officers (CRO). As a Control Room Officer you undertake numerous roles within the control room. My main role is being

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a call taker picking up 999 calls, admin calls and switchboard calls, however I may occasionally be the designated radio operator or paging operator. A radio operator sits on their own bank of desks and monitors the fire brigade channels. A Pager Operator manages operational officers during certain incidents, which can include paging senior officers if there is a serious incident. I also organise standbys at stations. This is reviewing staffing levels to ensure every station has the right staff and skills required on a shift.

Control Room Officers usually switch between these roles and it would be their allocated duty for that tour. If there is an overflow of calls, an alarm sounds in the building with a tannoy message saying 'recall'. This is to notify any personnel on breaks that there is an overflow of calls and they are to return to the control room to assist. I also know that the West Midlands Fire Service can take calls on our behalf, taking basic details before calling us directly to inform us of the call. We also take other fire brigades calls.

There is a set procedure when answering calls. When a call is coming in, we have an alert/noise to indicate that there is a call. As a CRO I know what type of call is coming in based on the alert, whether it is a 999 call, admin call or from switchboard. 999 calls always take priority. When I answer the call, I am presented with a form in front of me on the system. I take the callers number/address and get the incident circumstances. From this, the system creates a Pre-Determined Attendance (PDA) and sets an automated attendance for appliances based on the information given. Supervisors will know what calls are coming in, and will monitor the calls. If it was a serious incident I would notify a supervisor as they may want to listen in and review. They would not interfere.

We currently use a system called VISION. We have been using this for 4-5 years. It is not a great system and I personally don't feel 100% confident using it. It does the job with mobilising resources but we have issues with address searches. The addresses it holds are not always correct, which then cause's issues for attendances of appliances. For example, it may not note that a building is a high rise, which normally requires more appliances than a standard house fire. It has to be based on a postcode search, which must be spelt correctly or it does not give results. I have had training on the VISION system. We started training but there were issues, so various start dates came and went to enable whatever company it was to repair the issues. It was a bit rushed when it did come in to use, so the staff in the control room had to adapt to it very quickly.

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The current shift pattern is based on a six day rota. Day one is our long day where the team works from 8am-8pm. Day two is a shorter shift where our team splits to work either an 8am-4pm shift, or 2pm-10pm shift. Day three is a night shift where we work 8pm-8am. This is followed by three days off.

Some calls may become 'Fire Survival Guidance' calls, which I will now talk about in more depth. In summary, if there is a fire and a person cannot leave a property because of that fire, the procedure is to make it a Fire Survival Guidance call. This creates a new procedure from a control room officer's perspective. I have dealt with quite a few of these calls over the years, but they are quite rare. I would raise my hand and inform a Supervisor who may come to me or listen in on the call. I would take the details from the caller, asking if they can get out and other questions to establish the circumstances and whereabouts.

I would normally stay on the phone until the person is rescued. National policy for Fire Survival Guidance calls in a high rise building would be to 'stay put' until rescued. For a standard house, I would normally tell people to get out, if it was safe to do so.

There are also occasions where an incident will become a 'major incident'. The decision to change this will be made on the ground at the incident where the fire is by the person who is in charge, normally a senior officer. They then notify us in the control room, requesting appliances and other resources to send to the scene. The Control Room then sends the requested appliances and resources to assist.

Communications can be through the telephone or radio channels.

I will now talk about the night of Tuesday 13th June 2017 going into the Wednesday 14th June. My Team were on a night shift starting work at 8pm. We were at our fall back Command Centre in Stratford that night due to maintenance works being conducted at our main Command Centre in Merton. Stratford is a small room, a lot smaller than Merton. It is probably better because you can hear each other and you know what is going on. However it can get very noisy which can make it difficult to hear callers.

That tour we had minimum numbers on duty with Control Room Officers Peter DUDDY and Pamela JONES working on overtime to assist us. Our Operations Manager was Alexandra NORMAN. That tour I was on the 'standbys' job and was co-ordinating that. For the first few hours of the shift I went to a different part of the Command Centre for this role. However our STARS roster system failed, which is not the end of the world but I could not do much after this, so I returned to the Control Room. I intended to return later when it was back online.

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Our CAD system would not log me in properly with my username and password, so I logged in using a default reference of '007' which is based on the position I was sitting in. Only one person uses a username at one time.

Everything was normal and the night was ticking over. At around 1am we started receiving phone calls to Grenfell Tower. I didn't take the initial call but everything seemed normal and appliances were sent to the incident as per instructions on the ITC. After appliances arrived on scene, the incident was quickly made up to six pumps, which is still normal. But from there it all started to progress quickly, with the incident being made up to 8, 10, 12, then 20 pumps. 20 pump response is a massive fire. Our phones in the Control Room were just ringing and ringing, and there was nothing else going on. I didn't know what was going on at the scene of this fire. I could only go by what the callers were telling us. I was aware there were phone calls from the 4th floor of the tower, which is where the fire was. But I also answered a call from someone on the 21st floor saying there was smoke in their flat. I gave suitable advice to open windows for fresh air, but they said the smoke was also outside. It was not a FSG call but I thought it was a bit weird, and wondered how could there be smoke as we had dealt with the fire that was a number of floors below.

In the control room we assumed that it was finishing up and that the fire had been dealt with. Normally our appliances let us know immediately if they need more units to assist, but that didn't happen. More and more calls were starting to come through to the control room.

Some of the calls I answered were from people who were not in the tower, mainly neighbouring blocks and driving along the A40 Westway. I cannot remember the first call I answered but I recall telling the first few callers that we were aware of a fire and were on our way to the incident, asking them to be patient whilst we dealt with it. Those calls were quick and not much information was gathered, other than flat/floor number.

At the same time we were waiting for the appliances on scene to tell us what they needed. They normally update us within 15-20 minutes of first attending, even if no further units are required. However I don't think any information had come through where all of a sudden they started asking for more and more resources at the scene. The CRO's noted these and AOM Debbie REAL dealt with the deployment of more pumps.

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The calls then became relentless. It was call after call. I can't say what time this started or how long it went on for because I was so busy answering the telephone. I was taking calls from people who were within the tower. These people were saying there was fire and they had smoke in their flats. I was just advising them to stop the smoke from coming into the flat and get themselves to where there is the least amount of smoke. I was also asking how many people were in the flat, including children. I did not ask people for their names. Ordinarily we would type a message for the Radio Operator to forward to the command unit at the scene, and I would stay with the caller on the phone. However with so many people calling, we couldn't pass on the information this way. There would have been such a backlog of messages. It was at this point that officers came into the Control Room to help. It was a big incident so the officer of the day would have been called in. I cannot recall who this officer was but he setup a whiteboard in the control room. Rather than typing messages to the radio operator, we would use scrap paper to write a message, then hand it to the Officer of the day to write on the whiteboard. The message would contain flat number, floor and any other relevant information e.g. were their children or not. I made the decision not to take names. We normally do for FSG calls, but when I realised what was happening, I didn't want to know. I didn't want to get that involved on a personal level with people. Rather than relaying each piece of information to the Command Unit, the Officers just gave the list to them in bulk. From there, the Command Unit would review the information and calls received.

At one point we were receiving phone calls from people outside the tower saying that they could see people going up on the roof of the tower. We had no visual of this and were merely going on details the callers were giving us, but couldn't understand why people were going up there. We were not aware that our appliances were fighting a fire of that scale.

The calls continued to relentlessly come through. I did not have much time to think and was giving the best information that I could, giving advice for people to stay where they were and to block the smoke from coming in by closing windows and getting low. I would then tell them to call us back if anything changed.

My aim was to just keep people safe in their flats. These calls quickly progressed to people telling me that fire was coming into their flats. Someone from the 22nd floor said to me that their cooker was on fire. I was thinking how that was possible with the fire being on the 4th floor not long before that.

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I took one phone call from a family in a flat shouting 'fire fire'. It was a high floor, cannot remember exact floor number but I thought to myself, how it can be on that floor. I also remember one call from a fella who was driving on the A40 nearby the tower. He told me this building was on fire, where I said that crews were on scene and dealing. He replied with "You want to send everyone love". I acknowledged it, but was (what) on earth was he seeing from there.

At one point the Officer of the day walked round the control room and had a picture of the tower on his mobile phone. The whole building looked like it was on fire. I cannot remember the time of when this was. Once I had the visual of what we were dealing with, everything made sense. All the calls, the panic and smoke issues. I mentally changed after seeing the images, it was a real shock to see it. I was still giving advice of 'stay put' to people who were calling, because we had not been instructed any further. I was sticking to the policy. Half of me was thinking 'how will we get them out?', and the other half was thinking 'what do we do'. Do we keep them safe in the tower until rescued as the policy says it's the safest place for them to be, or do we send them into the unknown?

I can't remember an exact time but I received instructions from my Assistant Operations Manager Debbie REAL that we needed to get these people out, and that the advice had changed. I now needed to tell people to get out of the building. I don't know who made this decision and it was only filtered down to me by Debbie. The Control Room was full with officers at the time. Present was our Principal Operations Manager Scott HAYWARD and both Senior Operations Managers Joanne SMITH / Adam CRINION. Our IT guys were also there, which was normal procedure. The phones were still going. Our AOM's Peter MAY and Debbie REAL were doing 'make ups' and logistics ensuring we had suitable resources on standby at other stations to cover the rest of London. Peter also did the Extended Duration Breathing Apparatus requests (EDBA) which is a tricky and lengthy job. They needed those at the scene and he took up the responsibility to do that. Its jobs they wouldn't normally do, but the CRO's were so busy, they were unable to do it.

After the change in advice, I was taking calls from a mixture of people. Some calls were from the same people, repeatedly updating us with the circumstances in their flat. I remember one fella who called a few times. He was with his pregnant wife and kids. They were just waiting to be told to get out, or for any other instructions. He was a dad and I couldn't imagine what it was like. I told him they needed to leave. He was scared to go, but also scared to stay. They left their flat and there phone line remained open, but

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there was no speaking. I could hear heavy breathing as they were possibly going down the stairs. All of a sudden the phone line cut off. I didn't hear from him after that.

I was trying to be realistic and tell people what they were going into. Unbearable heat and lots of smoke. I did not want them rushing out of the door and losing track of where the stairs were. I was trying to prepare them to get out.

At one point I heard one of the other CRO's saying to a caller "Go. It is your best chance". I cannot remember exactly who this was.

All of a sudden, the rush of calls coming in had dropped. You could hear a pin drop in the control room. It was awful, and felt worse than the calls coming in, because we knew why there were no more calls coming in. We started receiving the odd calls from relatives of people that were in the building, and recording that information. I think one lady lost contact with her brother.

One fella called because he was in communication with his sister on Whatsapp messenger. He was asking for advice to pass onto her. I was telling him what he needed to tell her, with the instructions to get wet towels and try to leave. I told him to pass on the advice, which he said he would, before ending the phone call.

After it got quiet in the control room, I got my phone out to look at photos and videos of the tower. The whole building was on fire. I remember Adam CRINION bought McDonalds in to the control room. I was starving after having no breaks during the night. People from the day shift started coming in early, maybe around 7am time. Another CRO, Pauline WARNER came in and sat next to me. She was asked to look at ordnance survey maps to find out where our appliances were, alongside the logistics of the building area to review the access for new appliances going to the scene. Pauline did this and showed me how difficult the access to the building was. There were appliances sitting stationary all over the place around Grenfell Tower. The access for new appliances or resources looked very difficult. It was madness.

I think over the shift I took 60+ calls from people. When the calls were coming in I was in work mode and just doing my job. I had no time to stop and think but felt that there may not be a good result. When it stopped it was worse.

I officially finish my night shifts at 8am, however I was relieved at 7.15am by another CRO Thomas STIBBARD. I verbally told Thomas what had happened but there was no formal handover between

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control room officers at that time. Before I went home, Alex NORMAN wanted us to see a woman from welfare who came to the control room. The woman gave me some advice and chatting with me, which had helped.

I went home after that and stayed up to call my mum after having some missed calls on my phone. I was exhausted. I haven't avoided it on the television but have followed the news. It seems so sad and should not have happened. I have been well supported since the night of the fire, with support from our welfare unit. The support from other people has been overwhelming.

I did not make any notes on the night, I had no time at all to make any. The notes on the scrap pieces of paper that I made were handed to the Officers who were updating our whiteboard.

I don't think we could have done anything different in the Control Room. Everyone did everything they could. I believe we had over 60 rescues from our FSG calls and messages.

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