

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: RUSSELL, SARAH

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

Occupation: CONTROL STAFF

This statement (consisting of 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:

Date: 10/10/2017

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

This statement relates to the night of the Grenfell Fire on June 13th -14th 2017.

Throughout the statement I shall introduce my role within the Control Room based at Merton, SW19 and what it entails. I shall also introduce and explain various terminologies. I shall introduce various colleagues that I work with and shall refer to them by their names. I shall also use LFB terminology which I shall explain.

An 'appliance' is the general term for a fire engine, but can also be referred to as a 'pump'.

A 'pump ladder' is a fire engine with a ladder attached. An appliance can also be a Fire Rescue Unit (FRU) which are the vehicles with cutting equipment attached. A 'crew' are the riders of the appliances - the fire fighters. Within the crew, in the lead appliance, will be either a Crew Manager (CM) or Watch Manager (WM). They will be on the ground making decisions about what appliances would be needed at a scene and will relay the messages to us in the Control Room via a radio.

I am a Control Room Officer (CRO) and have been in post, on the 'Watch' for the past nine months. I enjoy my job because it is very varied and no day is the same. Before working on the Watch I had to complete a nine week training programme. I began my training on the 12th September 2016. Every week we learned a new element before being assessed at the end. We had to pass the assessments before we could move on to the next stage. Each week the learning felt longer and more practical. We would start

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with learning simple terminology and then developed on to technical aspects such as finding addresses and understanding the relevant codes used for calls, relaying messages and finally dealing with calls to completion and mobilising available appliances.

Training also covered how to handle mobilising calls — either when or when not to mobilise. For example, advising callers regarding fire alarms when cooking and explaining why we would not be attending.

We have access to some refresher training and updates can be frequent. It may be that there are new procedures to be undertaken that we need to keep up to date with, however more routinely we will cover this by asking other members of the team or the support team. Throughout the training and beyond, we have access to policy documents and guidance when required. These are known as ‘Reference Index Forms’ or ‘RIFs’ and offer a step by step guide if reminders are needed. These are easy to find under an alphabetical index, for example, if we needed guidance for incidents involving ‘fire with cylinders’ we would look up ‘F’ and scroll down until we found the appropriate header.

Working as a Control Room Officer covers a variety of roles. Primarily we are responsible for taking calls from members of the public. However we are also responsible for the management of resources, mobilising of appliances as well as handling logistics

The process of call handing is centred on trying to find out information quickly. Essentially we want to know the address and type of incident so we know what, where and how to deploy to the situation. We have to quickly find out the problem and then decide whether or not to deploy. If we deploy we check the address using our systems and then mobilise appliances using specific codes dependent on the call and then communicate the information to the nearest stations via a tele printer which advises the crews of the call they will be attending. For example, if the call requires the Gas Board to attend, this will be relayed in a message form and updates given regarding their ETA. There are no set questions that a CRO asks, however there is specific information that needs to be obtained. How we obtain the information is down to the individual CRO, but speed is essential. Therefore addresses and type of incident are paramount; names less so. Names would only be particularly necessary if we needed to call other emergency services such as the LAS or the police and we would pass on basic information. With the taking of names we have concerns over data protection so it is not something we would routinely ask.

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Each call is handled on its own merit and dealt with specifically. It is standard practice that if a caller is calling from a landline regarding a fire in their property we will tell them to leave straight away.

However, if they call via a mobile it affords us greater communication and we can continue to speak to them and offer reassurance whilst they make their way out. Typically, calls should last for about a minute and a half however it very much depends on the call and the caller. We will always try to keep the caller calm and safe until the crews arrive with them but at the same time we have to be flexible depending on the number of calls coming through and the available time we have.

Standard practice for most fire calls would be to advise the caller to leave, saying that fire crews would be making their way, who would attend and contain and deal with the fire. The vast majority of the time, that is the safest place to be and safest piece of advice to give. If they are unable to leave we need to probe further and ascertain why they cannot leave — whether it be for fire, smoke or heat. In the event that the situation changes and they tell us they cannot leave, this becomes a Fire Survival Guidance (FSG) call.

A FSG becomes active at the point the caller says that they cannot get out of their property and they are affected by smoke. If they are in a flat above or below a fire and not affected by smoke, it will not be a FSG. In the event of a FSG our advice centres on trying to make the caller as safe as possible until fire crews can get to them. We would advise the covering of gaps in doors with whatever can be used to keep smoke out. Ideally to keep windows open to let fresh air in, but if smoke comes in we advise they shut them and move to a room that is furthest away from the fire. There is a RIF for guidance in the event that anything is forgotten. FSG calls are very much lead by the caller, we can only advise.

Every call that comes in to the LFB is logged, regardless whether anyone is deployed to it. The incident will generate a number and the numbers then work sequentially. The numbers continue to go up and will only reset at the end of every year at midnight on New Year's Eve. Currently our number is around 132,000 I believe. Each call that a CRO deals with will have their initials next to the log number so that we are able to access the individual incidents that we have dealt with. Routinely, each CRO can look up any call they have dealt within the last three months using their own ID. Their unique ID is defined simply by their initials, so in my case, 'SR'. It is possible to look beyond three months and this would be via specific searches such as addresses, officer or operator names.

Having mentioned 'codes', I will expand further. Each call we handle can be summarised or grouped into a specific 'code' area. For example, fire scenarios are regarded as 'A' calls, accidents are 'B' calls. The

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codes can then be sub categorised depending on the type of fire or the type of incident. A normal house fire with no injury would be categorised as an 'AI' call. These individual categories then advise us, if necessary, of the amount of appliances needed to handle such a call. An AI call will have a minimum of two to three appliances for a basic fire. We, as CROs, pick the code we feel best fits the situation based on the information received which is then sent to the nearest station's tele printer. It is imperative that we allocate resources based on what the caller has told us, and not on what we think.

In the case of an incident that is not a basic fire, a high rise for example, more appliances will be sent. An increase in appliances can also be dictated by the number of calls that are coming through from the same address or post code. If we receive four or more calls to the same address, the system will automatically send a minimum of four appliances and a Station Manager (SM) in support.

We will be notified of a reoccurring address because the system will have a flashing repeat button. The fourth call to the same address makes it a priority. The system is able to generate the message to be sent to the nearest appliances and then codes tell them what equipment is required. We can manually add more resources if necessary. These decisions will be made at the 'back of the room' by supervisors and managers. The supervisors' desk is staffed by the Operations Manager (OM) and two Assistant Operations Managers (AOMs). The AOMs are our direct line managers, but the OM is in overall charge of the Watch.

Our systems can get technical glitches which can make things difficult. For example, if we need to attend an address that is relatively new or a brand new building, it is likely that the system will not recognise it or the address, which means it can be difficult to move on to the next task in the allocating of resources. The system can also be slow due to the amount of information that needs to go through it. In the event of that happening, white boards are used in the Control Room and information manually written out. This does not happen often. Since I have worked on the watch this has maybe happened twice, most recently last week when we lost most of the system. However it eventually came back online.

I joined my Watch, Watch 2, nine months ago after the completion of my training. A Watch is allocated based on when you complete your training on the Friday; the corresponding Watch on the Monday becomes your assigned pattern. It is common for there to be a 'close knit' environment between Watches because you work so closely together. Watches work in a strict three shift pattern — 'days' and 'nights'

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are twelve hours, 0800hrs-2000hrs and 2000hrs- 0800hrs respectively. Sandwiched in the middle is an eight hour spare shift which is either 0800hrs-1600hrs or 1400hrs-2200hrs. The 'short shifts' are designed to provide support and back up to the core shifts. This can range in general support roles such as handling Resource Management Logistics (RML) — writing reports of near misses with equipment that is fed back to management, dealing with spillages at scenes, contacting Operational Support Units that handle equipment and also making sure that radios work effectively in the Control Room. These RML tasks are usually handled during the early short shift (8-4) and then the late shift would most likely be supporting the core team and relieving them for breaks. At present I will always be posted to the RML during my short shift because I am not trained to deal with other elements. However, in the event of a major incident we can be relieved from the RML and placed back as a call handler.

Throughout the Watch we are allocated breaks at set times. Depending on the shift will depend on the length or frequency of the breaks. The times can range from 30-45 minutes or up to 90 minutes. Depending on your role will determine who goes on a break, for example, only a two or three CROs can go for a break at the same time, or only one AOM at any one time. Break times were divided up in hourly slots. On 13th, 14th June, my break was between 11pm — midnight, the next slot for others was between midnight and 1am and then others had 1am — 2am. It is unusual, but a recall alarm can go off to call people back in the event of a major incident. The alarm is activated by a supervisor.

The Control Room uses computers as strategic resource. Often a TV is on, usually showing the news, so that we know what is going on. We are allowed to have our mobile phones with us whilst we work but a lot of the time we do not have the time to look at them. We are allowed to access the internet on the computers most of the time, using Google Maps for example, but it has been known to be prohibited because of the threat of cyber-attacks.

As of the 14th June 2017, I had been on the Watch for six months and had recently completed my probation. We were working a night shift and based from Stratford, our fall-back centre, because of routine maintenance at Merton. Stratford is a smaller Control Room than Merton. I was posted as a radio operator, monitoring channel 2 (south London), with Sharon DERBY who was operating channel 4 (North London). The first part of the night ticked over as a normal shift but after midnight I became aware of a call to a 4th floor block of flats. Initially nothing out of the ordinary, but then we started to become inundated with calls to the same block. Soon, all call handlers were busy with calls and I could see on the computer screens, a red button flashing which means there are calls waiting to be answered.

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The number of calls began stacking up and up. I asked Sharon if she would mind combining both channel 2 and channel 4 on the radio. My channel was silent so I thought I could help better by answering calls. I did not want to sit doing nothing when everyone else was busy. Sharon agreed so I de-monitored my channel and moved back to call handling.

The first call I took was about an hour long. I think it was about 1.15am when I answered and it was a young girl inside Grenfell Tower. I tried to find out basic information from her, such as the flat number, floor number and how many people were inside with her. She told me that she lived on the 20th floor but had gone higher to the 22nd. Once I had received the basic information and due to the influx of calls I thought about ending the call so that I could move on to take others. But then I thought again. I was talking to a twelve year old girl who was very scared, so I decided to stay with her. She told me that she had already been affected by the smoke and had tried to leave several times but was unable to go. I told her to go to the room least affected and to shut the windows, stay low to the floor and cover her mouth. When she said that the flames were outside the window it did not make any sense. The fire was on the 4th floor, so how could she be seeing flames on the 22nd?

I then started to hear calls coming from the 14th floor and it started to make sense — the fire had moved very, very quickly. I asked the girl what her name was and she told me it was Jessica.

I asked Jessica if she was calling from her phone and I think she said she was. I asked to speak to someone a bit older to try and get some more information from them, but she did not hand it over; I do not know why. Perhaps she did not want to. I felt I needed stay with her and that she needed me. I asked her if she wanted me to stay and she said 'yes'. I am glad I did — even if it was only to offer her a little support. The fact that she did not hand the phone to anyone else showed to me that she needed it. I stayed with her for the entire call which I think was about an hour. All I could do was offer support, to keep asking questions in the hope that her situation might improve, tell her the fire engines were there, fighting the fire and try and prevent panic. After about an hour I could not get anymore response from her — only rasping sounds, then nothing. I stayed on the line a little while longer with my hand hovered over the call termination button. I was torn as what best to do.

I eventually ended the call when the line fell silent.

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Reflecting on that call, I felt completely helpless. When people are pleading with you, saying do not want to die and I cannot physically do anything to help them; it is very hard. I can pass on all the information but I cannot actually do anything — that is very tough.

Not long after the call finished I became aware that the advice we were giving callers to stay where they were had changed to try and make attempts to leave via the stairwell. I think this was about an hour or two into the incident. I was told by Joanne, the Senior Operations Manager, and I think someone else too. I am not sure if it was a decision they made or if it had come from the crews on the ground. Jo is senior to the OM and she works with Scott HAYWARD. They have overall say in the Watch. I think by that point there may have been a Deputy Assistant Commissioner (DAC) in the Control Room, along with a host of other senior officers but I am not sure. Information about flats was being written up on to white boards at the back of the room and anything new we had to have passed to them. I have no idea how many calls I took. The time went very quickly.

There was still a stack of calls that needed to be answered and we began telling them the new advice. We were able to tell on our screens, from the numbers, if the caller had called previously. There were quite a few that I spoke to on more than one occasion. It was relentless call after call after call. I do not remember ringing anyone back or even having the chance, just updating the callers with the new advice. We kept asking them that if their situation changed, to keep calling us back which a number of them did. There was no time to look at names or any particular individuals, only the numbers. We gave the advice and then moved on time and time again. The calls got a lot quicker as a result, but on a number of occasions I was torn as to whether to stay with them or move on. The vast majority of time I gave the advice and moved on to another call. There simply was no time to offer comfort.

By this time, the incident had become a 40 pump fire. An unprecedented level. Every single call was a FSG call — one after another, after another, after another. With no time to stay with them I got the details and where they were and moved on trying not to get too emotional. Normally with a FSG call a supervisor will listen to make sure we are giving the right advice and pass on any messages to the radio operators for the crews on the ground. I remember looking up to see if anyone could help me but everyone was really, really busy. I remembered one of the AOMs, Pete MAY, say that we had to keep moving on. I asked him whether we should for every call and he said if we felt we needed to stay with the caller then stay. This continued on an on until about 5am. Between 1am and 5am I never looked up just took calls, wrote down the details (flat numbers, number of adults or children, floors and the situation

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priorities). This became the norm and if I had a chance I would take the information to the white board myself.

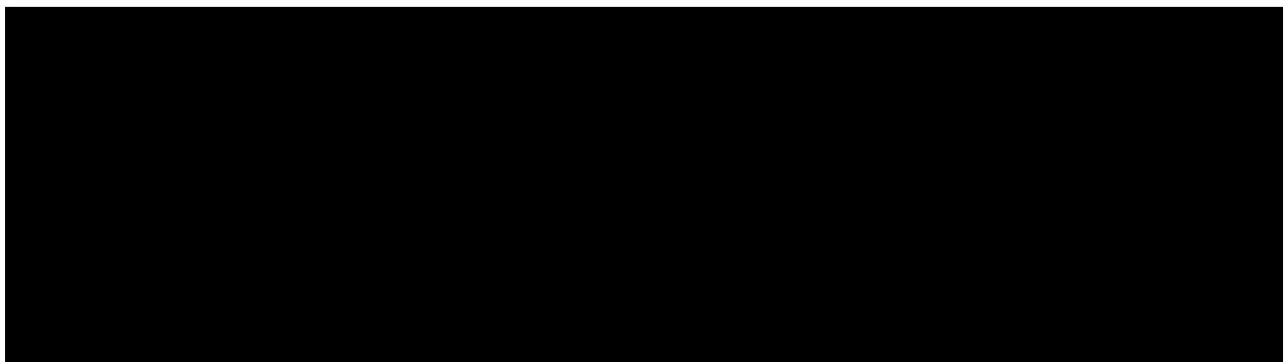
At 5am there seemed to be a lull in the number of calls. It went eerily quiet and a little creepy.

I remember someone saying, "I wish they'd call again". That way we would have known that they were still alive. The Control Room was completely drained and a number were very upset.

I remember someone having a look on their phone at images when it went quiet. We had no TV on the Control Room so I had a look on the phone and then saw the extent of the blaze. I remember someone saying, "Oh my God! How is anyone still calling us?!" the whole building was on fire.

After 5am there a few calls but nothing in the realm of what we had dealt with before. A lot of the calls were from family members calling about relatives that lived in Grenfell Tower. I answered a couple but then moved back to my posting as radio operator on channel 2. I remained on the radio until about 7.20am — 7.30am and was aware of things going on. I remember messages coming from the police helicopter about a man on a floor who could not get out but could be seen from the window. I am not sure what happened to him.

I was aware that calls had been made for staff to come in and assist us and I remember Pauline, an AOM, coming in and relieving us so that we could take breaks. I cannot remember what time she came in. She was not alone however, lots arrived. There was not much for me to handover to my relief officer — a couple of fire alarms but that was all. The supervisors had a lot to handover which was expected. It felt strange leaving. We were told that we had to speak to the Counsellor before leaving. It was obvious that some people did not want to talk yet so they were told to expect contact at a later date. I think I left about 8am. I think it hit me when I was driving home. It was all over the news and the radio and that's when I got upset.



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