

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: BASSON, GERARD

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

Occupation: OPERATIONS MANAGER

This statement (consisting of 6 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: GERARD BASSON

Date: 25/11/2017

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

This statement relates to my involvement on the night of the Grenfell Tower fire in London on Wednesday 14th June 2017.

I am the Operations Manager for North West Fire Control and have been in post since May 2014. I joined Greater Manchester Fire Control in 1997 as a call operator and worked my way through the ranks. I moved to Warrington, North West Fire Control 12 months before the planned merge of the 4 brigades Lancashire/Manchester/Cheshire/Cumbria and initially worked within a training role, testing the new systems. I performed this role as a Team Leader and am fully proficient in the workings of the Control Room.

At the point of becoming the Operations Manager I was also the single point of contact for managing Lancashire's needs with regards to fire and rescue and other staff are responsible for the other counties that we support. Janine CARDEN is the SPOC for Greater Manchester Fire Service, and Paula PARKES in the SPOC for Cheshire & Cumbria Fire Service. My role as the Duty Operations Manager is taking on the day to day management of the Control Room in an oversight capacity. I do not get involved in the running of the Control Room unless it is much larger or involved incident such as Grenfell Tower or the recent Manchester bombing. The running of the Control Room is left to the Team Leaders to manage. My role sits directly above the Team Leaders who monitor the Control Room operators and their handling of 999 calls. I manage 2 teams in the Control Room and am also the SPOC for Lancashire, handling any issues or complaints that may arise. I work on a Monday to Friday basis and am also in an on call

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capacity every 6 days in the event of 6+ pump fires or major incidents. There are five Operations Managers that work for North West Fire Control that cover the on call shift.

North West Fire Control has a tri-service agreement with the London Fire Brigade and West Midlands Fire and Rescue. We work in a 'buddy system', which means if a call transfer from BT is not answered within 5 minutes it will automatically be passed on to the buddy service. For example, London calls are transferred to the North West, the North West's are transferred to West Midlands and West Midlands back to London. This system is based around the capacity strengths of the individual Control Rooms and the levels at which we can operate to sustain our 'buddies'. North West looks after London's overflow because it also covers the Greater Manchester area so therefore has the natural resilience to cover it. In the last 12 months I have known it to happen a few times but it is not frequent.

The strength of the North West Control Room in terms of team numbers does vary depending on the time of day. This is based on historical data that suggests that the quieter times are usually during the night and therefore we have fewer staff members on duty at that time. However, it can be often that we have our most prominent incidents at night. The staffing levels work as follows: 0700hrs-1200hrs - 8 staff members including 2 Team Leaders and 6 CROs. 1200hrs-1900hrs - 11 staff members including an extra 3 CROs (statistically our busiest period). 1900hrs-2200hrs - 10 staff members with 2 Team Leaders and 8 CROs, and finally 2200hrs-0700hrs - 7 staff members with 2 Team Leaders and 5 CROs.

In the event of a major incident, we have an escalation policy which can be actuated depending on the circumstances. For example, in the event of a major incident whatever it may be, a Control Room Operator will inform a Team Leader of what they are dealing with and if necessary it will be passed on to the Operations Manager. In the event of a fire, I would be notified at 6 pumps or above or any significant incident such as flooding (which we deal with frequently) or the MEN arena incident. My role would then be to take charge of the Control Room or move in to a support/advice role depending on the levels of experience of the Team Leaders. On the night of Grenfell Tower, the Team Leaders, Natalie POMPONI and Paula CRAIG were both very experienced in managing the Control Room so my role was one of support.

Throughout the incident of Grenfell Tower, there were a number of Fire Survival Guidance calls. The process of FSG calls follows strict guidelines as to the information that needs to be obtained from the caller. Essentially the role of the CRO is to quickly ascertain the incident location and mobilise the

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pumps. Stage 2 will entail the CRO asking a number of questions to the caller, for example, asking about their location on the property and whether or not it is safe for them to leave. If it is not, we try and make them as safe as possible before the fire fighters are able to rescue them. FSGs are essentially about making the caller as safe as possible and relaying information quickly to fire crews. The principle is the same regardless of whether the caller is in a high rise or not, but the questions can vary depending on the individual circumstances, for example, if they are on a 14th floor, using a window as a means of escape is clearly not going to be an option. In those events we would change tact and ensure that the caller is safe as possible and able to block out any smoke coming in if means of escape are impossible. Every incident type will have set questions.

The training for FSGs is done on an annual basis for experienced CROs as a refresher, but for new starters it is incorporated in to their basic training. The refresher training places the onus on the staff to ensure that they are up to date and if they feel that their understanding is lacking in certain areas then they are to ensure that they ask for help or advice to ensure that they are up to speed. However, every 12 months we run training packages for the staff to assist with any new procedures and any issues that may have been raised by staff. My role within this has been to set up rolling projects and training packages and set the questions to ask callers around FSGs - a support guide. The guidance sheet is designed to help them and guide them should they feel they need extra help. I exhibit this guidance sheet as GDB/1.

I will now talk about events that took place on Tuesday 13th June 2017 going into Wednesday 14th June 2017. On the Tuesday evening I clocked out of work at 18:37 hours and went home. That night I was on recall duty.

At 0130 hours on the Wednesday morning I received a telephone call from one of the Team Leaders in Control, Natalie POMPONI. I was in bed and asleep when I received the call so it was a bit blurry. Natalie informed me that they were receiving phone calls about an explosion in London. I said to Natalie that I will look at the television to see if anything was happening. After the call ended I turned the television on to see what I can see, but there was nothing on the news at that time.

I got dressed and phoned control on my way to control informing them that I was on my way in. I arrived to control at 0207 hours and went straight into control. On getting in to control I had a word with the Team Leaders Paula CRAIG and Natalie POMPONI to assess what was going on. They told me that the control room was receiving calls from Grenfell Tower, a high rise building in London. I have not heard of

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this tower before. Paula said she had recalled all staff from breaks due to the increasing amount of incoming calls. They said that two of the Control Rooms Operators Sue PIMBLETT and Aisha JABIN were taking calls at that time from people and giving Fire Survival Guidance, gathering information and providing reassurance to them. Fortunately activity levels in the North West area were extremely low that night, allowing us to answer these calls from London.

At 0215 hours I took a call for Grenfell Tower. It was not an emergency call and came through on our admin line. The male caller stated that the number I answered from had just rung him, and that he was calling from a mobile. The caller was nervous and said that people were dying in the high rise building including his sister who was trapped and had rung him twice. The caller told me that his sister was in Grenfell Tower with her son on the 14th floor, flat 115. I told the caller that we would pass the information on to the firefighters at the scene and that there were 40 fire engines in attendance, to provide him with reassurance that the firefighters were doing their best. The caller responded by stating that he was going to ring his sister back and see if she was still in the flat, and the call ended. I knew that I could only reassure him that we had 40 fire engines at the scene and pass the information to control in London. Paula passed this information on to Control in London.

After answering this call, I then continued to assess what was going on in our control room. The Team Leaders Paula and Natalie had everything organised. I picked up our airwave radio and tuned into the London Fire Brigade channel to monitor what was going on in London to get an idea of what was going on. This was to help us gain an understanding of the fire as we did not know anything about it, although it is not something we normally do. I could hear that numerous firefighters were on scene, getting up to floors 3/4/5. I knew we were receiving calls from people trapped on much higher floors than this. I did not communicate with anyone on the radio and only listened to the communications.

At the same time, I turned on the television in our control room, putting on Sky News channel. It is not procedural to have the news on, but it should be on to help give Team Leaders an overview or visual picture of a scene during a big incident. Having an overview and visual picture helps us prepare ourselves if needs be. I don't recall seeing Grenfell Tower when I switched the television on.

At around 0230 hours I recall a call being taken by our Control Room Operator Sue PIMBLETT. She was on the phone to a guy called 'Senna' who was in a flat where the conditions were getting extremely bad. Whilst Sue was on the phone, she was relaying information to Paula who was contacting London to pass

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on the information about the call. Whilst Paula was on the phone, she was told by the Control Room in London that they changed the policy and we were now to instruct callers to cover themselves in wet towels and get out. Paula passed this information onto Sue but her caller had already decided to get out due to the conditions he was faced with. Our Control Room Operator Aisha was also on the phone at the same time this change of advice was passed to us, but her caller could not get out and I believe she lost them.

Our Control Room Operators were constantly on the phone taking calls regarding Grenfell Tower. The information they gathered was being passed onto Control in London by Paula as we got it. The easiest way to pass on this information to London was by telephone, and this is what we did. We have numerous numbers for London, to both their control room and the critical phone. We use the Critical phone line for life and death situations as you are not held in a queue waiting for someone to answer. Paula contacted London using the critical line. At the same time, I went round the control room talking to staff providing support and advice to them where it was needed.

There was no open line between us and London, and we were only passing on information as we received it.

Regarding the stay put advice that we were giving, if callers says they cannot get out, then our Control Room Operators would give advice for them to block doors, prevent smoke coming in, and stay safe. If it was a general fire and the caller could get out, then the Operators would tell the callers to evacuate. This advice may vary on circumstances and building types. Grenfell Tower was a unique incident and we would follow normal advice of staying put or evacuate based on the callers' location in the tower.

Between 0300-0400 hours the calls coming in started to die down. Paula and Natalie started to let operators go for breaks. It was around this time that I decided to start recording and saving the calls we received regarding Grenfell Tower as I knew they may be needed in the future due to the seriousness of the incident. Recording these calls took a couple of hours and provided further support to the staff during the same time.

At around 0500 hours I recall seeing an image of Grenfell Tower for the first time. This was on social media. I saw flames coming out of windows from flats, and both the top and sides of the building were on fire. The building was fully alight at this point.

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At around 0600 hours I was happy that Paula and Natalie were in charge and ensuring that everything was ok. The levels of incoming calls had significantly dropped. I left a message for the oncoming Duty Operations Manager informing them of what happened and to provide further support for staff. I left control at 0610 hours.

Post incident, the team will have looked after themselves. The following days we had a mini debrief to allow everyone to chat about how they felt. Personally, I try to switch off after the incident and remain professional, focusing on my role. It was a terrible fire and awful for those residents.

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