

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: OULTON, HELEN

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

Occupation: CONTROL ROOM OPERATOR

This statement (consisting of 5 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: H OULTON

Date: 26/11/2017

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

On Sunday 26th November 2017, I was interviewed on audio disk. This is a summary of the information I gave during the interview with DC Emma HARRIS and DC David PEARL at North West Fire Control in Warrington, Cheshire.

I am providing a statement to The Metropolitan Police Service in relation to an incident that happened on 14th June 2017. This incident involved a fatal fire at Grenfell Tower, Kensington and Chelsea Borough in London.

I was involved in the incident as I am a Control Room Operator (CRO) in the North West Fire Control Centre in Warrington, Cheshire. This call centre is an agreed 'overspill' call centre for the London Fire Brigade.

In this statement I will name a number of individuals, Natalie POMPONI, who is my supervisor and a Team Leader within the Control Room, Paula CRAIG is another Team Leader, Aisha JABIN, who is another Control Room Operator, Ged Basson who was the Duty Operations Manager on 14th June 2017.

I started in Cheshire Fire and Rescue in January 2006 which is nearly 12 years ago. I transferred over to North West Fire Service in May 2014. I have always been a call handler, my role is to mobilise fire engines and take the fire calls. I remained a CRO after the transfer as this is something I have always been happy doing this role. When I answer 999 calls, I ask for the address, the postcode, what's on fire and the incident being reported. I tend to repeat the address details back to the caller to ensure I have the correct information. If someone reports a house fire, for example, I try to calm the caller down in order to get the information however how I deal with a caller is very dependent on the incident being reported.

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In Cheshire, I received six weeks training- three weeks in a classroom (one on one) and the following three weeks in the control room. This included radio work, administration and being made aware of different alarm sounds. When I transferred to North West Fire Service in May 2014 as the fire services merged, I received refresher training which lasted for one or two weeks, I can't be sure. This training included how the new systems worked as there was a belief that we knew how to deal with 999 calls because we were experienced in our previous fire services. It was more system based than call handling, when we transferred over. The training also dealt with the differences in procedures. I was given a book which told me what the computer system can do, its capabilities and what process needs to be done to 'turn out' a fire engine or fire officer. It gives details on how I can put notes on a log, add information like stating a caller is oxygen dependant.

New recruits receive more in depth training into this as they have no fire service or call handling knowledge then they would have to be taught with how to deal with a caller that is panicking, terminology firefighters use and equipment acronyms. As a CRO, I report to my supervisor who is called a Team Leader (TL). My supervisor is called Natalie POMPONI. The Control Room is set up into 'pods', with Cheshire and Cumbria as one, Lancashire as another and Manchester also as one. As a CRO, I regularly rotate around the different pods, yesterday I was managing incidents for Cumbria, today I am managing incidents calls for Manchester, tomorrow I will be taking calls for Lancashire. We regularly move around so it gives us the experience of how it all works.

The supervisors sit together and it is expected that there is a minimum of two team leaders per shift. I am on Team 3, there are eleven CRO's and three Team Leaders. At any one time, there has to be two team leaders. We have eleven CRO's from 1200 to 2200 hours at, after 2200 hours, we have seven CRO's. We work two twelve hour days, two twelve hours nights and four days off. My shifts can vary to add in on call over and mid shifts

A Fire Survival Guidance (FSG) call is defined as a person who calls 999 stating that they are trapped within a building and have no means to escape. I have dealt with a couple of calls of this nature in the North West Fire Service with a caller being trapped inside a house. I gave a further call to a person trapped in a building collapse. I don't have vast knowledge of FSG's but I have experience of them. I have had training in FSG calls which involve role plays however there is always the knowledge that the call is not real and so I think you learn more dealing with a real situation. Training cannot prepare a person hearing a caller screaming down the phone in fear and panic. The background and basics can be taught but how a CRO deals with the call is down to experience and common sense. If a FSG is taken

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within the control room, I make sure that the room is aware of it and make my team leader is told. I can do this by either 'muting' my headset so the call cannot hear what I am saying, I can wave my hand for the team leaders attention or I ask a colleague to tell them on my behalf.

My understanding of 'stay put' advice is that we would only tell a caller to leave in exceptional circumstances. I didn't have specific training on 'stay put' when I transferred over to North West Fire, it is standard advice.

I receive refresher training each year, the content of which is normally requested by the staff. This allows new changes to be implemented, if there is thought to be a better way of working. Some people need refresher training on motorway mobilisation, different equipment used within our four fire services or requesting to know a little more about a geographical area, such as Manchester's way of working or Cumbria.

The computer system used within the control room is called 'Intergraph' and this is a very different to my old system and it took time to get used to. The maps within the system are very detailed however it is not as quick as myself or my colleagues would like. In general, the system capability is very good.

When I receive a 999 call, I can see what number the caller is calling from- this may be a mobile number or a landline, which normally gives an address and sometimes a name. The system provides me with a percentage of accuracy around where the mobile is. The Pre Determined Attendance (PDA) system enables the computer system to 'propose' the nearest appliances to me, depending on the situation. I shows me an amount of appliances that need to attend an incident, for example a house fire will require two appliances.

I have the ability to 'snatch' or take appliances from other areas, if they are closer to the incident and are not dealing with another incident. I can 'alert' them to the fact that they have been mobilised or 'snatched', particular if there is risk to life or property. If crews are in attendance at another incident, I cannot 'snatch' them. An appliance or 'pump' is a fire engine.

I can 'override' the system if the information I am given by the caller if the circumstances dictate it. This is called 'dynamic mobilisation'. I can remove or add appliances to an incident, with the authority of the Team Leader.

The Mobile Data Terminal (MDT) are on fire engines, they can change their status, read their mapping, I can send messages to their MDT's, they can view certain risks relating to the incident. Once the message has been sent to the MDT's, I don't need to contact them further unless they contact me for urgent

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contact. At times, I may need to make further contact with the relevant fire service, depending on what the protocol is, as each service does things slightly differently.

Within North West Fire control, we have a 'buddy' system with Northamptonshire, West Midlands and London Fire Brigade.

On 14th June 2017, I was on a 7pm to 7am shift. Initially it was a normal shift, there were two team leaders on —Paula CRAIG and Sue PIMBLETT. There was the usual kind of calls, administration to do and meal breaks. At around 0136 hours, the first call about London came into the control room from the Blackburn Exchange. I believed the information relayed from London was that there had been an incident in London, there had been an explosion. I verbally informed the team leaders that the control room would be used as an 'overflow' facility. The Exchange informed me that they had been waiting some time to put calls through to London.

Initially, I thought the address provided by the Exchange was called 'Green Field Tower' I could see that the address would not match on our system. The system wouldn't give me a PDA and there has to be a PDA attached. In order to deal with this, I just used 'London FRS' (Fire Rescue Service) in order to progress to add further information. 'Grenfell Tower' is not in our system and we do not have the postcode for that address either.

I understood my role to be taking calls- I do not recall taking any other calls from the other four fire services in the North West, at that time of the overspill.

I took a call from London in relation to a lady on the third floor that was in wheelchair bound. She told me she could feel heat and couldn't use the lift, she also said she was with an adult male and at least two children. The caller was panicking and I was trying to reassure her and give her FSG advice. I asked her what flat she was in, told her to get everyone into one room, block the doors from smoke, hang something out of the window so fire crews could identify her. As the lady was wheelchair bound, she couldn't get to the floor, to get clearer air. She had no option but to 'stay put'.

I stayed on the line with her until I heard banging on her door which I believed were fire crews, I terminated that call as I knew she would be safe. I don't want to hear the call again.

I don't remember how long I spent on the phone with the caller and I didn't remember asking for her name, this is not something that I would do generally ask for or give.

I tried support my colleagues, in particular CRO's that had not been in the fire service for as long as I have been. As I became aware of the amount of calls coming in, I released that I might need to support

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my colleagues and to check their welfare. I knew there were more pumps in attendance so it was a big fire.

My colleague Aisha JABIN, had taken a call, I had instinct that this was a hard 'persons reported' call. The caller, Debbie had moved to the higher floors of the block and I had a feeling the crews weren't going to get to her in time. At the time of Aisha's call, the news was airing the incident on the television inside the control room. It is very unusual that we would see an incident unfold on the news as we are taking calls. The television was not on when I dealt with my FSG call -It's always on a news channel but was not being aired. I knew the lady would not get out, it was one of the most distressing things anyone should ever have to listen to. The caller stopped communicating with Aisha, I was on mute. I told her to keep talking to her as we knew she wouldn't survive. Aisha could not see the television screen from where she was sitting as it was behind her.

I listened to the call as I knew it was a serious 'persons reported', some people that called escaped or were rescued but I knew that this caller was likely to die. Aisha tried to reassure her and we both didn't want the caller to be on her own when she died - that the last thing she heard was a reassuring voice. I spent about five minutes listening to the call. Paula CRAIG, the other team leader, was passing information onto London control, their secondary control which is a 'backup' control. She was able to tell them the information that we getting from the callers, like flat numbers, floor number, number of people trapped. I think the control room dealt with twenty calls, we were focused and quiet when we took the calls. We received information from London giving details of what floors the fire crews had reached. We were able tell our callers so try to reassure them, we knew how many pumps were there and this was passed on to the callers.

I and other staff within the control room do not receive and feedback or resolution about calls we have dealt with. We knew there were fatalities but we don't hear if someone has died or survived. After the calls stopped, there was a calm within the control room and everyone was very shocked. There was a very low mood within the room. I checked that everyone was ok, from a welfare point of view. I was tearful but keen to go home and get away from a horrible night. I was offered trauma incident support afterwards. When we returned back from our days off, we had a debrief but it's never been discussed in great details. It was a horrible night but we have to move on.

I will always feel I could have done more, even if we did everything we could. There will always be people that could never get through to us that night and didn't have the comfort of a voice on the other end of the phone reassuring them, that's very difficult to accept.

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