

**WITNESS STATEMENT**

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

Statement of: POMPONI, NATALIE

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

Occupation: TEAM LEADER

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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: N POMPONI

Date: 25/11/2017

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

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On Saturday 25th 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 Team Leader 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 refer to a number of people.

Paula CRAIG, a fellow Team Leader who was working with me on the night of the fire and liaised with the London Fire Brigade.

Aisha JABIN, a Control Room Operator who took a 999 call

Sue PIMBLETT, another Control Room Operator who took a 999 call

Ged BASSON Duty Operations Manager

Tessa TRACEY, Senior Operations Manager

I started working for Lancashire Fire and Rescue in April 1999 and I worked as a Control Operator, Crew Manager and Acting Watch Manager in Lancashire. In 2014, I transferred over from Lancashire to Warrington and originally started as a control operator and was promoted to Team Leader about 18 months ago, which is the role I remain in.

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In Lancashire, I took part in a twelve week training programme, some of which was residential. It was more regimented than it is these days with marching, uniform and saluting in those days. The first week was residential and then a further eleven weeks involved learning about the different systems and processes.

Throughout my fifteen years within Lancashire, we did various courses internally and externally, in line with the role I was in. If we got new systems or equipment then we would get the appropriate training. In March 2014, I transferred to the North West Fire Service, learning a new system and learning about new processes, I did several courses prior to joining and I have done refresher courses and system training whilst I have been here. We have completed two lots of training, these were around two or three days in length, if my recollection is correct. I learnt about the new systems which was the main part of the training and learning how the different Fire Rescue Service's (FRS) operated. There were four FRS's that merged into North West Fire Service, these included Cumbria, Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire. Each area joined at slightly different times to stagger the process but we were all working together within a four week period and working together, as one, at North West Fire Control.

I have refresher training about once a year, which is generally done in either January or February, it is specific to the systems that we use and the ways of working within the control room. It is collective training and not role specific.

Even as Team Leader, I can still be called upon to act as a Control Room Operator (CRO) which involves taking fire calls and generally doing things that are quite different to my role as a team leader. I sit at the supervisory desk, not really taking fire calls but supervising the calls coming in and the mobilising, so two different roles.

I used to be a CRO, this involved taking calls, mobilising and call handling and incident managing. If a 999 call is received, we have an automatic call distribution system which means that the system will select the CRO who has been without a 999 call for the longest. It will automatically 'present' on the screen but if the call is not answered within five seconds, the call then moves to other screens around the room.

If the call comes through to my screen, I answer the call, establish the address and the nature of the call and mobilise the appropriate resources. I also deal with the actions that come from that particular incident type and any subsequent mobilisation.

In most situations, someone calls 999 to report an incident to the CRO, as a result the system creates a log and assigns resources to the incident. The CRO can then establish the call signs of the appliances

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attending, such as fire engines. Further information can be added to the log by the CRO, either reducing or increasing the number of appliances to be mobilised. For example, if a high number of calls is being received into the control room about a particular incident, the decision may be made to increase the number of appliances attending the incident. The computer system can be overridden, if required.

The role of Team Leader is a supervisory one and involves the supervision of mobilisations or dealing with any questions or queries that are raised regarding the address or the incident itself, that are directed to me as Team Leader. I also carry out administrative duties and personnel management.

If one of my CRO's receives a call and they require extra assistance or supervision, they have the ability to 'request assistance' that means the CRO's can use a function on their touchscreen- this highlights on my screen, they may also wave at me to get my attention. I can generally sense by someone's tone, as they take some calls, that something is not right. In this situation, I would try to go over to the CRO to assist them and see what the problem is.

Within the control room, we have minimum staffing levels which means that during a day shift, there would be up to eleven staff and if it was a night shift, it would be a minimum of seven. The staffing levels change depending on the time of year, for example in February there would be more staff than in the summer, as more people want time off.

There are a minimum of two team leaders, supervising 5 CRO's on a night shift. I am part of a 'Team', I know some fire services refer to these as a 'Watch'. I am aligned to Team 3.

Each CRO is nominated a 'position' on a daily basis. The daily 'allocations' are posted in our break-out room at the start of each day so staff coming on duty can see what they are been tasked to do on any particular day. This helps CRO's and Team Leaders identify what roles are being filled on that day.

The control room is made up of a row of supervisor's desks, the Team Leaders, and pods relating to a geographical area, such as Manchester, Cumbria etc.

The computer system that I use within the control room is called 'Intergraph', this is a mobilising system which allows the call takers to create an incident. The system links telephony, radio and a mobilising system, meaning that a call comes in, entered on the mobilising system and incident is created.

Any messages coming from an incident will be taken using the linked Airwave radio side of the system, any call coming in as a fire call will be taken using ICAD the mobilising side of the system. The two are linked during incident management.

The system creates an incident and it assigns resources to that incident so, for example, a fire engine attends an incident, the crews would pass a message and the control operator would pick up a call sign of

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the appliance in attendance and it would link the incident with the radio and allow you to type onto the log the radio message.

The log can include details such as information passed to Control from outside agencies, for example the environment agency, a message passed via radio from the crews or officers attending an incident, a request for police or anything to do with that particular incident.

In order to establish what type of appliances attend an incident, or the number needed, the call taker should ask the caller what is the nature of the incident they are reporting. This then allows the call taker to mobilise the appropriate resources to the incident. The number of appliances recommended for an incident is automatically suggested by the computer system. The system can be overridden, if required. An example of this may be when an incident requires a two pump attendance but the information that I may be given by the caller suggests that it only requires a one pump attendance. A 'pump' is a fire engine.

I can also increase the number of resources to an incident, for example, when the control room is receiving a large number of calls to a particular fire it may be decide to mobilise an extra engine to this incident, this is a decision that I can make.

Team Leaders, as supervisors, do not normally answer fire calls- as this takes them away from the supervisory element of the role. However, there are times when team leaders have to take 999 calls as the calls are stacking up, all staff have been recalled and there is no one else in the control room to take the calls.

In a major incident, we would inform the Duty Operations Manager and Senior Operations Manager, Tessa TRACEY, this is dependent on the incident in hand.

North West Fire Service has a 'buddy' system with London Fire Brigade, this allows calls to be answered by us, if the necessity arises. I believe the buddy system has been in place since 2014. I have never experienced an 'overspill'.

If London Fire Brigade are moving to their secondary control or are having difficulties mobilising, the 'buddy' system gives us the ability to answer their calls for a short period of time. North West Fire Service also have 'buddy' system agreement with Warwickshire, and West Midlands Fire Services. The calls that are received into the control room can be varied.

Fire Safety Guidance (FSG) is given to 999 calls in which a person or persons are trapped inside a building, for example, and are unable to escape. The idea of an FSG is to provide advice around survival and safety until the firefighters arrive at the scene. The advice that is given can range from telling

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someone to keep low (stay near the floor), try to prevent smoke from entering their room, keeping together and opening windows, if possible. I try to stay on the phone to the caller for as long as possible, normally waiting for the fire crews to arrive. There is no set time that a call taker has to remain or terminate an FSG call.

I have handled approximately five FSG calls within my career. I dealt with one in the North West fire service around twelve to eighteen months ago- this involved a domestic property with persons trapped. I remained on the phone to her until crews arrived on scene. There is no set time when I have to terminate the call. Most operators will remain on the phone, depending on the situation and build up a rapport with the caller to assist in keeping them calm. If a person is trapped then a CRO would normally remain on the phone.

I have not received any FSG training since I transferred to Warrington but completed my FSG training in Lancashire. The training I have received has mainly been generic and around domestic properties and not around high rise buildings specifically. I don't think there is a distinction between a high rise and a domestic property.

As a matter of course, I would normally ask for the caller's name to build a rapport.

I am aware of advice to 'stay put' during an FSG call, this means that the person or persons who are trapped are advised to remain where they are. I have not previously had to give advice on whether to stay put or leave on FSG calls as the calls I have dealt with previously have had persons trapped with no alternative but to stay put within the building. There is a computerised 'prompt' within the control room that shows suggested questions and guidance that can be given to the caller. There are also paper prompts that the CRO's can also refer to.

Up until the Grenfell Fire, I had not had to give advice about leaving a property

On 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017, I was a team leader, on my last night shift- this was my fourth shift of the tour before I had four days off. I started at 1900 hours on 13 June and finished at 0700 hours on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

On that night, there were two team leaders and five CRO's covering the shift. Six were from Team Three, my team and another was from Team One.

It started as a normal shift and I don't recall anything out of the ordinary happening initially, the control room was steady with calls from around the North West region until around midnight. We had around half a dozen calls after midnight that we were working through such as small vehicle fires and fire alarms. I was aware that a call was received from British Telecom (BT) requesting permission for the control room to be used as the 'overspill' for London.

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I also spoke to the BT operator who was requesting permission to pass a call through for London stating that the waiting time for a 999 call to be answered was taking around seven minutes. I said it was OK to use us, as per the longstanding agreement of the 'buddy' system.

The London Fire Brigade and North West Fire Service have a 'buddy' system agreed since 2014, this means that in the event of a large number of calls, assistance to answer 999 calls will be met. This 'buddy' system applies throughout the country between different fire services.

I took two calls that night and also called one caller back. The first call I took was at around 0200 hours, it was a lady on the 20th floor, who sounded quite upset. She stated that she was in the flat with her husband and three children and wanted advice on what to do.

I knew this was a FSG and gave her safety advice on staying low and opening a window however the caller told me the smoke was getting worse. The caller asked me if she could give water to her child as it was choking and I said that she could, she told me that the fire was below them. This was the first time I realised the building on fire was a high rise.

At the time of this call, I was aware that other calls were being taken by other operators and so I knew that other calls had to be answered. I was very conscious of the fact that we had no capacity to take any other calls. I gave the female caller fire safety guidance and tried to reassure her that fire crews knew where she was would be coming to her shortly.

I took the decision to end the call with the caller, which is something I don't normally do. This was the first time I have ever terminated a FSG call however other calls needed to be answered. The control room was taking calls from London as well as calls from the North West region.

At the time of the first call, I was not aware of the full scale of the incident in London

I contacted Ged BASSON, the Duty Operations Manager, when the request for the overspill was made and informed him that something was happening in London. He rang back around 20 minutes later and he told me he was coming into work. When Ged arrived into the control room, he switched on the television within the control room and switched on the radio to the London channel so we could hear what was happening on the ground.

London has its own talk group so we could hear there were 20 pumps and then to forty pumps. The television provided us with a visual aid whilst my fellow Team Leader, Paula CRAIG passed on information back to London control. Paula was speaking to a lady in the London control room called Alex and she was passing on information to her. We had been given a different telephone number when we came on duty and we told that the London Fire Service had moved into their secondary control and so the

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number for London was handy as it had been placed on the whiteboards. Paula was in constant contact with London to update them.

Initially, the television within the control room was switched on, prior to that there had been no news channel on. The television was put onto a news channel that was covering the Grenfell Fire. After my first call, the television went on and that was the first time we were fully aware of the situation.

The second call I dealt with was put through by the BT operator however it had not connected. I rang the mobile number back and he didn't seem as if he wanted to stay on the line. He was in flat 115 on the 14th floor and I passed the information on, he didn't want to stay on the line.

As a supervisor, I can monitor calls and for a short period of time, I listened to one call taken by Aisha, one of my CRO's. I went over to her and stayed with her for a short time, this was after I answered my calls. There were no calls waiting to be answered and having heard the nature of Aisha's call, I decided to walk over to help her.

Aisha was talking to a person who was trapped, the person had moved and there were a number of other people inside the same room, around ten to fifteen people. The female caller was distressed and Aisha was trying her best comfort her.

I feel guilty that I had to terminate the call I had with the lady I was talking to, that will stay with me forever because I had to let her go. I didn't know the outcome of my call, Aisha's was particularly distressing because she lost the caller on the actual call.

We were giving the advice to stay put and my colleague Sue PIMBLETT had gone through a lot of safety advice with the caller she was talking to. The caller was very distressed and Sue managed to calm him and had gone through the process of fire survival but then we got the instruction from London that the advice to stay put had changed. This came directly from London via a phone conversation with Paula CRAIG, another Team Leader. I felt all the good work that Sue had done had been undone. This was very difficult to deal with, the fact that Sue had managed to do everything right but had to change advice and get the caller and his wife out of their flat. I feel that the advice we gave them had a direct impact on their outcome, that's very difficult to deal with.

The advice to stay changed around the time of the last call that came into the control centre.

It was only after four or five calls, that I was aware that the incident in London involved a tower block and the news gave us a visual of what was happening. None of us imagined how bad it was there, I found it helpful to see however others found it distressing. It helped me as I knew what I was dealing with.

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I have never heard of Grenfell Tower before this night.

North West fire took nineteen calls relating to the Grenfell fire. I would describe the feeling within the control room as 'numb' after the final call was received. We still had three hours left of our shift and so we tried to have a break afterwards. It was important people needed time out of the room but we were still receiving calls from the North West region so we had to carry on.

The control room was very quiet and at the end of the shift, I got the feeling that everyone wanted to just go home. We were all going onto rest days and people just wanted to leave.

We were offered welfare and I think most people declined any immediate help however as the days went on and I had time off, the feeling changed within the group of people. We chose to do a team brief on the second day having listened to the feedback from some CRO's on our first day back to work after the fire. They told me they had been affected by what they had dealt with.

The four days off caused people to dwell on what had happened so I decided a group discussion may help them. I have been offered trauma counselling, if I feel I need it.

Since the Grenfell fire, there have been changes in how we deal with incidents involving high rise buildings, in particular, questions that the computer systems 'prompts' us to ask the caller. For example, as soon as you become aware it a high rise, questions are asked and then put onto the log. I don't recall the exact questions that are asked.

This has happened as a direct result of the Grenfell fire.

There has been subsequent contact between our control room and London, this is more of a colleague to colleague conversation. It is nice to hear good news, I heard last week that the caller speaking to Sue survived and wanted to hear that news, that changed everything. I thought they wouldn't survive and to hear that they lived is good to hear.

I have never experienced anything like the Grenfell fire before in terms of the scale of loss of life.

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