

Grenfell Tower Inquiry:

Survivors and bereaved give evidence—“We will not be silenced anymore”

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The official inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire of 14 June 2017, which claimed 72 lives, has been hearing testimony from survivors, relatives and the bereaved about the events of that night.

The Inquiry is separating evidence about the night's events from submissions on wider issues concerning the responsibility for the fire of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)—which managed the building on its behalf. These are scheduled for Phase Two of the Inquiry, which will not begin until after December.

This is confirmation of the Socialist Equality Party and Grenfell Fire Forum's insistence that the Inquiry will not bring justice. Established by the Conservative government under the provisions of the 2005 Inquiries Act, the Inquiry has no powers to prosecute. Its fraudulent character was epitomised by chairman Sir Martin Moore-Bick's statement that issues of a “social, economic and political nature” will not be part of its deliberations.

The separation of submissions is part of that process, but the evidence nonetheless confirms that the Grenfell fire was a social crime.

Survivor testimony reveals a devastating picture of official negligence before and after the fire. Witnesses commented on the absence of sprinklers, the lack of smoke alarms in communal areas, and the inadequacy of one stairwell as an escape route. Many said fire alarms had not yet been activated by the time they left their apartments on the night of the fire.

The eyewitness accounts make for harrowing reading.

David Benjamin, who was staying with his partner on the fourth floor, said “the worst thing [was] seeing those people screaming for help [at their windows] and not being able to do anything.”

Tiago Alves, a university student had lived in Grenfell Tower most of his life. He described seeing people at their windows inside the burning building and “hearing the screams and cries... They ran through you and even now I cannot sleep well and tense up when I remember these cries. They were cries for help.”

Alves has only been able to resume his studies part-time because of the trauma. His younger sister, Ines, went straight into a GCSE Chemistry exam hours after the fire, although she had to abandon later exams because of the impact of that night. Like many other witnesses, Tiago and Ines were still living in temporary accommodation when they submitted their statements.

Alves said that outside the building he had heard someone asking whether the architect had been contacted to confirm what materials were involved. He described seeing the fire come out of the flat and ‘roll under’ the cladding, setting fire to it: “I could see that fire was escaping into the cavity between the insulation and what I thought was aluminium cladding.”

The Alves family lived on the 13th floor. Their father, Miguel, said he had been aware of notices advising residents to stay indoors in the event of a fire but had insisted they leave.

Meron Mekonnen, who lived on Grenfell's 19th floor, said during the refurbishment KCTMO and contractor Rydon had advised them of the “stay put” policy. She was unconvinced that the front door they had fitted was a fire door, but KCTMO did not answer her complaint. On the night of the fire, as the tower burned, she ignored being told to stay put and made her way out.

Witnesses pointed to many problems hampering the London Fire Brigade on the night. Christopher Roncolato, who lived on the 10th floor with his father, said that as a boy he had played football on the site where RBKC later

built an Academy. It was good they built a school, he said, but its location blocked fire access to the Tower and this was not safe.

The refurbishment raised other safety concerns. Fourth-floor residents noted that a hose had been removed, along with fire extinguishers. There was a general lack of information on fire procedures.

Shahid Ahmed, a leaseholder on the 18th floor, was concerned about these issues because his wife, Sayeda, had been injured in a fire there in 2010. At that time, there had been signs advising evacuation in a fire, but these were removed when Sayeda began her personal injury claim. Shahid said there was no adequate fire information after that, although some signs about the stay put policy were put up in March 2017. There was no current Tenants' Handbook.

Witnesses indicated other problems in the refurbishment that contributed to the fire. There were repeated complaints about poor kitchen windows and air vents, which were not sealed properly, fell out, and had to be replaced. Others complained about pipework being left exposed.

All criticised the attitude shown by RBKC and KCTMO during the refurbishment and afterwards. Many said the TMO were dismissive of queries and complaints and provided little information.

Alison Moses said the door to the stairs on the fourth floor did not close properly. A spring broke early in 2017. KCTMO fixed it, but "I am not sure what they did to the door. The slamming stopped but the door was always ajar and never shut after that."

The Jafari family, on the 11th floor, were tenants of the Notting Hill Housing Association, which had agreed the proposed refurbishment changes with Rydon. Nadia Jafari said that the Housing Association was no longer checking the property monthly, as when they first moved in.

In spite of the official effort to arbitrarily separate the disaster from larger social and political issues, witnesses drew their own connections.

The statement of Ed Daffarn, who lived on the 16th floor, was recorded. He described how the Grenfell Action Group (GAG), of which he is a member, had two Freedom of Information requests—concerning decision-making around the refurbishment—turned down on the grounds that it might "prejudice the commercial interests of the contractor," Rydon.

He noted that had that information been made available it may have revealed that two months earlier a decision was made for more expensive zinc cladding, due to go on

Grenfell, to be been swapped for cheaper, combustible plastic-filled cladding. This decision saved RBKC almost £300,000 but was critical in turning a small kitchen fire into an inferno that took 72 lives.

Daffarn said, "If we had seen that they had replaced non-combustible materials with combustible materials we could have publicised it and campaigned against it." He added, "I didn't have the information I needed to know just how unsafe our homes really were. The thought that if I had been given this information I could have done something about it continues to cause me anguish."

Fourth-floor resident Jenny Dainton summed up the feelings of Grenfell's survivors.

"This fire should have never of happened," she said. "My current overriding feelings are one of anger. Now when it is too late, people are finally listening to us. For too long we were ignored by the RBKC, the TMO and their contractors, who were driven by greed and a hunger to cut costs. They did not heed residents' warnings and failed to ensure we were safe in our homes on 14 June 2017. We will not be silenced anymore."

Witnesses said the lack of information and the cavalier treatment by RBKC did not end with the fire. After praising the community response to the fire, David Benjamin said, "The TMO and RBKC were nowhere to be seen."

Others spoke of the Council's rudeness and insensitivity, with no help or advice being received even on how long displaced residents were expected to be in temporary accommodation. Nadia and Maria Jafari were not told for three weeks that their father had died, although his body had been identified and a post mortem conducted.



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