

Grenfell fire campaigner Amanda Bickles committed suicide

By Barry Mason
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A Westminster coroner's court inquest heard that Grenfell fire campaigner, Amanda Beckles, had committed suicide. The coroner, Dr. Fiona Wilcox, gave the cause of death of the 51-year old woman as asphyxia. Amanda lived just 300 metres from the Grenfell Tower block and witnessed the devastating fire on June 14, 2017, in which 72 people died.

Police were called to her flat on December 13 last year and forced entry after concerns were raised for her welfare. A note on the bedroom door warned the room was filled with gas. Fire fighters wearing gas masks entered the bedroom and found Beckles dead.

Police found another written note in the flat which was read out to the inquest jury. It stated, "By the time you read this I will have passed. I need to let you know that there is nothing you could have done to stop this from happening... The Grenfell Tower fire has affected me badly. I had hoped the worst would be over but 17 months after I still suffer from acute anxiety. I really don't know why it has affected me so badly, but it isn't a life worth living."

The inquest held last month was told Amanda had sought therapy after witnessing the tragic fire. She also attended the first phase of the Grenfell Inquiry, which included many survivors and bereaved giving harrowing testimony on the events of that night. Speaking to London's *Evening Standard*, Elizabeth Abrahams, an outreach worker who attended the Grenfell Inquiry with Amanda, said: "She advocated on behalf of so many people in the community. She found the nature of the inquiry so traumatic—we needed to support her."

Amanda was anxious about her mental health and financial difficulties and showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The inquest heard that Amanda's savings were running out, that she had to apply for welfare benefits, and was at risk of eviction from her home.

Christine Coh, a mental health officer told the inquest, "I felt that I knew her very well... she was a private person. She had problems with confidence and wanted to get back to work. Her anxiety got worse around the time of the Grenfell fire anniversary and she was having a bit of financial

difficulty. She felt 'dehumanised, degraded and humiliated' by the benefits system."

In the aftermath of the fire, Beckles founded the Grenfell Tower Community Monitoring Project (GTCMP) and acted as its coordinator. She had worked as an independent community engagement/social researcher consultant for more than three years for several local authorities, including Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark and Ealing, but became critical of the way they delivered services to people.

This spurred her to work independently to help community groups access services and help. She strived to assist in whatever way she could the disadvantaged in society, including those with mental health or learning disability problems.

The main purpose of the GTCMP was to "hold the [Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea] council [RBKC] to account in regard to housing and support services provided to the communities affected by the fire."

Even the official watchdog set up by the government in the aftermath of the fire, the Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce, states that the council is still failing its residents. Its latest report notes that in some respects RBKC is "going backwards."

The taskforce's fourth report, issued June 2019, noted, "Whilst progress has undoubtedly been made we remain concerned that RBKC is not yet achieving the level of performance in its recovery effort that we have consistently suggested they aim for... In many ways RBKC was a broken organisation in the autumn of 2017. It has repaired itself, and in some areas, it functions well. However, it is still some distance from being a high performing organisation that has the confidence of many of its residents in the north of the borough most affected by the tragedy. We hope to be proved wrong, but we are unconvinced that the current pace of change will achieve this in the foreseeable future."

Amanda spoke out at meetings in the area and in the media [see videos on right hand column of linked page] raising many criticisms of the government and local

authority over the fire and their total lack of empathy for those suffering its impact.

After Dame Hackitt's inquiry into building materials refused to ban flammable cladding in the UK, Amanda told BBC News, "I think it's outrageous. The cladding was one of the major causes of the fire. We all saw it peel down from the [burning] building ... It wouldn't have been that difficult to ban the cladding. It is banned in other parts of the world. I really don't see how she could write a report like that and not ban it in this country, it's a missed opportunity, it's absolutely ludicrous... the cladding needs to be banned." Speaking a year after the fire Amanda said of Hackitt's report, "It seems pretty callous to me actually."

The contempt that RBKC has for the bereaved and survivors, whose entire lives were devastated by the fire, was confirmed again when the July 2 RBKC council meeting voted to scrap a series of committees set up in the aftermath of the fire. One of them, the Grenfell Recovery Scrutiny Committee, had Joe Delaney as a lay member.

Delaney was a consistent critic of the council prior to the fire and a member of the Grenfell Action Group, which had forewarned that the "refurbishment" work on the tower and local area rendered it inherently unsafe.

He told the *Independent* that scrapping the committee would reduce scrutiny and accused the council of treating the tragedy as a "PR crisis", while to the community it was a "humanitarian crisis." He said the council wanted "Grenfell to go away."

The *Independent* reported, "Members of the public sitting in the gallery responded with rage, telling the chamber, 'we don't want it abolished', 'you're not listening' and 'you don't act in our interest'."

The trauma suffered by Beckles after the fire has affected many in the North Kensington area. An *Observer* article headlined, "The hidden mental-health legacy of Grenfell Tower," published June 9, highlighted the huge levels of mental health problems suffered by residents two years on from the fire.

The article noted, "In the year after the fire, 2,674 adults and 463 children were screened for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Last year the St. Charles Health and Wellbeing Centre was opened so that those affected by Grenfell could be treated in dedicated therapy suites. Virtual reality headsets have been used to aid in assessing ever greater numbers of people involved and hundreds of people are still coming forward for treatment." Among the treatments offered are bereavement counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy and psychiatric interventions.

At the time of her death, Beckles would have been aware that the first phase of the government's official inquiry was only just ending, after much delay, with no interim report to

be published for many months. Everyone was then informed that the second phase, dealing with the critical decisions and circumstances leading up to the fire, was unlikely to even start till the end of 2019.

The chair of the inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, stated that before the second phase could even begin, 200,000 documents would have to be meticulously examined and redacted.

At the same time, the Metropolitan Police—who have neither arrested or charged a single person in political and corporate circles in relation to Grenfell—announced that there would be no criminal prosecutions, if at all, until the inquiry was over. Given the drawn-out timescale that the inquiry and police "criminal investigation" are operating on, it could easily be well into 2022, five years after the Grenfell fire, before the inquiry is over.

As we wrote on December 14 last year, "The claims that it is not possible to continue the inquiry for another year are part of a well-rehearsed charade, played out ever since the inquiry was commissioned by [then] Prime Minister Theresa May... As with previous official inquiries, the ruling elite plans to drag out the Grenfell inquiry for as long as possible in the hope of dissipating public anger and to facilitate their cover-up."

Amanda Beckles did not die on the night of the fire but her sad, untimely death was without doubt contributed to by the callous indifference and contempt by the government, local authority and corporate elite, who are ultimately responsible for the Grenfell fire and by the judicial system and police, who have done next to nothing to bring anyone to justice.

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