

Background and Context

In the early hours of Sunday 11 December 2005, explosions at Buncefield Oil Storage Depot, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire resulted in a large fire, which engulfed a high proportion of the site.

Over 40 people were injured; there were no fatalities. Significant damage occurred to both commercial and residential properties in the vicinity and 2,000 people were evacuated on emergency service advice.

The fire burned for several days, destroying most of the site and emitting large clouds of black smoke into the atmosphere. Over 16,000 employees within the adjacent Maylands Industrial Area were unable to access work and 92 businesses were displaced for more than one week. 17 were forced to permanently relocate.

Overall, the explosion cost local businesses more than £70 million in lost stock, lost revenue and relocation expenses.

How the Topic was Handled

The community recovery was co-ordinated by the multi-agency Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce. In terms of community engagement, there were a number of significant issues that had to be addressed. Perhaps the most important issue in the early stages was obtaining good and accurate information (e.g. when roads can be accessed, when houses will be repaired, how to get work, etc.), which could then be passed to people in a format that they could trust, such as newspapers, newsletters and face to face contact.

The Borough Council also initially established a call centre to directly answer queries and concerns from members of the public. Queries were received covering a wide range of different issues, such as the impact on headstones in local graveyards and from foreign haulage firms whose vehicles were stranded in the cordoned off areas.

In the initial weeks following the incident, a number of information sessions were held in the nearby neighbourhoods. However, these were not particularly well attended and it became clear that people had very specific needs and issues which would then need to be picked up and addressed very much on an individual basis. Therefore, in the months following the incident, the majority of community engagement was focused on personal issues and longer term issues such as the future of the site.

A number of community forums, chaired by Lord Newton from the Buncefield Investigation Team, in the affected neighbourhoods, brought together a number of key agencies. Whilst this was a further opportunity to provide information on various sources of help, it also gave people the opportunity to ask questions and, perhaps more importantly, to get a response to their questions. A further forum, aimed specifically at children, was also useful in terms of identifying some significant longer

term issues (e.g. counselling for children) and proved to be another valuable method for disseminating information.

A number of community newsletters were also produced, on an ad hoc basis, by Dacorum Borough Council, on behalf of the Community Recovery Taskforce, and received favourable feedback from residents. The Borough Council became a funnel for the dissemination of information to local communities and their website, residents' magazines and the Dacorum Digest publication were used as ways of publicising community information. The Borough Council were also particularly pro-active in attempting to gauge what the concerns of local communities were, particularly in terms of obtaining information from partner agencies, so that authoritative and informed responses could be given to any media queries.

Although the Borough Council tried to assume an advocate role for residents, by providing a balanced and reassuring stance, community engagement was very much a two way process and a valuable mechanism for gathering community intelligence. The incident did not result in any significant community tension. Information was well managed, thus diffusing any potential tension or anger. However, there were some tensions in terms of moving on from the incident. Some people just wanted to get on with life, whilst other people wanted to remember the incident and take the opportunity to talk about what had happened. In this sense, memories were just as important to some people as practical issues were to others. There were also a small number of people who managed to create a specific identity out of the incident. Whilst it was recognised that people wanted to talk about the incident and their experiences, finding a formal mechanism for this was more challenging. As a result, the Borough Council established links with a support group, set up by members of the public, but it was also considered important not to interfere.

In the longer term, the incident has effectively become a key part of the wider community engagement agenda, delivered by the Borough Council's community development team, with a number of specific activities leading up to the anniversary. For example, a youth group video project provided an opportunity to talk about the incident and a children's art competition helped collect reminiscences of the incident. Other activities included the painting of artwork on billboards, a people's exhibition bus and a symbolic tree planting on the day of the anniversary. In the future, a tree trail is planned to help replace many of the trees that were destroyed and to highlight the number of footpaths and walks in the area. Community development projects are now being scaled down with two surveys planned relating to children and voluntary sector capacity. No further community forums are planned, unless there is something else to tell people (e.g. as a result of published reports or future planning decisions). Considerable funding was obtained to support the process of community engagement, including an EEDA grant of £93,000 to support community development projects. The Citizen's Advice Bureau and Dacorum Community Trust were also given £30,000. Nearly two years on, it is expected that the work of the Community Recovery Taskforce will continue, but with more of an emphasis on lobbying and continuing

engagement between key players such as the Borough Council and the voluntary sector.

Lessons Identified

Dacorum Borough Council has identified a number of key lessons relating to community engagement following the incident:

- The lead role, taken by the Borough Council's community development team, was particularly significant. They were already familiar with community engagement issues and also knew the local communities well.
- The process of talking to people was important and played a key role in identifying the issues that would need to be addressed.
- The deployment of staff out on the street in affected communities was a useful way of disseminating information and engaging with the community.
- The timing of public meetings is important, as is targeting the appropriate audience.
- The adoption of a flexible approach to the use of staff time was helpful. Staff were essentially freed up to do what they needed to do.
- Effective communication is essential. Communities need as much information as possible and on a regular basis. Efforts also need to be made to acclimatise people to receiving information and regular updates.

Contacts for Further Information

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Additional Documents

The [Buncefield Multi-Agency Recovery Plan](#) (version 1.1) includes considerable detail about the establishment of the Community Recovery Taskforce and particularly the work undertaken in the weeks and months immediately following the incident.

The [Report of the Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce](#) (December 2005 – May 2007) provides a comprehensive overview of the community recovery to date.