

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. The explosion also caused considerable damage to utilities, vehicles, trees, vegetation and the local wildlife population. Over 50 tonnes of potentially contaminated waste was removed from the surrounding area.

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 removal of debris such as burnt out vehicles and general building rubble on the public highway, as opposed to car parks or private land and the removal of contaminated trees and bushes in public areas were the biggest problems faced by Dacorum Borough Council. Damaged vehicles were taken to a secure location at the Borough Council's depot whilst ownership and insurance issues were dealt with.

Although the Borough Council's depot is a licensed waste transfer area, considerable liaison was also required with the Environment Agency regarding the arrangements and the terms of the license. There was also liaison with the Environment Agency, Government scientific bodies, existing contractors, licensed carriers and specialist contractors regarding personal protective equipment, the lifting and transfer of vehicles and waste, and the removal of disposal of trees and bushes contaminated with oil.

Waste was eventually taken to landfill, whilst vehicles were taken to a metal recycling facility. One of the key issues was whether the area was deemed safe to clear by the Fire and Rescue Service on the one hand, and the political and business pressure being exerted to get cordons and roads opened as soon as possible on the other. The majority of the work to remove debris within the cordoned area was undertaken within a week, whilst work closer to the site was deemed too dangerous for a number of weeks.

Specialist contractors removed 32 million litres of heavily contaminated firewater from the site which was subsequently stored and treated at a number of sewage treatment works. The process of disposing of the firewater is still ongoing.

Dacorum Borough Council's resources managed to maintain service delivery without mutual aid, which was offered by other local authorities, by splitting their operational team between dealing with the Buncefield incident and providing normal service. Initial co-ordination of the waste removal effort was channelled through Tactical (Silver) Command and then the Infrastructure Sub Group, which provided a valuable network for the removal of waste due to the range of agencies, in particular the utility companies.

Lessons Identified

Dacorum Borough Council has identified a number of lessons:

- It needs to be accepted in advance that there are going to be costs involved, considerable time spent waiting around for the area to be declared safe and general uncertainty.
- It is important that local authorities understand what they need to do and that the clear up is an important element of both the response and recovery phases.
- Links with specialist contractors, the Environment Agency and Government agencies need to be built and developed.
- The speed at which personal protective equipment is used up is considerable; you need to understand in advance what you need and how to get hold of it in large amounts at relatively short notice.

Contacts for Further Information

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