

Background and Context

On Sunday 11 December 2005, an explosion at the Buncefield Oil depot in Hemel Hempstead caused Europe's biggest peacetime fire since World War II. The site bordered the Maylands business area that was home to 630 businesses employing about 16,500 people. As well as severely affecting businesses, the explosion damaged hundreds of homes.

The emergency response lasted for six days, after which Dacorum Borough Council led recovery work to support affected residents and businesses and to deal with the environmental clean-up. Recovery communications were led by the Borough Council's communications team. This work is ongoing to highlight a multi-agency response to problems including unemployment, property damage, debt and trauma.

How the Topic was Handled

A Recovery Communications Strategy provided a short and medium term framework for communications.

Objectives included:

- Providing ongoing, consistent, co-ordinated and simple messages.
- Maintaining confidence in Hemel Hempstead as a location to live and work.
- Celebrating community strength and promoting community involvement.
- Presenting the damage to Maylands as a regeneration opportunity.

Work has included:

- 8 Buncefield update newsletters for residents (the most recent issued in July 2007) targeted at the worst affected homes and also sent to community outlets across Dacorum.
- Use of local media. In February 2006 the local free paper, Herald Express, gave the Council four pages of editorial to publicise community recovery work and to highlight services available. Press releases were prepared by Dacorum Borough Council's communications team as and when required. The level of interest from the press tended to fluctuate, peaking when reports were released. Inquiries covered a wide range of issues (e.g. impact on businesses, impact on people and the impact on the local economy).
- Ongoing updates of the Council's web site.
- Briefings and e-mail bulletins for employees and councillors who were seen as having a key role to play in delivering information on the front-line.
- Buncefield pages in the Council's magazine "Dacorum Digest".
- Community forums for residents and young people to provide two way, face-to-face communications.

- Preparation and publicity for ministerial and royal visits, the aim of which has been to lobby for assistance, keep recovery work on the radar of opinion formers and celebrate local resilience.
- Communications support and planning in the lead up to the anniversary in December 2006 which included events for residents and businesses. At the time of the anniversary, the Borough Council's communications team did not really know what to expect in terms of press interest. Fact sheets were prepared in liaison with other agencies so that any inquiries could be responded to. This also applies to upcoming issues surrounding any prosecutions or discussions on the future of the site.

Approach

Buncefield was progressive in setting up a recovery structure to handle the ongoing response beyond the emergency phase. The Council's communications team was tied into the recovery structure and so had an overview of the recovery operation.

The partnership approach to recovery has set the tone for communications. There has ongoing liaison with press and communications contacts from a host of other agencies involved in the recovery work. These have included:

- Hertfordshire County Council
- Three Valleys Water
- Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce
- Environment Agency
- Health and Safety Executive
- Health Protection Agency
- East of England Development Agency
- Government Office for the East of England.

Behind-the-scenes liaison and co-ordination between all the agencies ensured a managed approach to communications. All organisations respected protocols of sharing information releasing it to the public.

The co-ordinated communications approach has helped provide a single line of communication in to residents and businesses. This has kept messages clear and consistent, reducing the risk of sending out conflicting information.

Duration

There were high levels of communications activity from December 2005 to February 2006 during the emergency phase and at the start of the recovery work. Activity is ongoing, with communications supporting continuing recovery work, particularly with the local community. There was a resurgence of communications activity in the run-up to the anniversary in anticipation of and in response to renewed public awareness.

In terms of the Borough Council's communications team, the incident took priority over other workloads. Up until the incident, resilience planning had tended to focus on incidents which might last for up to 24 or 48 hours. However, the incident and the recovery efforts dominated the workload of the team for 2/3 months and the regeneration process has added additional workload.

Costs

- Costs have been kept to a minimum through use of existing communications channels such as the Council's web site and residents' magazine and use of local media.
- Newsletter production costs have been kept to a minimum by producing this as a photocopied document. The low budget approach is appropriate given that some recipients are in severe financial difficulty. The cost per issue of the newsletter, including distribution, is £1,500.
- Initial costs for Communications staff time and for communications activity were claimed back through the Bellwin scheme.
- In Autumn 2006, the Council obtained a grant from the East of England Development Agency to help fund community recovery work, including communications. The Council match-funded this grant in terms of officer time, including that of communications staff.

Lessons Identified

- Buncefield raised issues in terms of resilience and business continuity. Previous emergency planning exercises had prepared us for dealing with emergencies lasting up to 48 hours. We had not anticipated that we would be involved in a response that would dominate our work for several months. Fortunately, Dacorum has a reasonable sized communications team for a District (7 FTEs) but smaller teams would have struggled to cope.
- During a multi-agency recovery effort, it is essential that one organisation takes responsibility for co-ordinating information. That task fell to the Borough Council's Communications team and was one that we were happy to take on, but it was a role that hadn't been identified or planned for.
- Being tied into the recovery structure was invaluable and essential in allowing us to identify the issues for communication and messages early on. It was key in achieving our objectives to provide consistent and co-ordinated information between all the agencies.
- Effective and ongoing liaison with key people in the press offices of different agencies was important. It was also important to ensure that other agencies were made aware of any changes to information or websites.
- It is important that the provision of information is co-ordinated as members of the public do not want conflicting information from different agencies.

- Members of the public need to be given information in a format that is easily digestible or in one clear package.

Contacts for Further Information

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Additional Documents

The council's web site, www.dacorum.gov.uk includes information issued to residents, including the community newsletters.