

Report of the Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce

December 2005 - December 2007

“Speaking to you all, it quickly becomes apparent that there are really strong partnerships in place... Obviously it is these relationships which will undoubtedly bring about sustainable and lasting solutions to all the challenges to rebuild community life” HRH the Prince of Wales



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An investigation into the impact of the explosion on the local community and the recovery work carried out

Introduction

The explosion and subsequent fire at the Buncefield Oil Depot in Hemel Hempstead on 11 December 2005 had a massive impact on the community affected. This impact was not confined to residents living near to the depot, but also affected hundreds of people employed on the Maylands Industrial Estate.

In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, issues faced by local people were handled by the local authorities, the emergency services and voluntary organisations. However, when the fire was out and the emergency response stage was over, it was apparent that there would be an ongoing impact on many lives.

The response of the Strategic Recovery Group was to set up a sub-group, the Community Recovery Taskforce, to monitor and co-ordinate responses to the ongoing issues.

The Taskforce has brought together a range of agencies from the public and voluntary sector. It has enabled these agencies to pool their knowledge and experience of the changing situation and to work together to provide an effective response and avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. This resulted in the development of two key documents: an assessment of the impact, based on shared knowledge; and a Recovery Plan to bring together actions. Both documents evolved throughout the two years since the explosion, reflecting a constantly changing situation and community need.

This paper is the Taskforce's assessment of the impact of the Buncefield explosion on the local community and an outline of the work carried out to address the issues identified. It cannot be a complete picture – there will, inevitably, be impacts on individuals and families that have not been reported to or picked up by the agencies concerned. However, it does reflect the findings and experiences of the key organisations working on community recovery.

One of the early challenges faced by the Taskforce was a lack of easily accessible information on how individuals and communities have been supported by local agencies following other disasters. It is hoped that this report will provide guidance for other organisations should they face an incident of this scale in the future.

1. Setting up the Community Recovery Taskforce

- 1.1 The need for a Taskforce to look specifically at the needs of individuals and communities affected was identified by the Strategic Recovery Group within a fortnight of the explosion. The job of setting up and leading the Taskforce was given to Dacorum Borough Council's Director of Communities, Customers and Housing, whose departments had been at the centre of work with the public during the emergency itself.
- 1.2 The brief for the Taskforce was set by the Strategic Recovery Group:
- To provide and co-ordinate ongoing support to the residents affected and the wider affected community;
 - To ensure the provision of information to the residents and the wider community;
 - To facilitate assessment of the long-term impact on community cohesion and capacity;
 - To report progress back to the Strategic Recovery Group on a regular basis.
- 1.3 It was decided that the membership of the Taskforce should comprise representatives of the key public and voluntary sector agencies already working with affected communities. It was also felt that it was crucial to involve representatives of the communities affected, as these people were likely to be living within those communities and to be best placed to advise on issues facing local people.



The Dacorum Borough Council Streetcare team begins the clear-up operation

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- 1.4 The organisations identified were contacted by telephone and invited to send an appropriate representative. The first meeting of the Taskforce took place on 3 January 2006 and the membership at this stage was as follows:
- Dacorum Borough Council – Director of Communities, Customers and Housing, plus representatives from Housing Service, Communications Team and Community Development Unit
 - St Albans District Council – Community Officer
 - Hertfordshire County Council – representative from Adult Care Services (later replaced by Children, Schools and Families)
 - Dacorum Primary Care Trust – Peter Wright, Assistant Director, Public Health
 - Police – Local Inspector
 - Jobcentre Plus – Area Manager
 - Citizens Advice Bureau – Manager
 - Dacorum Community Trust (administrators of Recovery Fund) – Manager
 - Churches Together – local Minister
 - Woodhall Farm Community Association – Chair
 - Leverstock Green Village Association – Secretary
- 1.5 At the beginning, it was recognised that this membership might need to be fluid and would probably change as time went on. In fact, the membership changed very little. The group was joined in due course by the Community Liaison Officer for the Buncefield Incident Investigation Board and Dacorum Borough Council’s Learning Partnerships Manager. Involvement from some members diminished as time went on, but on the whole, the partnership has remained constant.
- 1.6 The Taskforce met weekly for the first two months and then moved to fortnightly meetings and later monthly meetings.
- 1.7 After those first two months, when the immediate issues had been identified and work to address these was in progress, the Taskforce felt that it would be helpful to reduce the size of the co-ordinating group and have sub-groups to concentrate on delivering work on specific themes. The two sub-groups focused on Health and Welfare and Community Rebuilding. The Herts Response to Redundancy’s Buncefield Group, which was represented on the Community Recovery Taskforce, dealt with issues concerning employment.
- 1.8 The sub-groups reported to the co-ordinating group at every meeting, so that all representatives were fully briefed on the work taking place and any new issues emerging.
- 1.9 The final structure and membership of the Taskforce is shown in a chart as Appendix 1 to this report.

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- 1.10 The Taskforce was chaired throughout by Dacorum Borough Council's Director of Communities, Customers and Housing. This has been important for a number of reasons. It has put the Borough Council at the centre of the community recovery, reflecting its closeness to local people and the central role played by the authority during the emergency period. It has ensured that the Taskforce is led by a senior officer, empowered to make decisions and able to keep the profile of this work high. Most importantly, there has been a consistent leadership and membership of the Taskforce throughout, enabling the group to work closely together and to build trust between the organisations as well as a detailed knowledge of the issues faced and how these have changed since the early days of the recovery.
 - 1.11 Dacorum Borough Council has handled the administration of the Taskforce. This has also been important, as the workload associated with organising meetings and the writing and constantly updating of the Impact Assessment and Recovery Plan has been extensive.
 - 1.12 During the second year, the need for frequent meetings gradually diminished. In September 2007, it was agreed that the group, whilst it would continue to network electronically, will formally cease to meet in December of that year. For the final meeting, all those who have attended meetings through the life of the Taskforce, were invited to attend a workshop to evaluate the work done and to share learning.
 - 1.13 By coming together so early and by working so effectively as a group, the Taskforce has been able to build a picture of the impact which individual organisations would not have been able to match. The involvement of the voluntary sector has been particularly crucial in providing detailed intelligence of the situation on the ground, which might not have been picked up by statutory organisations. Some individuals, for example, have not chosen to register with Jobcentre Plus or apply for benefits. However, they have often sought support from the Citizens Advice Bureau or other voluntary agencies. Had the Taskforce not brought different agencies together, these people would have probably remained 'invisible victims'.

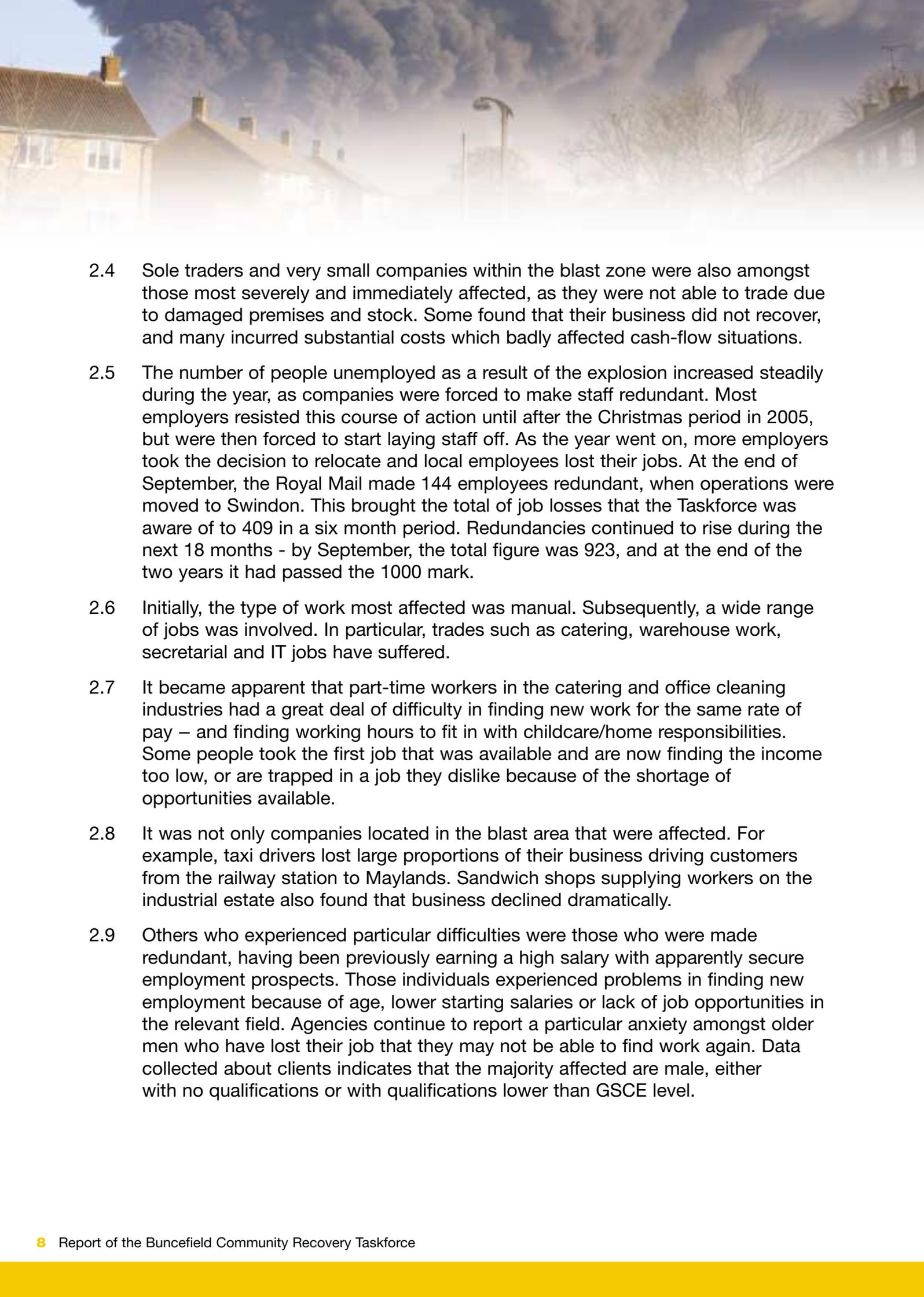
2. Employment Issues

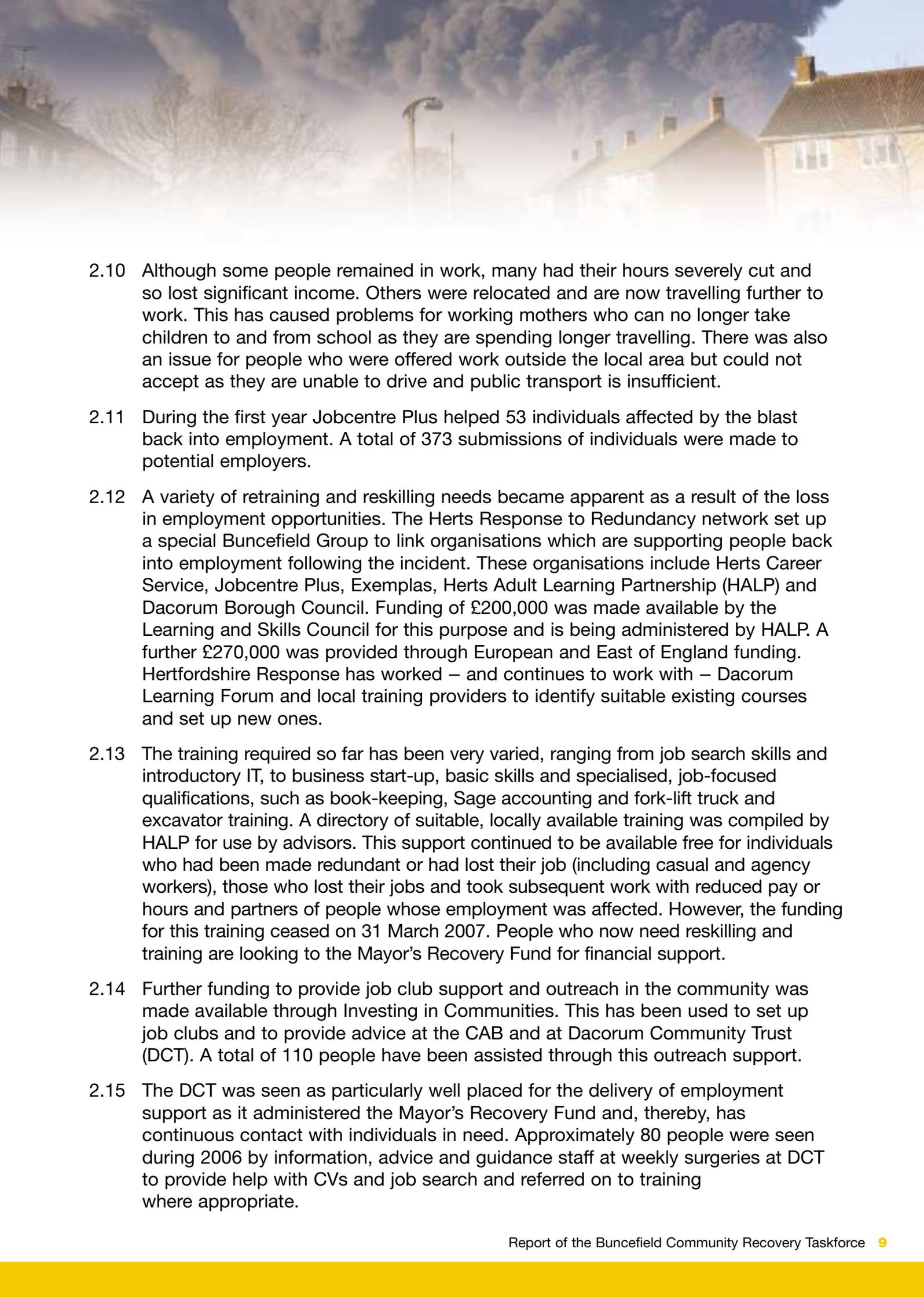
- 2.1 The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) has dealt with 311 requests for help and information directly related to the Buncefield fire. The vast majority of these were from people who had lost employment and earnings. The CAB secured national funding for a specialist employment rights advisor to hold weekly sessions for people affected. Dacorum Borough Council secured further funding to support this work from the East of England Development Agency (EEDA). By the end of 2006, employment cases dealt with by the CAB had diminished, and work on money advice, debt and benefits were increasing significantly.



A warehouse damaged in the blast

- 2.2 In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, those most severely affected were casual workers, usually employed through agencies. These people lost earnings immediately. Some were subsequently able to find work and so their losses were confined to a finite number of days. However, the damage to companies on the Maylands Industrial Estate resulted in a loss of casual and agency work and many remained unemployed.
- 2.3 A survey of local employment agencies early in 2007 found that the impact on these had been dramatic. In particular, agencies dealing with light industrial work (packing, warehousing, cleaning) and driving vacancies reported a significant drop in clients offering employment and an increase in candidates looking for work. One agency lost 70% of its clientele overnight. However, by early 2007 the picture was improving, with some companies returning to Maylands and an increase in opportunities for some types of work.

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- 2.4 Sole traders and very small companies within the blast zone were also amongst those most severely and immediately affected, as they were not able to trade due to damaged premises and stock. Some found that their business did not recover, and many incurred substantial costs which badly affected cash-flow situations.
 - 2.5 The number of people unemployed as a result of the explosion increased steadily during the year, as companies were forced to make staff redundant. Most employers resisted this course of action until after the Christmas period in 2005, but were then forced to start laying staff off. As the year went on, more employers took the decision to relocate and local employees lost their jobs. At the end of September, the Royal Mail made 144 employees redundant, when operations were moved to Swindon. This brought the total of job losses that the Taskforce was aware of to 409 in a six month period. Redundancies continued to rise during the next 18 months - by September, the total figure was 923, and at the end of the two years it had passed the 1000 mark.
 - 2.6 Initially, the type of work most affected was manual. Subsequently, a wide range of jobs was involved. In particular, trades such as catering, warehouse work, secretarial and IT jobs have suffered.
 - 2.7 It became apparent that part-time workers in the catering and office cleaning industries had a great deal of difficulty in finding new work for the same rate of pay – and finding working hours to fit in with childcare/home responsibilities. Some people took the first job that was available and are now finding the income too low, or are trapped in a job they dislike because of the shortage of opportunities available.
 - 2.8 It was not only companies located in the blast area that were affected. For example, taxi drivers lost large proportions of their business driving customers from the railway station to Maylands. Sandwich shops supplying workers on the industrial estate also found that business declined dramatically.
 - 2.9 Others who experienced particular difficulties were those who were made redundant, having been previously earning a high salary with apparently secure employment prospects. Those individuals experienced problems in finding new employment because of age, lower starting salaries or lack of job opportunities in the relevant field. Agencies continue to report a particular anxiety amongst older men who have lost their job that they may not be able to find work again. Data collected about clients indicates that the majority affected are male, either with no qualifications or with qualifications lower than GSCE level.

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- 2.10 Although some people remained in work, many had their hours severely cut and so lost significant income. Others were relocated and are now travelling further to work. This has caused problems for working mothers who can no longer take children to and from school as they are spending longer travelling. There was also an issue for people who were offered work outside the local area but could not accept as they are unable to drive and public transport is insufficient.
- 2.11 During the first year Jobcentre Plus helped 53 individuals affected by the blast back into employment. A total of 373 submissions of individuals were made to potential employers.
- 2.12 A variety of retraining and reskilling needs became apparent as a result of the loss in employment opportunities. The Herts Response to Redundancy network set up a special Buncefield Group to link organisations which are supporting people back into employment following the incident. These organisations include Herts Career Service, Jobcentre Plus, Exemplas, Herts Adult Learning Partnership (HALP) and Dacorum Borough Council. Funding of £200,000 was made available by the Learning and Skills Council for this purpose and is being administered by HALP. A further £270,000 was provided through European and East of England funding. Hertfordshire Response has worked – and continues to work with – Dacorum Learning Forum and local training providers to identify suitable existing courses and set up new ones.
- 2.13 The training required so far has been very varied, ranging from job search skills and introductory IT, to business start-up, basic skills and specialised, job-focused qualifications, such as book-keeping, Sage accounting and fork-lift truck and excavator training. A directory of suitable, locally available training was compiled by HALP for use by advisors. This support continued to be available free for individuals who had been made redundant or had lost their job (including casual and agency workers), those who lost their jobs and took subsequent work with reduced pay or hours and partners of people whose employment was affected. However, the funding for this training ceased on 31 March 2007. People who now need reskilling and training are looking to the Mayor's Recovery Fund for financial support.
- 2.14 Further funding to provide job club support and outreach in the community was made available through Investing in Communities. This has been used to set up job clubs and to provide advice at the CAB and at Dacorum Community Trust (DCT). A total of 110 people have been assisted through this outreach support.
- 2.15 The DCT was seen as particularly well placed for the delivery of employment support as it administered the Mayor's Recovery Fund and, thereby, has continuous contact with individuals in need. Approximately 80 people were seen during 2006 by information, advice and guidance staff at weekly surgeries at DCT to provide help with CVs and job search and referred on to training where appropriate.

2.16 People needing information and advice on retraining opportunities were – and continue to be – referred from the Job Centre and agencies including the CAB and DCT to Herts Response advisors, who include staff at the Bridge (Dacorum Borough Council’s Business and Training Centre) as well as Herts Careers Service. The help being given includes support with CVs and job applications, careers advice and referral to HALP for free courses and skills training. This work is ongoing.

“The Bridge is fantastic and I recommend it to lots of people”

Paul, attended a Job Club, now has a job in engineering

2.17 Outreach sessions held in February 2006 – using a bus to take advice and information into areas close to Buncefield such as Woodhall Farm, Leverstock Green and Maylands – were useful at the time. The need for further outreach sessions in evenings and at weekends was identified. Herts Response put on a two-day drop-in session at Adeyfield School, another neighbourhood close to the depot, on 23 and 24 October 2006 at which about 40 people affected by Buncefield were helped.



The recovery bus took advice and information into areas close to Buncefield.



3. Financial Hardship Issues

- 3.1 The Mayor's Recovery Fund, run by Dacorum Community Trust (DCT), had reached over £420,000 by the end of 2007. The vast majority of this was donated by Total, the operators of the oil depot, although there were also donations from the public, local churches and charities and other agencies.
- 3.2 A freephone helpline for people seeking financial assistance was originally run by Total, then for some months was provided by the Volunteer Centre Dacorum and is now handled directly by DCT.
- 3.3 DCT has made a total of 1,417 grants to date. Some applicants have received more than one grant, resulting in payments totalling over £357,000 being made so far.
- 3.4 Initially, these were mostly small amounts (usually £100) to alleviate immediate needs – 'sticking plaster' payments – but larger grants were subsequently given for longer-term problems. Many original clients have now been given further assistance and the DCT proactively contacts people already helped to monitor their situation.
- 3.5 Not all applications have been from Hemel Hempstead: a number were from people outside the area who were employed by affected businesses.
- 3.6 Most applications for grants have been related to loss of employment. This relates to approximately 70% of requests for financial assistance. However, grants have been given for a variety of purposes. Some examples are:
 - Replacement of Christmas presents in a residential home for children with special needs;
 - Support with expenses of people not living in their own homes (for example, insurance payments have not covered the full cost of meals);
 - Help with uninsured losses such as damage to fences and sheds;
 - Assistance to pay extremely high heating bills resulting from having windows boarded up during a very cold December;
 - Interim support whilst insurance claims are processed;
 - Help with rent and mortgage arrears for people whose employment suffered, preventing eviction, repossession and homelessness;
 - Payment for private counselling;
 - Purchase of work boots and equipment to help people obtain employment;
 - Support with costs to allow people to retrain and return to work (this now mostly concerns peripherals to training that HALP cannot fund);
 - Help with paying for structural surveys which insurers have not been prepared to authorise;
 - Replacement of treasured items or small comforts to help people over the trauma, for example the purchase of an aviary for a disabled person to replace one destroyed in the blast.

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- 3.7 A large number of requests have come from casual/agency workers. Some accumulated debt through losing a number of days' earnings but subsequently found work so needed one-off assistance. Others have needed ongoing support until they find employment. Some sole traders have also requested assistance due to short or longer-term loss of earnings.
- 3.8 The Taskforce was concerned that many casual workers have not accessed help because they were not already 'in the system' and may not access usual channels of information such as websites or newspapers. Agencies did become aware that a large number of immigrant workers, mostly from Eastern Europe, were affected, but these people proved extremely difficult to identify and contact. Employment agencies were contacted to establish the numbers of these people affected, but this remained a difficult issue.
- 3.9 The Mayor's Recovery Fund saw a significant increase in applications following the first anniversary events. Many people said that they had tried to cope without help until then, but had eventually found it impossible.

"Thank you for all the help you have given supporting me through a very difficult 18 months, both with vital money for living after losing my job because of Buncefield and helping with re-training. The good news is that I've now got a job because of it, and can now look forward to the future. Without the Recovery Fund my life would have been truly bleak. I don't know what I would have done"

Bob, a recipient of support from DCT

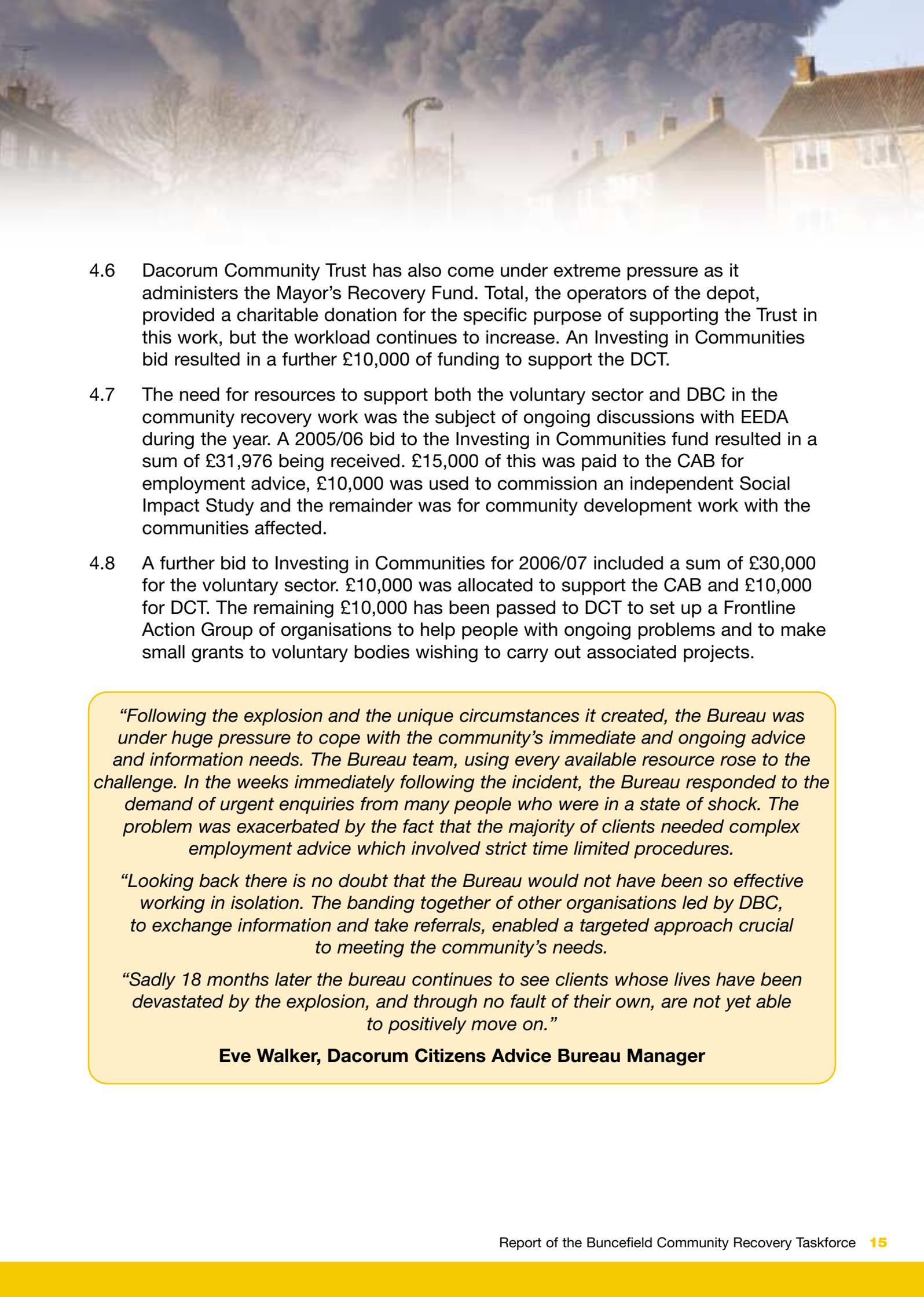
- 3.10 As time has gone on, demands on the Mayor's Recovery Fund have continued. Even as late as November 2007, new applicants were still coming forward, many of whom had struggled to manage without assistance for some time, but had finally sought help.
- 3.11 The CAB's specialist employment advisor reported a range of issues that have been raised. In particular, a number of employers did not pay the full amount of redundancy due to the employee and this caused financial difficulties. Other issues identified included employees being paid below the national minimum wage and one case of disability discrimination.
- 3.12 Some of the less obvious casualties of the incident in financial terms were people who were not actually made redundant, but whose hours were severely cut back. In addition, people whose employers relocated did not lose their jobs, but now incur additional expenses travelling to and from work. In one case, an employer had initially provided transport for employees to the new location. However, after reviewing year-end accounts, the company decided that transport costs were too high and were forced to make the employees redundant after all.

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- 3.13 DBC and St Albans District Council waived Council Tax from the date of the incident to 31 Jan 2006 for those households affected. Householders who were not automatically given this discount were able to apply to their district council for a waiver.
- 3.14 Jobcentre Plus received a total of 95 new benefit claims related to the incident during the first year. All claims were fast-tracked and paid as a matter of high priority. Of the 95 customers claiming benefit, 81 are no longer claiming as 53 are now in employment, ten stopped claiming for reasons unknown, 12 failed to attend their intervention appointment and six went on to claim Incapacity Benefit.
- 3.15 However, there continues to be concern supported by anecdotal evidence that there are number of people who have been reluctant to claim benefits or to register as unemployed for various reasons. These people will have found it more difficult to access support.
- 3.16 Agencies have been concerned about those who have been reluctant to ask for help and built up credit card debts in order to survive. These debts are now mounting and more people are approaching DCT for help, but it is feared that there are many more that are too embarrassed or proud to ask for support. Both the Community Trust and the CAB report that they continue to see new clients with financial problems each week.
- 3.17 Some householders complained of having been badly hit by the requirement to pay excess on insurance claims. Dacorum Community Trust did not make payments from the Mayor's Recovery Fund to cover excess payments, as these should be provided for by compensation in the future. Advice was issued to the public to log excess payments with Total's insurance helpline. Details were kept on file pending further information.
- 3.18 Problems for many people were exacerbated by inadequate or lack of insurance. Even when people were fully insured, they found that many of their costs were not covered. This was especially true for those who have had to stay in hotels whilst their homes were repaired. There are numerous stories of difficulties in dealing with insurers and this has been a major source of stress for many people.
- 3.19 An issue which emerged later in the year was that insurance premiums for house holds affected are rising sharply. In some households, a rise of over £500 per annum was reported. This will clearly put a further strain on many families.



4. Voluntary Sector

- 4.1 The Dacorum Council for Voluntary Service (DCVS) carried out a survey of the impact on the voluntary sector, as requested by the Community Taskforce. The survey was sent to 400 organisations – all the voluntary organisations affiliated to DCVS, community associations and churches in the affected area. A total of 100 responses were received which has given a good general picture of the impact to date.
- 4.2 Some organisations suffered immediately after the explosion through actual damage to premises or through lower attendance at events than expected. Much of this loss was addressed in the short-term.
- 4.3 Organisations are, however, apprehensive about future funding. Large companies have been a major source of charitable giving in the town. Some of this has already diminished and if this continues it will affect many voluntary organisations and their clients.
- 4.4 The main impact on the voluntary sector in the first two years was that pressure on certain agencies increased as a result of the incident, with workloads becoming vast, literally overnight. This stretched the capacity and skills of some voluntary sector organisations to their limits. The most affected organisations have been the Citizens Advice Bureau and Dacorum Community Trust.
- 4.5 The CAB had to call in specialist advice on employment law as many of their enquiries were highly complex issues involving claims such as breach of contract or illegal deduction of earnings. There was a massive demand for this help and waiting lists were high for some time. However, help was secured for the CAB from a number of sources. A claim for extra funding to the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux was successful and £10,249 was awarded for the specialist employment advice sessions. A further £15,000 and then £10,000 was awarded to the CAB through two bids to Investing in Communities made by the Community Taskforce, and Herts County Council also donated £5,000, allowing increased supervision to be put into place at the CAB to reduce waiting lists.

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- 4.6 Dacorum Community Trust has also come under extreme pressure as it administers the Mayor's Recovery Fund. Total, the operators of the depot, provided a charitable donation for the specific purpose of supporting the Trust in this work, but the workload continues to increase. An Investing in Communities bid resulted in a further £10,000 of funding to support the DCT.
- 4.7 The need for resources to support both the voluntary sector and DBC in the community recovery work was the subject of ongoing discussions with EEDA during the year. A 2005/06 bid to the Investing in Communities fund resulted in a sum of £31,976 being received. £15,000 of this was paid to the CAB for employment advice, £10,000 was used to commission an independent Social Impact Study and the remainder was for community development work with the communities affected.
- 4.8 A further bid to Investing in Communities for 2006/07 included a sum of £30,000 for the voluntary sector. £10,000 was allocated to support the CAB and £10,000 for DCT. The remaining £10,000 has been passed to DCT to set up a Frontline Action Group of organisations to help people with ongoing problems and to make small grants to voluntary bodies wishing to carry out associated projects.

“Following the explosion and the unique circumstances it created, the Bureau was under huge pressure to cope with the community’s immediate and ongoing advice and information needs. The Bureau team, using every available resource rose to the challenge. In the weeks immediately following the incident, the Bureau responded to the demand of urgent enquiries from many people who were in a state of shock. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the majority of clients needed complex employment advice which involved strict time limited procedures.

“Looking back there is no doubt that the Bureau would not have been so effective working in isolation. The banding together of other organisations led by DBC, to exchange information and take referrals, enabled a targeted approach crucial to meeting the community’s needs.

“Sadly 18 months later the bureau continues to see clients whose lives have been devastated by the explosion, and through no fault of their own, are not yet able to positively move on.”

Eve Walker, Dacorum Citizens Advice Bureau Manager



5. Health

- 5.1 There were no significant health concerns as a result of the incident, though in a survey of households surrounding Buncefield, out of 721 respondents, 110 (15%) reported that they or their families had felt unwell at the time of the incident because of the smoke from the fire.
- 5.2 The Health Protection Agency investigated the public health risk from the plume of smoke and found no evidence of such a risk as there was negligible contamination at ground level.
- 5.3 The Director of Public Health commissioned a random sample survey of the impact on health of the incident. This focused principally on the effects on those directly in the area of the plume of smoke and also on anxiety levels. The survey was sent to 5,000 households and had a 40% response rate. In a follow-up telephone survey, the main reason for non-response was a lack of concern about health effects.
- 5.4 The survey found that those people who were under the plume experienced a greater level of anxiety than those not directly under it. 50% of people expressed anxiety at the time of the incident, but seven weeks later this had dropped to 13%.
- 5.5 Between 11-14 December, a total of 244 people attended Accident and Emergency, mostly in Hemel Hempstead. Three quarters of these were from the emergency services. 127 had no symptoms but attended for a check-up. 117 had symptoms attributable to the fire. 38 members of the public showed symptoms, with injuries such as lacerations and sprains or respiratory symptoms. Most of the emergency services attendees were suffering with respiratory complaints such as sore throats. 90% of attendees were sent home with no need for any follow up.
- 5.6 GPs in Dacorum, Watford, Three Rivers and St Albans were asked to report any cases of patients whose health has been directly affected, but to date there have been no reports. There has been, however, mounting anecdotal evidence that people are being affected by post-traumatic stress syndrome. GPs were contacted in an effort to obtain more information on this problem, but only six people so far have been referred by their GPs for counselling as a direct result of Buncefield. NHS counselling has continued to be available to anyone who needs Buncefield-related support.
- 5.7 It is thought that many more people have sought support for stress through private counselling and workplace schemes (the Mayor's Recovery Fund has been used to pay for some private counselling sessions). It has been, however, difficult to gather accurate information on this. Residents and voluntary agencies have talked extensively about the impact of the incident on their mental health. People who have had employment and debt problems and families who have been displaced have been particularly affected.

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- 5.8 Families who were displaced from their homes, often several times, have clearly been under huge pressure from the difficulties of managing family life whilst staying with friends or in hotels. In addition, dealing with insurance companies and builders has been extremely stressful, sometimes described as ‘constant fighting’ simply in order to get repairs properly carried out.

“You could say that the constant upheaval of moving in and out continuously affects all parts of your life. It disrupts school, work, relationships, it pushes you to the point where you think you just can’t stand another second of it.

“You are forced to remove all that ‘makes’ you and your family and live in the sterile environment of the insurers choosing. You have no privacy or personal life, let alone family life. It strips the very fabric of your life.

“It is enough to break a marriage, let alone children. It is by far the worst experience we have ever had to endure. What is the hardest part is no-one else truly understands how far-reaching the effects are and it is too soul destroying to explain. The only others who understand are those who experience it. It makes you feel part of a small forgotten group of people”

A local resident whose home was badly damaged by the blast

- 5.9 The major concern of the health authorities is not the short-term effects of the explosion on health, but the longer-term impact of associated unemployment and loss of earnings on mental health, alcoholism and relationships. Both Adult Care Services and some voluntary agencies have echoed this view.
- 5.10 In a survey of households in the area surrounding Buncefield, out of 721 respondents, 397 (55%) said they had experienced worry and anxiety and 267 (37%) said that they had experienced stress as a result of the incident.
- 5.11 Many people were less in need of formal counselling, but simply needed to be able to talk about their experiences. In the early weeks, it was reported that many elderly and housebound people in particular were experiencing fear and trauma. Local churches played a significant role in addressing these needs and the Taskforce promoted a co-ordinated approach.
- 5.12 Immediately after the incident, the police visited a number of schools to talk to children and teachers for reassurance and educational purposes. A voluntary organisation, Time to Talk, visited schools to provide counselling to children aged 5-14, having been given initial funding for this from Hertfordshire County Council’s Children, Schools and Families and further funding from the Mayor’s Recovery Fund. This work is ongoing.

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- 5.13 It became apparent that many primary school children did not understand what had happened and were confused and upset. The Community Partnerships Service at Dacorum Borough Council worked extensively with schools during the year to address this in co-operation with Children, Schools and Families at Hertfordshire County Council. A Young People's Forum was held in June 2006 to discuss the concerns of young people from local schools. During October and November, information and presentations were rolled out to all schools in the area and teams including fire and police officers visited to educate the children about the original purpose and role of the depot, what happened during the incident and what might happen next. Dacorum Borough Council led this project and further work took place throughout 2007.
- 5.14 Time to Talk counselled over 60 children during the two years and continued to receive referrals throughout that period. At least one school, which had originally found no issues amongst pupils, subsequently contacted the organisation to request help with emerging problems. This supported the staff's view that the situation in terms of trauma was worse some months later than in the days immediately after the incident. Time to Talk reported a wide range of trauma experienced by children. Some continued to be frightened following the 'big bang' and were afraid to sleep in their own beds or go upstairs alone. Others were affected by being in temporary accommodation while their homes were repaired. Many were fearful that there will be another explosion and have needed reassurance.

"Counselling has been good 'cos it's made me stronger" **Boy age 7**

"You have really helped me find out what I want and how I feel. Thank you" **Girl age 12**

"I think counselling is the best because you get to express your feelings and play games like all about me!" **Boy age 9**

Comments book, Time to Talk

- 5.15 Some children have been badly affected by changes in their parents' employment – for example, if parents are seeing less of their children because they are having to travel further or live away during the week as their jobs have relocated. This impact on families and relationships is an area of growing concern. Relate relationship counselling service is expecting an increase in clients as a result of this and other pressures caused by the incident.

6. Communication

- 6.1 During the emergency itself there was a flood of information, both from local agencies and from media reports. However, in the weeks that followed the police and community organisations reported that local people were concerned that there was little information about the clear-up operation at the depot and the position with regard to matters like road closures – “It’s all gone very quiet”.
- 6.2 Residents have been keen throughout to know more about the Buncefield investigations and to be kept up-to-date with progress. The Buncefield Investigation Board, tasked with finding out what happened and why at Buncefield, has been keen to engage local people in a variety of ways.
- 6.3 Three Community Forums were organised by DBC, two in March and one in May. The Forums were held at Woodhall Farm, Leverstock Green and Adeyfield. The meetings were chaired by Lord Tony Newton of Braintree and attended by the Investigation Board, DBC Planning and Hertfordshire Police and Fire Service. The meetings were used to update local residents on progress with the investigation and respond to questions and concerns. Attendees highlighted a number of key local concerns about the incident and investigation. The meetings were very successful and attracted 300 attendees. Feedback was collected and was extremely positive. Further forums took place in 2007 and more information became available.

“Very well chaired in down to earth language, giving many people the opportunity to air their feelings. Much came to light that we didn't know”

Local resident

- 6.4 A Young People’s Forum took place on 8 June 2006 at the Civic Centre in Hemel Hempstead. Children and young people affected by the incident at Buncefield had an opportunity to hear directly about progress with the investigation and put questions to Lord Tony Newton. 120 young people attended aged 5-18 from 13 schools in Hemel Hempstead and St Albans. Feedback on this event was also extremely positive. This forum was short-listed for a Children Now award for good practice in championing the needs of children and young people.
- 6.5 Representatives of the Investigation Board also met with residents in St Albans affected by the incident, to respond to questions and concerns.

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- 6.6 A Community Debrief on the incident took place at Leisureworld on 3 May 2006, enabling local people to talk about the way in which the situation was handled by the emergency services and local authorities. 30 people attended and most questions focused on issues such as contamination, the investigation and the future of the site. The Buncefield Investigation Board attended to provide information regarding progress with the investigation.
- 6.7 There was a need during the year for regular and up-to-date information to continue be provided to the local community. Feedback indicated that the Borough Council was considered by the public to have greater credibility than national agencies and therefore took a lead in co-ordinating information. The Buncefield Investigation Board provided information and updates to be included in DBC publications.

"There was clearly a need for young people in Hemel Hempstead to have an opportunity to find out more about what happened at Buncefield. The young people who attended showed a great deal of interest and asked some excellent questions. In my view, the event was extremely well organised and worthwhile."

Lord Newton, Chair, Buncefield Major Incident Investigation Board

- 6.8 The Taskforce was particularly concerned that, despite widespread publicity, people continued to be unaware of the helplines available to them. Information was been targeted to directly affected residents by door-to-door delivery of letters and newsletters. A *Buncefield Update* newsletter was developed for this purpose by DBC and issues were produced and distributed to residents living close to Buncefield in February, March, May, July and November of 2006, and again in Spring 2007.
- 6.9 A special edition of *Dacorum Digest*, the Council's quarterly magazine, was sent to all households in the borough in March, and an anniversary issue of the *Hemel Hempstead Gazette*, the main local newspaper, in December included information on support available. In addition, posters publicising helplines were printed and distributed widely. Agencies used space in the People's Exhibition bus, touring affected areas from 9-11 December 2006 to signpost people to sources of assistance and advice.

6.10 Although the need for Community Forums diminished as there was little to report from the Investigation Board, there became a growing need for practical advice on issues like dealing with builders, insurance companies and solicitors. A need for increased legal advice to those affected also emerged, as well as counselling, debt advice and employment support.

Marketplace events were run by DBC in Woodhall Farm and Leverstock Green in January and February 2007 to provide this support. Although the numbers of people attending were small, these events were considered valuable in providing a further opportunity for people to talk about their experiences and get more information.

6.11 The local elections in May 2007 provided a further opportunity once again to remind people of the help and support available to them. A flyer listing key support organisations and their phone numbers was distributed to every household in Dacorum along with poll cards. This resulted in a new wave of enquiries, so was clearly of value.





7. Community Identity

- 7.1 During the year following the explosion, local people needed to be encouraged to talk about the incident and share experiences and feelings. This was not only cathartic, but also helped to bring the community together again and reinforce a sense of identity. The Highfield Highfliers, a local group experienced in voluntary and community work, worked with Dacorum Borough Council throughout the year on a reminiscence project to capture stories and memories of the incident and also anecdotes of how people were coping six months on. Community Forums, local events and lunch clubs were used to capture experiences. A DVD of these stories was launched to mark the first anniversary of the explosion.

“It was good because the community was listened to, and it was really interesting to hear their stories”

Sam, Ben, Johnny – young members of the Highfliers group

- 7.2 DBC also developed projects to allow local people to express their experiences, sense of identity and associations with the incident. These projects culminated in events to mark the first anniversary of the explosion, and some more permanent reminders of the blast in the form of public art works are being discussed. Discussions are taking place with local artists to explore this area. Funding for the community work was secured from Investing in Communities, with match funding provided by DBC and partner organisations.
- 7.3 One project, the Buncefield Treetrail, involves the planting of trees in a specific area to counter the effects of pollution on the environment and to recognise the number of trees destroyed by the blast. This is being developed with partners including the National Trust and Herts County Council and is linked to a school tree-planting programme. The seed collecting and planting sessions at Ashridge Forest were popular with local schools. A plaque at the ‘Buncefield Tree’, the first tree in the trail, was unveiled on the morning of the first anniversary of the explosion in Leverstock Green, the site of the blue light command centre. The Tree Trails project is being rolled out during 2007 and 2008.
- 7.4 Another project was an arts competition involving local schools, and culminating in a People’s Exhibition during the weekend of the Buncefield anniversary, which displayed artwork by local people reflecting their impressions, experiences and feelings of the incident. This exhibition was taken around relevant locations on a bus from 9-11 December 2006, so that as many people as possible had the chance to see it. Over 1,000 people visited the bus during the three days and many commented that the anniversary events had helped them come to terms with and move on from the whole incident.

- 7.5 A third project involved painting hoardings around a building site. The paintings represented the memories and stories of different people affected by the explosion and have attracted considerable interest. A leaflet explaining the stories behind the pictures was produced for the anniversary events.

“Thank you for giving the community people a chance to display their feelings, especially for the children.”

Julie, a local resident

- 7.6 The anniversary events proved to be helpful for some people in providing a degree of closure to the incident. For others, it proved an emotional experience which has been the catalyst to them seeking help, often for the first time. The support agencies saw a significant increase in enquiries and requests for help in December 2006.
- 7.7 There remains a concern that the affected area might be seen as an undesirable place to live in the future and that this could affect Council tenancies and house prices. In a survey of households in the area surrounding Buncefield, out of 721 respondents, 402 (56%) were concerned about a loss of value in their property. Discussions with local estate agents at the end of 2006 suggested that, in most cases, these fears had been unfounded, although the properties closest to the depot may have been affected to a degree. However, decisions about the future of the oil depot and proposed planning restrictions in the surrounding area are awaited with a great deal of anxiety by local people, and may yet have a major impact on the desirability of the area.



An arts competition involved local schools



7.8 The events run by Dacorum Borough Council with the community attracted 722 visitors and 519 participants. There has been extensive feedback, much of it focusing on the way in which events have helped people move on from the Buncefield incident.

“My name is Una Hewitt. We live 400 yards from Buncefield and on the morning of the explosion we were blown out of our beds. We’ve had an horrendous year trying to come to terms with all of this, but having seen this exhibition today and seeing how many other people were affected and in particular the children... has in a strange way helped me to begin to come to terms with what’s happened.

“I’ve never been able to describe the noise and the ferociousness of it and how frightening it was, but having heard it again now, I think perhaps I can start coming to terms with it and put it away and start trying to get my life back together.”

Una Hewitt, a local resident

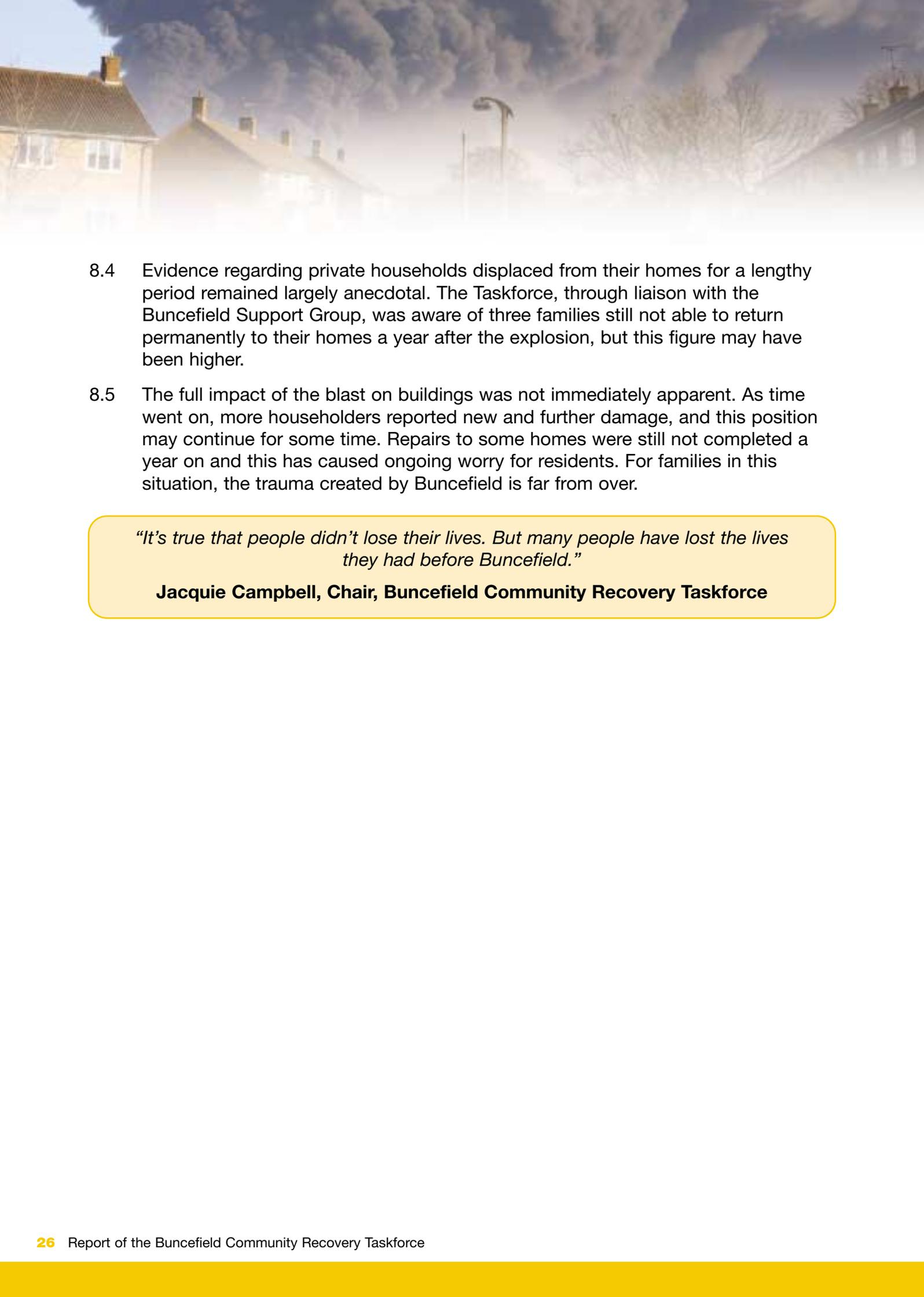
8. Housing

- 8.1 The only authoritative data relating to housing damage has been for council-owned property. 300 Council dwellings were damaged. The majority of damage related to windows and many of these buildings were repaired within weeks. Some internal cracking subsequently appeared, but this was not extensive and no significant structural damage was reported. All initial repairs to Council properties were completed by May 2006, although a few problems continued to emerge during the rest of the year.



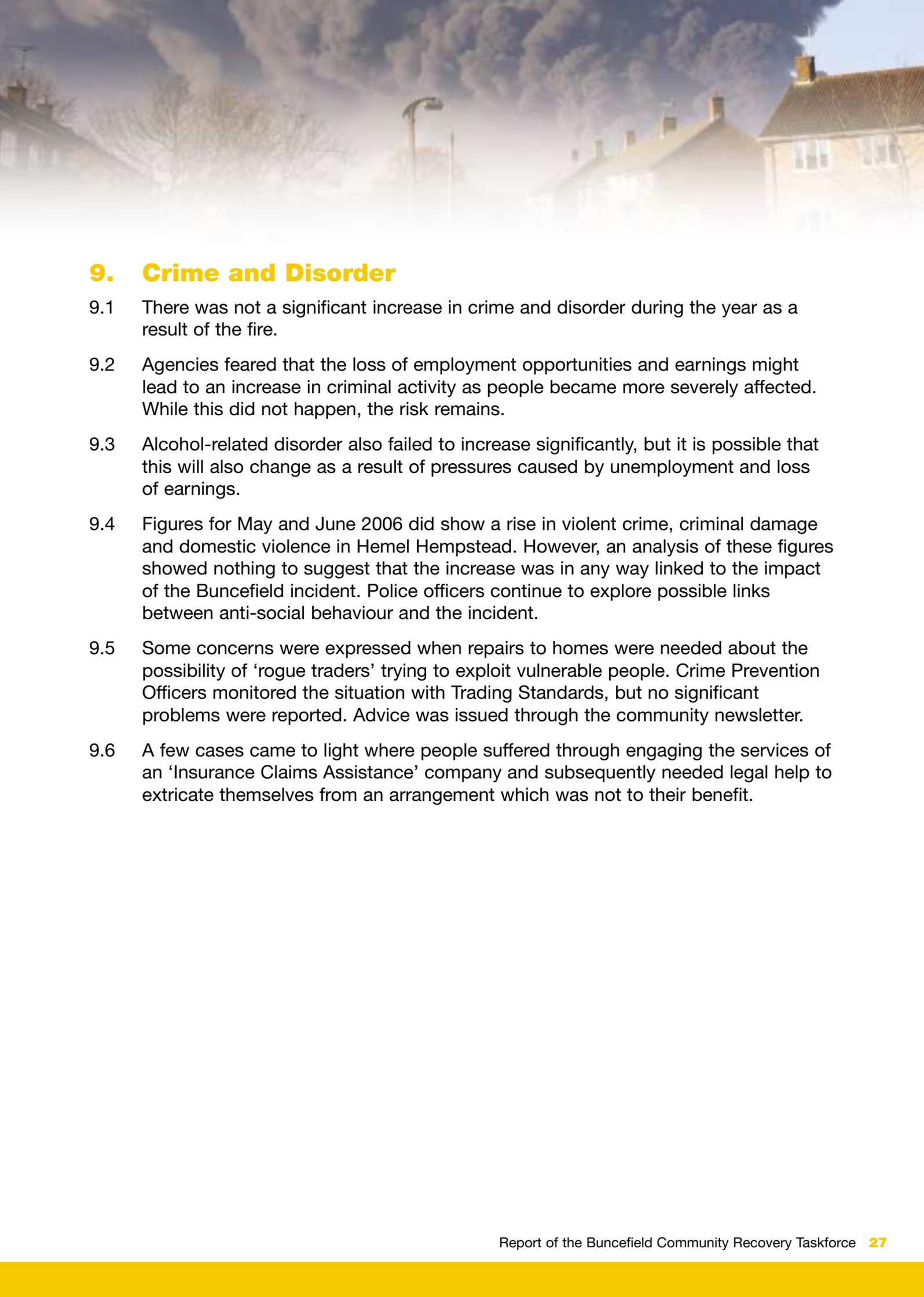
300 Council dwellings were damaged by the explosion

- 8.2 However, there was considerable damage to private property as well as council dwellings. In a survey of households in the area surrounding Buncefield, of 721 respondents, 76% said their property had been damaged in some way. The vast majority of damage related to broken glass, damaged window frames, roofs, doors and door locks and cracks in walls and ceilings. Other types of damage included loss of heating or electricity, smoke damage and damage to loft hatches, garage doors, carpets and furnishings. The majority of households reported that they were able to claim against their insurance for this damage.
- 8.3 A total of six households remained in temporary council accommodation for some months after the blast. Housing officers provided support for as long as was needed. Four of the households provided with temporary accommodation by the Council subsequently took up permanent tenancies in those dwellings.

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- 8.4 Evidence regarding private households displaced from their homes for a lengthy period remained largely anecdotal. The Taskforce, through liaison with the Buncefield Support Group, was aware of three families still not able to return permanently to their homes a year after the explosion, but this figure may have been higher.
- 8.5 The full impact of the blast on buildings was not immediately apparent. As time went on, more householders reported new and further damage, and this position may continue for some time. Repairs to some homes were still not completed a year on and this has caused ongoing worry for residents. For families in this situation, the trauma created by Buncefield is far from over.

“It’s true that people didn’t lose their lives. But many people have lost the lives they had before Buncefield.”

Jacquie Campbell, Chair, Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce



9. Crime and Disorder

- 9.1 There was not a significant increase in crime and disorder during the year as a result of the fire.
- 9.2 Agencies feared that the loss of employment opportunities and earnings might lead to an increase in criminal activity as people became more severely affected. While this did not happen, the risk remains.
- 9.3 Alcohol-related disorder also failed to increase significantly, but it is possible that this will also change as a result of pressures caused by unemployment and loss of earnings.
- 9.4 Figures for May and June 2006 did show a rise in violent crime, criminal damage and domestic violence in Hemel Hempstead. However, an analysis of these figures showed nothing to suggest that the increase was in any way linked to the impact of the Buncefield incident. Police officers continue to explore possible links between anti-social behaviour and the incident.
- 9.5 Some concerns were expressed when repairs to homes were needed about the possibility of 'rogue traders' trying to exploit vulnerable people. Crime Prevention Officers monitored the situation with Trading Standards, but no significant problems were reported. Advice was issued through the community newsletter.
- 9.6 A few cases came to light where people suffered through engaging the services of an 'Insurance Claims Assistance' company and subsequently needed legal help to extricate themselves from an arrangement which was not to their benefit.



10. Data Collection

- 10.1 It was crucial that accurate records were kept and linked in order that the longer term impact of the incident could be properly monitored as well as to prevent fraudulent claims in the future. Job Centre Plus, CAB and DCT all kept records. Jobcentre Plus in particular carried out an extensive mapping exercise in the first year to track and monitor the impact on local employment and benefits claims.
- 10.2 Advice was sought on how agencies might be able to share information on clients, whilst staying within the requirements of the Data Protection Act. The Information Commissioner advised that an exemption could apply if data was used to promote the welfare of the people concerned. A Fair Collection Notice was drawn up which organisations used to notify clients that data relevant to the impact of the Buncefield incident was to be shared.
- 10.3 The Taskforce has remained conscious that knowledge and information on the impact of Buncefield on local people remains incomplete, despite its best attempts. A questionnaire was delivered to 5,500 households along with the first newsletter in an attempt to gather more data which resulted in 721 responses. However, the Taskforce identified a need for a more in-depth assessment of the impact. A sum of £10,000 was awarded by EEDA to the group to commission such an assessment. This was carried out by SQW, the company that has carried out a similar assessment of the impact on businesses, and was published early in 2007. Dacorum Borough Council has also commissioned a further household survey to examine the impact on people's lives two years after the event.



11. The Situation Two Years On

- 11.1 Nearly two years later, for the majority of people affected the Buncefield explosion has become simply a memory – a dramatic event which caused short-term inconvenience, but not long-term problems. Damage to their homes has been repaired and their insurance claims have been settled. They have perhaps retrained and moved on to new jobs. They have forgotten the initial fear and remember the week of the explosion and fire with a degree of excitement. For these people, the Buncefield explosion has already passed into Hemel Hempstead's history.
- 11.2 For others, whilst the effects have not been dramatic, they have caused greater and more far-reaching problems. Some now have lower-paid, inconveniently located or less appropriate jobs. Some are still burdened with debts they incurred during those early weeks and months when they were without work temporarily, or when they incurred extra expense because of uninsured damage. Those who live close to the oil depot are concerned that the oil companies are starting to operate again and are very worried about the long-term impact on the value of their homes.
- 11.3 And then there are those for whom the Buncefield explosion was a catastrophic event which changed their lives for ever. Some are small business people, for whom the regeneration of the industrial estate will come too late because they have already lost their business. Some remain unemployed or with an income which no longer meets their needs. A small number lost their homes and possessions completely and have had to start again. Others have endured up to two years of building and repair work, daily battles with insurance companies and long spells of endeavouring to lead a normal family life while living in a local hotel. These people's relationships, children and health have suffered badly. They continue to pursue claims for compensation, and eagerly await the outcome of the investigation and a decision on liability – while acutely aware that no amount of money will restore their lives to the way they were before the explosion. These people are the true victims of Buncefield.

Conclusion

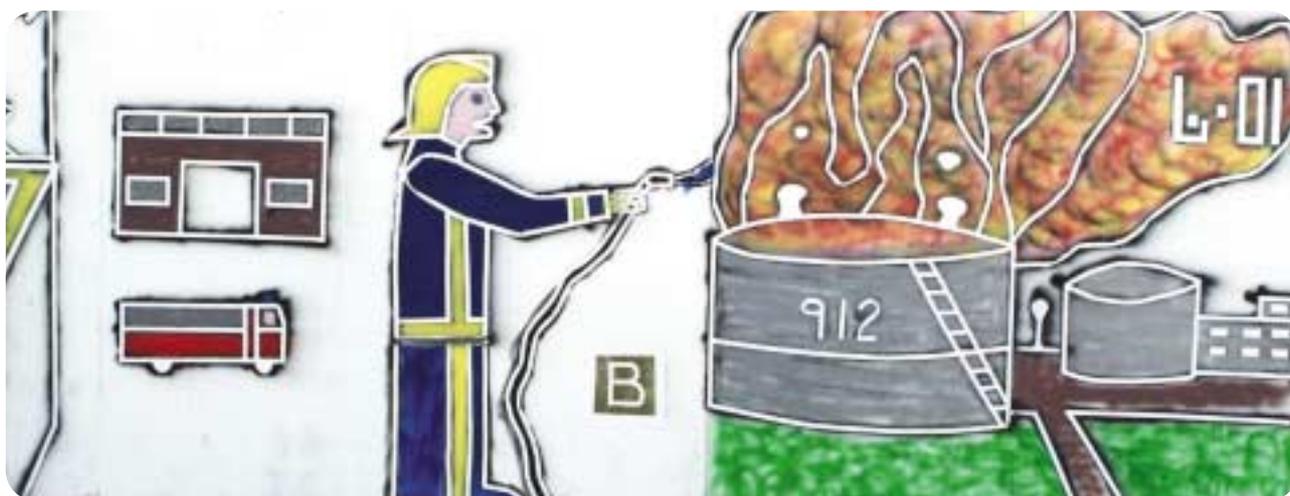
The impact assessment allowed the Taskforce to track and monitor the way in which the local community was affected throughout the year following the Buncefield explosion. It was clear at an early stage that the implications for many people's lives were massive and long-term. This has proved to be the case. New issues and concerns emerged during the last two years, so that the work to assist recovery has been constantly changing.

One of the biggest lessons learnt from this recovery work is that it is not short-term. The CAB and Dacorum Community Trust, in particular, continue to see new clients each week – people who have managed until now but can no longer cope with financial or emotional issues. For some people, the effects of Buncefield continue to dominate their lives.

Although the Taskforce itself no longer needs to meet to co-ordinate the recovery programme (which has been mainstreamed into the work of specific agencies) the organisations will continue to network in order to monitor future impacts and to do everything it can to help those who continue to be affected.

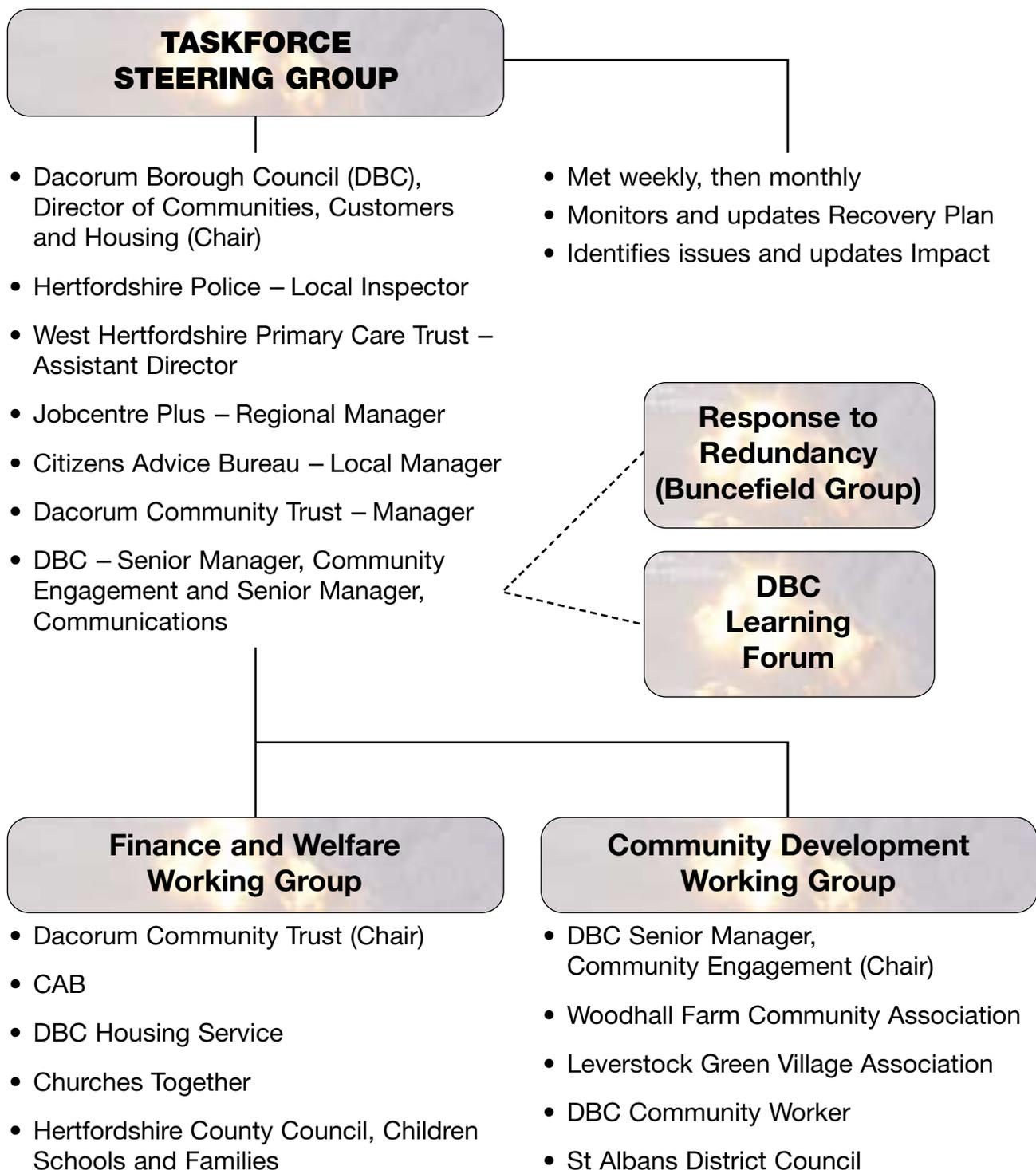
“Dacorum Borough Council's response to the needs of its community was a model of care and professionalism. The challenges it faced were enormous, almost unprecedented and they rose to the challenge with dedication and great skill.”

Simon Parr, Assistant Chief Constable, Hertfordshire Constabulary



Following the explosion, recovery needed long-term commitment

Appendix 1 Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce Structure and Composition





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