

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

In the initial stages of the incident, recovery issues were effectively considered and co-ordinated as part of the emergency response. However, the decision was soon taken to establish a multi-agency Recovery Group to co-ordinate recovery issues in more detail. The first meeting of the group took place on 13 December, under the chairmanship of Hertfordshire County Council's Director of Environment. Whilst the group was ultimately responsible to Strategic (Gold) Command, there would inevitably be an overlap with operational recovery related issues being addressed by Tactical (Silver) Command. Therefore, ensuring effective communications and liaison was a key issue.

It was intended from the outset that, as well as looking at short term actions, the Recovery Group would also be looking to put in place a more formal structure to effectively manage the longer term recovery process. As well as identifying a way forward for the Recovery Group, it was proposed that three sub-groups should be established to address short term physical issues (eg. infrastructure, utilities, maintenance, etc.), business recovery and community infrastructure and welfare.

It was also agreed that any political, elected official or stakeholder input would be more appropriately addressed directly through the Recovery Group, along with the generic issues of communications, finance and resources. In particular, communications formed a key part of the recovery structure. Although the Recovery Group co-ordinated the overall strategy, it was also important that there was effective liaison throughout the recovery structure and, after a period of time, communications staff from Dacorum Borough Council were directly involved in the work of the sub-groups.

It was also recognised that the handover from the emergency phase to the multi-agency recovery phase would be more effective if the recovery structure accommodated the outstanding strategic objectives from

Strategic (Gold) Command. The formal recovery structure and terms of reference for the Recovery Group and three sub-groups were agreed on 19 December. It was also agreed that Hertfordshire County Council's Director of Environment should continue to chair the Recovery Group in its strategic role. Chairs from Dacorum Borough Council and Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry were appointed for the three sub-groups and swiftly tasked with establishing appropriate membership, agreeing the frequency of meetings and developing actions plans. In addition, outstanding Gold Command strategic objectives were assigned to the Recovery Group or appropriate sub-group.

With the longer term recovery structure effectively now in place, Strategic (Gold) Command (ie. Herts Constabulary by this time) were formally notified that the Recovery Group was ready for a full handover of responsibility from the emergency response phase to the longer term multi-agency recovery phase.

Lessons Identified

A month after the incident, the Recovery Group undertook a structured debrief to identify any lessons arising from initial recovery efforts and the establishment of the formal multi-agency recovery structure. The following were identified:

- Disasters that affect businesses also have a huge community impact.
- The sheer scale of the recovery phase and the number of agencies that need to be involved.
- A co-ordinated multi-agency response is important and there needs to be good communication channels between those dealing with the wider recovery and those responding on the ground.
- There is a need to engage directly with all communities, providing clear information.
- Having a clear understanding of the command structure is useful.
- There is a need for communications and information to be co-ordinated in a structured and systematic manner.
- The division of police resources, so that the Deputy Area Commander was involved at Silver (Tactical) Command and the Area Commander was involved in the wider recovery, worked particularly well.
- Good contact with key professionals throughout the recovery process is essential.
- There is a need for the recovery response to be flexible, since different emergencies will call for different skills.
- There is a need to be clear on responsibilities in order to best fit in with the emergency activity.
- The recovery structure should be established as early as possible, as part of the overall response structure.
- The importance of the Recovery Group holding early public meetings and communicating with the public through all sorts of media.

- Guidance on recovery structures and the issues to be addressed need to be built into emergency plans.
- The role and importance of 'recovery' in relation to emergency planning and its relationship with Gold, Silver, Bronze needs to be clarified.
- The importance of having the right agency/person providing leadership.
- Relationships should continue to be built so that the Recovery Group, when it is established, is clear about its own responsibilities and the role of the agencies and individuals around the table.

The debrief process leading to the publication of the Buncefield Multi-Agency Debrief Report and Recommendations also identified the following learning points:

- Guidance on recovery should be built into emergency plans and should outline clear roles and responsibilities in order to ensure a joined up and comprehensive response.
- The business community should be engaged early on in the incident to facilitate good communication with businesses and an open dialogue.
- Relationships with local communities and the business communities across Hertfordshire should continue to be developed and enhanced so that they can fully contribute to the recovery phase of an incident.
- The existence of Hertfordshire Resilience and previously HESMIC meant that there was a strong culture of working together in terms of emergencies. The existing network, training and previous experience of dealing with incidents created an inbuilt resilience and also allowed the confidence to be flexible in terms of the recovery process.
- Had the incident resulted in the loss of life then the recovery, and in particular the community recovery, would have been more complicated and probably would have been undertaken in a different format.

Contacts for Further Information

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Additional Documents

The **Buncefield Multi-Agency Recovery Plan** (version 1.1) provides an overview of the scale of the task facing the Recovery Group, details of the recovery structure, membership of the Recovery Group, terms of reference for the Recovery Group and the three sub-groups, summary of the work undertaken by the Recovery Group, an overview of the three sub-groups and details of key issues and actions required.

[The Buncefield Multi-Agency Debrief Report and Recommendations](#)

includes a section on recovery, covering issues such as the importance of building recovery planning into response plans, the importance of keeping the business community informed about the operational response, likely timescales, etc. and the importance of involving relevant communities in recovery arrangements.

The Recovery Group were conscious of the fact that recovery from the incident would be a lengthy and complex task involving a wide number of people and agencies, therefore members of the group were keen to capture any initial learning whilst it was still relatively fresh. The Buncefield Incident Multi-Agency Debrief – Recovery Group Report therefore identifies key difficulties, key successes and lessons learnt during the first month. The subsequent proposed recommendations were also fed into the multi-agency debrief process.

[Note: The Buncefield Multi-Agency Recovery Plan (version 1.1) was developed to capture the work undertaken by the Recovery Group and to identify the key issues and future actions. Unfortunately, the speed of transition from recovery to regeneration meant that the recovery plan was no longer viable in its current format. Before it stood down, the Recovery Group made the conscious effort not to update the plan with the benefit of hindsight, but to make it available as it stood at the end of January 2006. It was hoped that in this format, it would provide a far better understanding of the workings of the Recovery Group and the thinking behind some of the decisions, etc.]