

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 displacement of communities near to the site as a result of the incident raised a number of key issues. For example, displaced residents were particularly worried about pets left behind that would need feeding. Other displaced residents had not taken personal items such as glasses, medication and prescriptions with them when they were evacuated or did not have access to important documentation (e.g. passports, insurance details, etc.). The Community Recovery Taskforce, which co-ordinated the overall community recovery, worked closely with the Police so that, where it was safe to do so, residents could return home to retrieve some possessions and key documents.

Following an initial public meeting, it was recognised that the business and residential communities had to be treated separately. In terms of residential communities, one of the significant features was that the Community Recovery Taskforce was not only dealing with displaced, but also a wide range of very different individual needs within those communities. As a result, considerable efforts were made to listen to people's issues and to deal with displaced people as individuals. A community survey undertaken by Dacorum Borough Council, shortly after the incident, was also useful in assessing what people wanted and what was required in terms of the community recovery.

A number of wider issues also had an indirect impact on dealing with displaced communities. Whilst Hertfordshire County Council closed schools in the area, on the advice of the HPA, this created a number of problems in terms of childcare and disruption to normal routines in the wider community. The decision to close libraries in the area, with the benefit of hindsight, had also meant that a valuable route for the dissemination of information to local communities had not been available during the initial recovery stage.

By utilising existing support networks (e.g. resident support groups, voluntary groups, etc.) which worked closely with the community, the Community Recovery Taskforce was able to disseminate information. However, getting information to people who were not in their homes proved to be a key problem. Although there was very much a need for information, the existing distribution mechanisms had not been established to cope with an incident of such magnitude. Delivering information and leaflets to residents was problematic as many residents had been dispersed into other types of accommodation (e.g. friends and relatives or hotels), or simply had no front door to post the leaflets through. It also proved difficult to keep track of displaced residents in the longer term, as they came from a variety of different housing backgrounds, such as local authority housing, private housing and rented accommodation.

Lessons Identified

Dacorum Borough Council has identified a number of key lessons in relation to dealing with displaced communities:

- Ascertaining the needs of displaced residents is important. In particular, there needs to be some form of help point whereby displaced residents can log their specific problems. This would also help those agencies involved in the recovery effort to address needs on an individual basis.
- In the longer term, there is a need to track displaced residents. Details should be registered so that the various agencies are able to locate residents, this is particularly important in terms of disseminating information (e.g. when people can return home, updates on repairs, etc.)
- There is a need to maintain public information points and helplines where people can obtain help and information. As well as maintaining these facilities, it is essential that the locations and numbers are publicised widely.
- It is important to keep up the level of engagement with displaced communities. For example, it needs to be demonstrated on a regular basis that the people affected have not been forgotten about.

Contacts for Further Information

Jacquie Campbell

Chair of the Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce

Email: jacquie.campbell@dacorum.gov.uk

Emergency Planning Team

Hertfordshire County Council

email: emergency.planning@hertscc.gov.uk

Additional Documents

The [Buncefield Multi-Agency Recovery Plan](#) (version 1.1) makes limited reference to the initial visits made by the Deputy Prime Minister.

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