

Manchester Evacuees

“Emergency planning teams in Manchester, like their colleagues elsewhere in the UK, acted quickly to smooth the evacuation of hundreds of British passport holders from the bombing in Lebanon.

The international crisis, prompted by the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, was played out nightly on our television screens during July and August.

But the consequences of the conflict between the Israeli army and Hezbollah were soon felt closer to home as British citizens, caught up in the fighting, clamoured to leave Beirut.

The first Norman Davey, Manchester City Council’s emergency planning manager, realised he might be involved in the evacuation came when he received a call from Manchester Airport to say that a flight from the RAF base at Akrotiri in Cyprus was due to leave within 24 hours.

“Like everyone else I had been following the story on television but it had never occurred to me that we would be directly involved here in Manchester. I suppose that was because I had never really associated large numbers of British citizens with the Lebanon.

“That was one of the lessons we learned from the exercise – that there are British citizens all over the world and even the most remote conflict can quickly have an impact here at home.

In this instance, while 24 hours might not sound like a lot of notice to those outside the emergency planning profession, in fact it gave us more time than usual to organise our response.”

The city council assembled an 80-strong team of representatives from the Salvation Army, Red Cross, St John Ambulance, Government Office for the North West, Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive, WRVS, Jobcentre Plus, Immigration Service, Manchester Airport’s terminal and security sections and its own housing and social services teams to cope with the demands of more than 600 evacuees arriving at Manchester Airport on three flights between 20 and 22 July. Two other flights were cancelled at short notice.

Similar flights arrived at Gatwick, East Midlands and Stansted airports during that period.

The city council had experience of the Kosovan evacuation in 1999 in which 15 planes carrying evacuees landed in Manchester. It also responded to similar evacuations of British passport holders

following the Asian tsunami, the bombing of Egyptian resorts and the Mexican hurricane.

At Manchester Airport, the normal emergency planning had primarily focused on the possibility of an aircraft accident and the identification of suitable areas for dealing with survivors and distressed friends and relatives.

In fact, because the airport was still fully operational, the designated reception area could not be used and the team had to quickly move to untried facilities at Gate 20, Terminal One.

The procedure aimed to separate those evacuees who needed support on arrival from those who were happy to make their own way onward from the airport. The main concern was to ensure that people needing support were dealt with before passing through passport control and immigration, as the majority of support was only available airside.

Norman said: “On arrival the reception centre team offered everyone refreshments, toiletries and support while they were waiting. We also tried to avoid a situation in which people were crowding round the tables used to conduct interviews, so we created a physical barrier between this area and the rest of the reception centre

“In fact, we had five tables for interviews and a further five waiting areas behind where those next in line could wait.”

The majority of those wanting support were in need of advice on accommodation and transport. Many wanted to travel on to London.

“The main demand was for travel warrants for their onward journey and, in some instances, for overnight accommodation. Anticipating that, we had made arrangements for local taxis, a coach firm and a nearby hotel to be on standby.”

Information on the number of evacuees on each flight was not known until it was in the air. The first flight brought 67 evacuees to Manchester, the second a more daunting 435, a number which at times threatened to overwhelm the team’s resources.

There were also individual human difficulties. Some evacuees were still in a distressed state having been caught up directly in the bombing. One woman had lost her sister in a direct hit on the building where they were living.

One of the passengers evacuated had lost both legs in an earlier bombing

incident and needed a wheelchair for his onward journey. This prompted a 2.30am hunt across Greater Manchester for a wheelchair he could be given.

Wheelchairs and baby buggies were available for evacuees on subsequent flights

The Regional Resilience Team from Government Office for the North West was initially involved in the evacuation flights as an observer but quickly found itself performing a vital role.

Kathy Settle, Regional Resilience Director at GONW, said: “We provided the link with central Government and in particular with the Foreign Office in instances where individual evacuees were concerned about the safety of family members left behind in Lebanon or wanted to arrange for them to be evacuated.

“We were also able to use our contacts at national level to ensure that the next stage of the journey for evacuees went smoothly. For instance, a number of evacuees wanted to travel on to other countries to meet up with family members, and we liaised with the Spanish and Sierra Leonean Embassies to make the necessary arrangements. We also realised a lot of people wanted to travel to London and worked with Virgin Trains to run a special late-night train from Manchester after all the scheduled services had ceased for the day. The effective working relationship we had developed with Virgin through our NW Transport Resilience Forum and recent exercises was invaluable in making this all happen.”

Norman said: “We had never envisaged GONW being directly involved, but in fact we couldn’t have done it without them. They were a vital link to the Foreign Office and used their contacts with central Government to good effect.

“In one instance, we found three bags left on a flight (one of which included five passports) which couldn’t be traced to anyone. In fact, Kathy and her team discovered that their owners were still in Cyprus and not due to fly to Stansted until later that day. We also had one suitcase left on the baggage carousel after all the evacuees had departed. Again, Kathy’s team worked with the Foreign Office to find out who the suitcase belonged to and managed to reunite all the lost bags with their owners.”

The processing of evacuees took just over two hours to complete each night.