

Background and Context

The Aberfan Disaster drew in contributions from all over the world. The Mayor of Merthyr immediately launched a Disaster Fund to aid the village and bereaved. By the time the Fund closed in January 1967, nearly 90,000 contributions had been received, totalling £1,606,929. The Fund's final sum was approximately £1,750,000.

How the Topic was Handled

The immediate burden of dealing with the influx of donations fell upon the staff of the Merthyr Tydfil Corporation but they were soon augmented by the willing hands of the many volunteers who made themselves available for this purpose and in numerous other ways.

The Fund faced difficulties from the start as its legal status was unclear and there were fears that any money it gave out immediately could influence future compensation claims against the National Coal Board. The provisional committee, comprising largely members of Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council and other local people, decided to pay out some money immediately to those affected. Concerns grew as the Fund grew on how the money was to be used. Media reports exaggerating divisions between the committee and the village increased the concerns. Some donors wanted the entire fund to go to the bereaved, others felt that it should benefit the wider community, a few that it should be used to remove the remaining tips.

The disputes continued even after the Fund was put on a firm legal footing under a permanent committee with clear local representation. The Fund's Trust Deed specifies that the money was:

1. For the relief of all persons who have suffered as a result of the said disaster and are thereby in need.
2. Subject as aforesaid for any charitable purpose for the benefit of persons who were inhabitants of Aberfan and its immediate neighbourhood (hereinafter called 'the area of benefit') on the 21st day of October 1966 or now are or hereafter become inhabitants of the area of benefit and in particular (but without prejudice to the generality of the last foregoing trust) for any charitable purpose for the benefit of children who were on the 21st day of October 1966 or who now are or hereafter may become resident in the area of benefit.

Apart from gifts in kind which were actually received there were many offers of other gifts in kind which could only be accepted at a later date upon completion of a particular project in which the gifts could be incorporated: for instance, one firm offered to make a gift of 1,000 rose trees at any time suitable for their planting in the Memorial Garden. There were also gifts of a different nature such as the provision of 100 free railway travel warrants for use by people afflicted by the disaster.

This wide remit allowed the Fund to finance a number of different schemes to aid the regeneration, both physical and emotional. As well as donating money to the bereaved, the Fund paid for a memorial, house repairs, holidays for villagers and a community hall. The well publicised and widespread fears that the money would just stagnate in investment accounts (as had happened with many other disaster funds) were proved unfounded.

The most controversial aspect of the recovery was that after the National Coal Board and Treasury refused to accept full financial responsibility, the Fund ended up having to contribute £150,000 for the removal of the remaining tips overlooking the village. Despite the outrage of donors, villagers and the local MP, it was not until 1997 that this money was repaid to the Fund. The fact that the original disaster fund was seen as being plundered by Government for safety work on the tips remained with local people for over 40 years. It was felt that the fund should have been used solely for the victims and the memorial.

Lessons Identified

The role of the Fund Trustees was a difficult one, as they had to ensure the fund was put to its best use whilst complying with the laws of the Charity Commission - a task which several well-educated people were hand picked to perform to their best ability, but a task that they failed to achieve. Money was unable to be spent on what the bereaved families intended and a series of battles took place in order for residents to achieve what they so badly desired.

As far the fund is concerned and what it achieved, it is important to note that it did help in alleviating the suffering and was a focus for the grief of many. Positive steps were made in the form of the memorial which was a massive relief for many bereaved families, and still today is way of release from suffering for the people of Aberfan and further afield.

Contacts for Further Information

www.merthyr.gov.uk