

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.

The explosion damaged over 300 residential properties, as well as business premises, and in the immediate aftermath 2,000 people were evacuated. Reception centres, established by Dacorum Borough Council, initially cared for approximately 350 people, but numbers declined over time.

How the Topic was Handled

In the short term, the needs of individuals were essentially practical. Items such as clothing, nappies, toiletries and food were provided and local supermarkets also played a key role in terms of donating, collecting and distributing various supplies. The Jarman Park leisure complex also provided free entertainment for children in their cinema and bowling alley. As the incident occurred in the run up to Christmas, there was a need for immediate financial help. However, the short term needs of individuals covered a particularly wide range of different issues. For example, uninsured loss, financial support, small cash sums, Christmas presents for a children's home, bed linen, curtains and money for food. In particular, immediate support was needed by casual workers who had lost their source of employment. The scale of the impact on casual workers was hard to ascertain as they proved difficult to track.

Accommodation was also a key issue. Overnight accommodation in hotels was required for those who could not return home and temporary furnished housing, in particular, was in short supply, which meant that additional furniture and bedding were required. In the longer term, the needs for individuals covered a similar wide range of issues. For example, uninsured loss, replacement of work tools and equipment for self employed workers, retraining, small grants for redecorating children's bedrooms, replacement of one elderly resident's aviary, cost of private counselling, help paying debts, higher heating bills due to damaged housing and replacement of treasured items.

Individuals also had a need to talk about the incident and there was considerable demand for emotional support in the form of “skilled listeners”. In particular, it was found that many elderly people were keen to speak about their experiences, and a number of children also required longer term counselling. Therefore, the key task for the Community Recovery Taskforce was to provide a mechanism for people to talk about the incident. As well as a series of events, such as art competitions and reminiscence projects, the first anniversary was used as an opportunity for both the community and individuals to reflect back on the incident.

There was also a considerable need for information provision. To meet this need, a number of community forums were particularly useful and also provided an opportunity for individuals to ask questions of the Buncefield Investigation Board. The overall co-ordination of the community recovery was undertaken by the Community Recovery Taskforce and involved a number of key players from a wide range of different agencies. However, it was essential that locally based agencies, such as Dacorum Borough Council, Dacorum Community Trust, Citizens Advice Bureau and Churches Together were involved. It is estimated that the community recovery cost in the region of £1m. In terms of expenditure, it has so far cost the Borough Council around £500,000, whilst the Mayors Recovery Fund has raised around £420,000. It is important to note that the community recovery is still very much ongoing, over a year and a half later.

Lessons Identified

Dacorum Borough Council has identified a number of key lessons regarding the needs of individuals.

Firstly, it is important to evaluate the exact needs of individuals. To this end, volunteers could have been utilised to knock on the doors of residential properties in the affected area, to ask residents, face to face, what help they required.

Secondly, the sharing of information between all agencies was essential. No one agency had all the answers and it was important that a number of different perspectives were taken into account. In particular, the voluntary agencies were able to see issues that the official agencies could not.

Thirdly, for the Community Recovery Taskforce, the process of obtaining additional funding for the community recovery, such as that available through the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), proved to be particularly resource intensive and involved a considerable amount of effort.

Contacts for Further Information

[Jacquie Campbell](#), Chair of the Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce.

[Emergency Planning Team](#), Hertfordshire County Council.

Additional Documents

The [**Buncefield Multi-Agency Recovery Plan**](#)^[PDF] (version 1.1) includes considerable detail about the establishment of the Community Recovery Taskforce and particularly the work undertaken in the weeks and months immediately following the incident.

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

The [**Buncefield Social Impact Assessment - Final Report**](#)^[PDF] (and Annexes), January 2007 was a study commissioned to draw together, from an external and independent point of view, the scale and range of the social impacts of the Buncefield incident.