

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

Building control officers from Dacorum Borough Council were unable to access the cordoned off area as it was unsafe to do so. Therefore, only a visual inspection of the most affected area from outside the cordon was possible. It was initially expected that domestic properties would be affected most by the explosion. Whilst those domestic properties closest to the boundary of the site were damaged significantly, given the scale of the incident and the fact that approximately 350 council houses were damaged (the number of private properties damaged is unknown), it was largely restricted to blown in windows and doors. There were also collapsed ceilings in a small number of properties.

The Borough Council's emergency contractor was called and instructed to do what they could in terms of boarding up and making safe domestic properties. Building control officers and emergency contractors went round the most affected neighbourhood asking residents if they wanted their properties making safe. A conscious decision was made to board up and secure all domestic properties whether public (eg. council housing), private or rented. Any empty properties were also boarded up and made safe in the presence of the Police. Local DIY stores in Hemel Hempstead donated materials to assist in the boarding up of properties. By the end of Sunday, contractors had effectively managed to board up and make safe damaged doors and windows in the most affected neighbourhood. On the following day, the exercise was repeated in another of the affected neighbourhoods. A list of all repaired properties was maintained, although no efforts were made by the Borough Council to recover the costs. It is estimated that the costs came to £14,500. On subsequent days, building control officers were also involved in escorting people back to their properties.

The responsibility for inspecting both commercial and domestic properties placed a considerable burden on the Borough Council and, although surveyors had provided support initially, additional building control officers

had to be drafted in from local authorities in St. Albans, Three Rivers and Watford. Environmental health officers were also involved in some inspections, as the presence of asbestos was suspected in domestic properties.

Lessons Identified

Dacorum Borough Council has identified the inability to gain access through cordons as a key lesson. On some occasions, the lack of clear communication between Strategic (Gold) Command and Operational (Bronze) Commands, the absence of an identity badge system or the lack of Police resources to provide an escort, meant that building control officers were faced with considerable delays in terms of obtaining access. On the one hand, building control officers were being specifically tasked by Strategic (Gold) Command, but were then unable to undertake these tasks due to the situation on the ground (e.g. presence of Police cordons).

Contacts for Further Information

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