

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 importance of VIP visits was recognised and, generally, they had a positive impact. A number of VIP visits were made to the area by leading politicians. Two visits were made whilst the fire burned and a further three (including Prince Charles) were made in the following weeks and months. However, the early VIP visits proved to be a distraction from responding to the incident, particularly for Dacorum Borough Council. The normal protocols and the level of detail involved in planning, such as identifying participants, identifying venues, security arrangements, content of the visit and the preparation of biographies, agendas and presentations did not accommodate the fact that the Borough Council were at the same time dealing with a crisis. The costs of VIP visits were minimal and met by the Borough Council and sponsorship.

Lessons Identified

The key lesson identified by Dacorum Borough Council was that the normal protocols of VIP visits did not accommodate the fact that, at the same time, they were dealing with a crisis. As a result, they proved to be a distraction in the early stages and had a significant resource implication, particularly for key figures such as the Chief Executive. It is suggested that in future, Central Government or the Regions could provide more practical or direct support and ease some of the burden by undertaking some of the detailed planning themselves

Contacts for Further Information

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Additional Documents

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