

Background and Context

The blast ripped through the heart of Manchester causing widespread damage to buildings up to half a mile radius and leaving hundreds of shops, offices, dwellings open to access, many of which were unusable due to the extent of the damage which varied considerably in degree. Also, streets throughout the city were strewn with broken glass and other debris.

How the Topic was Handled

The recovery began on the afternoon of Monday 17 June when control of the site was handed over by the Police to the Local Authority. The immediate priorities were to maintain security and make the streets and buildings safe as quickly as possible to allow people access to their premises. Planning this task fell to Manchester City Council Building Control and was managed from their offices in the Town Hall which were undamaged by the blast.

The broad strategy was first to maintain the Police cordon, make the streets safe by taking down dangerous structures, fixtures and fittings on buildings that could collapse onto the highways, removing broken glass from windows and clearing debris from the highways. Once safe, building owners and their contractors could be allowed access to their premises to recover valuables and arrange for their premises to be secured. Access had to be controlled by the use of passes issued after checking their bona fides.

With more than 1500 buildings in need of safety inspections, the area affected was split into zones with a team of surveyors working in each zone assessing damage and making arrangements for the necessary works to make areas safe for reoccupation. Bomb damage diminishes the further it is away from the blast. On the outer periphery, there are many more buildings and the damage is slight therefore reoccupation can take place relatively quickly - usually in just a few days. At the scene of the blast, damage is extensive and reoccupation will not take place for many months.

Accordingly, a secondary cordon was established around this inner zone by fencing off the buildings affected with a robust hoarding - an area of about 10 hectares. Within this zone was the Arndale Centre, Marks and Spencers, the Corn Exchange, the Royal Exchange, the Royal Insurance Office HQ, a five story office block, several dwellings, two public houses and ancillary properties. Both the Royal and Corn Exchanges are listed buildings.

From this stage, the recovery would become two co-ordinated but separate operations for the inner and outer zones using the same strategy; buildings made safe, streets made safe, controlled access given to building owners, premises made secure, zone reopened for public access. In the outer zones, this process was done progressively working inwards towards the fenced off inner zone. It took just over a week to return public access to all but the inner zone, during which time the police maintained effective security.

Initially, security was maintained by a Police cordon that covered most of the city centre, however this was an expensive operation and a major drain on Police resources as police had been drafted in from all over Greater Manchester. They wanted an exit strategy as a matter of urgency that meant there would have to be alternative arrangements made. This was of serious concern to business within the cordon that were fearful of the consequences of a reduction in the level of security or entrusting it to others.

In just over a week, the greater proportion of the city in the outer zones were open to public access. This left the central retail core fenced off and reasonably secure - recovery in this zone was going to take many months. A plan was agreed to replace the Police with private security provided by the businesses with the secured area, ie. Marks & Spencer would guard its own property, Arndale Centre would provide its own security, and so on. The advantage of this approach was that these were big organisations, each one of which could draw upon its own resources and supply chains and, perhaps more importantly, incur the costs of doing so themselves. The City Council secured the dangerous working area around ground zero and co-ordinated and supervised the whole of the security operation from then on and the police withdrew completely.

The same principle was applied as for the outer zones and the building owners and their contractors were given access to their buildings to undertake damage assessments but were excluded from the most dangerous areas in which the city council was working to make buildings safe.

Throughout this recovery phase, controlled access needs to be provided to the utility services, insurance assessors, loss adjusters, VIP's and other visitors.

Some of the buildings eventually had to be demolished - a process that took quite a long time partly due to the presence of asbestos contamination. In all, it was just less than a year before it was safe to reopen all the roads to public access in the area affected by the blast.

In terms of access and security, all decisions were taken at a local level in consultation with the people affected.

The work undertaken by the City Council was done under the provisions of section 78 Building Act 1984 (emergency measures for dangerous buildings), the costs of which are recoverable from the owners of the building. This means keeping accurate records of what work is being done where for the purpose of debt recovery.

Lessons Identified

- With such widespread damage it was necessary to harness the resources of companies like Marks & Spencer, the Arndale Centre and many others who could bring in the big national building contractors (Bovis, AMEC, etc.) as well as smaller builders with their own supply chains to draw upon.
- Strict control of public access needs to be enforced until all buildings in the area have been made safe and secure. Use of a pass system to ensure only bona fide people are given access is vital.

- Documented advice given to owners and their contractors relating to the reoccupation of damaged buildings.
- With so many different contractors working on their own properties within a controlled zone, there has to be strong leadership, effective co-ordination of activities, and good liaison. The leadership was given by the Council and daily meetings took place with representatives of each organisation to address the issues of the day and to plan ahead.
- Delegation of security of premises to the building owners affected and for the control of access with work permits etc.

General Comment

This strategy and the processes used worked extremely well - it achieved what the people wanted most; access to their premises in the shortest possible time. However, we were in the main dealing with companies and businesses that generally speaking had the capability to respond and do what was necessary to safeguard their own interests.

The same strategy was used again following a major fire in the city centre on 30 April 2007. At the height of the blaze, five separate buildings were on fire. The cordon set up by the Police had closed three major routes through the city centre closing off access to 21 multi occupied buildings housing 85 businesses employing hundreds of people. In terms of access and security, this was effectively an identical situation to the Manchester bombing and was dealt with by Building Control in just the same way. We received many expressions of appreciation for the speed of our response, in accommodating peoples' need to access their premises for the recovery of valuables and important information, and generally giving them the help, advice and information they needed to deal with the difficult situation they had found themselves in.

Contacts for Further Information

Bill Challenger, Business Manager, Manchester Building Control -
b.challenger@manchester.gov.uk