

Topic

Dealing with waste

Incident / Exercise

Camberwell Fire (Lakanal), 3 July 2009

Background and Context

At around 4pm on the 3 July 2009, a fire broke out in Lakanal, a 14 storey residential building on the Sceaux gardens estate in Camberwell, in the London Borough of Southwark. It took six hours to get the fire under control by which time, tragically, there had been six fatalities.

The fire was attended by 18 fire engines including a special unit and around 100 fire fighters. Early findings from the police investigation suggest the cause of the fire was an electrical fault in a portable TV set in a bedroom on the ninth floor.

More than 20 people including one fireman were admitted to hospital for smoke inhalation and minor injuries. Around 150 people were evacuated or rescued from the flats. More than 250 residents comprising 100+ households were left homeless on that evening.

As of January 2010 all residents had either been re-housed or had made their own arrangements for new accommodation. Lakanal has remained under the control of the police to varying extents since the fire. The pursuant and on going coroner's investigation has required that the site be preserved in its present post-fire state until further notice. To date, access to the site remains strictly controlled (July 2011).

How the Topic was Handled

During the fire, all utility services to the Lakanal building were immediately switched off and the building closed to access until further notice. It was to be some weeks before the police could finally permit access for Council officers to begin arranging retrieval appointments for residents to access their homes. However before anyone could get into the flats, it became clear that a lack of power to the block for such an extended period of time in the middle of summer had resulted in the perishable contents of people's kitchens, fridges and freezers decomposing very quickly. It was now a health hazard

Plans were drawn up between the Council's Environmental Health, cleansing teams, wardens and housing management divisions to start the process of clearing flats of food items and cleaning flats where required, employing little used powers set out in the Public Health Act 1936. Residents were contacted in writing at their temporary addresses to notify them of the clean up operation.

Teams of cleaners, wardens, environmental health officers were allocated a landing and worked through every flat. It took just over a week to clear food debris and clean affected surfaces in all of the accessible properties. In some cases where pests or vermin were suspected, fumigation was carried out.

Lessons Identified

Use of the Act: The Public Health Act 1936 proved an effective way of ensuring that Lakanal was cleaned sufficiently to allow retrieval visits by former residents.

Record cleansing operatives: Residents were naturally uncomfortable with the idea of strangers in their home. To reassure residents, the names and details of everyone who entered or operated in the flat were recorded meticulously.

Communication: A single communication in writing was sufficient to notify residents of the use of the act and permit our intention to enter and clean the properties.

Contacts for Further Information

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