

Topic

Displaced communities

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

Maintaining support networks for vulnerable people

Maintaining support networks for vulnerable people following an emergency displacement such as that experienced by the residents of Lakanal on the afternoon on Friday 3 July 2009, should be a top priority for any provider of social housing. To some residents their care services are almost as important as having a roof over their head.

On the night of the fire, the priority was temporary accommodation for all displaced residents, but for households composed of vulnerable people with disabilities, mental health problems or other issues, the allocation of suitable temporary accommodation was more challenging. The initial housing-needs assessment made by the temporary accommodation team at the emergency rest centre helped to identify vulnerabilities within a household from the start. Council officers were made aware during this registration if there were extenuating circumstances or vulnerability issues. If vulnerabilities were too

significant for the available temporary accommodation the households were placed in either self contained properties or put up in commercial hotels where accessibility was not an issue.

Later, the information recorded in the initial needs assessment on the night of the fire would be passed to the dedicated case management team who would take over once the initial emergency had period has passed. On a resident by resident basis the case management team could, where appropriate, then liaise with social services to make sure that all vulnerabilities had been addressed and that any support provided by social services was recognised and continued despite the change of address (in some cases there were multiple changes of address).

Redirecting mail and telephone contacts

Early on following the fire it was clear accessing the Lakanal building was not going to be possible for anyone including Royal Mail. To take the burden off residents, the Council contacted Royal Mail and advised that all post for the 98 Lakanal flats be re-directed to the Cator Street resource centre which opened in the week after the fire. The resource centre, located close to Lakanal, was used as a base for services where people could access housing advice, counselling, and other information (please see 'Needs of people – non-health' topic). By re-directing postal services to the resource centre, residents could conveniently pick up their mail from a central location.

Keeping track of displaced residents

Keeping an accurate record of displaced residents was, in the first days following the fire, achieved by recording data manually at the rest centre. All of the details for the affected residents were taken there and then and by early morning on Saturday 4 July 2009, the Council knew the temporary address for everyone that had turned up at the rest centre on the night of the fire.

As the emergency situation passed and the case management team got involved at the Cator Street resource centre, residents began being offered permanent accommodation. With each resident having a dedicated case worker, further changes in address were easily captured and recorded centrally. This meant that at any point, the Council had the current addresses of all Lakanal residents. In any case, the central housing database would soon be updated with all the recorded information. This meant that at any point, reports can be requested that detail the current whereabouts of all displaced Lakanal residents except those that are no longer Council tenants or leaseholders and have moved on from their last known location.

The importance of being able to track displaced residents was best illustrated when the Council needed to notify all residents of public meetings or other important information. Though mainly achieved through texts, the few occasions when the Council needed to communicate to residents in writing (for legal reasons. See 'Dealing with waste' topic), we were able to do this without complication.

Helping the local tenant and resident association make contact with the displaced residents of Lakanal.

Some of the displaced residents from Lakanal were members of the local tenants and residents association (TRA). The Sceaux gardens TRA are particularly active in the local community and wanted to reach out to the displaced residents of Lakanal. The Council provided a forwarding service in which the TRA would produce and provide the communications (letters/documents) and the Council would address, envelope and deliver. This way, the residents still received news and updates from their TRA and the Council could facilitate communication without compromising data protection issues. More importantly, direct contact between displaced resident and the TRA was re-established if the resident returned correspondence.

Children and their schools

On the night of the fire, Southwark Children services were on site accounting for any children that were evacuated to the rest centre. There they identified children with additional support needs, children with families needing further help, children with known vulnerabilities or safe guarding issues and generally working to provide continuity and minimise the impact on children and their families. Over the next days, children services would help to liaise with schools and secure resources to help children, now in temporary accommodation, to continue to attend despite the displacement.

Lessons Identified

Dedicated case management team: a dedicated team of case workers, specialising in housing management and housing options meant that we could identify and address vulnerability issues for all effected households while preventing any required support from avoiding our attention.

Red Cross impact: the Red Cross provided excellent support to the Council rest centre manager by sending trained personnel to help carry out the initial documentation and triage of the displaced people.

One location start: the importance of having an immediate rest centre set up to accurately record details of displaced people under one roof. Once the initial recording of displaced people had taken place in the rest centre, a triage process of individual needs was conducted and the results of that triage used as the basis to decide on whether it was necessary to set up further specific facilities and centres. The ability to capture information on vulnerability from the outset and from one location was key to support needs being identified early and the relevant service engaged.

Redirection of mail to a central location: simple, easy and effective. Rather than changing individual addresses, the mass re-direction of mail allowed

residents to pick up their post at their convenience and at the same location as where support services could be accessed.

Contacts for Further Information

Miny Jansen
Head of Community Housing Services
Miny.Jansen@southwark.gov.uk

Ben Finden
Project Manager
Benjamin.finden@southwark.gov.uk