

Buncefield Social Impact Assessment

Final Report

January 2007



1: Introduction

The Buncefield oil depot incident

- 1.1 Early on the morning of Sunday 11 December 2005, an explosion at the Buncefield Oil Depot on the eastern edge of the Maylands employment area brought Hemel Hempstead to the world's attention. The depot, which receives, stores and distributes fuels including petrol, diesel and aviation fuel, is the fifth largest of its kind in the United Kingdom. The subsequent fire, which burned for a number of days and sent a black plume of smoke across Hertfordshire, London and other southern counties before being successfully extinguished, was the largest peacetime fire in Europe.
- 1.2 The incident miraculously did not cause any loss of life but it is increasingly apparent that the social impacts of the incident, both in the immediate aftermath and in the longer term, have been and continue to be serious. The explosion caused significant property damage (both commercial and residential) and, as we explore below, had serious impacts on a large number of people's lives and livelihoods.
- 1.3 Buncefield presented a challenge to organisations and agencies of a type and/or scale which they previously had not encountered. The response can be seen in two distinct categories: the immediate (emergency) response, and the longer-term response. This report focuses on the longer-term social impacts and organisational response.

Research: purpose and approach

- 1.4 This study was commissioned to draw together, from an external and independent point of view, the scale and range of the social impacts of the Buncefield incident.¹
- 1.5 In undertaking research for this report, we have drawn on a range of sources which are listed in Annex A. In addition, we have spoken with several community members and former employees of the Maylands employment area. We conducted two focus groups in August 2006, one on employment-related issues and one on housing-related issues. We also spoke to a number of representatives of organisations dealing directly with a variety of social impacts. These are also listed in Annex A. Finally, we attended two meetings of the Community Task Force which was set up as part of the Buncefield Strategic Recovery Group to co-ordinate the support given by a variety of agencies to help the local community recover from the incident, and a Young People's Forum set up by the Dacorum Borough Council's (DBC) Community Partnerships Team.
- 1.6 The report has been researched over a period of several months and is submitted some ten months after the incident occurred. Nevertheless it is apparent that many of the social impacts are, and will remain, hidden and that others are still emerging. We anticipate that the incident will continue to have an impact for years to come. The report, therefore, is not

¹ It follows on from an assessment of the economic impact of the incident commissioned by EEDA: *The Buncefield Oil Depot Incident: Economic and Business Confidence Impact Study* (SQW, April 2006)

presented as an exhaustive ‘audit’ of the impact of the incident; rather it seeks to highlight its repercussions on the lives of different people. Statistics and numerical data are given where they are available, but given the difficulties encountered in collecting data of this kind the figures are likely to underestimate the true impacts.

Structure of this report

- 1.7 The social impacts of the Buncefield incident are many and varied and hence there would have been many possible to present our findings. For example it is clear that the social impacts have differed *over time*: the immediate and short-term impacts of the explosion are quite different to those which are and have been present in the months which followed, and are likely to be different again in the longer-term. It would also have been possible to structure the report by *types of impact*² – including impacts on: people’s way of life (daily routine); health and wellbeing (physical and mental health); the local environment; personal economic wellbeing (including property prices, other costs, job loss); and psychology and perception (fears and aspirations; community cohesion and stability; extent of influence over decisions).
- 1.8 However, most importantly, the impact has varied across different *groups of people*. Whilst it is apparent that the effects have been wide-ranging in local communities, the following chapters examine the impact on three groups in particular, and – within each – the response of organisations to the perceived needs arising over time:
- employees of businesses on the Maylands estate³ (chapter two)
 - local residents (chapter three)
 - young people (chapter four).
- 1.9 Chapter five examines some of the wider impacts on the local community as a whole, related in particular to people’s way of life and the effects on psychology and perception. We briefly cover health issues and do not cover environmental impacts, both of which have been examined in greater detail in separate reports⁴. The section concludes by summarising community support structures and organisational response.
- 1.10 In chapter six we present a summary of findings and overall conclusions.

² This approach formed the structure of our research. A fuller research framework is presented in Annex B

³ The impacts on businesses themselves was the subject of a previous report carried out by SQW on behalf of DBC: *The Buncefield Oil Depot Incident: Economic and Business Confidence Impact Study* (April 2006)

⁴ e.g. *The Public Health Impact of the Buncefield Oil Depot Fire*, Health Protection Agency (in collaboration with the Dacorum and Watford and Three Rivers Primary Care Trusts), July 2006, and ongoing updates available on: <http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk> .

2: Local employees: impact and response

The effect of the Buncefield incident

- 2.1 The Maylands employment area was, and is, one of the largest business parks in the East of England region and home to some 630 businesses employing an estimated 16,500 people⁵. The economic and business confidence impact study⁶ found that (in April 2006) some 90 businesses, from micro-enterprises to large companies, were ‘severely affected’ by the incident because of total or partial destruction to their premises and other business assets, or otherwise restricted access.
- 2.2 A range of impacts, most notably increased operating costs, affected companies of all sizes. Medium, small and micro-companies (including sole traders) were particularly affected by an inability to meet existing orders and a lack of new orders coming in. Total losses to nearby companies was estimated to be in the order of £100m⁷. Short term cash-flow problems and under-insurance hit hardest on the smaller companies; sole traders were particularly badly affected. Many businesses are still suffering from the effects of the incident, particularly as the impact ‘ripples’ through the supply chain⁸.

“In dealing with these issues, even firms that have survived this crisis will have been severely weakened and may well, by using up reserves, have damaged their resilience. Firms that do not face immediate survival issues today may still be seriously at risk if faced with another unforeseen issue in future”.

The Buncefield Oil Depot Incident: Economic and Business Confidence Impact Study (SQW, April 2006, p.ii)

The social impact

- 2.3 The social impacts related to the effects on local businesses are characterised by loss of earnings (through loss of temporary or permanent employment) and a range of psychological impacts, many of which have gone largely unrecorded (in particular, fear of loss of job).
- 2.4 Official unemployment figures at the district level have risen by 15% in the six months between October 2005 and April 2006⁹. However, against the regional and national context, the Buncefield effect cannot be easily identified (see Figure 2-1).

⁵ SQW, April 2006. The business estimate comes from the Business Recovery Taskforce; the employment estimate comes from the Annual Business Inquiry (ABI)

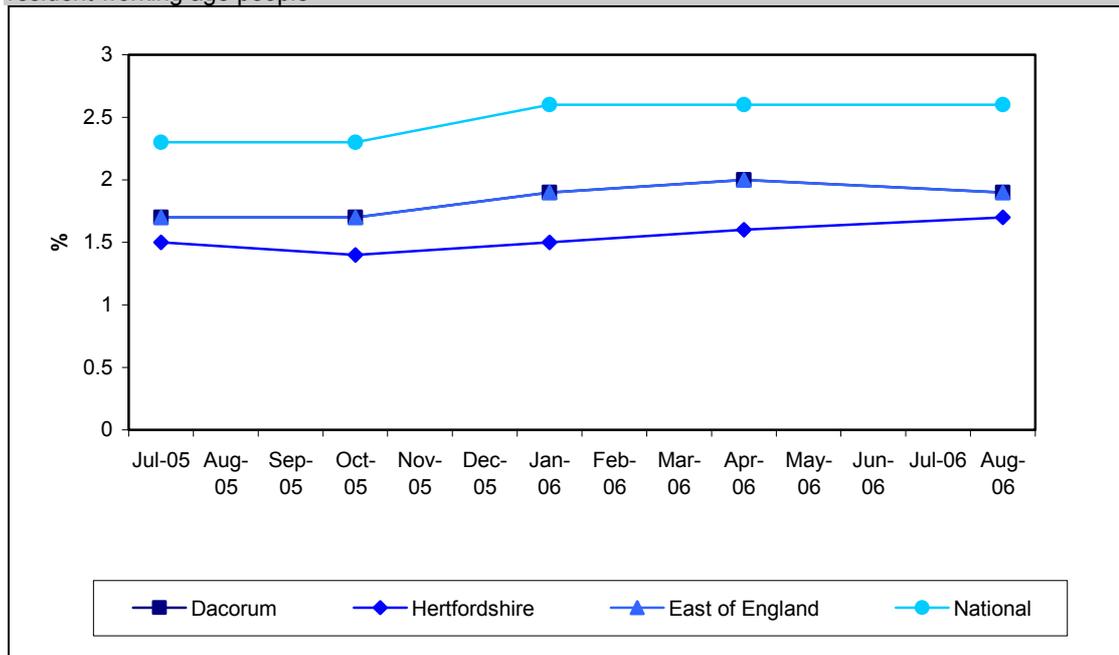
⁶ *op. cit.*

⁷ The total GVA loss amongst firms on the Maylands estate was estimated to be between £91.65m and £114.40m (SQW, April 2006, *op. cit.*). This figure, estimated in April 2006, included multiplier effects, but excluded depreciation

⁸ For example EBG Bakeries announced 100 job losses in August 2006

⁹ JSA claimants in Dacorum (information provided by Job Centre Plus): October 2005 – 1467; January 2006 – 1594; April 2006 – 1694; August 2006 – 1657

Figure 2-1 Unemployment rates (%): number of JSA (Jobseekers' Allowance) claimants as proportion of resident working age people



Source: Job Centre Plus, compiled and supplied September 2006

2.5 Other sources suggest a different story. Those figures that are available suggest that:

- A vast number of jobs were relocated. According to the business impact study, by March 2006 there were 90 'severely impacted' firms on the Maylands estate, or around 15% of the total. Of the 25 'severe impact' firms that returned a business survey, 16 (64%) had moved out of Maylands in totality, and a further four (16%) partially. Many more were uncertain of their future on the estate. The total number of relocated jobs reported by surveyed companies, which represented 28% of 'severe impact' firms and 5% of non-severely impacted firms, was 1,422 (although we note that this is likely to be an understatement of the reality)¹⁰
- A large number of redundancies were made, but figures recorded in agencies differ widely.
 - Job Centre Plus estimates that there were 95 new benefit claims (to August 2006) directly related to the Buncefield incident¹¹
 - The Citizens Advice Bureau over the same period has dealt with 227 requests for help directly related to Buncefield, the 'vast majority' of which 'are from people who have lost employment and earnings'¹²
 - The Community Task Force reports that 'We are aware of 265 job losses since March [2006]...' ¹³

¹⁰ SQW, April 2006. *op. cit.*

¹¹ Of these, 81 are no longer claiming benefit: 53 are in employment, 12 have failed to attend their intervention appointment, 6 are now claiming Incapacity Benefit, and 10 have stopped claiming for unknown reasons. (Job Centre Plus update (24/08/06): *Impact of Hemel Hempstead explosion (Buncefield site) on JC+ business*)

¹² *Buncefield Incident: Short and long-term impact on individuals and community – assessment of current position at 11 October 2006*, Buncefield Community Task Force

- An estimated 200 people who have come to the DCT for help have lost employment/earnings post-Buncefield
 - The wider job market has been affected. According to Job Centre Plus, around a third of those claiming benefits were signed off within 18 weeks, compared to closer to two-thirds in a comparable period prior to Buncefield.
- 2.6 Unpacking the quantitative evidence by more qualitative findings, the following picture emerges. Employees working with agencies or contractors (e.g. cleaners, caterers, ‘office angels’), were hit almost immediately. Seasonal workers were also badly affected, particularly because the incident fell into the Christmas period. Warehousing staff in particular were affected badly in this early period as products were not being traded or transported. Early analysis of client records¹⁴ shows that 85% of those seeking advice following Buncefield had qualification levels below NVQ level 2 (compared with a district average profile of 28% in Dacorum and a county average of 31%¹⁵). The main occupations of those accessing IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) were: warehouse (40%), catering (15%), production (13%), sales/retail (10%), drivers (8%) and administration (7%).
- 2.7 Moving into the longer-term, the ‘survival instinct’ of businesses has made it hard to measure the full impact. In many cases businesses have continued to operate until it became clear that they could not re-coup losses, and have responded over time by gradually cutting staffing to save costs where necessary. There are subsequent transparency problems, as companies (on the most part unintentionally) ‘dip below’ the line where they are required to report large-scale redundancies to the DTI, despite potentially making significant job cuts over a period. The chain of information is therefore disrupted and such job losses are, for example, not reported to the Hertfordshire Careers Service.
- 2.8 In many instances, companies were able to move operations away from Maylands and/or Hemel. Relocations depended on company size; larger companies were often able to move staff to other premises across the south east of England. Smaller companies have tended to relocate closer to Hemel Hempstead including Hemel town centre and locations within a 10-15 mile radius of the town centre. Therefore, in many instances retained staff members of relocating larger companies have experienced a greater impact on their daily routine.

Case study A: Mr. A lives around two miles from Maylands. In October 2005 he started work for a local manufacturing company on a temporary contract which he had got through an agency. The building was badly damaged by the blast and distribution of the product was severely affected; all contractors not on permanent contracts were immediately laid off. On the date of the Buncefield explosion, Mr. A was three weeks away from the minimum period of employment needed to make his contract permanent; with no job security, he was laid off three days later. Mr. A tried immediately to identify further employment through his employment agency but found himself competing with up to ten times as many people as usual because of the pressure on the local labour market; despite signing up with several other agencies, Mr. A is still unemployed nine months later. Mr. A is restricted to employment in Hemel

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Analysis of sixty Buncefield clients given IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) at DCT, Bridge and other community venues, including the bus

¹⁵ These comparator figures represent proportions of all people of working age having lower than level 2 qualification, and not just those looking for work or seeking advice. *Source: Annual Population Survey, December 2005*

Hempstead and surrounding towns (e.g. Luton) because he is unable to drive or afford a long commute; any shift work would have to be particularly local due to the logistics of getting to work outside 'normal' office hours.

Case Study B: Mrs. B had been working as a part-time cleaner for an IT company and a manufacturing company. She had taken on extra seasonal work at the latter, in order to supplement the total family earnings and to help pay for Christmas presents. Following the Buncefield incident, she was immediately released from the manufacturing company. The IT company was able to keep her on, but after three weeks had cut her hours from 15 hours per week at £10 an hour to 10 hours per week at minimum wage, resulting in a significant economic impact on total family earnings and reducing disposable income to below zero (i.e. she has had to dip into her savings and borrow money on credit cards).

Case Study C: Mr. C had joined a software company nine years ago on the management team, and it had since grown to employ around 50 staff. The Buncefield incident led to significant building damage, and the company had to let go around a third of their staff almost immediately, mostly agency staff and those on short contracts. As the months progressed, it became increasingly difficult to service all the company's liabilities, and – gradually – another third of staff were 'let go' over the next six months. Things looked to be picking up for a while, but when a new software development did not perform well in the market there was no financial 'slack' in the business and the business was taken into receivership; Mr. C was made redundant. Mr. C has also separated from his wife of twenty years, which he blames on the excessive pressures of trying to keep the business afloat, letting staff go, and increasing personal financial pressures as well as the imminent closure of a business he helped to build. He is having trouble finding a new job as he is approaching retirement age.

The financial impact

2.9 Provisions by the *welfare system*, designed to cater for those who find themselves out of employment through no fault of their own, were not always sufficient to support individuals affected by the Buncefield incident:

- Employment agencies and related organisations report a wide-scale lack of awareness of entitlements and the benefit system
- There has been incomplete take-up of benefits by those who could claim them because of various reasons, including: a) the stigma attached to benefits (“I never wanted to feel I had to rely on benefits”), b) previous bad experiences (e.g. with the tax credits system) have led to an assumption that applicants are not eligible for certain benefits, c) the process of applying for state benefits, which is at times drawn-out and confusing, d) many people “holding on to hope”, staying loyal to their companies and not believing that their job would be lost or that they would not get it back, and e) the ‘shock’ phenomenon of losing a job, which can lead to irrational (or lack of) decisions being taken. For some people there is a recognised ‘bereavement’ phase linked to the loss of a job, which leads to the displacement of the thought

“What do I do next?”; others had mentally committed to relying on a legal process which in the end may not compensate them fully for loss of earnings

- The benefits system does not – in most instances – cover the loss of earnings arising from the loss of employment, and – in some instances – does not provide enough to live on.

- 2.10 In general, the *redundancy procedures* followed by companies (where they were in place) was perceived by community organisations as poor. The Laid Off and Short Time Working (LOST) provision of the Employment Rights Act (1996) was used by some local employers to lay-off employees without pay. HR departments were reported not to have coped well with handling such large numbers in a short space of time, and reportedly discovered large gaps in their records. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) told us of a number of incidents where their clients had not been provided with a written contract, and start dates¹⁶ were recorded inaccurately; even large companies were found to be not paying out the correct redundancy packages because they reportedly were using incorrect information.
- 2.11 For those who lived nearby, the first concern tended to be the loss of their home and/or belongings. The CAB report that this left little time for people to gain advice and comply with statutory requirements with regard to employment tribunal time limits. Six months after the event people were still consulting the bureau on employment matters and this time span could have affected the individuals’ right to claim in an Employment Tribunal; fortunately these particular clients had received their correct entitlements.
- 2.12 The *debt problem* which can be triggered, or exacerbated, by loss of income is another feature of the financial impact. This is detailed further in chapter five.

The psychological impact.

- 2.13 There can be a huge psychological impact on individuals related to losing a job. For many individuals, particularly amongst smaller companies and sole traders, the effect of the Buncefield incident has meant “losing everything we had worked for”¹⁷ (employee response). For others it has meant a serious interruption in a planned career path; in some cases those made redundant have had to take a step ‘backwards’ on their career path due to the financial (and hence time) pressure of being unemployed.
- 2.14 One respondent replied that he had seen several cases of ‘knee-jerk reactions’ made in a state of confusion following redundancy, which have made employment – and personal – situations worse. Even if staff were not made redundant, there has been widespread uncertainty regarding the length of their further contract. For those who have managed to find new employment on Maylands, many are aware that they may be the first to lose their jobs (‘last-in-first-out’), if further redundancies take place.

¹⁶ Particularly where TUPE transfers had taken place

¹⁷ This is not simply a position in a company, but is also linked to pension payments, salary increases, reputation, morale, etc. There is also an impact on the social relationships through work which can be lost.

- 2.15 According to community-facing workers, the psychological impact has been to a great extent – and noticeably – a ‘male problem’. 73% of Buncefield clients given IAG at various community venues were male¹⁸. This is further noted in chapter five.

The ‘hidden’ impact

- 2.16 As discussed above, there are a significant number of ‘hidden’ cases where unemployment or ‘under-employment’ goes unrecorded, causing discrepancies in the records of people seeking help and support. Those affected by the Buncefield incident only register in the statistics when they come into contact with one or other of the statutory agencies and declare that their situation is linked to the impacts of Buncefield. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that it is difficult for employment agencies and organisations to separate impacts from the Buncefield incident from underlying trends in the rate of unemployment and also that there will be some double-counting by different agencies.
- 2.17 In the paragraphs below, we provide an indication of why there may remain significant ‘hidden’ social impacts.
- 2.18 Where a new job has been found and wage-earning has resumed, in many instances individuals have had to take a pay cut (due either to time pressure related to being out of work, or to an over-supply of skilled individuals looking for work locally). This has knock-on impacts on pensions, credit ratings, etc. Some agency and contract staff are still in employment, but are having to work fewer hours or on a lower hourly rate¹⁹. There has been an effective ‘**downwards shift**’ for many in the local employment market, with immeasurable outcomes on standards of living and quality of life.
- 2.19 Further, there has been a **displacement** of employment pressure in the local labour market onto those not directly affected by Buncefield, with similar outcomes. **Seasonal or part-time workers (e.g. university students)** are amongst those who have not been able to find short-term work they otherwise would have had. Other **trades in the supply chain** have been affected (e.g. taxi drivers in Hemel have lost a significant proportion of business driving clients to and from Maylands).
- 2.20 **Relocated employees** often have to spend longer hours and more money on travelling to work, and sometimes this is unfeasible due to childcare responsibilities or lack of public transport options.
- 2.21 **Older employees** have reportedly found it hard to secure another job, due to age discrimination, and in some instances have been forced to take early retirement.
- 2.22 **Secondary income earners** were also affected but to some extent are another ‘hidden’ group. Although only working part-time or for a few hours in-between school times, the loss of work impacts the family income and can push people ‘over the edge’ into a vicious circle of debt, but it does not necessarily show in the benefits/agency systems. Part-time workers (e.g. in catering or office-cleaning jobs) have had difficulty finding jobs with the same rate of pay or

¹⁸ Information supplied by The Bridge (DBC)

¹⁹ The Community Task Force’s ‘assessment paper’ suggests that agencies have also become aware of a large number of immigrant workers, mostly from Eastern Europe, who have been affected but are proving difficult to identify and contact.

hours to fit in with childcare / home responsibilities, due in part to oversupply of labour in the local market.

2.23 Finally, it has been difficult for agencies to ‘capture’ the full extent of the impact. For example, Job Centre Plus is only able to count the number of people who register with them but estimate that the numbers registered in this way are systematically under-represented because:

- There is an incomplete take-up of benefits for various reasons, as discussed above
- Many agency staff working on Maylands were employed from agencies outside Hemel Hempstead (e.g. Luton, St. Albans) and, hence, have been difficult to track
- As time progresses, a direct causal link to Buncefield is increasingly difficult to track.

The response and how it has worked

2.24 The response of *firms* has been mixed. Some have allowed employees time off for sorting out housing problems, or for psychological help/support; others have not, although it is not clear whether this is positively correlated with those firms with the most serious financial issues. There are examples of firms strongly supporting their employees; EBG Bakeries, for example, provided all Hemel employees full pay and benefits since December, despite them only working every other week²⁰.

2.25 Below we outline some of the main elements of the response by *local employment agencies and organisations*.

2.26 The response of **Hertfordshire Career Service** to the incident occurred in two phases. For the initial ‘unfunded’ phase it was necessary first to identify the funding and support needed and then attempt to streamline various funding packages. The second ‘funded’ phase (starting in early February) was concerned with distributing these new funding packages created from the combined funding streams. This funding was promoted through various organisations.

2.27 The **Herts Response To Redundancy (R2R)** network set up a Buncefield Group to link organisations helping get people back into employment, including Herts Careers Service, Job Centre Plus, Exemplars and West Herts College. The group was funded by £200,000 made available by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for this purpose. Help has included careers advice, help with CVs and job applications and career development loans.

2.28 At **JobCentre Plus** the response also changed over time, with the first concern being to allow people to access benefits quickly, and to ensure a “streamlined service, where possible, for example the crisis loans and applications”. JobCentre Plus also helped to raise awareness of available benefits; encouraging people to take up their available benefits was through a number of other local partnerships e.g. Herts R2R, the Community Task Group, and Herts Learning Partnership. Not everyone chose to access benefits immediately as they became unemployed, and therefore it was difficult to plan. “We had planned for a large influx of people in the months immediately after the incident... they never came” (JC+).

²⁰ *Buncefield damaged bakery to shut*, BBC News: 16/08/06

- 2.29 In response to the situation, they opened at weekends and attempted to streamline the benefits system. Ongoing services include outreach activities such as a mobile service and open days. Over the longer term, JobCentre Plus has made 349 submissions of Buncefield job seekers to potential employers, and helped 53 customers back into employment. Five customers have been referred to a training opportunity. Tracking of Buncefield-affected clients, however, has been difficult, and they are now reviewing their tracking systems.
- 2.30 The **CAB** has dealt with 227 requests for help directly linked to Buncefield, and established the Buncefield Employment / Benefits Advice project for clients to have their employment rights and benefits entitlements assessed. Given the complexity of the situation, dealing with each case was time-intensive: typically between three to four hours was required just to do the initial research into the case. Further complications arose from strict time limits attached to employment tribunals, for example, and the length of time the impacts of the incident have taken to come to light (literacy and numeracy problems may also have had a disproportionate impact on ability to access support offered, on those groups who most need it). The CAB secured funding²¹ for a specialist employment rights advisor, with in-depth knowledge of contract and employment law, to hold weekly sessions for those affected; the continuing demand for employment advice into the longer term may require an indefinite extension of these extended services. During the period January to March 2006, a total of £18,054 was established as being owed to individuals by employers, ranging between £400 and £2,000, and a further total of £9,764 in benefits due. In fact, this process reportedly helped some clients to become aware of their eligibility for tax credits and/or benefits (e.g. because of low income or disability) which they were previously unaware of. Some cases arose of minimum wage not being paid.
- 2.31 **Dacorum Borough Council**, through its Business and Training Centre, **The Bridge** has provided training, certification and free advice on job searching for people affected by the incident. Referrals are mostly made by Job Centre Plus, CAB and the Dacorum Community Trust (DCT). Some applicants were supported through training and finding work in local construction projects, such as with Balfour Beatty on the M1 widening project. The Bridge provided free support and study packs for candidates to take the Construction Skill Certification Scheme (CSCS) license, through their CEMENT Project²².
- 2.32 Employment agencies and organisations carried out joint outreach work to encourage people to access support and help. In February 2006, The Bridge hired a double-decker bus which was driven around affected local areas such as Woodhall Farm, Leverstock Green and Maylands. Over two days, 48 clients were seen (of whom 25 had lost their jobs as a result of Buncefield), and given support and advice from careers advisers and Jobcentre staff onboard. The Bridge also ran job-search and training advice sessions in Leverstock Green Village Hall. However, the reach of these awareness-raising measures was criticised by some; it did not, for example, reach those former Maylands employees who lived outside of the area. Nor did it reach those living locally who have taken temporary work. Despite some of the

²¹ Funding was secured through the National Association of Citizen's Advice Bureaux (£10,249), supported by a further £15,000 through a bid to Investing in Communities, and £5000 from the county council

²² The CEMENT project supports unemployed men and women back into work, through teaching a variety of basic and trade skills in order to remove barriers into the world of multi-skills and construction.

shortcomings, a bid has been made to Investing in Communities (IiC) for funding further outreach sessions in evenings and weekends.

- 2.33 The response of local employment agencies and organisations as a whole has been described as ‘messy’ and confusing. The nature of the incident and the fact that there had been little preparation made by employment agencies and organisations for an emergency of this scale, meant that the response was, by and large, uncoordinated. This was compounded by the drawn-out nature of the employment impacts, which often led to a case of ‘second-guessing’ on the behalf of agencies. There was also reportedly a lack of information flowing from the companies most affected by the incident on their future decisions to the relevant employment agencies and organisations.
- 2.34 Some of the agencies have said that there was no appropriate overarching response: the variety of companies and employees affected all needed different response systems and recognising / preparing for these different forms of support was “difficult” for agencies.
- 2.35 Some of the gaps in support which arose were – on an individual basis – ‘plugged’ by the Mayor’s Fund, administered by the **Dacorum Community Trust** (DCT) (this is further detailed in chapter five).

3: Local residents: impact and response

The effect of the Buncefield incident

- 3.1 The Buncefield explosions were heard up to 70 miles away and were even reported to have been heard as far away as the Netherlands. It caused a massive amount of damage to nearby buildings, including a significant number of residential homes. Immediately after the explosion, exclusion zones were set up around the site, controlled by Hertfordshire Police and assisted by the Metropolitan and Bedfordshire Police; around 2,000 people were evacuated from nearby homes and businesses. Around 300 people used the temporary 'rest centres' co-ordinated by the Borough Council, and temporary accommodation was organised for 30 families unable to return to their homes on their first night.
- 3.2 The scale of the physical damage is difficult to judge, and could form the subject of a separate assessment. At the time of the incident around 300 homes were made secure, and Health and Safety Risk assessments were undertaken of damaged properties, mostly in the neighbourhoods of Adeyfield, Leverstock Green and Woodhall Farm. A survey of households in the area surrounding Buncefield found that 546 (76%) of more than 700 respondents had experienced damage to their property²³. This mostly took the form of: cracks in walls and ceilings (60% of positive responses); damage to window frames (49%); broken door/door locks (42%); broken glass (27%); damage to roof (24%); damage to curtains/carpets/furnishings (14%).
- 3.3 Whilst we do not know the exact tenure mix in the local area, the majority of households are owner-occupied²⁴. However, a good indication of the extent of damage locally is provided by council property figures (which are approximate): of 156 council properties in Woodhall Farm, there were 146 reports of damage; and of 180 council properties in Leverstock Green, there were 113 reports of damage. In total some 300 council dwellings were reported damaged (out of around 5000 council-owned dwellings within two miles, i.e. around 6%), mostly this was damage to windows. Some internal cracking appeared, but no structural damage to Council-owned dwellings has been reported²⁵.
- 3.4 However, some privately-owned houses experienced structural damage as a result of the blast. In a relatively small number of cases this has meant that residents are to date (November 2006) still not in their homes permanently and are living in hotels.

²³ Source: *Buncefield Community Impact Survey (DBC household survey delivered with newsletter in January 2006)*

²⁴ 87% of respondents to a community survey were homeowners, 7% were Council tenants, 3% were private tenants and 2% housing association tenants (*Buncefield Community Impact Survey, DBC, January 2006*)

²⁵ *Buncefield Incident: Short and long-term impact on individuals and community – assessment of current position at 11 October 2006*, Buncefield Community Task Force. Some residents, however, were not convinced that surveying on council property had been carried out properly and thought that some tenants might be at risk from damaged property, especially when there is clear evidence of structural movement within the houses.

The social impact

“It was not necessarily the explosion itself that has caused so much effect and impact on families, it is everything since” – local resident.

- 3.5 The impact of the explosion on residents is of two types. First, the (often long-lasting) psychological impact related to memories of the explosion itself. Second, the legacy of the physical damage to residential houses. The first will be explored later on in this document; the second forms the focus of this section.
- 3.6 We understand that most, if not all, residents who were displaced from their homes have been allowed back to live in their homes. However, in some instances, the damage has recurred; cracks remain so large that “water pours through every time it rains”. (Some residents believe that builders have capitalised on the influx of work locally, and that many have carried out rushed jobs leading to recurring damage.) Residents we have talked to stressed that the moving in and out of property more than once was the most disrupting factor, and was both stressful and costly.
- 3.7 For the unfortunate few who have experienced ongoing problems, the emotional and physical impact has been huge. Some residents have lost a number of irreplaceable belongings over the period of multiple moves. The stress inevitably has had an effect on relationships and the family unit, often resulting in the counselling of one or more family members. The process has been extremely time-consuming as well. For example, the time taken to move in and out of the house often means taking time off work (with a subsequent effect on earnings).
- 3.8 At the time of writing (November 2006), an estimated three families are likely to spend a second Christmas in a hotel. This loss of ‘home’ for an extended period has been demoralising: “A hotel room is not a home – you can’t even boil an egg”.

Case study D: Family x have been in and out of their house three times since the explosion. Large cracks in the wall became apparent on moving back in when the exclusion zone was lifted. The husband has lost several weeks’ worth of wages through time spent co-ordinating builders, workmen and decorators. As the insurance company had postponed a decision on compensation, the family had to take out loans on two credit cards to pay for the work. On moving out for a second time, the family missed several bills that arrived demanding repayment: “How can we explain to people that we can’t receive post, as we don’t even have a front door?”. The TV package could not be cancelled as they had not reached the minimum period, and the electricity bill was higher than normal, despite not having lived in the property, due to usage of electricity by workmen. The family fell further into debt and have been threatened to be cut off from electricity. They also did not have access to the local paper where much of the focus of information dissemination was made.

- 3.9 Some of the biggest stress has come from dealings with *insurance companies*. The majority of households have reported that they have been able to claim against their insurance for relatively minor damage. However, the experience of the most-affected residents has been somewhat different. Some residents report that insurance companies took four weeks before sending out loss-adjustors to view the damage. In many instances insurance companies have delayed payment, pending investigations which can be delayed by weeks or even months. Seven months after the incident, several residents are still ‘battling’ with insurance companies which is having a significant psychological effect. They have no idea how long it will be until

the claims are completed or when they will be able to move permanently back into their properties²⁶.

- 3.10 Residents have relied on their own source of financing (e.g. borrowing on credit cards; using savings) in the first instance, adding financial pressure and – sometimes – debt to their problems. Interim payments from insurance companies, once they arrive, do not usually cover the interest incurred; recipients also incur the loss of an excess fee and, subsequently, a sharp rise in premiums has been reported by some residents. Residents with recurring problems have found particular difficulties in claiming compensation from insurance companies; it is reported that insurance companies state that further damage (e.g. cracks reappearing) was pre-existing, or is as a result of the underlying geology, rather than the blast itself.
- 3.11 Some local residents feel that Buncefield has been ‘brushed under the carpet’ and that people have forgotten that there are still ongoing problems: “people don’t realise that we are talking about homes, and not just houses” (local resident).
- 3.12 For several of those suffering long-term effects, living nearby is a constant reminder. However, unlike some businesses, local residents cannot simply sell up and leave the area. Residents feel that the name and image of the area has been tainted and that there will be less demand for houses in the area²⁷. In particular, there is concern amongst residents in badly damaged houses that people will not want to buy them, especially after the amount of structural work undertaken on the houses. One household estimated that the value of their house had dropped by £30,000 since the incident, following an independent valuation.
- 3.13 Responses from local estate agents indicate that the housing market across the town as a whole has not been too badly affected. House prices in the town centre have not been adversely impacted (indeed one estate agent said that it had helped put Hemel on the map). However, estates and residential areas local to Buncefield have experienced some “holding back of asking prices and ... people nervous about buying”. It is also possible that a small effect has arisen from reduced demand as some people who have lost their jobs had to relocate.

The response and how it has worked

- 3.14 The immediate response of Dacorum Borough Council was to establish a 24-hour emergency call centre for residents, as part of the Borough’s ‘emergency plan’. Two ‘rest-centres’ were set up, and these were used by around 300 people.
- 3.15 An early response of the two district councils was to classify those people within the immediate area who were expected to be moved back into their homes within two weeks, and for whom it would be much longer. However, it soon became clear that a timescale could not be put on an event of such a scale.

²⁶ There is currently a feeling that they are having to ‘fight for everything’. “Some residents have battled for so long, they develop feelings of compliancy and cannot be bothered to fight any more”

²⁷ 56% of respondents to the household survey were concerned about a loss in value to their property (Buncefield Community Impact Survey, January 2006)

- 3.16 The total proportion of Council-owned stock is low in the affected area. The Councils were unable therefore to locate other properties for households temporarily; in any case, as most of those affected were private residents, they were ineligible for temporary rented property from the Council. The response of the Council was to assume that insurance companies would pay for temporary accommodation²⁸. However, it is reported that insurance companies who delayed in arranging for work to be done, advised some residents to approach the Council. DBC and St.Albans District Council waived Council Tax from the date of the incident until the end of January 2006 for those households affected.
- 3.17 The residents we spoke to perceived a specific impact on end-of-terrace houses. However, we found that no systematic mapping exercise has been carried out of houses damaged by the blast, where people have been evacuated from, or when they moved out and back in. This seems to be a missed opportunity for better understanding the effects of the blast.
- 3.18 Charitable organisations were thought by residents to have been helpful but their geographical location and lack of staffing were barriers to providing extensive help.

Communications

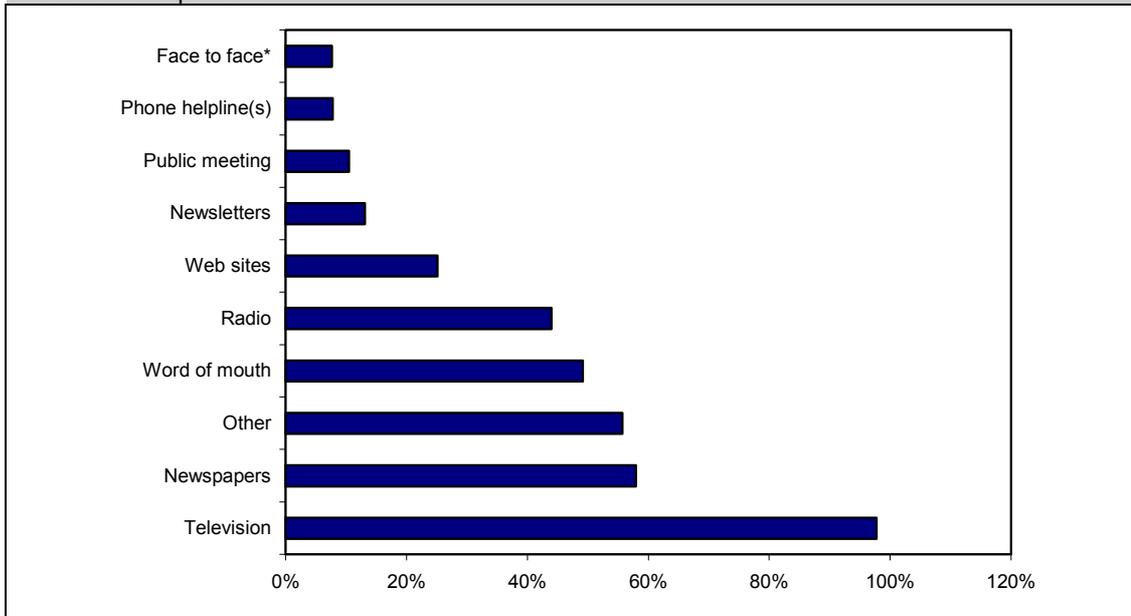
- 3.19 The Buncefield Investigation Board of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (hereafter, the Investigation Board) appointed a Community Relations Officer, who worked with the community (both residents and businesses). He acted as co-ordinator of contact with local stakeholders, ensuring that information was available to those interested, and that people were aware of what the Board and wider investigation were doing.
- 3.20 DBC distributed four 'Buncefield Newsletters' to residents in Leverstock Green, Woodhall Farm and Hales Park, between December 2005 and May 2006. The first was distributed by police on 12 December 2005; the second, in January 2006, was distributed by a community organisation (and went to other community venues such as libraries); the third was distributed in March with the residents magazine, *Dacorum Digest*; the fourth and fifth, in May and July, were delivered by a distribution company. The Newsletter contained advice on a number of topics and contact details for a variety of key organisations. It also contained advice on other topics such as looking out for 'rogue traders' offering to carry out repairs, and updates from the Investigation Board. Planning issues and community interest in the HSE's Investigation were also addressed in DBC Communications. However, some residents reported not to have received the Buncefield Newsletters.
- 3.21 Posters detailing Helplines were distributed to community locations such as Community Centres, shops, schools and GP surgeries in February and June 2006. DBC also put regular announcements in local newspapers and issued more than 40 press releases regarding Buncefield (to June 2006), 75% of which were released in the first week of the emergency. Many of these amounted to little more than a line or two, with many responding to issues that were being reported to the Council as concerns. In addition to the local news stories, four pages about Buncefield appeared in the *Herald Express* on 2 February, half of which was an editorial by DBC. The spring edition of *Dacorum Digest* carried four pages, and the summer

²⁸ DBC housed two vulnerable families on the basis of delays from insurance companies, but did not have the capacity to do this as a matter of course.

edition carried a page on Buncefield. The Council's website also contains Buncefield information for residents.

- 3.22 However, by far the most used form of communication in the short-term following the explosion was the television. 98% of respondents to a community survey²⁹ stated that they used television to keep up-to-date with events related to Buncefield during and after the explosion.

Figure 3-1 Community responses to: How did you keep up to date with events related to Buncefield during and after the explosion?



* (rest centres; community information points)

Source: Buncefield Community Impact Survey, January 2006

- 3.23 The Council also organised three Community Forums, held at Community Centres in Woodhall Farm (20 March 2006), Leverstock Green (27 March 2006) and Adeyfield (22 May 2006). The forums were organised to give advice, information and guidance, and to allow communication between the Council, the Investigation Board and other organisations, and the community. A multi-agency panel was established, which included members of the Investigation Board, the emergency services, council staff and officers, and local councillors. Community attendance was significant, with numbers ranging from 53 at the Adeyfield Forum to 106 at the Leverstock Green Forum.

- 3.24 The forums allowed the community to cross-question an Investigation Board, which is a new approach to emergency response. Panel members found it to be a useful way of finding out how people were reacting to the messages being sent out. Overall, 81% of respondents in community feedback thought that the presentations given were 'Good' or 'Very Good', and 63% found the Q&A session useful and informative. However, we note that some residents did not feel that enough information was being shared through these sources, and that there was no process to collect resident views in a structured manner 'on the ground' about what they knew or what would be the best way to provide help. The feedback from the May forum showed that people felt that large amounts of information were being shared but that there

²⁹ Buncefield Community Impact Survey, DBC, January 2006

was a lack of information about what the community *really wanted to know* (including issues about compensation and the future of the depot).

- 3.25 Whilst community feedback included comments appreciating the efforts made to organise these meetings, some of the feedback we received suggests that the meetings were not advertised widely enough. We note that some of the most-affected residents set up a self-help group (Buncefield Residents Support Group), and that these meetings were advertised using different forms of media, including the local paper as well as local radio stations.

4: Young people: impact and response

The effect of the Buncefield incident

- 4.1 The Buncefield fire was the largest seen since WWII. The fire itself took four days to bring under control, involving hundreds of firemen and police. For some young people, this was inevitably going to be a source of excitement although it is clear that for many it was also the source of anxiety.
- 4.2 Other than those impacted through damage to their homes, the most direct immediate impact on young people was through the closure of several schools. However, young people were also terrified by the explosion and subsequent commotion; the evacuation exacerbated their panic.

The social impact

- 4.3 Following the advice of the Health Protection Agency (HPA), Hertfordshire County Council decided to close over two hundred schools in the immediate area and in the path of the smoke plume, for two days. This led to massive disruption to classes, and caused some confusion about which ones would be open, and when. However, all schools were re-open from December 14th, other than a small number which were ‘significantly damaged by the blast’.
- 4.4 The psychological impacts were many and varied, particularly amongst children. Even professional counselling organisations did not anticipate the scale of the impact: “We were absolutely mindblown how many parents contacted us” (Time2Talk counsellor).
- 4.5 Parents and teachers were faced with their children and children in their care experiencing issues they were unable, unused or not trained to deal with.
- 4.6 A common thought for young people was that it was ‘the end of the world’. Indeed what scared many the most was that it was the first time they had ever seen their parents scared. Common symptoms for young people were sleepless nights; fear of the dark (particularly as the explosion occurred in the dark); fear of going upstairs; not wanting to leave their parents or let them out of their sight (e.g. going to school); and general insecurity. Young people also exhibited anxiety about noise (for example alarms going off), as this was associated with a full day of car alarms, house alarms and police sirens following the explosion. Another common symptom amongst some of the older children were feelings of panic and disempowerment, related to “What if?” scenarios.

The response and how it has worked

- 4.7 A £10,000 grant was made to ‘Time 2 Talk’ – a children’s counselling service provided by Hertfordshire Family Mediation – to provide counselling for children in seven (mostly primary) schools in Hemel Hempstead. Counsellors worked with groups of children in schools, as well as individuals mostly between the ages of 5-14 (some senior schools have their own counsellors, but some secondary-age pupils still wanted to access the service). Six

sessions were offered to young people, which was extended for those who experienced the most severe trauma. Overall, around forty young people accessed the service, and at least one child is still being seen. Young people heard about the service through advertisements in all local schools, school nurses (who were briefed by Time 2 Talk), and word-of-mouth. However, many referrals came from parents or teachers (particularly due to the age of children, who would not necessarily seek help). Parents were informed through the community forums, newspaper articles and word-of-mouth.

- 4.8 The counselling and therapy is reported to have been successful. Whilst it is not something that was immediately considered as important (it was not seen as an obvious response), many people talked to by Time 2 Talk counsellors on an informal basis realised the likely importance of the work. The ‘play therapy’ process adopted by the counsellors was seen to have worked well, and allowed young people an outlet for their thoughts which they otherwise would have kept inside.
- 4.9 A Young People’s Forum was held on 8 June 2006 in the DBC Council Chamber. Pupils and teachers from thirteen local schools were invited to attend. Pupils were selected by (or volunteered from) each school and some schools had a follow-up event (for example, with young people who attended sitting on similar panels). Most teachers sat separately from children to keep the event child-centred.
- 4.10 Information packs were handed out, and presentations were given by the Mayor, the Chair of the Investigation Board, and the Fire Brigade. Children were then able to ask questions, which they had jointly prepared with their schools, to a Panel of experts which included the emergency services, the Investigation Board, the Borough Council and Environment Agency. One child from each school was selected to go on a tour of the Council’s response room (the ‘Bunker’).
- 4.11 The questions asked by children reflected their concerns. They were largely mixed between curiosity about the scale of the fire and the emergency services response, and the longer term impacts of the blast, including compensation. There were also questions about whether the oil depot would be rebuilt.
- 4.12 All young people and teachers were sent a questionnaire following the event. 39 of 43 respondents (91%) thought that their visit to the Council Chamber was ‘Good’ or ‘Very Good’, and 75% thought the Forum was ‘Good’ or ‘Excellent’. 73% enjoyed the main presentation (by the Chair of the Investigation Board) and 86% enjoyed the Fire brigade video. Overall 42 out of 43 respondents were happy with the panel’s answers to their questions.
- 4.13 Over 200 schools were contacted following the incident and all schools in Hertfordshire have now been asked to develop an emergency containment plan in the light of Buncefield.
- 4.14 The police have also visited a number of schools for reassurance and educational purposes. On the whole, primary schools responded well, with pupils encouraged to talk about the incident and use drawings and other art to express their thoughts and feelings. However, interviewees indicated that secondary schools did not provide as much support or provision for students who had been badly affected by the incident.

5: Other community impacts and response

Way of life

Daily routine

- 5.1 Over 2000 people were evacuated immediately after the explosion. A survey of local residents suggests that:
- during the following day: 88% of those evacuated visited relatives or friends and 7% went to the Council rest centre. Only 4% of those evacuated went to work
 - Overnight arrangements: 95% of those who did not return to their homes that day stayed with friends or relatives; 4% stayed in a hotel/B&B arranged by the Council and 1% stayed in a hotel/B&B arranged by an insurance company.
- 5.2 In the longer-term, daily activities for many are still disrupted. People have had to change their travel to work patterns, following relocation of their companies. In some instances companies have moved operations as far as Manchester and made posts available to staff from Hemel Hempstead.
- 5.3 For several households, daily routine is still seriously disrupted (as we examined in chapter three). However, for many residents nearby, life is returning to normal. Local shops and leisure activities have re-opened, and there was no discernible long-term impact on central retail or other town-centre activities.

Financial hardship / personal economic wellbeing

- 5.4 The financial impact on individuals and households has been, in some instances, extreme. We have already discussed the financial impacts on households arising from loss of income and damage to property, although it is difficult to quantify. Longer-term financial hardship is expected to emerge from loss of assets (most predominantly a fall in property prices, as discussed in chapter three), and an inability to service debt. The incident has “thrown many people into new situations which they don’t understand” (community worker). The CAB advise that they are seeing increasing numbers of cases relating to financial advice and debt issues.
- 5.5 Whilst Buncefield was reported to have pushed people into debt, there was some difficulty in determining the level of debt. It is believed that, in some instances, Buncefield was a catalyst for ‘tipping people over the edge’ with regard to levels of debt and their ability to control it. The DCT report that financial issues caused by a combination of factors is common. Some applicants to the Mayor’s Recovery Fund for example were suffering from rent/mortgage arrears, overdue bills and court fees simultaneously. CAB staff and volunteers expressed concerns about long-term debt and what benefits are available; in some instances, particularly moving into the longer term, people are not necessarily attributing or realising that Buncefield is the cause.

- 5.6 Even where financial hardship or debt is not an issue, we have heard about several instances where people are unable to maintain the standard of living that they were used to, pre-Buncefield.
- 5.7 The HSE's ongoing investigation will determine what, if any, compensation will be paid. There remain further questions about whether the long-term cost of repairs caused by Buncefield will be paid for locally through taxes.

Services and facilities

- 5.8 A community survey³⁰ showed that nearly one in five respondents (138 out of 716) contacted the Borough Council for support following the incident. This compared with 90 (13%) who rang the Total Oil support lines (repairs, assistance, insurance, counselling), 8% who contacted a GP, 4% who contacted the Police and 3% who contacted the Church/Vicar/Minister for support.
- 5.9 In general, access to services and facilities was maintained at a high level. In terms of public services and facilities, several schools were closed for a few days, but there was no reported pressure on GP surgeries or other health facilities. Employment agencies responded by increasing staffing availability where possible in anticipation of maintaining accessibility to their services. The police have been visible throughout; at its peak around 200 officers and staff were working on the incident. (Some residents felt that more could be done, this is discussed in the section on 'Crime and Disorder' below.)
- 5.10 There was some disruption to transport arrangements, particularly related to the closure of the M1 and disruption to bus services into Hemel Hempstead. However, these were relatively short-term and we do not enter into these in any detail here.
- 5.11 Access to some private services, for example retail and businesses, was seriously affected within the Maylands area and the evacuation zone. Within Hemel town centre, most shops opened as usual, despite some concern from both owners and customers regarding air pollution. Following advice from the Environment Agency and Health Protection Agency (HPA) on the state of the pollution, the Police were able to advise shops on whether to open.
- 5.12 Local residents reported concerns that the contamination of land and water has not been fully investigated³¹. One of the main concerns raised through questions at community forums and through our focus groups was about the safety of drinking water (we note that having bottled water at the forums did not help with the reassurance message).

Psychology and perception

Fears and aspirations

- 5.13 At the time of the explosion, the Police received over three times the number of calls during the first 48 hours and dealt with 142 missing person reports. In the short-term, the main fears

³⁰ *Buncefield Community Impact Survey*, DBC, January 2006

³¹ This report does not cover environmental impacts, which have been covered by a number of reports by the Environment Agency (www.environment-agency.gov.uk)

were air pollution and when the fire was going to be put out, or whether there would be further explosions.

- 5.14 In the more medium-term, some residents were concerned about when they would be able to get back into their homes. One in seven residents replying to a community survey³² (January 2006) expressed concerns about the future of their job or business because of the Buncefield incident. More than half (56%) had concerns about loss of property value.
- 5.15 As we progress into the longer-term, it is clear that serious concerns remain about the future of the depot site. People are questioning what the results of the public inquiry will be and whether Buncefield will be re-built. Perhaps inevitably, differing reports and rumour abound, and only serve to strengthen the fears of the local community.
- 5.16 There has been some criticism levied at the Council, HSE and other relevant organisations, that information provided – particularly in the months immediately following the incident – was too scientific and did not answer the main questions the community had (e.g. Who was to blame? Is the depot still dangerous? Will the depot be reconstructed? Where, if at all, is compensation coming from?).
- 5.17 Some local residents have suffered from longer-term fears. People have reported to us that they are ‘jumpy’ and more nervous, particularly when hearing an explosion. One woman told us that she broke down in tears when approached with a Buncefield commemorative booklet which appeared to trivialise the incident.
- 5.18 Voluntary services report that there is an ongoing requirement for counselling. We note that the PCT has made counselling available, although there has been little reported take-up to date. ‘Churches Together’ have been providing a listening service for those suffering from trauma, shock and fear, and coordinated a series of visits to elderly and disabled people in the affected area.

Community identity, community cohesion and stability

- 5.19 Intra-community support was strong and can be seen to have grown following the incident. In fact the presence of support structures that existed and have arisen further complicates the possibility of recording the full impact of the explosion, as residents relied on community support instead of accessing the range of services that were made available.
- 5.20 Residents set up a self-help group, the Buncefield Residents Support Group, which (at the time of writing) is still active.
- 5.21 Despite early fears of terrorist activity, there has been no reported ethnic, racial or faith-based tensions arising from the incident.

Extent of influence over decisions

- 5.22 In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, there was a general feeling that communications could have been better between the emergency teams and the community. In some instances, residents relied on access to TV and Internet to keep up-to-date with what was happening and

³² *Buncefield Community Impact Survey*, DBC, January 2006

how the incident was being dealt with. In once instance, a couple who were not allowed back into their homes saw live footage being filmed from their garden, which they felt to be very disempowering.

- 5.23 The police responded sensitively to community concerns at the same time as ensuring the safety of the community and environment. For example, the community police ensured that Government scientists who were testing air pollution were accompanied by a community officer in case of residents asking any questions. However, some of our interviewees suggested that a one-to-one approach of working with residents would have been more appropriate, with more extensive on-the-ground police presence for example, and following up cases of concern more efficiently.
- 5.24 A common feeling expressed in the residents focus group was that no-one had asked residents on how best to communicate their opinions and needs. Some residents continue to feel disempowered, and in particular are experiencing a 'lack of closure', with the situation regarding the future of the depot still unclear and the potential for compensation unresolved: "It's difficult to move on. Sometimes I want to just leave and start over again, but then I realise there's so much left to sort out".

Crime and disorder

- 5.25 There has not been a significant increase in recorded crime and disorder in the months since the incident. There is however concern that the loss of employment and earnings may yet lead to an increase in criminal activity and/or alcohol-related disorder. Figures for May and June 2006 showed an increase in violent crime, criminal damage and domestic violence in Hemel Hempstead, although it is too early to say whether these can be linked to the Buncefield incident³³. The police registered no reports of 'rogue-traders' exploiting vulnerable people in relation to home repairs, which had also been a concern. Crime Prevention Officers monitored the situation with Trading Standards.
- 5.26 In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, the Community Police Team were made highly visible to the public as part of the emergency procedures, in order to provide residents and employees with reassurance. Looting was a potential problem, but was, as far as we are aware, avoided with one or two exceptions.
- 5.27 However, some residents to the north of the site in St Albans, whose houses were particularly badly damaged, felt there should have been police resident at damaged properties to prevent burglary whilst repairs were made. The police were not able to do this because of staff health and safety procedures.

³³ Herts Police are looking at sample cases to ascertain any connections of victims or offenders with Buncefield

Health and wellbeing

- 5.28 This section will briefly look at whether the Buncefield incident has affected the physical or mental health of local residents and workers. We do not intend to cover this area in great depth as it is the topic of a separate study by the Health Protection Agency (HPA)³⁴.
- 5.29 In summary, it appears that there were no serious public health effects from exposure to the fire. The time and date of the explosion, subsequent climatic conditions, and intense heat of the fire helped to ensure that there was no evidence of a public health risk from the plume, either as deposits or air quality.
- 5.30 There is a general feeling of amazement that no-one was killed or seriously injured by such a large explosion and fire. A relatively small number of people (244) attended A&E; three-quarters were from the emergency services and 90% were sent home without need for follow-up³⁵. Most of the others had minor injuries (HPA, July 2006)³⁶. GPs in Dacorum, Watford, Three Rivers and St.Albans to date have provided no reports to the HPA of any cases of patients whose physical health has been seriously affected by Buncefield. West Hertfordshire Primary Care Trust (PCT) report that six people had been treated/referred by GPs for long-term stress related to the Buncefield incident.
- 5.31 However, both residents and community organisations have indicated to us that the mental health implications have been understated. Private referrals for post-traumatic stress (e.g. through occupational health or solicitors) are not systematically recorded. In a community survey³⁷, 402 (55%) of 716 respondents responded that they (or members of their family) had suffered from anxiety and worry related to the Buncefield incident. 37% of respondents reported related stress. The HPA report (based on a survey of 5,000 people) stated that the level of anxiety amongst the public dropped markedly from around 50% at the time of the incident to 13% about seven weeks after the event.
- 5.32 Mind, a mental health charity, was part of the initial group of organisations getting together and offering services; their services were advertised in GP surgeries, and through recovery lines set up after the incident. Mind has reported some additional referrals related to Buncefield, mostly related to depression. However, it is difficult to track whether people affected by Buncefield are still receiving counselling as the reasons behind people seeking help is not recorded.
- 5.33 According to community-facing workers, the psychological impact has been to a great extent – and noticeably – a ‘male problem’. 73% of Buncefield clients given IAG at various community venues were male³⁸. It could be interesting to analyse the local trends of people requesting anti-depressants, although this information is not currently available to us.

³⁴ *The Public Health Impact of the Buncefield Oil Depot Fire*, Health Protection Agency (in collaboration with the Dacorum and Watford and Three Rivers Primary Care Trusts), July 2006

³⁵ In a community survey, 110 people (15% of respondents) reported that they had felt unwell as a result of the plume of smoke; 8% had contacted a GP for support

³⁶ Of those attending A&E, 117 had symptoms attributable to the fire. This included 38 members of the public, mostly with lacerations and sprains, or else respiratory symptoms such as shortness of breath or asthma attack. Most of the 63 emergency workers and those working at or near the depot presented with respiratory complaints such as shortness of breath or sore throat.

³⁷ *Buncefield Community Impact Survey*, DBC, January 2006

³⁸ Source: Information compiled and provided by The Bridge

Community support structures and organisational response

Emergency response

- 5.34 This document does not intend to evaluate the strength of the emergency response; we do however provide a brief overview. Around 2100 personnel from 51 organisations were involved in responding to the incident³⁹. A command centre was set up by **DBC** within hours of the first explosion as part of the Borough's 'emergency plan'. This was the centre of strategic operations and incorporated a 24-hour emergency call centre. Two 'rest-centres' were set up, and these were used by around 300 people. On the whole, the response was considered to have been good, although the Chief Executive of the Council stated at the Youth Forum that inevitably lessons were learnt and some improvements to the system are now needed.
- 5.35 The **Health Protection Agency** (HPA) provided health advice to the public and emergency services following the explosion. This was not, however, as rapid as it could have been according to the Investigation Board. Through a follow-up survey, the HPA report that "the main source of public health advice was through national and local television and local radio, with little use made of NHS Direct, GPs or the internet" (HPA, July 2006: p5).
- 5.36 In broad terms the **emergency services** were perceived in a very positive light by the local community. Thirty three fire and rescue services assisted (over 1,000 officers in total), and the police played a wide variety of roles, including evacuation of 2,000 people and securing a number of strategic buildings in the area.
- 5.37 Various **private companies** also provided emergency support. For example, McDonalds, Tesco and Asda supplied food to the emergency services and members of the community; Primark provided clothing and support to those evacuated from their homes; and Luminar (owner of Leisureworld) provided support in terms of supplying food and entertainment for younger children.
- 5.38 However, we also found that some emergency procedures and processes were not as strong as they could have been. For example, the arrangements for police to deal with day-to-day police business alongside an emergency response were not as strong as they could have been. Further, DBC staff did not record community enquiries on the Home Office Forms and used a computer system that was incompatible with that of the Police, leading to administrative complications. Sharing information was therefore slower than it could have been, and this proved to be a barrier to emergency planning.
- 5.39 As a result of lessons learnt from the Buncefield incident, Hertfordshire County Council has developed a new Emergency Response Plan for schools, and are developing an automated 'critical information dissemination system' to speed up the notification process following an incident.

³⁹ This included 33 fire and rescue services, local ambulance services, police forces, local authority staff, and those involved in caring for casualties, construction and engineering work and environmental sampling (HPA, 2006)

Dacorum Community Trust and the Mayor's Recovery Fund

- 5.40 Within five days of the blast, the Mayor's Recovery Fund had been set up with a £150,000 donation from Hertfordshire Oil Storage Limited (HOSL) forming the bulk of the funding. The fund was administered by the DCT. By March 31st, the Fund stood at £221,000, including donations from churches, local companies and public donations (including Rotary and Lions). In June 2006, a further £100,000 was donated by HOSL, enabling the fund to remain solvent.
- 5.41 By June 2006, the Fund had made 478 separate grants in response to 370 requests (some people needed more than one grant), totalling around £116,000. 3% of respondents to a community survey⁴⁰ reported that they had contacted the DCT/Mayor's Recovery Fund for support since the incident. 60% of the fund was allocated to people who were affected because of loss of employment; 30% was allocated to those who had experienced damage to their homes. Initial grants were mostly 'sticking plaster' payments for immediate needs, but larger grants for longer-term problems have been granted. Examples of things the fund has helped to cover include: costs incurred during the time it can take to sort out insurance complications; help with large heating bills; help with uninsured losses (e.g. damage to fences and sheds); help with rent and mortgage arrears; psychological help; equipment such as work boots to help people get jobs.
- 5.42 The effect on the Trust itself has been significant, in terms of stretching human resources to the maximum, raising the Trust's profile, and exposing them to the "risk of implosion as an organisation". The DCT is developing a new business plan as a direct result of Buncefield later in the year.

Voluntary and community organisations

- 5.43 The Dacorum Council for Voluntary Service set up a **Community Recovery Group** to survey voluntary and community groups⁴¹ "to map the extent to which the explosion had had an effect on their work and the needs of the community in which they are active and serve". Just over a fifth (22%) of respondents said that the Buncefield explosion had impacted on their organisation. Of these, almost three-quarters said that it had had a financial impact (although it is hard to quantify how much), through lowering of donations or paid usage of services (following job loss), potential loss of support from local companies, or direct damage to buildings and, in one instance, loss of rental income from use of a hall. One organisation reported a financial gain through temporary letting of space to a displaced company. Two-thirds said that it had had an emotional impact on their organisation, such as through loss of employment, increased demand on volunteer time and pastoral care duties, and general disruption.
- 5.44 Half (i.e. around 10% of all community and voluntary organisations who responded) said that it would impact on future work through, for example, greater demands on staff and volunteer time, continuing demand for advice and support services, or ensuring that contacts and

⁴⁰ *Buncefield Community Impact Survey*, DBC, January 2006

⁴¹ This included the Dacorum CVS membership, as well as Community Centres and Churches in Adeyfield, Grovehill, Woodhall Farm and Leverstock Green. 100 responses were received, a response rate of approximately 25%

procedures are reviewed and updated for emergencies. Some groups, such as Dacorum CAB and DCT, had already sought advice on future sources of funding to meet a predicted increase in demand on services and potential loss of income.

- 5.45 In general, it is worth noting that the public sector in Dacorum already had a strong relationship with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in Hemel Hempstead; the presence of pre-existing infrastructure, networks and relationships appears to have helped the speed, and co-ordination, of VCS response locally.

Partnerships and working groups

- 5.46 Separate to the emergency response, a longer-term ‘**Buncefield Strategic Recovery Group**’ (see Annex C for composition) was quickly set up and was co-ordinating activity 2 days after the explosion. Four sub-groups were also established to take over the work on the ground; of particular relevance to this social impact study, the ‘**Community Recovery**’ sub-group (also known as the Community Task Force) was set up to allow community-facing organisations to share their knowledge and jointly plan their response into the medium and longer-term. The Community Task Force was organised by Christmas 2005 and met immediately after the New Year. It is made up with representatives from: DBC, St.Albans District Council, Hertfordshire County Council, the Police, DCT, HSE, the local Primary Care Trust, Job Centre Plus and the CAB (an organisation chart is provided in Annex C). The Task Force meets regularly, about once per month at the time of writing (although weekly in the early stages) to discuss various aspects of community impacts and the appropriate response, and produces two key documents, updated on a monthly basis, from which action points are drawn: the ‘Short and long-term impact on individuals and community: assessment of current position’ and ‘Community Recovery Plan’.
- 5.47 Within the Council, Community Partnerships⁴² have sought to develop ways of commemorating the event and celebrating the recovery, through the Community Development Group (a sub-group of the Community Task Group). Collating people’s memories and commemorating can be cathartic and help the community to achieve normality once more. As part of these efforts, the sub-group are working on: further community fora later in the year once the Investigation is further down the line; an exhibition of artwork and other exhibits related to Buncefield in December 2006 to mark the anniversary; a long term ‘Tree Trail’ planting of trees reaching from the town centre to Buncefield (symbolic of the carbon issue); a schools competition and a school science project related to the physical and chemical activity taking place during the incident.
- 5.48 Charitable organisations were thought by residents to have been helpful in terms of their advice and guidance but their inaccessibility was a barrier to the maximum help they could potentially provide. Buncefield was a useful lesson in forming partnerships between such organisations and Government agencies; however, because there was no clear overarching response or ‘leader’ in the response to the incident, it is possible the expertise and knowledge of both were not used to their full potential.

⁴² Community Partnerships is a Directorate within DBC. The Community Partnerships team brings together staff involved with community development (and community response), cultural development and housing functions into a single unit. This proved to be a helpful structure in responding quickly in a unified way to the emergency.

- 5.49 In general, organisations have reported to us that the Buncefield incident has encouraged them to work together⁴³ and that, on the whole, joint responses have worked well. It has also led to closer relationships being developed on a personal level between staff of different organisations and a subsequent better understanding of what other organisations offer to communities in terms of support, and legislative processes.

⁴³ For example, The Bridge now sends a regular careers advisor to the DCT on a weekly basis. This arrangement is likely to continue into the future.

6: Summary and Conclusions

- 6.1 The Buncefield incident has had a wide-ranging and long-term social impact; it is difficult to measure the full scale of the impact in absolute terms.
- 6.2 With considerable effort and commitment, the emergency plans of the Borough Council and other organisations fell into place, and on the whole fairly quickly. However, the social impact has occurred over a considerably longer time period than the emergency plans were designed to allow for, and – as we move towards the anniversary of the incident - some longer-term impacts are still emerging which are both important and ongoing.
- 6.3 This continuation of impact long after the incident itself is both unexpected and disturbing. Like a stone thrown into a pond, over time the impact has grown but is becoming increasingly difficult to trace directly back to Buncefield. In many instances, as much as with personal relationships and livelihoods as with the viability of businesses, the Buncefield incident could be seen as a catalyst for disturbance.

Organisational response

- The emergency response has, on the whole, been good
- For those who could voice the need for help, the longer-term response has also been largely positive, provided through a variety of agencies who worked increasingly closely together (DBC, DCT, The Bridge, JobCentre Plus, and CAB, amongst others). Existing networks helped in achieving rapid response, as well as the strong involvement of a more flexible voluntary sector
- The Community Task Force was quickly established to take over the work on the ground and has been an effective group to pool the information on community and individual needs
- Recording of data has been mostly piecemeal to date, partly in response to funding availability and partly as many organisations had been too busy ‘simply reacting’
- Whilst agencies have played an important role of making people aware of what was on offer, there have still been quite a number of cases where people have been left helpless. It was felt that emergencies such as this should test the ‘welfare state’, and that – in a small number of instances – the system has badly let some people down. There is some debate as to whether the governmental response would have been ‘better’ if the incident had occurred in a more deprived area, or if people had died
- The key problem appears to have been those who have fallen ‘through the cracks’ in the system, particularly: a) those made homeless in the medium-term, b) those suffering from multiple effects, and therefore in a state of shock, and c) those who were already vulnerable for one reason or another

- With hindsight, it might have been appropriate to place more community workers directly in the most affected local areas, more visibly and for a longer period, to fulfil the pastoral duties of all the local authorities concerned, and to share as much information as possible. Whilst it is unlikely that the local authorities would have had sufficient staff capacity available for this, the senior officer responsible for the community recovery work at DBC has reflected that one option for authorities faced with a similar event in the future would be to utilise the resource of local volunteers. It may also have been appropriate to develop a thorough list of all those affected (including locations and full contact details), using information gathered through a bottom-up approach, similar to that which was used for contacting businesses.

Employment

- Impacts are still occurring, because some companies are continuing to adjust to the effects of Buncefield
- There are particular vulnerable groups, such as agency staff and part-time workers, which have been very greatly affected. This issue may be worth exploring for special provision to be made in future situations
- It has been difficult to collect accurate data, and cross-check between data collected by different organisations. This issue needs to be examined in preparation for future emergency response
- Financial loss is difficult to determine accurately and the opportunity cost of job loss would – in particular – be hard to ascertain, even with more accurate information. However, the financial loss would not accurately represent the scale of the social impact on some people's lives.

Individual hardship

- Insurance, and dealing with insurance companies, has been a key problem for individual householders
- It has been difficult to link specific impacts (e.g. those occurring outside Hemel Hempstead) directly to Buncefield, and this is becoming increasingly difficult as time passes. On the whole, the social impact – and the scale of intra-community support from family, friends and neighbours – has been routinely underestimated
- Multiple shock, caused for example, by long-term damage to homes and incurred debt, is making the situation particularly difficult to deal with. This is further complicated by differing 'coping mechanisms' making suitable response hard to predict. Often it is the seemingly marginal impacts – e.g. loss of part-time job of secondary income earner – which can push people 'over the edge' and into the vicious circle of debt
- The establishment of an emergency buffer fund should be considered, to help pay for hardship cases that have occurred to continue with 'normal' life.