



Buncefield Incident

Community Impact

“No one lost their life because of the Buncefield explosion. But many people lost the lives they had before it happened.”

Director of Dacorum Borough Council, Chair of the Buncefield Community Recovery Taskforce

The explosion and subsequent fire at the Buncefield Oil Depot in Hemel Hempstead on 11 December 2005 had a massive impact on the local community. As well as residents living near to the depot, it also affected hundreds of people employed on the Maylands Industrial Estate.

This was the largest and the most lengthy emergency response that Dacorum Council has ever had to deal with.

Housing

“The constant upheaval of moving in and out continuously affects all parts of your life. It disrupts school, work, relationships, it pushes you to the point where you think you just can’t stand another second of it.

You are forced to remove all that ‘makes’ you and your family and live in the sterile environment of the insurers choosing. You have no privacy or personal life, let alone family life. It strips the very fabric of your life.

It is enough to break a marriage, let alone children. It is by far the worst experience we have ever had to endure. What is the hardest part is no-one else truly understands how far-reaching the effects are and it is too soul destroying to explain. The only others who understand are those who experience it. It makes you feel part of a small forgotten group of people. ”

A local resident whose home was badly damaged by the blast

- 2000 people were evacuated from their homes, 300 of which visited council-run reception centres. The Council organised emergency accommodation for 30 evacuated families.
- In a survey of households in the Buncefield area, of 721 respondents, 76% said their property had been damaged in some way. Most damage related to broken glass, damaged window and door frames, door locks, roofs, doors and cracks in walls and ceilings. Many of these were private householders who had to make insurance claims to cover the cost of the repairs.
- 300 Council dwellings were damaged and made secure by the Council. This is 6% of the 5000 council-owned dwellings within a two mile radius of Buncefield.
- Six council households remained in temporary council accommodation for months afterwards, supported by housing officers. Four families took up permanent tenancies in those properties.

Employment and Financial Impact

“I have lost count of the number of jobs I have applied for over the past year or so, and not heard back from which I find distressing... I just want a job, any job so that I don't have to rely on the Trust Fund to keep helping me out.”

“Thank you for all the help you have given supporting me through a very difficult 18 months, both with vital money for living after losing my job because of Buncefield and helping with re-training. The good news is that I've now got a job because of it, and can now look forward to the future. Without the Recovery Fund my life would have been truly bleak. I don't know what I would have done.”

Two people who received help and support from the Dacorum Community Trust

- The most significant impact was on people who were 'economically fragile' – who were just about managing financially, but could not sustain a loss of income or increased expense, even for a short period.
- By the end of 2007 there were over 900 Buncefield-related redundancies. There were a large number of temporary and casual employees working in the Maylands business area who lost earnings immediately. Some families lost both incomes.
- Many people who did retain their jobs had their hours reduced and so lost income.
- Others were relocated, resulting in increased costs and more time spent away, which has affected ability to manage childcare.
- Jobcentre Plus received a total of 95 new benefit claims related to the incident during the first year. All claims were fast-tracked. Of the 95 customers claiming benefit, 81 are no longer claiming as 53 are now in employment, ten stopped claiming for reasons unknown, 12 failed to attend their intervention appointment and six went on to claim Incapacity Benefit.
- The local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) has dealt with over 300 requests for help and information directly related to the Buncefield fire, mostly relating to loss of employment and earnings. By the end of 2006, employment cases had diminished but work on money advice, debt and benefits had increased significantly.
- Within days of the incident a Community Recovery Fund was set up to by the Mayor to provide immediate financial support to affected residents businesses. This fund was administered by a local voluntary organisation, Dacorum Community Trust.
- By this year the Recovery Fund had reached £665,210 of which £75,960 was donated by churches and voluntary organisations as well as public and statutory bodies. HOSL and Total contributed £589,250 and latterly Total supported the ongoing work with grants amounting to a further £32,500. Most of the money in the fund has now been paid out and 2,266 grants have been made. Initially, these were mostly small amounts (usually £100) to alleviate immediate needs but larger grants were subsequently given for longer-term problems. It is estimated that 75% of the grants reflected unemployment.

Health Impact

“Counselling has been good ‘cos it’s made me stronger.” Boy aged 7

“You have really helped me find out what I want and how I feel. Thank you.” Girl aged 12

- Between 11-14 December, a total of 244 people attended A&E, mostly in Hemel Hempstead. Three quarters were emergency services personnel. 117 had symptoms attributable to the fire.
- Residents and voluntary agencies have talked extensively about the impact of the incident on their mental health. People with employment and debt problems and families who were displaced were particularly affected.
- 60 children aged 5-14 years were offered counselling through schools to help them overcome trauma and anxieties caused by difficulties at home.

Community Legacy

- Towards the end of 2007 it was agreed that any ongoing support for the community should be absorbed into the work of the voluntary sector, principally the CAB and Dacorum Community Trust.
- Both have been using external funding to run clubs and offer people one-to-one support and where appropriate help with their CV's and job preparation. Whilst funds last they will continue to do this and of course sign post people on to others for help.
- Agencies have been concerned about those who have been reluctant to ask for help and built up credit card debts in order to survive, resulting in mounting debts. Both Dacorum Community Trust and the CAB reported that they were continuing to see new clients with financial problems each week for two years after the incident.

Further Information

Most of the information in this fact sheet is taken from the Report of the Buncefield Recovery Taskforce: December 2005–December 2007. This report can be viewed on the Dacorum Borough Council web site, www.dacorum.gov.uk/news/buncefield