

## **Incident at Buncefield fuel depot 11 December 2005**

### **Note by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister**

The explosion and subsequent fire at the Buncefield fuel terminal near Hemel Hempstead, which occurred at 6.00am on Sunday 11 December has been described as the worst such event in Europe for over sixty years.

From the early hours of the incident at Buncefield the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister played a key role in leading the Government response in support of the police, fire and rescue and other emergency services.

### **MINISTERIAL INVOLVEMENT**

The Deputy Prime Minister co-ordinated the Government response in the early stages of the incident and chaired a cross Whitehall ministerial meeting under the COBR machinery. He visited Buncefield on the day of the incident and discussed with the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer for Hertfordshire and other agencies how the response was proceeding. He assured them of the Government's full support and assistance with tackling the fire.

ODPM Ministers made two further visits, on 15 and 17 December, to meet local authority representatives, members of the business and local community, members of the emergency services involved in tackling the fire, and to witness first hand the scale of devastation caused. The Deputy Prime Minister maintains a close personal interest in developments. He is in regular contact with constituency MPs and plans to make a further visit to Buncefield in the near future.

### **ODPM RESPONSE**

ODPM officials were involved immediately after the incident. The Director of Fire Resilience was the department's lead official and worked closely with the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS). CCS was responsible for co-ordinating the wider response of government departments.

Senior members of the Regional Resilience Team based in Government Office East of England (GO-East), attended Gold Command where they provided a key link with, and focal point for briefing, central government departments on the incident and developing situation at Buncefield.

The Department's Fire Emergency Information Centre (FEIC) was set up early on 11 December to provide strategic and operational advice to the police led Gold Command in Welwyn Garden City and to Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) throughout the course of the incident. The FEIC is set up in response to major incidents to provide such support. It is staffed by firefighting professionals who are either members of Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate or on secondment to ODPM from the Fire and Rescue Service.

A senior professional member of the Department's New Dimension Programme team attended the police led Gold Command to provide first hand firefighting expertise and act as liaison with the FEIC.

Critical support for the Hertfordshire led FRS response was provided by the high volume pumping (HVP) resources funded by the Department's New Dimension Programme. The project manager – a professional firefighter seconded to ODPM - for the New Dimension Water Capability project attended the incident scene to give advice on the number of pumps and associated equipment needed to tackle the fire. A total of fifteen HVPs were brought in from fire and rescue services across the country to pump water used for the foam supply from a nearby balancing tank. At this incident each pump did the job of at least 10 traditional fire appliances, pumping water over 1.8 km, and providing a vital component in the assault on the blaze. In the absence of the HVPs and 150mm hoses with which they are equipped it is estimated that over 150 traditional appliances would have been needed to pump the water taken from the balancing tank. A further 700 would have been required to lay an adequate quantity of traditional 70mm hose from the balancing tank to the fire.

The ODPM funded Interim FRS National Coordination Centre (INCC) in West Yorkshire co-ordinated deployment of New Dimension equipment and other resources, including the substantial volume of foam stock used to tackle the fire. The INCC was actively involved from early on the day of the incident and co-ordinated the deployment of equipment and associated firefighting resources from 16 fire and rescue services from Somerset to North Yorkshire. At its peak 180 firefighters were involved in tackling the fire.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Following the incident, the Department has initiated, and is supporting or contributing to, action to ensure lessons learned are identified. The Department is working closely with the affected local and county authorities to provide appropriate advice on the process for claiming assistance under the Bellwin scheme. The Department will also liaise, and share relevant information, with the team conducting the independent Health and Safety Executive investigation into the Buncfield incident.

## **LOCAL REVIEWS**

At the request of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hertfordshire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) has conducted an initial review of issues arising from the multi-agency response to the Buncfield incident. The LRF's report was forwarded to the DPM on 20 January. The report is the property of the LRF. It has been shared with all LRF members but has not been published. All agencies involved in the response are undertaking their own internal debriefs prior to a full multi-agency debrief being conducted. This is expected to form the basis of a comprehensive multi-agency debrief report by the LRF that will be submitted to the DPM and other interested parties on its completion.

## **HERTFORDSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE REVIEW**

ODPM is providing input and support to a review being conducted by Hertfordshire FRS of all aspects of fire and rescue service involvement in responding to the Buncefield incident. The review is assessing the roles and input provided by the interim National Co-ordination Centre; the critical contribution made by the High Volume pumping capability funded through the New Dimension programme and the ODPM Fire Emergency Information Centre. The review is expected to take some three months to complete and to feed into the LRF's multi-agency debrief report.

## **REGIONAL REVIEW**

At the request of the Deputy Prime Minister, Government Office East of England are compiling a report on issues, lessons and actions arising from and as a consequence of the incident. The report will encompass lessons learned by the Office's Regional Resilience Team during its involvement in the response and on-going recovery phases. This is an internal report for the DPM's information.

## **CENTRAL CROSS - GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT REVIEW**

ODPM is contributing to a cross-government review, being co-ordinated by Cabinet Office (Civil Contingencies Secretariat), of lessons learned by central departments during the response to the incident at Buncefield. The review is addressing such issues as preparation and planning, central co-ordination of the response, media strategy and predicting supply and demand. The findings of the review will be shared with departments but no decision has yet been taken on whether these should be made more widely available. The review is expected to be concluded by the spring.

## **BELLWIN SCHEME**

Shortly following the incident, ODPM officials made contact with Hertfordshire County Council and Dacorum Borough Council in connection with possible Bellwin claims. Since that time, ODPM officials have been advising the councils on how to frame their Bellwin claims. These exchanges have enabled ODPM to give the authorities early help with the procedures to follow and what would constitute eligible costs etc.

ODPM officials have written to the local authorities to confirm that financial assistance will be made available through the Bellwin Scheme and have issued guidance notes and a claim form to Dacorum, Hertfordshire County Council and Hertfordshire Police Authority

A separate note on the Bellwin scheme is at Annex A.

## **PLANNING**

The terms of reference of the independent HSE investigation into the Buncefield incident include :

*"make recommendations for future action to ensure the effective management and regulation of major accident risk at COMAH sites. This should include consideration of offsite as well as onsite risks and consider prevention of incidents, preparations for response to incidents, and mitigation of their effects."*

ODPM is sponsor Department for the the Planning (Hazardous Substances) Act 1990 but cannot pre-empt the investigation report.

Consideration of "offsite risks" and "mitigation of their effects" may involve consideration of the extent to which the land use planning system can be used to mitigate the effects of any incidents that occur.

Local planning authorities are required to consult HSE on proposals to develop land within certain areas known as "consultation zones." These are within the vicinity of hazardous substances as defined by the Planning (Hazardous Substances) Regulations 1992 . The types of development covered by this consultation requirement include residential development; retail, office and industrial development above specified floor areas and any development likely to result in a material increase in the number of persons working within or visiting the notified area. The decision whether, on planning grounds, to permit the type of development covered by consultation with HSE rests with the the local planning authority who must take account of, but are not bound by advice received from HSE. Where the local planning authority proposes to go against HSE advice, it is required to give HSE an opportunity to ask the Secretary of State to call-in the application.

There has been speculation about whether HSE's consultation zones are sufficiently large to separate and protect people or property in the event of an incident. But until the cause of the Buncefield incident is established HSE has no reason to believe that its existing consultation zones are insufficient. HSE will re-appraise the position once the cause(s) of the incident have been clearly identified. ODPM will then consider the implications for planning.

ODPM is considering, along with other interested departments, the implications of ongoing HSE analysis of information it has gathered in compliance with the regulations that apply to major hazard sites such as Buncefield. The group will liaise with the Buncefield investigation team and share relevant information with them.

## **CONCLUSION**

The response of government departments and agencies to the Buncefield incident was rapid, joined up and effective. Central co-ordination of government resources was provided via the CCS. Regional co-ordination was provided via the Regional Resilience Team in the Government Office for the East of England. The Gold Commander for the incident – the Chief Police

Officer for Hertfordshire – praised strongly the input of government and support for the front line response. Through the lessons learned reviews being undertaken we intend to draw out the lessons for future emergency planning. The Deputy Prime Minister and the ODPM are continuing to monitor the aftermath and are providing continuing support to the local authorities affected.

## ANNEX A

### BELLWIN SCHEMES

- Bellwin schemes are the means by which the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister can make available financial assistance to local authorities following an emergency.
- Schemes are set up under the authority of Section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 as amended.
- In England Bellwin schemes apply only to Local Authorities as defined in section 155(4) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Police Authorities were added in 1994, the Greater London Authority on its creation in 2000 and Combined Fire Authorities from 1 April 2004.
- There is no automatic entitlement to special assistance.
- A scheme will only be set up if there has been an emergency or disaster involving destruction of or danger to life or property on a scale, which is clearly exceptional in relation to normal experience in the locality.
- Any application for assistance must demonstrate that the authority incurred expenditure on or in connection with action to protect life or property or to avoid severe inconvenience.
- Before qualifying for grant a LA must have spent 0.2 per cent of its budget on eligible expenditure. Above that threshold grant is normally paid at 85 per cent.
- The purpose of a Bellwin scheme is to provide emergency relief, not to put right all the ill effects of an incident.