

BUSINESS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**TUESDAY 17TH SEPTEMBER 2019**

REPORT TITLE:	NEW FERRY – A REPORT ON THE INCIDENT & THE ACUTE & RECOVERY PHASES
REPORT OF:	INTERIM DIRECTOR ECONOMIC & HOUSING GROWTH

REPORT SUMMARY

The report evaluates the role played by the Council, the emergency services and other key stakeholders in respect of the gas explosion in New Ferry in March 2017. In particular, the level of effectiveness of the Council and its partners during the respective acute and recovery phases.

In addition the report provides an update on the Council and its key strategic partners' role in leading the current regeneration phase and any next steps.

This matter affects the borough's Bromborough ward.

This is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

Committee is requested to note the report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Committee on 28th November 2018 it was agreed [minute 33 refers] that a case study be undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of the Council and its partner's roles in the various phases of the New Ferry incident.
- 1.2 Furthermore, that any lessons learnt be reported to Members.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 N/A

3.0 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

- 3.1 On Saturday 25th March 2017 at approximately 21.14pm hours an explosion occurred at 1 Boundary Road, New Ferry, Wirral, Merseyside.
- 3.2 The explosion resulted in the collapse of the Complete Works dance studio, furniture showroom, charity shop and funeral parlour causing severe structural damage to approximately 30 nearby domestic and commercial properties, plus a number of road closures.
- 3.3 There were 34 reported casualties with 2 assessed as critical, who were taken to a number of local hospitals. All three emergency services responded to the scene along with representatives from Wirral Council and Utility Companies.
- 3.4 An emergency evacuation centre was set up by Life Church (opposite Bebington Rail Station) which remained open over the weekend to support displaced residents and members of the local community.

4.0 EVENTS & TIMELINE

Acute Phase

4.1 Initial response -Saturday 25 March 2017

- 21:14 First call received to Wirral Council Control Room regarding concerns over a very loud bang.
- 21:16 Wirral Council Patrol Officers (WCP) asked to attend area to investigate.
- 21:18 Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service (MFRS) called to report possible gas explosion, initial reports suggest area approx. 40m X 50m affected.
- 21:24 MFRS established rendezvous point (RVP) at junction of Boundary Rd & Bebington Rd. "Major incident declared", WCP officers on site to assist. Duty Mobilising Officer (DMO) contacted and informed of incident.
- 21:40 Building Control requested by MFRS and the need to include David Armstrong and Mark Camborne both on site.
- 21:56 Road Closure put in place by Police & MFRS. Access provided through New Ferry Road from both ends.

- 22:05 The Oval put on standby as a possible rest Centre.
- 22:07 BAM Nutall (Council Contractors) contacted to provide road closure signs.
- 22:30 Multi agency Meeting at RVP point. National Grid now on site. 8 MFRS appliances in attendance with Mark Camborne and DMO in attendance too.
- 22:40 Update from MFRS – Log Number – 40450. Casualties given as 16 walking wounded being assessed by North West Ambulance Service (NWAS). 2x persons with serious injuries. Life Centre Church now place of safe assembly.
- 22:42 MFRS at Central station due to strong smell of gas. Investigating possible link.
- 23:25 BAM confirm Crew at incident site awaiting instructions.

4.2 The first Council Officer on the scene was Mark Camborne, Principal Health Safety and Resilience Officer, who was soon joined by David Armstrong, Deputy Chief Executive and Wayne Tsoi from the Housing Options Team.

4.3 Upon arrival the site was already under the control of Mersey Fire & Rescue Service and the area of the explosion subsequently designated a crime scene under Merseyside Polices' jurisdiction. Dan Stevens, Chief Fire Officer at the time was in attendance and he determined that the level of damage was such that it be declared a "major incident". A Gold Command meeting was then scheduled for the next day.

4.4 As responsibility for the site was in the hands of the emergency services, it should be stressed that the Council had no input whatsoever at the time, in determining the designation of the incident.

4.5 Arrangements were made initially for the Oval Leisure Centre to provide shelter for residents, however the nearby Life Church came forward to provide a welcoming environment providing essential food, drink, notwithstanding invaluable support from members of the church who stayed throughout the night to support victims. The level of input by the Life Church was of the highest order and in recognition of their sterling work the Council later made a £1,000 financial contribution to reimburse them for costs of heating/lighting and food and drink.

4.6 Supported by an "on call" Children's Social Worker and staff from Mark's Community Safety Team, most of the Council's input in the immediate aftermath was focussed on supporting displaced residents. Key matters resolved during the night included making arrangements regarding the recovery of pets (both present and missing), sourcing the delivery of medication from Arrowe Park Hospital to replace those left behind, to providing telephone facilities for residents to contact relatives.

4.7 For those individuals unable to make alternative accommodation arrangements with friends or family, the Council made separate arrangements to book accommodation at the nearby Village Hotel. At the same time residents who had left their home with no money at their disposal were provided with cash to fund taxis, buy breakfast and essential toiletries.

4.8 Sunday 26 March 2017

- 00:27 Council social services at church site. Oval site to be closed down.
- 00:45 Multi Agency Meeting to assess ongoing actions.
- 01:50 CCTV checked no footage available. Only aftermath and response.
- 04:15 Site secured with block & mesh.

- 04:17 DMO & Mark Camborne stood down.
- 05:12 Building Control Officer stood down.
- 08:30 On site multi agency meeting.
- 10:00 Council Housing Options service on site to facilitate emergency temporary accommodation multi agency meeting.
- 11:48 Police request assistance over road closure.
- 13:00 Police Gold Meeting.
- 13:25 Mayor attended Life Church.
- 17:26 Building Control stood down.
- 20:35 NHS direct Council Contact Control Room over welfare of persons in Life Church – updated and passed onto Life church.
- 23:30 Life Church site closed down.

- 4.9 The Housing Options service launched an immediate response to the incident, with an initial on-site presence all day on Sunday 26th March 2017, to facilitate access to emergency accommodation using a combination of local Bed & Breakfast accommodation and Council-owned temporary accommodation for 16 households. In addition staff utilised a Wirral Council credit card to provide essential emergency provisions (such as food and personal items) to affected residents.
- 4.10 On Monday 27th March, the team linked with the on-site New Ferry operation to provide housing advice and assistance to a total of 37 households who comprised of owner-occupiers, social, and private rented tenant who had been either displaced or affected by the incident. Over the coming weeks, the team provided emergency accommodation, food, arranged furniture removals, and where appropriate access to taxis to facilitate appointments (due to cars being stuck within the cordon) with expenditure totalling £38,677.
- 4.11 In order to support the households worst affected and individuals unable to return to their homes, Local Welfare Assistance awards were made available, with Bebington One Stop Shop providing a specialist ‘drop-in’ service for affected residents. The service provided a fast track Local Welfare Assistance application for food, fuel, the provision of an enhanced clothing award, toiletries and daily living expenses. In excess of £6,500 of Local Welfare Assistance funding was awarded to 16 residents during this period.
- 4.12 For those residents unable to return to their homes due to significant damage or repair, partner social landlords were requested to provide any available accommodation to help rehouse affected households. This resulted in 7 households being permanently rehoused into social housing tenancies. The team provided financial assistance, in the form of tenancy deposits for a further 2 households to access private rented tenancies. The majority of households requiring rehousing were rehoused within 3 months of the incident. The remaining displaced households returned home as the cordon was removed or property repairs completed, some chose to secure their own properties independently or accessed accommodation provided by their insurance companies.
- 4.13 With everything following the incident now firmly under control and all risks being satisfactorily managed, Merseyside Police at its Gold Command meeting, took the decision to downgrade the classification of major incident status.

Recovery Phase

- 4.14 The Police were in control of the site as a potential crime scene and they had responsibility whilst the complex investigations were continuing. The Council commenced the recovery phase on 27th March, but did not have access to the site initially, focussing on supporting local residents and businesses, with David Ball acting as the Council's lead Recovery Officer.
- 4.15 On Tuesday 28th March a multi-disciplinary operational team consisting of a variety of internal and external stakeholders was established within New Ferry Village Hall to provide co-ordinated support to residents and businesses alike. Operating on a 'drop in' basis, the Village Hall was open from 9.00 – 5.00pm Monday to Friday for a period of two weeks.
- 4.16 A key aspect of the recovery phase was also the establishment of regular meetings and dialogue with a number of key public/private sector partners and agencies. This included representatives from Police, Fire, NHS, DHCLG (Dept of Housing, Communities and Local Government), National Grid, SP Energy Networks alongside a wide range of Council staff from Housing, Highways, Regeneration and Comms. The DHCLG representative, providing a valuable interface with government at the time.
- 4.17 On 6th April Wirral Council assumed responsibility for the area from Merseyside Police, immediately installing 24/7 security in and around the areas affected by the explosion.

A chronology of activity over the subsequent period can be summarised as follows:

April

- New Ferry Village Hall becomes HQ for co-ordination of recovery effort including support agencies (DWP, Homeless & Housing Options Team, Ask us Wirral, Port Sunlight Village Trust).
- Wirral Council take responsibility of incident site following handover from Merseyside Police.
- A multi-agency team of key public/private sector partners established.
- Building Control officers undertake supervised visits with homeowners/business owners to retrieve valuables and personal effects from properties still within cordon.
- Council tax and business rate payments suspensions put in place.
- Numbers of businesses reopen, some residents begin to move back in and repairs begin.
- Start of weekly meetings with local community (St Marks Church Hall).
- Meeting with all key stakeholders, i.e. owners, insurance companies etc.
- NHS Wirral commissioned to provide counselling support & therapy services.

May

- Regeneration Strategy planning gets underway.

June

- All displaced residents housing issues resolved.
- Boundary Road and Bebington Road fully reopened.

July

- Magistrates hearing for Section 77 Demolition notices.
- Site visit by Minister, Local MP, Liverpool City Region Metro Mayor and Council Leader.

August

- Demolitions begin following relevant agreements.

September

- Public consultation begins for regeneration proposals.

December

- New Ferry Regeneration Delivery Plan sent to Minister.
- Last formal Recovery Co-ordinating Group Meeting.
- 'Business as usual' status declared.

4.18 A significant aspect of the recovery phase was the ongoing lobbying of central government for financial intervention by the local MP, Ward Members and local business and resident groups in the community. This was conducted via correspondence and face to face meetings with the Secretary of State and via PM's Question Time in the House of Commons. This can be summarised as follows:

- Secretary of State meeting with Alison McGovern MP - (April '17).
- Letter from Council Leader to Northern Powerhouse Minister – (July '17).
- Impromptu visit from Archbishop of York (Sept '17).
- Submission of Regeneration Delivery Plan to Secretary of State – (Dec '17).
- MP & City Region Mayor letter to Northern Powerhouse Minister– (Feb '18).
- MP, City Region Mayor & Council Leader letter to new Secretary of State - (May '18).
- Meeting with Secretary of State in Parliament (attendees included MP, Ward Councillor, local businesses and residents) - (Sept '18).
- Adjournment debate in Parliament (MP questions Secretary of State) – (March '19).

4.19 At the meeting of the full Council on 10 July 2017 a notice of motion was put to Members, seeking cross party support for the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State and Prime Minister inviting them to New Ferry to meet with community leaders and residents affected by the devastating explosion on 25 March. Cllr Warren Ward, the Ward Member at the time gave an impassioned speech to the Chamber and the motion was put and carried (60:0) with one abstention.

4.20 A further motion was put to the Council seeking the use of the Council's reserves held for 'emergencies and unforeseen circumstances' to be used to support individuals. Following a debate this motion was put and lost (24:36) with one abstention.

- 4.21 Members also sought at the meeting to place on record its thanks for the hard work of our officers, led by David Ball, and the community of New Ferry, involved in supporting the area, since the disaster, including those who had organised and donated various items and money to the appeals.

(The link to the minutes from the meeting can be viewed below – item 35 refers).

<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=123&MId=5989>

- 4.22 One of the governments early responses to the authority was in signposting it towards The Bellwin Scheme, a scheme intended to reimburse the costs incurred by a local authority, taken in the immediate (acute) phase of an emergency. The key qualifying criteria for this scheme is that Council's will have been expected to have spent 0.2% of its annual budget on eligible works during the emergency phase. In 2017/18, 0.2% of the Council's annual budget equated to £494,424.
- 4.23 In light of this, the Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) at the time, deemed that this level of spend in the acute phase would be unlikely and Wirral would not have had a robust case to put forward. To illustrate this, the cumulative spend currently (as at 1/8/19) on both the acute and recovery phases currently stands at £423,243.

5.0 New Ferry Town Team

- 5.1 In the absence of financial intervention from government it was left to a number of voluntary and business organisations to provide financial assistance and support, no more so than New Ferry Town Team (NFTT).
- 5.2 NFTT had been established in the six months before the explosion. Essentially the group consisted of key stakeholders within New Ferry – residents, businesses, youth and charity groups working for the collective good of the community, mindful that at the time the town centre was in decline and suffering like so many other high streets were across the country. As a result, following the explosion it seemed appropriate to try and co-ordinate support and assistance to residents and businesses via NFTT.
- 5.3 NFTT was at the forefront of support from a wide range of businesses, charities and individuals and this came in various guises from financial donations to material items such as essential goods and clothing and “in kind” support. Such was the level of sympathy towards the community, that donations came from far and wide within the borough and beyond. Supporters included amongst others: Wirral Chamber of Commerce, Wirral Lions, Wallasey Lions, Cheshire Freemasons, Rotary Clubs of Neston, Unite union, alongside numerous churches, youth groups and individual businesses. Allied to this there were significant individual donations made through a Just Giving page set up by the NFTT.
- 5.4 Over £27,000 was donated to NFTT and the breakdown of support as follows:
- 38% towards helping New Beginnings establish themselves and act as a dedicated resource providing help and support in various guises to residents affected by the incident;
 - 6% distributed to local traders and a donation to “Blue for Lewis” supporting the resident who had life changing injuries following the explosion;

- 12% directed towards mental health and counselling provision via MIND;
- 8% on various events to facilitate community cohesion – community picnic, Christmas Day lunch, pantomime trip for schoolchildren, train fares to support businesses and residents attending meeting with Secretary of State;
- 5% used to produce two editions of a New Ferry Business Directory and newsletter for New Ferry Residents Association along with promotional butterfly stickers to improve the image of New Ferry and encourage businesses to thrive;
- The remaining 31% of the fund was directed to Community Action Wirral for distribution among traders.

5.5 In addition, members of the Town Team provided “in kind” help and support to residents offering a listening ear and practical help in providing free transportation of furniture and white goods to residents moving to new accommodation.

6.0 DEBRIEF REPORT

6.1 The events in New Ferry were unprecedented in Wirral and one of the most significant incidents that the Council and the emergency services in the borough had faced in peacetime.

6.2 In February 2018 the Council and the emergency services undertook a detailed review of the respective handling of the incident in the acute (response) and recovery phases. The review focussed on areas for improvement, best practice and perceptions of what went well, concluding with a series of recommendations to assist the Council and partners to improve the planning and management of similar future events.

6.3 A copy of the debrief report (response phase) is attached as Annex 1.

6.4 A copy of the debrief report (recovery phase) is attached as Annex 2.

7.0 NEW FERRY – THE WAY FORWARD

New Ferry Regeneration Masterplan

7.1 Prior to the explosion in 2017, New Ferry had long been recognised as an area suffering from retail decline, evidenced by above average rates of vacant units. It was clear in the weeks following the explosion, the profound effect this was having on local businesses, through the reduction in footfall to the area.

7.2 In order to provide a renewed focus and opportunities for future investment in the town the Council commissioned GVA to develop a Regeneration Delivery Plan for New Ferry. This “visioning” plan was consulted on in September 2017, seeking to protect local businesses and bring a mix of new residential commercial and community uses into the area to create a sustainable future for New Ferry.

Residential Masterplanning

7.3 Building upon the Regeneration Delivery Plan for New Ferry, Homes England alongside consultants BDP have for the past twelve months been working alongside Wirral Council on developing the residential elements of the wider Delivery Plan. The residential master

plan is seen as key to kick-starting the wider plan and revitalising a community still reeling from the impact of the explosion.

- 7.4 A number of 'preferred' residential options have been developed by BDP and these were exhibited at two public consultation events at the end of January 2019, where residents and local businesses were invited and given the opportunity to comment on the various proposals.
- 7.5 Informed by the views of residents, local businesses and Ward Members consultants BDP have been exploring, subject to viability, the potential for some new mixed-use retail/leisure and commercial activity to replace those uses that were lost in the explosion.
- 7.6 This piece of work once completed will inform the collation of all the necessary technical information required for an outline planning application.

Strategic Acquisition's Programme

- 7.7 Running in parallel with this work, the Council has been moving forward with its own plans to invest £1.3 million to support the land assembly exercise that is needed to facilitate the proposed new residential/mixed-use developments. This involves buying in a number of derelict and dilapidated commercial properties in the area, which are currently in private ownership, and demolishing them as part of the redevelopment plans.
- 7.8 This work is now well under way led by the authority's Asset Management Team.

Liverpool City Region (LCR) Town Centre Fund

- 7.9 The LCR Combined Authority (CA) announced in 2018 the creation of a fund to improve the vitality and viability of the city regions town and district centres. It has ringfenced a sum of £1million per local authority district and a prospectus was launched in January 2019.
- 7.10 Wirral's allocation will be split equally between New Ferry and Liscard town centre i.e. £500,000 each and applications to the fund were submitted in March. The proposals for New Ferry and Liscard were formally approved (subject to contract) by the LCR Combined Authority in July and grant due shortly. All activities and spend associated with each proposal will need to be completed by December 2020.

Future High Streets Fund

- 7.11 As part of the government's commitment to help more high streets adapt and meet changing expectations in order to survive, MHCLG recently launched their Future High Streets Fund (FHSF). Expressions of interest (EOI) were invited from local authorities and an application for New Ferry, alongside one for Birkenhead town centre were submitted in March. MHCLG have now informed Wirral that both submissions have been shortlisted and the Council will shortly receive a development grant of £150,000 per location to work up a detailed business plan to enable New Ferry and Birkenhead to have the chance of securing significant capital funding in 2020.

8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 As previously reported at para 4.19, the cumulative spend on both the acute and the recovery phases within New Ferry now stands at £423,243.

9.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are none arising from this report.

10.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING & ASSETS

- 10.1 The Council deployed significant staff resources to deal with the New Ferry incident and all performed professionally and effectively in dealing with a range of complex challenges. Officers supported residents and businesses in and out of normal office hours and at weekends when required.
- 10.2 The ongoing regeneration of New Ferry is being led by officers within Regeneration Team within Major Growth Projects & Housing Delivery Directorate using existing resources. The acquisition programme is being led by Asset Management team in conjunction with Legal Services.

11.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 11.1 There are none arising from this report.

12.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 12.1 None required.

13.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 There are no direct equality implications arising from the report at this stage.

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APPENDICES

- Annex 1 – Planning for Emergencies (Merseyside Resilience Forum) – Structured Debrief Report (Response Phase)
- Annex 2 – Planning for Emergencies (Merseyside Resilience Forum) – Structured Debrief Report (Recovery Phase)

REFERENCE MATERIAL
SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 Years)

Council Meeting	Date
N/A	