

Topic

Needs of people – non-health

Incident / Exercise

Camberwell Fire (Lakanal), 3 July 2009

Background and Context

At around 4pm on the 3 July 2009, a fire broke out in Lakanal, a 14 storey residential building on the Sceaux gardens estate in Camberwell, in the London Borough of Southwark. It took six hours to get the fire under control by which time, tragically, there had been six fatalities.

The fire was attended by 18 fire engines including a special unit and around 100 fire fighters. Early findings from the police investigation suggest the cause of the fire was an electrical fault in a portable TV set in a bedroom on the ninth floor.

More than 20 people including one fireman were admitted to hospital for smoke inhalation and minor injuries. Around 150 people were evacuated or rescued from the flats. More than 250 residents comprising 100+ households were left homeless on that evening.

As of January 2010, all residents have either been re-housed or have made their own arrangements for new accommodation. Lakanal has remained under the control of the police to varying extents since the fire. The pursuant and on going coroner's investigation has required that the site be preserved in its present post-fire state until further notice. To date, access to the site remains strictly controlled (September 2010).

How the Topic was Handled

Resources: food, clothes, money, counselling and housing advice

By the early morning of Saturday 4 July 2009, all displaced residents had been allocated temporary accommodation in hostels, hotels or had made their own emergency arrangements with friends and relatives. Emergency shelter was no longer the main priority for the residents; food, money, clothes and other personal and essential items were now what people needed. However it was clear that no one was going to be able to access the Lakanal building in the immediate future. The building had now been secured by the police.

By Saturday afternoon, it was decided that the Bushey Hill rest centre (original rest centre procured for evacuation) was not going to provide the resource base that was now required. On Sunday, a local tenants and residents association hall was offered to provide shelter. However, it was only one large room and did not offer the facilities needed to respond to the broadening needs of the residents. As well as money, food and personal items, residents would very soon be in need of housing advice and possibly counselling.

A decision was taken to open a dedicated resource centre: a one stop shop to provide as many services and facilities as possible under one roof. The centre was set up in a council owned building, normally used for training and organisational development, on Cator Street. The building was chosen because it provided the combination of:

- Being close to Sceaux Garden's Estate
- Being close to the Bushey Hill rest centre
- Plenty of office space
- Excellent IT facilities and capacity
- Phone lines
- Room to accommodate privacy needs
- and meeting rooms

At the Cator Street centre, residents were offered clothes donated from the community, food, on site counselling in private meeting rooms, somewhere to re-direct post and perhaps most important to being able to move on, re-housing advice. Residents were allocated a case worker to manage their re-housing needs and any matters arising from their personal circumstances or vulnerabilities; a number of residents were elderly or disabled. It was here that residents were also offered an emergency grant to ease the burden of sudden displacement and to help with such things as getting the children to and from school and their temporary home (see Financial Support topic).

On Friday 10 July, the Bells Gardens rest centre was set up. Little more than 400m away from the Cator street resource centre, this new location in a set of offices was offered by the Southwark Group of Tenant Organisations (SGTO) as somewhere to provide food, clothes and games for children. This left the Cator Street resource centre to be used as a base for services, dealing with the re-housing cases, counselling and information. The Bells Gardens rest centre even provided displaced residents with free sports and swimming passes for the local sports centre.

The Bells Gardens rest centre was staffed by volunteers from the Tenant's Council and representatives from the council's resident involvement team. It was closed in late September when it became clear that residents were now more settled and life essentials such as food and clothing were no longer a concern.

Talking to residents: the need for information

Although most civil contingency emergency plans have a focus on external communication, managing the media and providing emergency response advice following a major incident, from day one it was the residents in most need of information.

With little sign of the building being accessible for months, public meetings were held at the resource centre on a regular basis giving residents as much information as possible and updating them on progress and any developments. The first of these was on 7 July. This was a highly charged and at times confrontational meeting, attended by senior council, police and fire service officers. This meeting was followed up by weekly meetings held at lunchtime and early evenings (to allow for people working during the day) and provided residents with an update of the long term accommodation plans, plans to retrieve belongings, the resident support centre, storage, counselling and other key issues.

However meetings were not always the most convenient method of relaying information. Resident phone numbers were taken so that the council could provide information at any time in the form of texts. These were sent via the Southwark customer service centre facilities (CSC) and proved an invaluable tool when residents were dispersed across the borough in temporary accommodation.

A dedicated phone number was set up at the CSC where residents, family and friends could access up to date information on a 24 hour basis. In addition, a question and answer document was updated on a regular basis and passed to staff at the resource centre. As well as giving residents new information as it arose, the document allowed staff at the resource centre to remain fully briefed on any decisions being taken centrally.

Although Lakanal was the only block affected by the fire, the council needed to address the impact on residents on the Sceaux Gardens Estate in general. For instance, Marie Curie is the sister block to Lakanal and the buildings share fundamental design features. The fire was sure to concern residents of Marie Curie and the council put into place a similar communication program supported by home fire safety advice and information. This started on the evening of 4 July with home visits being made jointly by fire officers and wardens to all of the properties in Marie Curie and a series of weekly residents meetings.

Both Lakanal and Marie Curie meeting programs continued throughout July and August.

Retrieval of belongings from the block

Essential items

In the first week following the fire, residents were anxious to retrieve essential belongs, such as wallets, mobile phones, money, ID, laptops, car keys and other items which would let them gain some level of normality. However, at that point, the building remained in the control of the police. After some lengthy discussions with the lead investigating officers, it was agreed that retrievals of essential items would take place. Residents were contacted through the Cator Street Centre and asked to provide a list of essential items in their flat. They were also asked to authorise Police Officers entering their property to retrieve these goods.

Belongings were distributed during a meeting at the resource centre. In total, approximately 100 visits to retrieve essential items were carried out over a two-three week period, with many residents able to make more than one request. This process continued throughout July.

Resident visits to Lakanal

It was not long before residents needed more than just their essential items. Some people had accepted offers on new permanent accommodation and they were now keen to visit their home and retrieve other belongings. However, managing site access for 100+ households was never to be an easy task.

Accompanied by the community wardens, residents were allocated two hour slots in which to visit their homes and collect portable items. After the first round of visits, a number of residents were granted a second appointment and some, a third visit.

The community wardens and the case management team were responsible for the administration of the 170+ retrieval appointments for the residents of Lakanal who, for practical, psychological or other reasons benefited from visiting their home at a

time when accessing the Lakanal site was made difficult by the strictly controlled access and the sheer number of different agencies requesting entry.

Lessons Identified

Dedicated resource centre

The decision to set up the Cator Street centre as a one stop shop for all resources worked effectively. Resource centres should ideally have numerous rooms and IT facilities.

Dedicated case management team

A dedicated team of case workers drawn from different departments in the council, specialising in housing management, housing options advice and decanting from large capital projects meant that we could deal with a wide range of concerns related to finding residents a new home.

Text messaging and meetings

Taking resident mobile numbers and texting information was invaluable when everyone was dispersed across a large area.

Counselling services

Over 230 sessions of informal crisis counselling were taken up by residents following the fire. Trauma specialists were brought in to provide this service and the informal nature of the sessions seems to have been well received by all. Counsellors even joined residents on visits to their Lakanal home to provide further support. Offering informal support of this kind immediately after tragedy seems to have been preventative and may have had a marked effect on the need for clinical support later. To date, there have been very few requests for formal counselling in relation to the Lakanal fire.

Contacts for Further Information

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