

NOTES OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD ON 10TH AUGUST 2010 AT
SOUTH HALL, STAPLEHURST VILLAGE CENTRE
TO DISCUSS THE HIGH STREET FIRE

Present: Howard Dellow & Jason Bardell, Kent fire and Rescue Service
Alan Rogers, Kent Police
Teresa Young, KCC Emergency Planning
Bob Cass, British Red Cross
Pete Gardner, PCSO, Chris Lomax, Rural Warden
Parish Councillors John Perry, Tom Burnham, Margaret Arger,
Joan Buller, Paul Butcher, Jenny Fairfax, Peter Spearink,
County, Borough Councillor & Mayor Eric Hotson
Borough Councillor Lusty
Twenty-nine residents and Parish Clerk, Sue Bassett.

Chairman Perry's opening remarks – The Chairman welcomed everyone to this public meeting. Thankfully no-one had been physically injured although a number of residents' lives had been seriously disrupted. The event had highlighted the importance of the emergency services and emergency planning. The prompt reaction to the incident undoubtedly minimised disruption and the Chairman was joined through applause when he put on record his thanks for the efficient and effective way the various emergency services had reacted. It was also considered important to look closely at how this emergency was handled and to learn from it. The Chairman then introduced in turn speakers from KF&RS, Police, KCC Emergency Planning & British Red Cross.

Howard Dellow, Retained Station Manager, Maidstone Cluster, South Division – Mr Dellow gave an overview of the sequence of events which took place on the day of the fire beginning with the first call to the emergency services at 03:37 described as "fire in flat" and two fire tenders were despatched from Headcorn and Marden. When a risk assessment had been carried out taking into account the spread of fire and smoke with the construction of the affected buildings, roof voids, differing heights, lack of rear access and "persons reported" (i.e. missing), additional support was called in. A height vehicle was needed which had to be parked in the road outside, which required the road to be closed. Additional fire tenders and water units were also needed to supplement the local water supply. As people needed to be evacuated and looked after, the Red Cross Victim Support team was requested. The emergency teams also needed welfare and thanks were expressed to the Manager of Spar who provided round the clock teas/coffees and food, etc. Smoke had travelled to adjacent buildings and it had been necessary to break through the roofs to stop the fire spreading. Safety Officers and the Incident Command unit assessed the risks hourly. Due to concerns over stability of the buildings following a partial collapse, the Urban Search & Rescue Team was deployed to shore it up. Wider considerations such as potential spread, evacuation of adjacent buildings

and using water jets to keep buildings cool were undertaken. Liaison with the police was good to maintain the integrity of the cordoned off areas to ensure the safety of all and allow the Fire Investigation work to take place. The Police also co-ordinated the traffic management throughout the day. Representatives from the local community were used to engage people and relay information. The KCC Emergency Plan Team was able to provide temporary accommodation for displaced victims. Once the incident had been brought under control with the buildings made safe, investigations took place to try and establish the cause of the fire. It was not possible to find the cause in this case so it has been recorded as accidental. The Fire Service conducted some home safety visits and was able to put up smoke detectors for free. They will continue to do so and residents should call 0800 923 7000 to request a free home safety visit.

Police Inspector Alan Rogers, Kent Police – Inspector Rogers spoke generally on the roles that the Kent Police undertook to support the work of the KFRS. In a major incident such as this, Kent Police would command, control and co-ordinate roles to ensure public safety, arrange and maintain cordons to preserve the scene for investigation as well as call in all sorts of other bodies for assistance and liaison. Their main priority is to save life including traffic management, as well as to uphold the law and investigate the causes of fires. Police liaison with many other agencies is also an important part of these works. A Risk Register is used to assess the impact of an event to allow the planning of resources. The emergency services are classed as Category 1 responders, Category 2 responders will include Parish Councils and local representatives but all need to work in partnership to ensure successful outcomes.

Teresa Young, KCC Emergency Planning Officer – Teresa explained the wide scope of her role and responsibilities. KCC & MBC deal with the consequences of events and Teresa was called out to give assistance to the 20 evacuees. Fortunately Councillor Buller was able to give details of where to obtain keys to the Village Centre to enable the rest centre to be set up quickly. The Red Cross Victim Support unit was also called in to assist with the immediate needs of the evacuees. A "Rest Centre Box" containing useful equipment was brought from Maidstone – it would have been better to have had one located on the south side of the Borough. Such box contains tabards, documentation, language cards, signage, etc. Ambulance Service, District Nurses, Social Services and W.I. were also called in to assist with housing and personal needs of the evacuees and to make cups of tea! The Youth Club was also opened to provide entertainment for the evacuees. Breakfasts were supplied by Spar supermarket and lunch by Sobell Cheshire Home. Members of the Press wanted information which Teresa supplied in consultation with the Fire Incident Commander, as the evacuees were too much in shock themselves. Keeping everyone informed helped to put people's minds at rest. By 6 p.m. everyone had been sorted out with temporary accommodation or allowed back into their own homes and the rest centre was closed.

Bob Cass, Head of Response for British Red Cross – Bob explained that the Red Cross had Fire & Emergency Support Vehicles (motorised caravans) which were called in to bridge the gaps in humanitarian service whilst moving through the trauma. The Red Cross has an arrangement with Tesco supermarket to provide necessary supplies up to £500 per incident. He paid tribute to all the agencies involved that day; there is very good liaison in Kent and everyone worked well together. The Spar Supermarket Manager showed excellent community involvement too by providing the fire crews and support staff with refreshment.

Teresa Young – Parish Plan initiatives & draft Government Guidelines – Teresa then spoke on “Community Resilience” and how communities working together become stronger and self-preparation helps to ensure that major incidents such as this can be dealt with even more smoothly. Local people know their area well and can play key parts in assisting emergency service providers. The Emergency Plan process is assisted by KCC who can provide training and documentation. The main assistance that can be given by parishes is to draw up a list of volunteers and resources within the Parish. To identify hazards and vulnerability; people who live on their own, railway, industrial areas (a 200m cordon is required around a fire where acetylene cylinders are present), factories, main road, rural farms, flood risk areas, severe weather, care homes, schools, garages, etc. An assessment of local resources is also useful to list local people with specific skills, locations of keys to public buildings, emergency contact list/telephone tree, community organisations, activation triggers for the response team and their first agenda. Such Emergency Planning will also need constant practice and regular reviews. The information pack provided by KCC even provides sample log sheets and draft letters to residents. A Parish Emergency Plan will need volunteers to support it and training can be provided by KCC. Much information is also available at www.ukresilience.co.uk

Councillor Peter Spearink – Peter thanked everyone for attending this evening and especially the speakers. The Parish Council has been exploring the idea of a Parish Emergency Plan for sometime. A small working group is set up to work through the recommended initiatives and encourage volunteers to form a Community Response Team. Volunteers with any type of skills or experience will be needed to contribute. If the Parish Emergency Plan is linked into the KCC system, then it would be contacted at the outset of any future emergency. Community Response Plan Guidance is available online at <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/349153/community-emergency-plan-guidance.pdf>

Questions & Comments

Chris Ralph commented that it was sad that the 12 WRVS trained emergency team in the village was not called upon to assist with this emergency. It was understood it was no longer on KCC's list. There used to be a Rest Centre Box at Maidstone Fire Station but it had disappeared.

Robin Oakley asked what effect the EU working time directive would have on retained firemen and whether there were any plans to close fire stations staffed by retained firemen. Howard Dellow responded that there were no plans to close but to change retained firemen to part-time workers. Kent was proactive to support the retained fire service which provided effective cover.

Stephen Eigheten, Reporter of Downs Mail asked whether the police had investigated the cause of the fire. Alan Rogers responded that the police had done an assessment of the scene with the Fire Service and it had not been possible to identify the source of the fire so the default is accidental.

Helen Warmington commented that the local community needed to focus on what it could do better in future. The Village very much appreciated the handling of the situation and level of information available; courtesy and communication was high despite being under pressure.

Wilson Rush was grateful for the way in which the evacuees were treated and well looked after. This was very much appreciated.

Chairman's closing remarks – Chairman John Perry was impressed with the turn out to this meeting by local people and for the attendance by representatives of the emergency services. Good feedback had been received and it was important to learn from this. Special thanks were given to Councillor Joan Buller for being on hand so early in the morning to enable the rest centre to be opened quickly. Good community spirit had assisted the emergency services on the day and he encouraged residents to volunteer and assist with the Parish Emergency Plan.