

Responding to civil emergencies

Reflections from chief executives

Foreword

December 2017

This document for chief executives and council senior teams captures the discussion from a chief executives' session at the 2017 LGA annual conference, which heard from Charlie Parker and Joanne Roney about their reflections on the immediate aftermath of the terrible events in Westminster and Manchester. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to emergency planning, but aims to share practical advice from colleagues who have very recently dealt with the most traumatic of incidents.

Those of you who were able to attend the conference discussion will need no reminding of what a powerful session it was. In introducing this document, let me pay tribute again not only to Charlie and Joanne but to all the officers and politicians working in areas that have been affected, the neighbouring authorities who supported them, and colleagues in other boroughs that experienced tragedy over a very difficult few months in the spring and early summer of 2017.

The threat of this type of incident seems unlikely to diminish in the medium term. Our preparedness for dealing with them can continue to increase and improve. The LGA is working with SOLACE to explore the direct support that can be made available to chief executives in this area, including new guidance and training opportunities. We will be also be revising our councillor guidance on civil contingencies and are developing new training sessions to support this.

We have also contributed to the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat's programme on enhancing national resilience. Our key objectives in working with government on this programme are to ensure that any changes to the existing framework reflect the importance of existing locally designed approaches to issues such as mutual aid; and to emphasise that the measures government takes – particularly in the immediate aftermath of an incident – help and support, rather than distract from, the work of councils and their partners on the ground.

I hope you find that this document useful, and please do share your thoughts on other support that would be helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Lloyd". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Mark Lloyd
Chief Executive
Local Government Association

Background

This document is a brief summary of presentations given at the LGA annual conference in July 2017 by Charlie Parker and Joanne Roney, chief executives at Westminster City Council and Manchester City Council at the time of terrorist attacks there in March and May 2017.

It does not provide a full overview of the role of either council in the emergency response or longer term recovery relating to each incident. Instead, it highlights some of the learning from their personal experience of the immediate response to the attacks, which other councils and their chief executives may find helpful in thinking about their own emergency plans and preparedness.

Alongside this document, the LGA and SOLACE are exploring the development of a wider piece of work to provide guidance on the full life cycle of an emergency response and recovery. In addition, an updated version of the joint DCLG-Solace publication, Local authority preparedness for civil emergencies: a good practice guide, will be published in early 2018.

Ensuring preparedness

Both Charlie and Joanne spoke about how as chief executives, they knew their role in emergency planning and responding to civil emergencies, but they acknowledged that relatively few chief executives will have gone through the reality of a sudden, large-scale civil emergency. The first piece of advice they had was for chief executives to ensure they are prepared to fulfil what is a huge responsibility, by fully understanding their role and the emergency planning framework.

They stressed the importance of having oversight of the council's emergency plans, including checking them to ensure that they are up to date. Emergency plans developed several years ago may not reflect the capability and capacity of councils following seven years of austerity; it is therefore imperative that chief executives assure themselves that current plans reflect their councils' current resources.

Similarly, Charlie and Joanne discussed how important they feel it is for chief executives to personally attend civil contingencies training. They spoke of how, tempting though it was to send a reserve given the competing pressures on their time, the experience of having undergone training or a simulation exercise was invaluable in ensuring senior level understanding of the emergency response process and their council's capability.

Another critical element that came out in the conversation was how vital it proved to be able to communicate with key contacts in the event of an incident. Taking the worst case scenario, this might mean the local mortuary and coroner, as much as fellow officers and partners such as fire and rescue and the police service. Ensuring there was a range of contacts in their phone would save time in the event of an emergency.

Recognising the LGA's guidance for councils in the event of a cyber-attack, ensuring these are saved in more than one place, and not just electronically, would also be sensible.

Key theme – understanding capability and capacity

Participants in the discussion recognised that however good a chief executive might be at their job, it is a huge challenge to lead an emergency response and longer term recovery and that level of difficulty cannot be overestimated. In ensuring preparedness, chief executives need to have a level of awareness and understanding of the relative strengths of different individuals within the senior management team, to understand which aspects they and others will be best placed to take on. It was suggested that chief executives consider how different skills and leadership evaluation tools can help them and their senior managers to assess this.

In preparing for an emergency response and ensuring local capacity, there is also a need to have an understanding about the role and expectations of political leaders in this area. Some leaders and their cabinets may wish to front as much of the public facing council work as possible, whereas others might expect to lead key interviews and speeches with the media and public but expect officers to front the rest. Being clear about these expectations as part of the council's emergency planning process, and updating this understanding as and when political leadership changes, will remove the need to bottom out this issue in the midst of a crisis situation. As already noted, the LGA is exploring how it can offer support and guidance on issues such as this.

Key theme – managing donations and voluntary assistance

Councils should review what their emergency plans currently say about the management of donations and funds raised following an emergency incident. In an online world where people may move quickly to set up fundraising webpages, it is sensible to ensure that existing council or other local funds or schemes can be used, to avoid private funds being set up and potentially abused. Manchester found that they would be unable to use their existing Lord Mayor's charity to support victims of the Arena terrorist attack because under the terms of the charity donations could only be made to people in Manchester, while the victims came from outside the city. The council therefore moved quickly to set up a separate charity, the We Love Manchester Fund, which immediately raised millions of pounds, following initial concerns about false charitable donations points being set up. Other councils may wish to look at whether their existing channels would be suitable to manage an influx of financial donations.

Key theme – multi-agency planning and relationships

Manchester highlighted that one of the reasons that the council was able to respond effectively to a major incident was due to the time previously taken to invest in multi-agency planning and relationships for handling emergencies. While noting that councils have longer term responsibility for recovery, partnership working in the response phase is absolutely critical, and the council emphasised that the importance of building and maintaining relationships as part of the emergency planning process cannot be overestimated.

Responding – dealing with an incident and the immediate aftermath

While the principles of emergency planning and response are consistent across various types of emergency there are differences between responding to a relatively localised and contained event versus an incident with significant fatalities or covering a much larger area. Clearly, more contained incidents will be, relatively, more straightforward to deal with, while a bigger incident can significantly change the dynamic of the situation.

The discussion at the conference recognised that councils have a short window of time – perhaps less than twelve hours – to get the response right. If this opportunity is lost, it can be impossible to recover control of the situation. During the conversation, it was very clear that it was vital that councils have properly tested and understood emergency plans in place, so they can respond immediately when an emergency occurs. Even with the best plans, however, the reflections shared with the room showed that it is important to recognise that in this situation, everything is fluid and can change significantly and repeatedly, and chief executives must be prepared to adapt – and quickly.

Key theme – councils' roles: operational management, civic and community leadership

Key advice from the session was that chief executives need to understand the different roles in an emergency response and how best to fulfil these. Alongside the strategic, tactical and operational (gold, silver and bronze) activities shared with other local agencies, councils must also fulfil a critical civic and community leadership role. The civic leadership role councillors, and officers, play was also emphasised, and the

need for them to provide visible leadership and reassurance to their communities. The discussion acknowledged that if this role is not led by the council, a vacuum will occur which will quickly be filled by others, whether from within the community or outside it. This quickly risks creating a 'them and us' situation, rather than the community and council working together. In both Westminster and Manchester, public vigils / ceremonies were held on the days immediately after the attack to commemorate the victims and to signal a display of unity and reassurance to communities.

Manchester noted that part of a council's civic leadership role is to capture the essence of place, and that the content of the vigil is as important as the fact it happens. The poet Tony Walsh read out 'This is the Place', a poem that united communities. The council also looked towards community and faith leaders as speakers to lead and stand on the platform for the vigil, rather than local or national politicians speaking despite being in attendance. Although this was partly due to the incident occurring during a General Election campaign, it worked well in reflecting the city.

Both Westminster and Manchester emphasised that how the council works to support the local community is exceptionally important. Community engagement, empathy and understanding, and regular communication with the general and wider public are all vital. Similarly, meeting with local community groups and businesses (particularly those in the immediate vicinity of an attack) are a crucial part of the council's response.

Manchester's response recognised the need, amidst the wider emergency response phase, to have someone to step back and say 'what does this feel like for our community?' Three

days after the attack, the council held an open invitation listening session which proved to be a very valuable session and helped identify key groups and individuals, the things the council needed to do, and gave the council a clear sense of how things felt in the community.

The council also recognised the critical role of the local authority in helping to minimise the impact on day to day lives, with visible leadership helping to reassure residents, businesses and visitors that despite being disrupted by an attack the city was still open for business.

Understanding the chief executive role

Participants recommended that chief executives think in advance about where and how they can play the most effective role in an emergency response; this links back to the need to think proactively about senior management strengths and capacity. Following the Manchester Arena attack, the Greater Manchester gold command took the lead on the strategic response, leaving the chief executive free to fulfil a more visible tactical leadership role with local partners, staff and people at operational level on the ground. Visibility and involvement at this level – rather than through the media – proved valuable in ensuring the effective deployment of time and resources.

Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it

Participants were clear that even the best prepared, most competent chief executive will struggle to keep on top of every detail in the aftermath of an emergency, particularly if it is an emotionally demanding incident. One piece of advice from the session was that chief executives should not be afraid to ask for help or support during a crisis, but should be ready to pick up the phone to chief executive colleagues outside the immediate response, who can provide advice and provide a fresh pair of eyes on how the chief executive and council are responding.

Key theme – managing mutual aid

It was clear from the discussion that undertaking a swift assessment of the scale of an incident and whether it is too big for one council to deal with; understanding how you will invoke and use external support; and effectively managing mutual aid in civil emergencies where it is invoked are all absolutely vital. Following the Grenfell fire, this is a key theme for the Civil Contingencies Secretariat's review of national resilience, including the potential development of a civil disaster reaction taskforce to provide coordinated support from central government, as highlighted in the Queen's Speech.

Both Westminster and Manchester were able to utilise long standing and well established local resilience and mutual aid arrangements, which proved very important. Both councils emphasised the importance of being clear where councils can get mutual aid from in these situations and of being able to ask for support in a structured way. While mutual aid is clearly an area that may evolve as part of the longer term response to the civil emergencies of summer 2017, individual and groups of councils should review how existing mutual aid arrangements are planned in their regions and sub-regions and ensure that these are clear.

Managing information and support

One of the common elements of both the Westminster and Manchester attacks was that the victims were not local residents, but people visiting the areas. This added a new dimension to the already vital issue of managing information and support for those affected by the tragedies, with the need to ensure additional support for those unfamiliar with an area or who may not speak English. Charlie highlighted that the international dimension of the Westminster attack in particular, showed how councils need to think about the range of different organisations they may need to work with in response to an incident; beyond local service partners, this may mean event organisers (e.g Ticketmaster) consulates and embassies, UK visas and immigration, church groups and others.

In Westminster, many of the victims were tourists from overseas. The council recognised the need to support relatives of the victims on issues such as visas to ensure as smooth a journey to the UK and Westminster as possible.

In Manchester, the council quickly grasped the importance of overseeing and managing the community's response to the incident. Local restaurants, hotels and taxis all quickly opened their doors or offered their services for free, but the challenging reality for the council was that there were many unaccompanied young people whose parents didn't know where they were. Getting a grip on this very quickly was clearly imperative. To manage safeguarding issues, the city's gold command sent officers to check at hotels and places where children had taken shelter, to check whether there were safe and to make sure there was no misinformation spreading.

Manchester Council set up and managed a respite centre for people waiting for news of loved ones at Manchester City's Etihad Stadium. The creation of the respite centre proved to be a valuable focus and physical resource for those affected by the attack, with senior staff from the council's Adult Social Care and Children's Services deployed to

the centre just a few hours after the attack. As well as facilitating family reunions, staff subsequently had to deal with distraught families, conveying very bad news to distressed people, as well as working with other agencies including the police, Red Cross and others, and dealing with the considerable press presence outside the Etihad.

The session heard about practical steps that can be taken to prepare for such an eventuality, include knowing where to host this type of centre if required, and mapping out the requirements for running one, including staffing and facilities (eg phone chargers, wifi and phone connectivity, tea and coffee and so forth). Manchester's experience suggests that emergency planning procedures should include training for staff in respite centres so that they are fully prepared for the physical and psychological issues which they will have to deal with. Staff would also benefit from being prepared in advance for the flexibility needed to manage a respite centre when its purpose is continuing to change.

Key theme – data sharing

Data sharing was a major issue in the Manchester response and recovery. The lack of contact details and data for those affected by the incident was a major challenge – for the response and recovery organisations as well as the injured and bereaved. Those affected could not be contacted, or their details shared, as quickly as hoped because they had not been asked to provide, or to agree to allow information on them to be shared. Future emergency planning would benefit from ensuring that any organisation (health service, local authority, hospital, GP etc) which comes into contact with the injured, bereaved or affected explicitly asks for their names, contact details (ideally email addresses) and agreement to share these details with other relevant organisations. Doing this would enable communications to be quickly and accurately shared about the removal of tributes, accessing services, emerging communications stories etc.

A further information issue to manage is the repeated requests from central government for information about an emergency. Councils which have experienced flooding or other civil emergencies will recognise this challenge, as there have been regular reports of councils being almost overwhelmed by Government interest which has diverted and strained their capacity to respond effectively. The LGA has raised this with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat as part of their review of national resilience, and is encouraging government to look at approaches for ensuring there is a regular upward flow of information in a manageable way.

Key theme – communications

In an environment of 24-hr news and social media, managing the media and social media is a vital part of responding to an emergency. Communications isn't an end in itself or something that should be seen as a separate or add on part of an emergency response; it's an integral part of a council's civic leadership response.

The session showed learning from both Westminster and Manchester, as well as other recent incidents around Europe, is to be prepared for the speed with which the media can access information and with which it can spread across both mainstream and social media. In terms of social media, Manchester had a team of five people watching and managing it after the attack at the Arena, correcting rumours and inaccuracies before they took hold across different platforms and providing information and updates across a range of channels. The council was supported by colleagues from other councils in managing the scale of media enquiries, with more than 800 media representatives present in the city in the aftermath of the attack.

Partly due to unprecedented international leaks of the police investigation arising from the UK's intelligence partners, the media quickly knew of the name of the alleged attacker, leading to local residents with sometimes even tangential connections

(eg former teachers) being door stepped. Again, working with local partners to support communities experiencing this process is an important part of the council's civic leadership role.

Delivery role and operational impacts

Both attacks inevitably involved a significant service delivery role for the council, as well as having an operational impact on a wide range of services, including the closure of road and transport networks and the very difficult role for environmental services in clearing the scenes of the incidents after the necessary forensic and police investigation work was complete.

In Manchester, alongside staffing the reception centre and establishing a communications cell to manage the significant number of incoming and outgoing messages, the council's role included:

- Organising hotel accommodation for affected families, friends and professional responders deployed to Manchester from outside of the city region.
- Highways staff being deployed to support the management of the road network, including putting in place road closures and to provide assistance to those unable to access vehicles and property within the cordoned area.
- Co-ordinating the contributions of businesses offering to help, such as with the provision of food and water. This involved significant co-ordination and required the designation of lead officers within the council and police to jointly manage. The donations given after the Grenfell tragedy also emphasise the need for councils' emergency plans to include consideration of how voluntary activities and contributions can be effectively managed.
- Finally, given the disproportionate impact of the incident on young people, considerable work was also undertaken to ensure that school staff and pupils received the information and advice they required to provide reassurance and were able to access support if required.

Memorials and commemorations

With multiple fatalities at the Westminster and Manchester attacks, there was a need to sensitively manage both the need for commemorative services and the impromptu shrines and memorials that develop in the aftermath of the attacks.

It was clear that some form of service was required after both attacks, and councils need to be astute in their understanding of what local communities need. In Westminster, the council drew on well-established links with the local community to bring different faith leaders together to stand as one the day after the attack; later in summer, the London Borough of Islington was also able to draw on these connections to take a similar approach in the aftermath of the attack on Finsbury Park mosque. As noted, in Manchester, the council took the well-received decision for a local poet to lead the vigil outside the town hall less than 24 hours after the attack, rather than politicians. Having a plan for how the council can quickly arrange an appropriate service or commemoration will make it easier for councils to do in the event of a civil emergency that requires some form of community event in response.

Alongside this, the response to the Manchester attack also highlights the need to include in emergency planning a section on managing VIP visitors to the scene of an incident, with the city inundated by national politicians and others, something which was repeated following the Grenfell tragedy.

Both Westminster and Manchester highlighted the huge importance of sensitively handling the flowers laid at the scene of the attacks or elsewhere in the borough and supporting staff involved in this, recognising that mismanaging these types of issue can lead to serious reputational damage. In Manchester, all of the flowers laid outside the city hall that could be saved were pressed by the city's archivists to preserve them; soft toys were cleaned and donated to good causes.

Key theme – emotional support and wellbeing

Leading a council's response to an emergency will inevitably be exhausting and attritional – Manchester operated on a 24/7 basis over nine days, including the late May bank holiday. In the case of incidents such as Westminster, Manchester or Grenfell, it will also be deeply harrowing and emotional. While there is likely to be little respite or sleep in the immediate aftermath (perhaps 48 hours) of an incident, at an early point chief executives, political leaders and other senior managers need to plan how to look after their own and staff wellbeing. This means being willing and able to share the load, and ensuring that there is sufficient capacity to enable staff and councillors at all levels to have some downtime.

Depending on the event, councils should think about the need to put in place support and counselling for staff affected by an emergency, many of whom may be traumatised by what they have witnessed or dealt with. Councils should consider within this the role of contractors, who may not be direct council staff but who may have played a really important role of the aftermath of an event, eg in environmental services.

Simple, human touches such as thanking staff and acknowledging peoples' emotions can also provide a significant amount of support and goodwill in these difficult circumstances.



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