

**PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE  
2 AUGUST 2023**

<b>Subject Heading:</b>	<b>Wennington Fire 2022 – Supporting Vulnerable Persons, Recovery Progress and Lessons Learned</b>
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<b>Policy context:</b>	Relates to the Council's responsibilities and roles in relation to vulnerable adults/ children, emergency planning and resilience.
<b>Financial summary:</b>	The response to and recovery from the fire has cost the Council around £100K to date and may cost up to a further £5M (gross) in the form of loans and/or acquisitions if there is a decision to financially support homeowners in that way who were either under-insured or uninsured.

**The subject matter of this report deals with the following Council Objectives:**

Communities making Havering	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Places making Havering	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Opportunities making Havering	<input type="checkbox"/>
Connections making Havering	<input type="checkbox"/>

## **SUMMARY**

With the majority of homes in the village suffering at least some level of smoke/fire damage, dozens of residents were left homeless (after their houses were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable) and hundreds of people had to be accommodated elsewhere (some at the Council's Rest Centre) on the night of the Wennington Fire in July 2022.

Almost 100 staff/volunteers were on the ground to assist the vulnerable both in terms of coordinating activities (eg. access to GP) as well as providing direct support to those in need (eg. comfort, reassurance and information) and then facilitating access to the donated clothes and household items in addition to distributing the £33,000 raised through the Salvation Army's crowdfunding appeal.

Support for those displaced from the 19 houses (18 dangerous and 1 unliveable) continued through ensuring suitable temporary accommodation, facilitating demolition of unsafe buildings, assisting with insurance queries and fast-tracking planning applications for rebuilding.

This report provides an overview of the support given to families and vulnerable people on the day of (and immediately after) the Wennington Fire, gives an overview of the progress of the recovery operation to date and presents an overview of the lessons learned during both the (emergency) response period and the recovery period.

These overviews are primarily from the perspective of the Council but does include activity/perspectives from some partner agencies.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Members to note:

- the activity to support vulnerable people in need during (and in the immediate aftermath of) the fire
- the ongoing support to those still in need
- the particular challenge for residents who are underinsured/uninsured

<b>REPORT DETAIL</b>
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**1.1 Introduction**

- 1.1 Britain endured 25,000 wildfires during 2022 (quadruple the number in 2021) sparked by the hottest year on record in Britain with temperatures exceeding 40°C. During the second of three heatwaves that summer, the UK Meteorological Office issued its first ever Red Warning due to “extreme heat” for 18/19 July 2022. Consequently, Wennington Village (which traces a history going back to the tenth century) suffered its greatest calamity in over 1,000 years ago as a result of the Fire of 2022 (leaving aside plunder in the Peasants Revolt in 1381).
  
- 1.2 The official LFB fire investigation report into the Wennington Fire of 19<sup>th</sup> July 2022 does not identify a specific cause of that fire but does confirm that it started outdoors before engulfing fields, gardens, cars, houses and other buildings (sheds, garages etc.).
  
- 1.3 The Council immediately activated its Major Emergency Plan, deployed Local Authority Liaison Officers to the incident site and set up a Survivor Reception Centre at a hotel on farm on the edge of the village and then an overnight Rest Centre at Harrow Lodge Park Leisure Centre.
  
- 1.4 119 families were supported via the Community Assistance Centre (originally the Rest Centre) and longer-term temporary accommodation was arranged where needed, large amounts of clothing and household items were donated by the public, and free skips / rubbish collections were provided (huge amounts of waste removed – glass, rubble, vegetation). Residents were kept updated via mass texts and numerous community meetings were organised with over £30K raised in crowd-funding and distributed to those in need.

<b>WENNINGTON FIRE DATA OVERVIEW <i>(as at 4 July 2023)</i></b>					
SUBJECT	NUMBER	SUBJECT	NUMBER	SUBJECT	NUMBER
Buildings Ruined	<i>c40</i>	Support via Assistance Centre	<i>119 residents/families</i>	Salvation Army Crowd Funding	<i>£33,000</i>
Houses Destroyed	<i>18</i>	Council Temporary Accommodation	<i>11 households</i>	Clothes etc. Donations	<i>hundreds of items</i>
Dangerous Structure Notices	<i>18</i>	Houses Demolished	<i>17</i>	Planning Permission Granted	<i>4</i>
Total Staff Involved	<i>96</i>	Internal LBH	<i>56</i>	<sup>†</sup> External Volunteers	<i>40</i>

<sup>†</sup> NELFT and HVC

## **2. Supporting Vulnerable People**

2.1 Hundreds of people were displaced on the day/night and had to be accommodated in the official Rest Centre and then onto other temporary accommodation or private arrangements as necessary and Council staff have provided considerable support to vulnerable residents over the past year in a range of areas including housing, benefits, resettlement, emotional support and engaging on insurance matters.

2.2 Almost 100 council staff, councillors and volunteers (from NELFT<sup>†</sup> and HVC<sup>†</sup>) were involved in the emergency response on the day and in the immediate aftermath. Some then continued by supporting the recovery effort over the subsequent months.

<sup>†</sup> NELFT = North East London NHS Foundation Trust; HVC = Havering Volunteer Centre.

2.3 The Council's Corporate & Community Resilience Team CCRT activated the Rest Centre Plan and coordinated with services to setup the centre in Harrow Lodge Park Leisure Centre, which accommodated some 20 people. It was primarily staffed by council officers and from the Leisure Centre but was also supported by volunteers from British Red Cross, Havering Volunteer Centre and a GP who attended in the evening to support residents (who had left their homes) with medication and for general wellbeing checks. The Leisure Centre staff supported the council in keeping media out of the centre at the request of residents.

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2.5 The Rest Centre was stood down the day after the fire with all residents moved to temporary accommodation who required it. It moved from being a Rest Centre to an Assistance Centre, with a 'one stop shop' of professionals/clinicians (both council and NHS) and voluntary sector organisations made available to residents who had stayed overnight in the Rest Centre, but also for the majority of residents who came to site the following day for information, advice and company.

2.6 A wide range of vulnerabilities were catered for during the emergency including for those people who were elderly, disabled, had small children, were in mental distress or facing administrative difficulties due to key personal documentation having been consumed by the fire.

- 2.7 Some individuals suffered multiple vulnerabilities at the same time. Some (including elderly) were already in a vulnerable state and some also lost pets to the flames as well as personal documents (such as passport). Some also then lost connection to the community that they may have been part of for several years. The Council supported many multi-vulnerable individuals throughout the process of dealing with the trauma of the incident, of securing a new home and of obtaining/applying for a new passport etc.
- 2.8 The fire itself, smoke damage to possessions and having “run for their lives” and spend time in emergency accommodation was distressing enough – even for those whose houses were not totally destroyed. Staff provided ad hoc informal counselling people around the site, at the rest centre and at the assistance centre as and when needed. However, some individuals were traumatised by the experience and were provided with psychological support through provision via NELFT and MIND.
- 2.9 Arrangements were put in place to support those who were left without any personal belongings by collecting donated clothing and household items – initially at the Assistance Centre at the local farm and then at Rainham Library.
- 2.10 A key theme for the Council during both the response and recovery periods was to “Listen, Inform and Respond”.
- 2.11 The Council communicated time critical information to residents via mass text messages and collaborated with the London Fire Brigade to hold a briefing to residents being affected. A Fire Recovery Board was setup to coordinate recovery arrangements and support to residents.
- 2.12 At the request of affected residents, the Assistance Centre was moved from the Leisure Centre in Hornchurch back to the Willow Farm Hotel (Premier Inn) as it was much closer to their homes in Wennington. This remained open for four weeks supporting residents with concerns and issues. The Assistance Centre was staffed by officers from Housing, Adults and Children’s services with support accessible through psychology and counselling services from the NHS. Council officers walked daily around the village throughout this period, checking in on people as they returned to their homes, sorting out resident questions/issues/requests and being available just to chat.
- 2.13 In the immediate days and weeks after the fire, driven by the apparent and expressed needs of those who required ongoing support, a number of different information meetings were arranged (for those still displaced from their homes or suffering mental distress) on the topics of insurance, submitting planning applications (for rebuilding) and health/wellbeing.

**3. Progress in the Recovery Phase**

3.1 The council began the transition from “response” to “recovery” a few days after the fire by establishing a Wennington Fire Recovery Board (WFRB) with “bronze” sub-groups covering:

- Health, Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Site Management, Accommodation and Rebuilding
- Streetcare and Highways
- Community, Voluntary Sector and Donations
- Communications

This is led by a director and involved a wide range of external partners including police, fire, health and the voluntary sector. The frequency of meetings and membership has evolved over time based on need.

3.2 Key activity under the WFRB included working through Havering MIND to help families and individual residents needing counselling and psychological support; Local Area Coordinators working to address ongoing needs of vulnerable adults; coordination of access to donated clothes and household items; coordinating distribution of the crowd-funded financial donations; supported the Wennington Fire Station Halloween Open Day (Oct. 2022) on fire prevention and post-fire community fundraising (1,000 people attended and over £2,000 was raised); offered free gas/electricity safety checks to affected residents; ensured site security/ safety; facilitated demolition of dangerous structures; and supported residents around insurance concerns where possible.

3.3 The council worked in partnership with community members and the voluntary sector (Salvation Army and Havering Volunteer Centre [HVC]) to distribute the physical donations (household items and clothes) until December 2022 and final distribution of the monetary donations funds was completed in March 2023. HVC, alongside the council, was able to maintain a physical donation site (location provided by the council) for affected residents and, with agreement from the community, this was widened to other borough residents in need (including refugees that had been placed in the borough) providing wider community resilience over the winter months.

3.4 In partnership with the community and effected residents, the council developed a system of distribution which meant that those whose 19 homes had been rendered uninhabitable (18 destroyed, 1 seriously damaged) received £1,170 before Christmas 2022. There were two additional tiers which provided smaller payments to other affected residents.

3.5 In the handover from the Response to the Recovery phase, having reconfirmed that all affected residents were suitably housed/supported and that the four sites were safe/secure, the next high-level step was to encourage movement towards demolishing the dangerous structures. Given that all properties were on privately owned land, the council broadly could

only play a coordinating role. However, demolition of the first site was achieved in October 2022 with two other sites demolished in March/April 2023. The fourth site is more remote and its insurance status is still being resolved. The fifth site is a row of garages which is being addresses after the houses.

- 3.6 The 18 destroyed properties were a mixture of owner-occupied and rented homes and a number were under-insured and, possibly, un-insured. This has affected speedy progress to demolition – particularly where such properties were either in the middle of a terrace or part of a pair of semi-detached houses. This continues to be an issue in being able to move to the rebuilding stage and could, potentially, mean the council concluding that the best way forward is to provide financial support (possibly up to £5M – mainly as loans or charges) to help ensure properties are rebuilt so that occupation can be resumed.
- 3.7 The issue of insurance has been the most significant and challenging element of the recovery process with some vulnerable residents facing traumatic consequences with either substantial negative financial impacts or even the total loss of their homes (one which had been in the family for three quarters of a century). The Council has worked diligently to help residents to try to find resolutions through their own means.
- 3.8 An insurance liaison/working group meets fortnightly with key officers from the Site Management, Accommodation and Rebuilding Bronze Group coming together with representatives from the loss adjusters (on behalf of the insurers) and managing agents (on behalf of other owners). This aids collaboration between key stakeholders on reinstatement plans and smooth facilitation with Havering on matters such as dangerous structure notices, building control and road closures for demolition, as well as planning matters. The Council has also provided a point of contact in the Planning Department to ensure consistent and sympathetic processing of planning applications. This has been a successful approach but innovative as the Council would not normally liaise directly with insurers of private property.
- 3.9 In July 2022, the fire was an international media story broadcast in a number of different countries and, in the year following, there continued to be an ongoing and steady stream of interest from the press. However, in the months and weeks leading up to the first anniversary, that regional and national media interest – eg. continual “door knocking” looking for stories – began to be felt (by some residents) to be intrusive, oppressive and distressing. Due to their feelings of vulnerability and being overwhelmed, and at their request, the Council proactively stepped in to assist residents and the local community with managing the media. Residents put up a sign on the village green noticeboard imploring the media to be respectful of those who do not wish to comment and redirecting the media to contact the Council instead.

#### **4. Lessons Learned**

- 4.1 Shortly after the fire a “hot (quick) debrief” and then later a couple of “cold (full) debriefs” were held with council officers and councillors. Debriefs were also jointly held with other agencies. Lessons learnt were captured and implemented (or being reviewed) in emergency planning and recovery activities, for example:
- enhancing the Rest Centre training for our staff
  - consider expanding the capacity of Local Authority Liaison Officer (LALO) / Humanitarian Assistance Liaison Officer
  - considering mutual aid from London at earliest opportunity
  - besides expanding LALO capacity, draw up a rota of LALOs to ensure adequate rest (during a prolonged incident)
  - acknowledging the importance of communications (particularly the website and social media) and how key it is to get “headline” messages out “immediately”
  - encouraging/coordinating maximum levels of input but having clarity around roles to avoid “too many fingers in the pie” (even from the well-meaning)
  - setting up a media room to ensure residents are not talked to unnecessarily
  - keeping mass text messages informative but brief
  - having multiple channels of communication (for individuals who did not provide mobile numbers)
  - ensuring accurate detailed road closure details are publicised (for demolitions etc.) to minimise any public confusion
  - continue practice of setting up individual invoicing for building control costs from the start to avoid later complexities – however, bills to be sent to property owners for forwarding to insurer
  - since the fire, we have put extra cover in place to deal with out of hours dangerous structures
- 4.2 The Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members and the ward councillors were proactive and engaged on the day of the fire and in the immediate aftermath helping the response initiative and to support affected residents.
- 4.3 It is also noted that staff welfare is important during the response to any major incidents or emergencies. Arrangements should be maintained to ensure adequate staffing levels and adequate rest – particularly during a prolonged incident.
- 4.4 The official London Fire Brigade Wennington 2022 Fire Investigation Report has now been published and is in tune with the key actions already identified by the Council which include:
- engage the voluntary sector to be involved in future emergency planning exercises
    - especially regarding the use of volunteers



- the Havering voluntary sector was invited to the pan-London exercise on 17 May
- use resilience forums to engage at all levels
  - eg. voluntary sector forums and community safety partnerships
  - not just first category responders (such as police and fire)
- keep communications ongoing between incidents
  - as then much easier to engage and connect response interventions when need arises
  - we have already strived to do this (eg. ensuring full representation at our Counter Terrorism, CONTEST Board)
  - first category responders (such as police and fire)
- maintain a Summer Wildfire Prevention Action Plan
  - managing open land (inc. BBQs in heatwave conditions)
  - encourage greater use of firebreaks (esp. near properties)
  - clearance of rubbish and deterrence of fly-tipping

4.5 In July 2023, as part of reviewing and assessing our actions in relation to the Wennington Fire, the Association of Local Authority Risk Managers (ALARM) – at its annual conference – gave Havering Council first place in the judging for the “Resilience Award”. This award recognises innovative approaches to improving resilience, including initiatives to respond to and recover from incidents. Resilience is defined as the ability/capacity to withstand or spring back from challenges.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

### 5. Financial implications and risks:

5.1 Estimates collated from teams across the Council indicate that approximately £100K\* had been spent in response to the fire; this largely represents the cost of officer time whose efforts were redirected away from day-to-day duties as part of the response and as a result was budgeted for as part of the Council’s overall establishment. The Government has indicated that reimbursement of these fire response costs is unlikely due partly to there being a minimum spend threshold of £400K and partly because their Bellwin Fund (to respond to major/emergency incidents) is currently empty. The Council may therefore have to absorb these £100K emergency response costs.

*\* counting stopped at £66K as it was clear that the £400K threshold would not be reached but was adjudged that it would have reached £100K had counting continued.*

5.2 The disbursement of the £33K raised by the Salvation Army through their online crowdfunding was administered by the Council and paid out through

the Council Tax system. The disbursement methodology was agreed with residents and overseen by Internal Audit. All of those funds have now been paid out to Wennington village residents and there are no financial implications for the Council.

5.3 The Wennington Fire was an exceptional event and some home-owners found that they were either underinsured or uninsured. In these exceptional circumstances, the Council may consider a number of options to support home-owners including:

- a) acting as “guarantor” if owner otherwise unable to secure loan
- b) providing a loan to “plug the gap”
- c) doing the whole rebuild
- d) buying the house and land

5.4 Home-owners would be encouraged to use private means to cover their financial needs and any funding support (loans, purchases etc.) provided by the Council would be kept to a minimum and not supplied as a grant. There are currently up to four properties potentially underinsured and one large property uninsured. Exact costings are still awaited but the initial estimate is that the financial input from the Council could be up to £5M – should the Council choose to provide such support. Steps would need to be taken to secure (eg. through a charge on the properties in question) any loans, investments or other funding support by the Council.

5.5 Note that this estimated figure of £5m essentially represents either an investment/acquisition and/or provision of a loan, whichever was deemed most appropriate in each case; not £5m of revenue costs.

## **6. Legal implications and risks:**

6.1 There are no apparent legal implications in noting the contents of the Report.

## **7. Human Resources implications and risks:**

7.1 The recommendations made in this report do not give rise to any identifiable HR risks or implications that would affect either the Council or its workforce.

## **8. Equalities implications and risks:**

8.1 Major incidents and emergencies can have significant impacts on people with vulnerabilities or those with particular equality characteristics. Forward planning for Rest Centre and Assistance Centre support activity (for example) should ensure that relevant potential needs have been considered – such as ramped access (portable and permanent) and culturally competent advice etc.