

THE TRUE SCALE OF IMPACT OF THE NEW FERRY / PORT SUNLIGHT EXPLOSION

By Marion Grundy Ridewood



BBC NEWS

Image courtesy of BBC News

Summary

Physical distribution of damage to property

Information gleaned from mapping the damage

- Physical distribution of damage to property covers an area of more than one square kilometre
- Recorded damage radius is a minimum of 702m from the blast epicentre
- 7 shops, with accompanying overlying residential properties were entirely demolished by the explosion
- Over 100 other houses and over 40 other shops were damaged by the impact of the blast

Psychological and welfare impact

Key issues raised are debt and depression:

- Extreme debt: Most of those individuals, families and businesses impacted by the disaster have been left to cover the cost of damages incurred due to: 1) unscrupulous insurance companies not paying out, or their not having the appropriate insurance cover; 2) not receiving appropriate financial assistance from emergency funds.
- In most cases, victims were left to fend for themselves. They have not received appropriate help.
- Severe depression: Even 18 months on, most of the victims are still traumatised, both by the disaster and its impacts, and by the level of debt in which they now find themselves, through no fault of their own.
- Many people have not been able to return to their homes

Conclusion

The size, scale and impact of the disaster is significantly greater than documented or reported.

The victims of the New Ferry / Port Sunlight explosion are being left to foot the bill for the disaster.

As a result, many are now in serious debt. They are receiving no help to deal with the unscrupulous creditors.

This debt, coupled with the original trauma and consequential PTSD, has resulted in most victims suffering from severe depression. Almost all of the victims have had to seek help from their own GPs, for which the typical response has been GP-prescribed anti-depressants.

Anti-depressants are not a solution, and only serve to render the victims unable to cope with daily life.

The entire emergency has been under-funded. Simply not enough money was or has been spent on emergency management, response and recovery

At 21.14 on the 25th March 2017, the night before Mother's Day, an enormous explosion destroyed a part of the shopping centre of New Ferry and many of the houses in the Grade 2 listed historic village of Port Sunlight, in Wirral, Merseyside.

The magnitude of the explosion was so vast, that it was heard across Merseyside, Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales.

Initially, during the first 24 hours, it was widely reported across mainstream media. At that point, no-one truly understood the scale of the incident.

Photos: Liverpool Echo





All photos: Liverpool Echo



David Ball, Wirral Council, in describing the scale of the explosion, stated that there had not been an explosion of this magnitude in Merseyside since World War II.

On 29th March 2017, 4 days after the explosion, Theresa May promised government help for the communities of New Ferry & Port Sunlight.

In July 2017, Jake Berry visited New Ferry to see the damage for himself, but as far as I'm aware, he did not venture outside of the immediate blast zone

He returned to London stating:
an incident of this size and impact does not warrant Government assistance



Source: Liverpool Echo

News ▶ Liverpool News ▶ New Ferry

Source: Liverpool Echo

New Ferry explosion: Fury as government says NO to funding plea

THE government was accused of "turning its back on the people of New Ferry" – after it was confirmed NO funding will be provided to support residents and businesses affected by March's devastating explosion.

Jake Berry MP, Minister for the Northern Powerhouse and Local Growth, has now written to Wirral Council saying government policy is to not provide financial assistance for "incidents of the size and impact of New Ferry".

Steve Rotherham wrote a reply in which he explained the limited geographic scale in no way minimises the impact of this disaster

All of these phrases undermine and downscale the true magnitude of the disaster

As time has progressed (it is now some 18 months since the explosion), mainstream media began describing the event as “the gas explosion, in which 2 people were seriously hurt and several houses and shops were damaged...”, effectively downscaling the size (and thus the importance) of the explosion.

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New Ferry group set for first meeting with communities secretary

11 August 2018

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Several buildings collapsed in the 2017 blast

People affected by a blast that **injured 31 people** are set to have their first meeting with the communities secretary after a "frustrating" wait.

Two people were seriously hurt in New Ferry, Merseyside on 25 March 2017.

Local trader Marion Ridewood said the town "needs more help" from government. A government spokesman said it took the matter "extremely seriously".

More than 100 people were temporarily evacuated following the blast, which **affected 25 homes and four businesses.**

In July 2017, the government was criticised after communities minister Jake Berry wrote that the explosion did not meet the threshold for government funding of emergency recovery costs.

NO! NO! NO!
Council figures state 39 hospital admissions, plus a significant number of injured people who attended later, or visited walk-in centres or their GPs

NO! NO! NO!
100s of homes & well over 50 businesses were affected

A quick glance at the council official figures (overleaf) tells you how wrong this article is

Wirral Council official report on the scale of the disaster

Incident occurred at 9.14pm on 25th March 2017 an explosion lead to immediate collapse of the dance school, furniture studio, funeral parlour and charity shop.

- 39 reported casualties, 2 suffering major trauma were admitted to local hospitals (1 with “life changing” injuries);
- In addition, a number of people attended hospital in the days that followed the explosion, and similarly there were a significant number of people who also attended walk in centres and their respective GPs in relation to injuries sustained on the night;
- 68 displaced into hotels / B&B, temporary accommodation (16 of which were identified as school aged children);
- As at 1 February 2018, 23 people had accessed the counselling support set up by NHS with 17 subsequently discharged and the remaining 6 still receiving ongoing therapy;
- As of 1 April 2018, there were still 17 dwellings unoccupied, undergoing major repairs to the properties in question – Underley Terrace, Boundary Road and Bebington Road;
- 32 residential or commercial properties suffered severe structural damage;
- 10 buildings demolished as dangerous structures;
- 6 businesses ceased trading immediately resulting in circa 20 jobs lost to the local economy.
- Loss of Council Tax and Business Rates to Council estimated at £15k and £18k respectively;
- Expenditure incurred by Council to date circa £300,000.

****Even these figures do not accurately describe the scale since they do not include any damage information from outside of the immediate blast zone or any damage which was not reported directly to the council, nor do they include the number of people made instantly homeless who went to stay with friends or family. Therefore even these figures underestimate the size and impact of the disaster.**

I am fed up with the constancy of the downscaling of this disaster. The perpetual method of reporting of this incident is, in my opinion, now tantamount to corporate downscaling.

These phrases SCALE, SIZE and IMPACT are used often – but they are never properly defined

So, in the four weeks we had to prepare for the meeting with the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, James Brokenshire, I made it my mission to define these phrases.

To understand the true scale of the disaster, the minister needs facts, not rhetoric.

With respect to this disaster there are three ways to define the scale and impact:

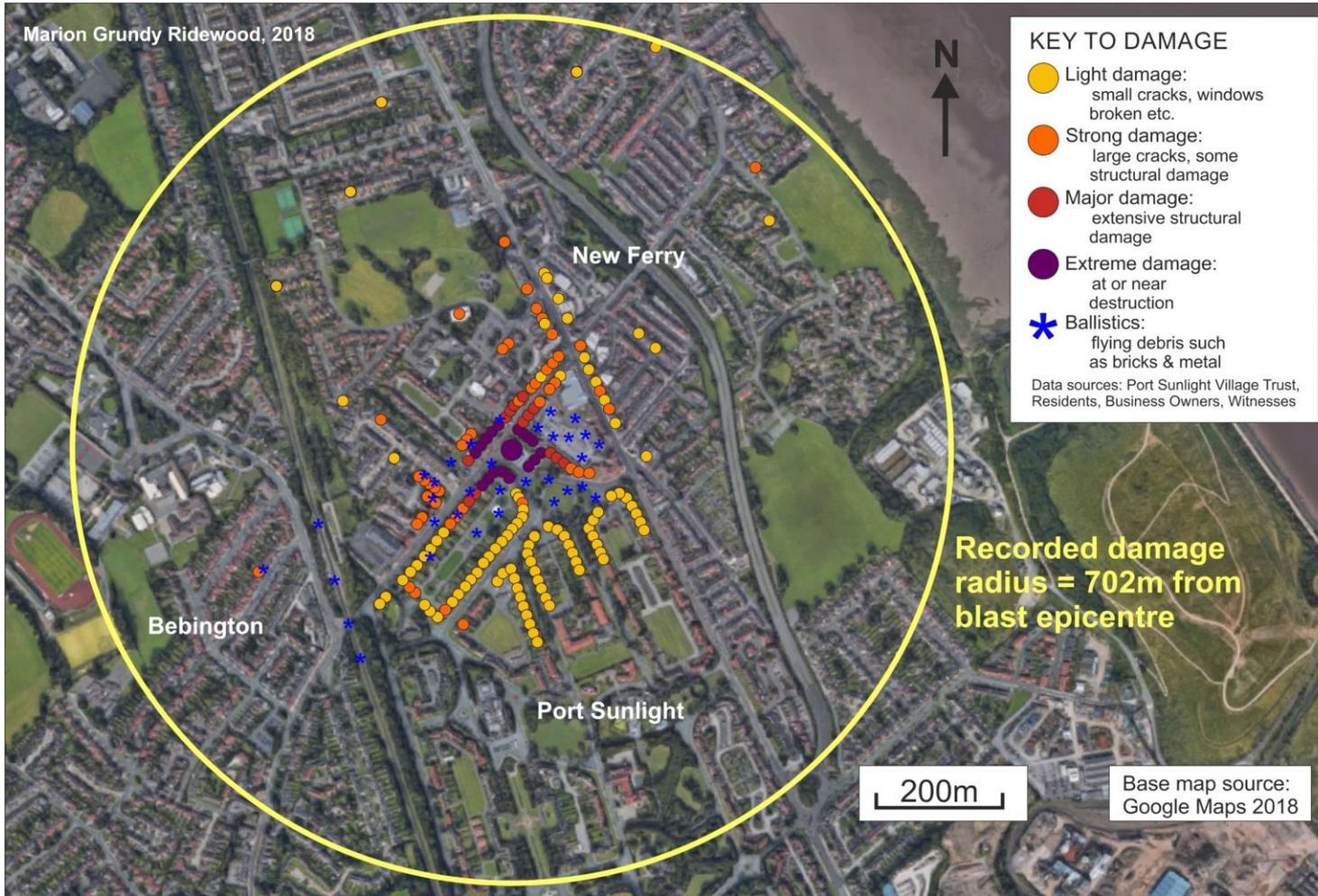
- Physical distribution of material damage
- Psychological and welfare impact
- Financial and economic impact

Mostly, the only concern talked about is the economic impact – but the first two should never be ignored...

Plus, the second is more important than the others, because these are people's lives, and those lives are protected by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004

Physical distribution of material damage

This was mapped by asking people what damage had been incurred to their property and where that property was located. In the two weeks of data collection, we did not have enough time to collect a complete or comprehensive data set. Thus, these data are incomplete and the true scale could be significantly greater.



Scale

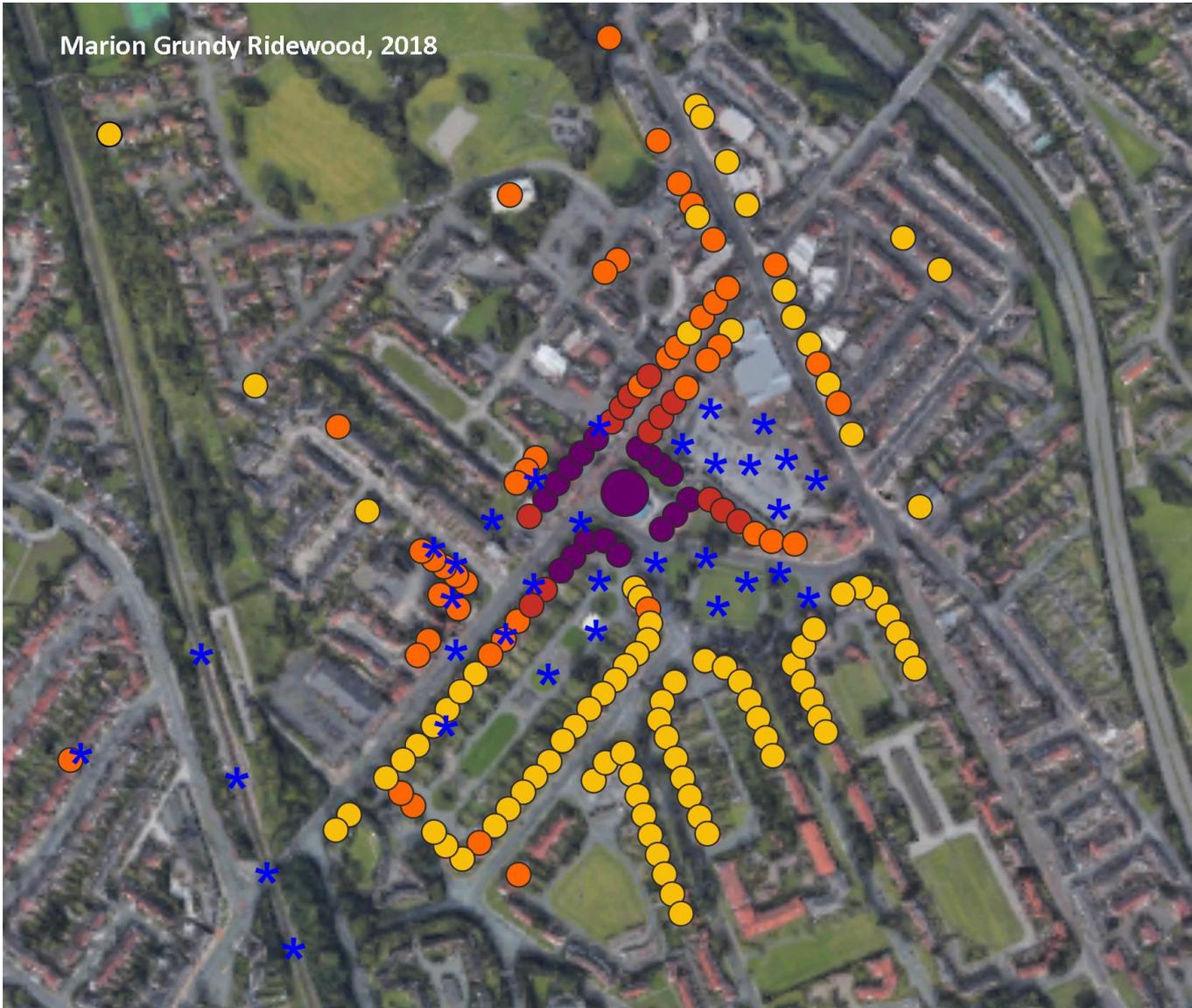
- Epicentre to main crossroads at the high street = 198m
- Epicentre to railway bridge = 385m
- Epicentre to Bebington Station = 341m
- Epicentre to furthest recorded reach = 702m

Bebington Station had to be closed for several days due to bricks on the line, and so that the bridge could be checked for structural damage

Map constructed by Marion Grundy Ridewood, 4th September 2018, using the above-mentioned sources. As these data could only be gathered over a short two week period, they are not complete. It is known that there was more damage in Bebington and Port Sunlight, as well as New Ferry. However due to time constraints, we could not gather confirmation of all of the damage information in time. Therefore this map is a minimum, and it is very likely that there are significantly more damaged properties than illustrated and that the damage radius extends significantly further than the 702m from epicentre shown here.

Physical distribution of material damage

If we zoom in closer to the map, we can start to appreciate just how many individual buildings were damaged. These include many shops, most of which had residential accommodation above them. It includes a great many houses, most of which are grade-2 listed buildings in Port Sunlight.



Within the blast radius, there are 169 dots on the map marking damage.

However, due to the architecture of map construction, the fixed size of the dots and the density of the properties (most of the shops are tightly compact and narrow, and most of the properties in Port Sunlight are compact terraced houses) many of the dots cover more than one property.

Therefore the actual number of damaged properties is definitely well over 170 and could be in excess of 200.

And these numbers are based upon data collected in just two short weeks.

Dynamics of the explosion

Whilst I do not profess to be an expert in explosion dynamics, the character and distribution of the damage, coupled with its reach, may be indicative of the behaviour of the blast wave.

Severe structural damage to the most proximal shops, flats and houses. Structural damage and window damage to shops on New Chester Road.



The compact buildings and narrow width of the precinct has likely concentrated the blast along this “tunnel” as it travelled up to the high street (New Chester Road). Once the blast reached the crossroads, it blasted this force out along New Chester Road. The blast wave continued across the crossroads, down along New Ferry Road.

Severe structural damage to the most proximal houses. Many houses with roof damage due to flying debris such as bricks. Bebington Station closed due to bricks on the line.



The majority of ballistics are found to the south and southwest, into Port Sunlight and Bebington. Potentially, the more vacuous space of the furniture store and the dance studio above, (compared with the more compact charity shop and funeral parlour/chapel of rest) allowed the explosion to significantly expand within that part of the building, thus lofting debris higher in this direction.

Psychological and welfare impact

16 months ago, I realised the importance of impact statements, and made suggestions to a number of different people that we should begin collecting them. However, it could not be done at that time. Now, in hindsight, I realise that it would also have been impossible, since the impacts were too recent and the traumas too raw.

Upon the invitation from government for residents and traders to meet the new Secretary of State to tell him of the impacts, this idea was raised. So, I immediately launched a public campaign to gather these statements. I created two facebook statuses which were widely shared. I created leaflets which were printed and we distributed them amongst many New Ferry shops as well as hand-delivering 1800 to the most proximal residential properties. I was also interviewed by a number of local radio stations who were keen to help in getting the message out to as many people as possible. To collect them, I set up a unique email address, I recorded and transcribed a few, my boss kindly allowed collection of the paper ones at my place of work, and I also received many via private messages.

Prior to my handing of them personally to James Brokenshire, their individual statements had only been read by me. As I was talking to people, collecting their photos and reading their statements, I was able to identify many common themes. Given that the number of statements collected was only few (57) considering the number of people impacted, these common themes were alarming, and had to be reported to government.

It was pleasing that James Brokenshire took full interest in these. As well as taking notes, he asked many questions which indicated his concern for the issues raised.

Psychological and welfare impact – Most serious issues

Some of those most deeply affected simply can't face the stress of reliving their trauma, so have been unable to write a statement – it is simply too difficult for them.

Most serious issues:

- **Serious debt and severe depression – these two are not mutually exclusive**
- For most, the loss of their homes, their jobs, their livelihoods, their physical and mental well-being, has resulted in enormous personal debt as a direct result of the explosion.
- All of the victims are bearing the significant financial costs of this disaster.
- All of the children impacted by the explosion have suffered long-term psychological difficulties, resulting in extreme stress for the children and their families.
- A great many of the victims are still under GP and / or psychiatric care and are on anti-depressants as a result of the explosion.
- Almost all of the families who were thrown out of their homes feel uneasy about moving back into them due to the constant reminder of the trauma.

Psychological and welfare impact – Common Themes

- Instant lack of access to money for those made homeless whose wallets and IDs were left in their demolished properties
- Deteriorated physical health – long term health impacts
- Now living in poverty – many people lost their jobs, their homes and have ended up in serious debt
- Depression and despair (from being thrown into unknown situations and or abject poverty, from feeling neglected)
- PTSD – short and long term
- A long-term sense of needing to control every situation – a result of having no control over what happened that night or in the weeks after.
- Difficulty in coming to terms with returning to the home in which they suffered such trauma, and some cannot return for emotional reasons.
- Scandalous responses of insurance companies – not covering all that was lost, not covering all of the repairs, not providing the cover they charged premiums for.
- Huge expenses and / or costs born by individuals for repairs and protective erections because they were / are not covered by and / or exempt from insurance cover.
- Enormous debt due to lack of financial support from insurance companies and so on, meaning the much of the financial burden of repairs and replacements has been borne by the victims
- Significant loss of trade for all business during enforced closure of the precinct – this was for 7 days in the entire precinct, several weeks as the police cordon was moved closer to the blast zone, and continued for 14 weeks until the opening of the precinct thoroughway on 14th June 2017
- Excessive costs of getting insurance cover for the derelict and dangerous buildings still left standing, the cost of which is having to be paid by the victims themselves
- Excessive increases in insurance premiums for all of the affected homes
- Devaluing of property – mostly mortgaged properties – to a fraction (or zero) of the value prior to the explosion
- A sense of guilt from those volunteers who helped - that they were okay and / or being applauded for their efforts when so many people were not okay and were not being adequately recognised by authorities as being in such dire need of assistance
- Depression at having to see the site every day, still derelict and with no signs of regeneration
- No desire to shop in New Ferry due to the depressive state it has been left in
- Significant loss of trade for all businesses resulting from the continued reduction of footfall due to lack of regeneration

Psychological and welfare impact – Questions raised

As a part of my 4-week preparation for the meeting with government, I downloaded, read and annotated the government-produced guidelines on disaster management. These guidelines were compiled and produced with specific reference to lessons learned from previous disasters. Thus, they stipulate responsibilities for best practice to ensure expectations of the affected community are met.

a) Recovery: An emergency management guide (pub: 01/01/06, Home Office) available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62228/recovery-emergency-management-guide.pdf (25 pages)

b) Emergency Response and Recovery (pub updated 10/2013, HM Government) available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253488/Emergency Response and Recovery 5th edition October 2013.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253488/Emergency_Response_and_Recovery_5th_edition_October_2013.pdf) (233 pages)

Note: I was honest with the minister and did tell him that unfortunately, during the short time frame we had to prepare, I had not managed to read the full 233 pages. I did, however read Chapter 7: Meeting the needs of those affected by an emergency (humanitarian assistance)

In my opinion, from having spoken to people, and having read every word of the personal impact statements detailing the truth of what the victims have endured, and having read the guidelines, it is obvious that responsibilities and expectations have not been met. I hope that government reach the same understanding.

The community, and especially the victims, would like answers to these and any other questions that arise from comparison of the guidelines with the truths in these statements.

Psychological and welfare impact – Questions raised

The community, and especially the victims, would like answers to these and any other questions that arise from comparison of the guidelines with the truths in their statements

Examples of the serious questions raised are:

- Why was the Bellwin Scheme not applied for within the first month?
- Why did the homeless have to rely entirely on handouts of money, food and clothes from local charities or their own families?
- Why was there no subsistence living expenses given to the homeless?
- Why were the victims not directly and immediately given the monies donated to the council that was intended specifically to help them during those early weeks when they had nothing?
- Why were new school uniforms not provided for the homeless children?
- How was it possible for so many large and valuable items to be stolen from the secured zone when it had 24-hour manned security, particularly given the thefts continued even after they had been reported?
- How is it justified to charge the victims for the emergency costs incurred by the council, and especially if they had no insurance cover?
- David Ball publicly acknowledged the impact of closure on footfall and trade in a statement on 14/06/17, so why has there been no quantification of or compensation for loss of trade?
- Why has the community been left to cope entirely on their own financially and emotionally?
- Why has New Ferry been allowed to stay in the same dishevelled state for 17 months with no regard for the impact on trade or the psychological impact on the community?

Impact Statement Excerpts

Whilst confidentiality of the respondents is paramount, their words are vitally important to aid the understanding of the enormity of the disaster.

Here, I present excerpts from their statements. These are their words.

Note: These excerpts highlight that many people are suffering similar impacts. They are sectioned under subheadings, so that it is easier to identify the common themes. None of the texts have been edited. Where square parentheses [] are used, it is to provide anonymity or to add clarity where a statement is out of context. Each separate excerpt within a section is from a different respondent. Some respondent's comments may be distributed over several sections. Statements are in no particular order.

Immediate impact and observations

“All we had that night were the clothes we had on, no toiletries, nothing.”

“So we had no money, we had no home, and we had nowhere to go. We had no clothes. We were just wrapped in [sheets], and they were all covered in blood...”

“We literally lost everything that night. Local people helped to gather us some clothes for the 5 of us and a charity alongside Asda in Bromborough sent us shoes.”

“We were not allowed back to the area for nearly a week, which left me without a car, job, wages.”

“I was supported by my family who housed me for 9 weeks, they gave me clean clothes, took me shopping for essentials – which they had to pay for because I had no money..”

“People were unable to buy things from shops as they did not have photographic I.D, credit and debit cards etc. as these had to be left within their homes and they were unable to access them. Banks were unable to give money for these reasons.”

Impact Statement Excerpts – Psychological and welfare impact

Financial impact

“The only money I ever received was £100 from New Beginnings and £200 from the church.”

“The children did not even have school uniform for a month as we were relying on handouts from local charities.”

“I have been threatened with the bailiffs for non-payment of utility bills despite the property being uninhabitable.”

“The long-term effect has been devastating. My income has dropped by 50%. I can no longer afford to pay my rent.”

“We have thousands of pounds worth of debt to pay..”

“My insurance company didn’t cover the cost of all the damage to our house.”

“The property, worth in excess of £130,000 before the explosion, would only be covered by the lenders insurance and I would not receive a penny and could even be liable to some costs.”

“We had to completely renew the roof, which cost me £7,700.”

“It’s so bad that I am using my own pension to pay shop rent and bills.”

“Trying to survive in B&B room with no way of cooking etc and having to replace clothes, shoes and everything else meant we soon spiralled in to debt.”

Impact Statement Excerpts – Psychological and welfare impact

Psychological impact – children suffering long-term impact of trauma

“Kids couldn’t sleep with stress from it all and have had to have counselling because of it. My youngest son has had problems sleeping since we moved back home ”

“My kids still have nightmares and are scared of loud noises, even motorbikes and hoovers, and they all have panic attacks in buildings with big glass windows.”

“...and my children suffered so much.”

“He was referred to camms. They advised us that he was suffering with anxiety. 17 months on, he rarely sleeps in his bed, still has bouts of incontinence mainly of a night and has become withdrawn and anxious.”

“My daughter still, not every night, wakes up scared of the house exploding”

“For several months he was visiting a councillor in school... he had become very withdrawn at home... he was quickly diagnosed with PTSD.”

“me and my little brother have had terrible anxiety since the event.”

“It is incredibly sad to see how this affected my children as well. My son and daughter have gone through behavioural and mental issues at school.”

Impact Statement Excerpts – Psychological and welfare impact

Psychological impact – PTSD and depression

“My GP signed me off from work after diagnosing me with PTSD.”

“Because of the stress I am feeling, I went back to my GP who had already put me onto anti-depressants, and when I told him of my difficulties, he doubled my medication.”

“I ended up off work for 6 weeks with PTSD and severe anxiety.”

“I fell into depression and felt useless, not only because of losing my job, but even after that.”

“I think I am quite a strong person but the last eighteen months have seen me reduced to tears, depressed and a gibbering wreck with frustration.”

“I try and hide my feelings because it’s 17 months down the line and I’m still not coping. I feel I’m going insane sometimes.”

“The greatest impact was on my mental health. ...I eventually went to the doctor for help. I was given medication. I am now on beta blockers for anxiety attacks.”

“I am [now] on anxiety and depression meds”

“I get nightmares, even today, about the explosion. I am always anxious that it might happen again. It brings tears to my eyes and makes me feel sick when I talk about the explosion.”

Impact Statement Excerpts – Psychological and welfare impact

Welfare – Homelessness and temporary accommodation

“We spent over 12 weeks at the B&B, paid for by our insurance [after which we] were literally left floundering alone and told to find ourselves somewhere to live. I was sent to Wirral council offices and was told to declare myself and my family homeless in order to even be considered for housing help. We survived purely from the help of local people who helped us secure temporary accommodation after 3 months in the B&B.”

“I have been living with friends, housesitting for others. I have now been living out of a suitcase for eighteen months.”

“We lived in temporary accommodation for 17 months. It was a small house with 3 teenagers sharing one room.”

“We are still not home it is well over a year on.”

“18 months on I am still in temporary accommodation.”

“I was eventually able to find a new house that myself and my children were able to move into after spending a year at my parent’s house.”

“We are still in temporary accommodation.”

“Every day I had to get the kids to school. It was the kid’s school who phoned the council to tell them that these little ones need to have a house, these children need somewhere to live.”

Impact Statement Excerpts – Loss of trade and depressed state of New Ferry 18 months on

“The situation is still the same nearly 18 months later.”

“The area around my home is now a waste ground with a few derelict buildings where once there were local shops. The state of the surrounding area, the lack of a way forward or funding to support the regeneration of New Ferry and the small traders that provide services there all add to the feeling of dereliction, desolation and despair.”

“I feel like less people are coming into the Ferry. Buses have been taken off. The closure of the precinct forced many people to go elsewhere for shopping.”

“The footfall has for sure dropped therefore 100% affecting my business which then affects my staff.”

“The sight of the Ferry was enough to stop people shopping in the area. Even now it still looks like a building site, with nothing being done.”

“Repairs / replacement of street furniture and housing incomplete, bomb site an eyesore.”

“I've gone from making £500-£800 per week [in my shop] to making virtually nothing. I'm lucky if I see £20 in my till at the end of the week now.”

“We have never received help for the loss of earnings. The foot fall in New Ferry has dropped at least 5 fold.”

David Ball, Wirral Council, 14/06/17: “New Ferry has remained open for business throughout the recovery phase but we know that the closure of the road and restrictions on pedestrian access, which was unavoidable, has impacted on footfall and trade”

Impact Statement Excerpts – Why has there been no help?

“No, we never lost lives thank the Lord, but really, is that what it takes?”

“The lack of response from people in high places was appalling. Its summed up when the P.M. was less than 10 minutes away in Hamilton Square [on 12/10/17] but couldn't take the trouble to just drive through the area in question.”

“It's so important for people to realise what the people of New Ferry/Port Sunlight have gone through. It shouldn't matter where we are located on the map, what the area was or wasn't like before the explosion, what matters is we are heard. No one other than local people seem to care.”

“It stands out a mile that government were not interested at all because it did not occur in London.”

“What does it take to spark a response of any meaningful description?
Bodies scattered about the area that was the devastated dance school?”

“The loss of many businesses for such a long time and the damaged houses being left for ages, without any apparent rush to get the people back into their homes, has left a sense of abandonment.”

“Personally, I still want answers, understanding and justice for what has happened as I cannot help but feel not only have we all been forgotten, but higher powers that be do not seem interested in coming to the aid of all residents of New Ferry”

“It feels like we've been completely neglected. It's a sad state of affairs when you feel alone. We need support and help. Not only business been affected, people's homes. If this was London the funding would be available. Help our town. Help us.”

Why has there been no help? – A London comparison

The most common statement made is by everyone in the area is:

“New Ferry wouldn’t be left to rot like this with no help if it were in London”

Having grown up in and around Sidcup, and with my own father having been his constituent, having voted him in as the MP for Old Bexley and Sidcup in 2010, it was easy for me to describe very accurately to James Brokenshire exactly what the impact would have been, had this happened in his own constituency.

I aimed to demonstrate the scale, size and impact of the New Ferry / Port Sunlight explosion to the Minister in real terms that he could visualise, in terms of physical scale, distribution, and in terms of the impact on his own constituents.

I overlaid the explosion map onto a to-scale map of Sidcup (see over).

I asked him:

- “How would you respond, Minister, if this happened in your own constituency?”
- “What would be the impact of the destruction of so many shops and houses in and around Sidcup high street?”
- “What would be the impact of the closure of Sidcup Station, of the closure of the A20 junction, of the disturbance to equipment in Queen Mary’s Hospital?”
- “How would you respond, Minister, to your own constituents when they begged you for help?”

I answered my own question... “I am sure that you would respond in the very same way as has Alison McGovern. You would want to do everything possible in your power to help them.”

A London comparison to exactly the same scale as the New Ferry disaster epicentre located 198m from high street crossroads toward the station (the exact same scenario as occurred in the New Ferry / Port Sunlight explosion)



The loss of a thriving shopping centre



September 2018 – How New Ferry and Port Sunlight have been left



People call it the bomb site

All photos: Marion Grundy Ridewood, 01/09/18