

Buncefield response

"Aligned but not joined"

Ken Rivers

"How industry responds to incidents such as Buncefield and how the regulators respond on behalf of the public is a measure of our society. A decisive and dynamic response with all parties co-operating is the product of a democratic and advanced society."

Buncefield Standard Task Group, 24th July 2007

Buncefield was a profound shock. It was a shock to the industry, it was a shock to the regulator and most importantly a shock to the public. No one expected that the overfilling of a storage tank containing petrol could lead to the largest explosion in Europe since the Second World War.

Buncefield has led to profound changes not just in the operational, technical and regulatory aspects of managing major hazards but also in leadership, and the way industry and regulator work together in the UK.

A Major Incident Investigation Board (MIIB) was set up to identify what went wrong, but it took time as much of the evidence had been destroyed. In the meantime, pressure was mounting on all parties to do something. The whole credibility of the industry and the regulatory regime was under fire. We were all in the same boat, all our reputations were on the line and the usual tennis match was not going to give us the answer. Up until then, developments progressed with one party proposing change which would be rebuffed with counter proposals from the other side. Solutions and ideas were battered backwards and forwards across the net to try to "win the point". Buncefield put an end to that.

I am proud of the way the leaders at the time stood up to the challenge. Industry and regulator all shared the view that a Buncefield incident must never happen again. We recognised that by pooling our knowledge, experience and insights, we could deliver better, more effective, more efficient and more timely solutions. And that whilst we might not know what had gone wrong at Buncefield (and there was a commission working on that), we had a clear understanding of what needed to succeed, which enabled us to act swiftly and collaboratively—driving prompt, meaningful change through the Buncefield Standard Task Group

We formulated a new mindset of "aligned but not joined" which recognised that regulator and regulated shared a common goal of preventing major incidents and that it was through open, frank discussion and sharing our different perspectives that we could best achieve that goal. We recognised that we needed more consistent responses to broadly similar risks. Delivery was an essential part of the trust upon which this approach depended and focussed our minds to "say what we do" and "do what we say". Recommendations were translated into real actions. It led



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industry to becoming more self-disciplined, taking ownership, and it led to a more mature and collaborative relationship with the regulator. It led to leaders across organisations stepping up and holding themselves to account.

The success in working together to identify, develop and deliver real change was subsequently continued and built on by the Process Safety Leadership Group (PSLG) which ensured the effective implementation of the MIIB's wide-ranging safety recommendations. The incidents at Buncefield — and also at Texas City — highlighted and re-emphasised the critical importance of leadership in preventing major incidents. The PSLG went on to define what good leadership in managing major hazards looks like. That work on leadership published in 2009 has had a resounding impact on the UK on-shore process industries and is now embedded in the regulatory framework. It was subsequently embraced by the Offshore Energy Sector and has had a similar impact.

The result from Buncefield of industry and regulator working together has generated better outcomes and a safer environment which in turn builds trust and credibility and creates a virtuous spiral, which manifests itself today in the COMAH Strategic Forum (CSF). The Forum established in 2013 brings industry and regulators together to identify and address matters of strategic importance in the management of major hazards in the UK.

Over the last twelve years, it has helped shape the Better Regulation review into major hazard legislation as well as ensuring the seamless introduction of Seveso III changes. It has gone on to agree a strategic vision which includes creating a thriving safe and sustainable sector with a regulatory regime that supports business growth, high standards and strong compliance. And has identified and is addressing the major challenges to achieving those objectives. One of the key challenges has been "to make good practice into common practice" and CSF has seen leadership and outreach to those currently unengaged as critical. CSF is providing a platform and framework within which the various bodies involved in managing major hazards in the UK can coherently interact. Practical problems can be nipped in the bud and longer term strategic imperatives can be identified and addressed together. CSF's agenda continues to evolve in the face of climate change

knowledge and
competence

systems and
procedures

human factors

culture

adaptation, net zero, cyber security etc.

Buncefield was a profound shock and it prompted profound change. Buncefield was a defining moment for major hazard regulation. It led to the principles of process safety leadership which have been game changing. The impact of Buncefield remains with us today continuing to stimulate industry and regulator to work together to protect people and places.

When industry works together, when regulators work together and then when industry and regulators work together then transformational change can happen and that is what Buncefield delivered.

Buncefield is a lesson for other sectors too on how to grasp the learning from a major incident and secure a safe and sustainable future.

And for those of us involved in the major hazard sector, I offer a closing & encouraging thought from my time in New Zealand

Kua tawhiti ke to haerenga mai , Kia kore e haere tonu
He tino nui rawa ou mahi , kia kore e hmahi nui tonu

*We have come too far not to go further.
We have done too much, not to do more...*



About the author

Ken is a non-executive director of the Health and Safety Executive and a past President of the Institution of Chemical Engineers. He is also a member of the Industry Safety Steering Group (ISSG) monitoring the progress made by the built environment towards achieving culture change following the

Grenfell Tower fire. Ken is a former chair of the Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) Strategic Forum.

Ken's background is in the oil industry. He is a past President of the UK Petroleum Industry Association and chaired the industry/regulator task force in the wake of the Buncefield terminal explosion. He also chaired the government and industry task force, which considered ways of improving the resilience of oil product supplies following a government review.