



Office of the  
Emergency  
Services  
Commissioner

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## Westpoint Chemical Fire Report to the Community

March 2008

## Contents

<b>Contents.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. Executive summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Purpose of the report .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Acknowledgement of Tottenham residents.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. The Westpoint incident.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5. Role of the Office of Emergency Services Commissioner.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6. The community engagement process.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>7. Community perspective .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>8. Emergency service and agency perspective of the Westpoint incident .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>9. Action taken by agencies since Westpoint incident.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>10. Additional work to be undertaken by agencies .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>11. Conclusion</b>	<b>20</b>

## 1. Executive summary

On the morning of 22 December 2007, a fire started at the Westpoint Pty Ltd chemical warehouse located at 11-13 Paramount Road, West Footscray. The actual site was known to emergency services and the WorkSafe authorities as Millview Forge.

Significant community concerns have been raised regarding the management of this incident and subsequently a number of opportunities for improvement have been identified by the emergency services and other agencies to provide a better response and recovery for all Victorian communities.

A community forum with emergency services and relevant government agencies was held on 7 February 2008 to explore community views on this matter and develop a shared understanding of the emergency.

This report has been collaboratively prepared with representatives from Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), Victoria Police (VicPol), Department of Human Services (DHS), Metropolitan Ambulance Service (MAS), Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA), Environment Protection Authority (EPA), Worksafe and Maribyrnong City Council. It identifies key issues raised in the community forum and by community members during individual discussion with the heads of emergency service agencies, representatives from state and local government departments and the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner (OESC).

The following recommendations seek to address issues raised by the community and seeks to incorporate the learnings from this incident and integrate effective incident management and community assistance for the management of any future incidents.

The emergency service agencies have already undertaken significant internal debriefs to identify improvement opportunities and have commenced actioning these. In addition, the Office of Emergency Service Commissioner has also made a number of overarching recommendations to ensure that these improvements are properly captured and incorporated into the state's emergency management practices.

Public safety is not just about police and emergency services it is also about communities and individuals who understand safety and who prepare and plan. The Tottenham community have a real opportunity to work with Maribyrnong City Council and emergency services to influence emergency planning and preparedness at a local level.

## **2. Purpose of the report**

The purpose of this report is to capture the issues raised by the community, detail the proposed actions of the emergency service agencies and outline the recommendation of the OESC to ensure that the learning's from the Westpoint incident are properly captured for the benefit of the community and to ensure that they are effectively applied to Victoria's emergency management arrangements. It is not intended to consider planning and zoning issues but rather the management of response and recovery for emergencies.

This report delivers on the commitment that the Deputy Emergency Services Commissioner made to the Tottenham residents to provide a report back to the community on the learning's and opportunities for improvement following the Westpoint incident by the end of March 2008.

This report has been collaboratively prepared with representatives from Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), Victoria Police (VicPol), Department of Human Services (DHS), Metropolitan Ambulance Service (MAS), Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA), Environment Protection Authority (EPA), Worksafe and Maribyrnong City Council. Agencies have identified opportunities for improvement within their own agencies and in respect of how they work together. The agencies are committed to individually managing the implementation of these initiatives.

## **3. Acknowledgement of Tottenham residents**

The Westpoint fire was a traumatic experience for a number of members of the Tottenham community. Both the local community and the emergency service agencies involved are determined to ensure that the opportunities for improvement identified from the incident are actioned to improve the emergency response and recovery for all Victorians. The honesty and willingness of residents to take the time to share their stories and their views, especially those who have repeatedly welcomed senior agency representatives into their homes and engaged in the process is acknowledged and appreciated.

## **4. The Westpoint incident**

On Saturday 22 December 2007, a chemical fire occurred at the Westpoint Pty Ltd warehouse located at 11-13 Paramount Road, West Footscray. The fire is believed to have started early in the morning in chlorine-based water treatment chemicals, including sodium dichlor stored in the warehouse, which resulted in the emission of chlorine gas into the surrounding area.

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), as the control agency for fire and chemical spills, attended and controlled the fire by mid-afternoon. Victoria Police (VicPol) attended providing emergency response coordination and supported MFB by setting up cordons to secure the immediate area and providing assistance to the MFB as required. Metropolitan Ambulance Service (MAS) attended and assessed/treated 12 persons as a result of the incident. A number of residents also self presented to hospitals.

MFB, MAS and VicPol undertook community warning activities through media and direct contact with some households in the area. The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and Maribyrnong City Council provided the local community with information on the effects of chlorine gas, with the Department of Human Services (DHS) providing input on public and environmental health risks during the emergency.

## **5. Role of the Office of Emergency Services Commissioner**

The Emergency Services Commissioner has statutory responsibilities to advise, make recommendations and report to government on any issue in relation to emergency management.

In response to community concerns OESC:

- Worked in partnership with Maribyrnong City Council and the relevant response and recovery agencies to ensure a meeting with residents was held on 7 February 2008 and to ensure that residents were given adequate opportunity to be heard, and provide input into the review processes.
- Met with some individuals that were affected by the incident to gain a better understanding of the challenges experienced by the community.
- Gave an undertaking at the community meeting on the 7 February 2008 to report back to the community by the end of March 2008.

## **6. The community engagement process**

Following significant community concern regarding the Westpoint incident the MFB Chief Fire Officer, the Chief Health Officer, senior officials from DHS, MAS, EPA, OESC, Maribyrnong City Council, elected members and local members of Parliament met with some residents to discuss their concerns.

In addition, a community meeting was jointly hosted by the OESC, emergency service agencies and the Maribyrnong City Council with residents on 7 February 2008 to listen and further identify and address residents concerns. Senior representatives from MFB, MAS, DHS, VicPol, EPA, WorkSafe, OESC and Maribyrnong City Council were present at the independently facilitated meeting. Residents attending acknowledged this meeting as being open and frank.

At the meeting OESC undertook to report back to residents by the end of March as to the outcome of the debrief process, and opportunities for improvement.

The Maribyrnong City Council also held a separate meeting with the Tottenham residents Group on 12 February 2008 to discuss planning and zoning issues as they pertain to the community and the event.

Through this process, emergency services, government agency representatives and local government had the opportunity to listen and consider community concerns; these have now been included in respective incident review and debrief processes, with a view of identifying opportunities for further improvement (Refer to section 9 of this report).

## 7. Community perspective

The following concerns and issues were identified by the community during the 7 February community meeting or during the consultation process with individual agency heads prior to this.

The planning and zoning concerns identified by residents, around the residential and industrial interfaces in West Footscray are outside the scope of this report.

Discussions indicated that the residents had clear concerns about the management of the Westpoint incident which are grouped as follows:

### General incident response

- Overall response by the emergency services
  - Inability for some emergency services and support services (ie VicPol, MAS and EPA) to enter the affected area due to Occupational Health and Safety considerations
  - Equity – perception that higher socio-economic suburbs get better treatment from services
  - Varying understanding of the impact of the incident on the community and what advice/actions were implemented relating to shelter-in-place, exclusion zones and evacuation by emergency services, police and local government
- Lack of confidence in the decision to advise residents to shelter in their homes
  - Perception that the shelter-in-place decision showed no understanding or care by emergency services agencies for residents
  - Vulnerable residents could not appropriately prepare to shelter- in-place
  - Perception that shelter-in-place downplays significance of incident
  - Some residents believe they should have been advised to evacuate

### Information provision during the incident

*(Please note that 000 was the term used by the community, this refers to the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority emergency call taking and dispatch service)*

- Concerns were highlighted about the coordination and consistency of information between/from agencies to the impacted community (MFB, MAS and VicPol)
- Lack of communication between ESTA call taking and dispatch (000) and emergency services on the ground.

- Information coordination and consistency between all agencies and local government during/following incident posed concern
- Poor information relating to exclusion zones, evacuation, and emergency relief centres
- Concerns regarding ABC Radio coverage during the event
  - Frequency and consistency of media messages and community updates
  - Reliability/helpfulness of proactively initiated emergency services messages via the media
- Concerns about health effects and clean up of properties and the quality of advice provided immediately after the event
- A need for timely health information about and support regarding health effects (particularly in the long term)
- Follow up meetings with individuals and the general community (regarding incident recovery) did not occur in a timely manner
- Lack of information regarding the close-down of the incident
- Community alerting, information and warning systems were felt to be inadequate by those being impacted by the event. Cited were concerns with lack of updates through ABC Radio broadcasts, lack of information from Maribyrnong City Council and lack of information provided to the Footscray Police Station

### **Community alerting, information and warning**

- Community members referenced that technology is available to improve alerting and informing communities during an emergency
- It was highlighted that a number of trials of community information and warning systems have been undertaken and that a system of this type could have assisted to get critical information out to the community in a timely manner
- It was also highlighted that a general emergency information line (like the Victorian Bushfire Information Line) would have been useful to assist community accessing accurate and timely emergency information
- Potential for website information for public use to assist both the community and emergency services should be examined

### **Operational issues**

- Air monitoring was raised as an issue of concern for the community, its frequency, effectiveness and the need expressed by residents to understand chemical exposure
- Residents felt that air monitoring needed to be conducted both indoors and outdoors to assist in operational decision making

## Planning issues and other considerations

Other issues raised by the community which are not canvassed in the report included:

- Closer coordination of planning issues by the Maribyrnong City Council and WorkSafe
- The desire for the community to see Westpoint investigations by EPA and WorkSafe completed and the company prosecuted
- The safety of buildings where dangerous goods are stored
- The visibility of public risk, as the community felt it did not have a true appreciation or understanding of the goods stored around the area
- Worksafe plans on identifying risk, including encouraging a geographic based risk which is available for viewing on the internet
- Dangerous goods on site/ issues of sites that are next door but not classified as a single lot

## 8. Emergency service and agency perspective of the Westpoint incident

### Incident response

Chemical fires are complex by nature with a rapid onset; and pending the type of chemical, information available, reactions to fire, air and water makes response related decision making by the emergency service agencies very difficult.

MFB, the control agency, was confronted with a lack of accurate information when they arrived on scene and it was quickly apparent that up to date manifests were not on site.

MFB is satisfied that firefighters on scene adequately addressed the immediate chemical fire situation, escalating to what is known as a “fifth level alarm” in a timely way. The fifth level alarm provided a scale of response appropriate for significant incidents. This included in excess of nineteen fire trucks and several senior command staff, and was based on the premise of speedy containment of the incident to minimise the impact on the community.

The on-site detailed list of chemical (manifest) was not up to date. It was established that there was an up to date manifest at the home of a director of Westpoint and Victoria Police accompanied the director to his home to collect the manifest.

Despite this lack of information, MFB officers were able to identify the chemical material and develop a control strategy. This was difficult to implement as it required the use of water to extinguish the fire while limiting the amount of water getting on the chemical. This could have easily compounded the situation. The weather conditions on the day caused the smoke

plume to remain low to the ground therefore increasing the complexity of the response. MFB officers with 20-30 years of operational experience reported that they had never seen a plume behave in this manner, this indicated what a challenging incident this was for emergency services.

MAS ambulances were located at the scene to assist the community and emergency services. Paramedics were limited to entering certain areas impacted by the smoke plume due to the initial unavailability of specialist personal protective equipment. These resources are available from a MAS centralised source, responded on a call out basis. This equipment was not immediately available as it is not carried on all ambulances and requires specialist training in its use.

The MAS Health Commander at the scene was not aware that some community members had rung 000 requesting the attendance of an ambulance in the area covered by the plume and therefore was not immediately aware that these resources were required.

### **Shelter-in-place**

The MFB Incident Controller understood that the fire was in an area of industrial/urban interface. The decision to “shelter-in-place” is internationally recognised best practice in these situations, and is a strategy to provide immediate protection to people by sheltering in buildings.

The community expressed concern about the decision taken by MFB to advise residents to shelter-in-place.

The decision to shelter-in-place meant that the Incident Controller was considering all residents, based on the best understanding of the safety requirements for at that time.

Due to the initial difficulty in controlling the fire, MFB sought international advice, during the course of the incident from an emergency resource centre in the United States, regarding management of this type of fire and plume, and the decision taken to shelter-in-place. The verbal advice received from this department agreed with MFB’s actions.

The MFB Chief Fire Officer indicated to the community that whilst shelter-in-place is currently considered best practice, and is practised by fire departments around the world, that the MFB would re-evaluate the shelter-in-place strategy to make sure it was still the safest option for Victorian residents in these situations.

### **Communication during the incident**

#### ***Lack of communication between 000 and the incident management team***

One of the biggest issues identified by both the emergency service agencies and the community was that information supplied through 000 to call taking and dispatch operators was not fed back to the Incident Management Team. The Incident Management Team is an agency group that is formed to control the incident. As a consequence the MFB and MAS officers in the field were unaware that residents were repeatedly requesting help and advice on evacuation but were not receiving any direct assistance.

Triple Zero (000) answers and refers emergency calls to emergency call taking and dispatch centres which are managed by the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA). This means that when the community phones in, information is requested and recorded and police, fire or ambulance service is dispatched based on the information provided.

Whilst some phone numbers of residents were taken they were not recontacted to advise them that ambulances were unable to enter the area. Repeated calls to ambulance advising of conditions inside residential properties and requesting assistance and advice were not communicated to the Incident Management Team or direct to emergency service commanders in the field. The emergency services have termed this issue “closing the loop” and identified it as having a major impact on the success of the operation in regards to community needs.

For instance MFB advised that had the Incident Management Team been made aware that residents were repeatedly phoning seeking assistance then MFB would have in all likelihood provided resources to check on the welfare of those repeatedly seeking assistance, and where necessary assist them to safely exit their homes and move outside the cordon.

### *Use of media messaging*

The community expressed concern about media information provision. As part of the debrief process, MFB conducted a media analysis of the messages and how many times they were broadcast, during and immediately post the incident.

The first media mention of the incident occurred at 8:36am, and received 21 media mentions between then and 1:00 pm.

At 9:13 am a MAS spokesperson was providing the first detailed messages about staying indoors and turning off air conditioners. Agencies were pleased that the shelter-in-place message was communicated so comprehensively and swiftly, however with hindsight the media analysis indicates that there was an issue in closing down the incident.

At 10:40 am ABC Radio aired the advice to residents that they ‘should check to see if the smoke plume is in the area and if not open the house and ventilate to clear gas trapped inside’.

ABC Radio advised that there were a number of live updates with the emergency services through an onsite ABC presenter. Announcements were broadcast through the morning until 11:00 am. After that ABC Radio went to a recorded program, with information broadcast in news bulletins, however the messaging reverted to the earlier messages about staying indoors.

At around 12:00 noon only two media outlets (Gold FM and MIX FM) broadcast the message advising residents that they ‘should make sure that smoke from the fire had cleared before opening windows’.

The media analysis highlights the importance of emergency services working collaboratively with ABC Radio during and after incidents to ensure that emergency messaging and information provided to the community is timely and accurate to the situation. In this situation the use of ABC Radio as the emergency broadcaster was not maximised

Residents highlighted that they expect ABC Radio to provide the same detailed information for all emergencies whether in the metropolitan or regional areas as it provides during bushfires.

### ***Connex – Train shut down***

Residents raised concerns that Connex was notified about the incident and advised to stop the trains, however the residents were not provided with the same information. Residents made a statement that if it was not safe for trains to be travelling through the area then why was it safe for residents to remain.

MFB did not advise Connex to stop the trains. Connex contacted the Incident Management Team and notified them that they had taken the precaution not to stop train at stations in the area. The MFB endorsed this principle on the basis that passengers would not have been able to shelter-in-place at the station.

Connex located a staff member on scene and when the incident was contained, reopened the train line.

### ***Community emergency information***

The need for clear, locally relevant and up to date information for residents was highlighted by both residents and the emergency service agencies during the community consultation and debrief process.

There was broad agreement that an information line, such as that available for people affected by bushfire, the Victorian Bushfire Information Line would have been an asset and an important information source for residents. An information line such as this would have meant that residents would not have repeatedly phoned 000, which residents felt was their only way of getting information.

The Office of Emergency Services Commissioner is currently evaluating the possibility of establishing a Victorian Emergency Information Line, which is reflective of Victoria's "all hazards" emergency approach, and builds on the success of the Victorian Bushfire Information Line.

The community need for this line was identified following the Gippsland Floods last year. The Westpoint incident has added further impetus for the need for a line such as this.

### ***Community Alerting, Information and Warning Systems***

As part of the debrief process, the emergency service agencies identified that a community information, alerting, and warning system would have been a useful tool during the event to provide highly targeted geographically relevant information to residents within the zone, or the path of the plume through telephone systems.

The need for a national community alerting, information and warning system has been recognised by the Victorian Government and consultation has been underway with the Australian Government and other jurisdictions.

The Victorian Government is seeking to progress a national system and the need for it will be discussed at the next Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Services meeting at the end of March 2008.

It should be noted that no single warning system can ever be 100% effective or guaranteed and technology is only as good as its ability to operate on the day, therefore the community should not rely on one formal warning but need multiple ways of getting time critical emergency information. It is acknowledged by the emergency service agencies that a community alerting, information and warning system would have been a useful tool during the Westpoint incident.

Maribyrnong City Council has also recognised the need for a community information and warning system and has previously been involved in a local trial. The results of this and other successful local trials are part of the supporting evidence for the Victorian Government's proposal to introducing a national system.

### *Closing down the incident*

At both individual discussions with community members and the public meeting another concern was that some residents remained in closed up homes longer than they needed to because they did not receive timely advice that it was safe to ventilate their homes, and that the incident and greatest risk to residents was largely over.

The Incident Management Team did endeavour to convey the closing down of the incident to the public and completed multiple media interviews advising that if the plume had dissipated then it was safe to ventilate homes. The media analysis shows that these messages were broadcast at 10:40am on ABC Radio, and at 12:00 noon on Mix and Gold FM stations respectively.

A member of the Incident Management Team doorknocked the 24 residents in Callea Street to advise residents about the closure of the incident. MFB identified and appreciates that this was insufficient for the scale of the plume and that a better outcome would have been for resources to be used to doorknock residents in all streets that had been cordoned off. MFB will put procedures in place for incident teams to ensure that emergencies such as this are closed down adequately for residents in the future.

### *Cross agency communication*

Emergency services and support agencies have identified that many of the communication issues in this incident could be minimised through the early establishment of an Emergency Management Team. This is a multi-agency team that supports the agency in control of the incident to assess the broader impact of the incident and develop the strategy to control it.

The early establishment of this team will enable information to be shared across all agencies in a timely manner. It will also assist in the assessment and subsequent response to the broader consequences of the emergency and enable consistent information to be provided to all agencies and the community.

## **Post incident community recovery – perspective of emergency services and relevant government agencies**

Agencies identified in consultation with community members that information post the incident in respect of operational, environmental and health information was not sufficient for community needs.

After the fire, DHS provided advice to Council and EPA about the potential public health risks associated with chlorine. This was provided via Council and EPA websites, and in information distributed to local residents on 28 December 2007. In each communication method, concerned residents were directed to call the DHS Environmental Health Enquiry Line for further advice.

The detail regarding community concerns about health and environmental impacts, as collected via this Enquiry Line informed the further community information provided to local residents on 11 January 2008.

Maribyrnong City Council provided limited information with its after hours emergency contact service and website on the day of the incident. This information supported the initial emergency service advice to shelter in place and transitioned to resuming normal activity after 12 noon.

Further updated information incorporating environmental and health advice from DHS was provided to Council's customer services and website on 24 December 2007 (312 external hits were recorded for the information provided on this web page by 3 January 2008).

At the community meeting, the Chief Health Officer acknowledged that advice about health and environmental impacts of chlorine gas was not timely enough to meet community expectations. Whilst at the time each agency was awaiting additional information it would have been better to provide people with the 'best available' information, earlier.

The agencies have agreed that at a local level the community should have been properly debriefed and invited to provide feedback at street meetings over the days immediately following the incident. Although DHS provided a phone contact point, earlier face-to-face debriefs would quickly identify the key areas of community concern and ultimately provide the advice necessary to assist community recovery.

During bushfires, the recovery and public health information provided by DHS is seen as particularly valuable considering the stress experienced by these communities. Although Westpoint was a very different type of incident, as an urban chemical fire that occurred rapidly without warning, it was still an extremely stressful experience for local residents. The community would have benefited from face-to-face debriefing at a local level, and a more timely public health, environmental and recovery-related information.

## **Health – post incident support**

Residents raised concerns about the potential long-term health impacts of exposure to the chlorine cloud.

The community information provided to residents on 11 January 2008 provided the following advice:

- If you smelled the chlorine without any symptoms of chlorine exposure, no health effects are expected after the fire.
- If you experienced irritation to your eyes, nose or throat these effects should have resolved quickly after the fire was out. If these symptoms have not resolved, seek medical advice.
- If you experienced respiratory irritation during the fire, it may take up to 2 weeks for your lung function to return to normal. Seek medical advice if you experience any ongoing respiratory symptoms.
- Chlorine exposure is not associated with delayed or long-term health issues such as cancer or birth defects.

At the community meeting, the Chief Health Officer provided residents with an overview of the likely short term and longer term health effects associated with chlorine exposure.

The Chief Health Officer (DHS), undertook to communicate with local general practitioners via the Western Melbourne Division of General Practice to ensure referral of cases of ongoing respiratory effects for specialist advice at Western Health and the Royal Children's Hospital. This has been completed.

## **Working with the community**

The emergency service agencies acknowledged that working with communities before, during and after emergencies is undertaken by the community safety branches of agencies and is comparably done well for other emergencies e.g. bushfires. This was not done in a timely manner, nor was it initially well handled immediately after the Westpoint incident.

The agencies did however believe that the individual discussions with residents and local members of parliament and local councillors held throughout December and January were invaluable in providing an opportunity to identify necessary improvements to the management of incidents such as these.

Feedback from the community meeting acknowledged the work of the agencies prior to the meeting.

Emergency services, government agencies and local government believe that further work is required to strengthen strategies for working with the community in the urban environment. This will assist communities to understand the surrounding risks and develop their own household emergency plan, similar to the bushfire model.

## **Air Monitoring**

Communication of air monitoring information, both during and after the incident, was raised as an issue by the agencies and also identified by the community as an area of concern.

MFB completed some air monitoring at the scene of the fire and downwind of the site in order to determine air quality levels, the personal protective equipment required, and make preliminary assessment on resident needs.

EPA also conducted some air monitoring downwind of the incident and the nearby Footscray ambient air quality monitoring station recorded some data for particles. No air monitoring inside houses was conducted during or after the incident.

EPA conducted air monitoring at 10:30am downwind of the fire at the corner of Cala St and Waiora Pde and then soon after at the corner of Indwe Street and Roberts Avenue. In both cases, chlorine levels were less than 1part per million and no further monitoring was conducted.

EPA's ambient air monitoring station in Hansen Reserve, Footscray is designed to measure background air quality – specifically it measures carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, nitrogen dioxide, ozone and particles. The station does not measure chlorine – the major hazard identified from this incident.

There were no readings for particles from 10am to 7pm and then negative readings or no readings from 7pm to 11pm. This is because the instrument was overloaded and compromised by particles from the fire.

## **Maribyrnong City Council**

Maribyrnong City Council agrees that information provided post the incident could have been more timely and of a better quality to meet local residents needs. The Council has identified that there were limitations associated with the after hours number and the website. The ability for council to provide this information is interdependent on the information that it receives from emergency services and government agencies.

The Council is currently considering appropriate action to provide a more timely and better quality information service to local residents.

# **9. Action taken by agencies since Westpoint incident**

## **Multi-agency actions**

### ***Closing the information loop***

MAS have modified procedures to address the issue of information being provided back to the community from the '000' call taking centre. Agencies will advise ESTA of their respective requirements to ensure that firstly, feedback from residents in situations such as this is relayed to the Incident Management Team, or senior emergency response personnel on scene.

Secondly, protocols have been put in place to ensure that residents are called back if there is an issue in dispatching services. These measures have been put in place by MFB.

### ***Emergency service and agency specific issues***

There were a number of agency specific issues raised at the community meeting and formally in writing by residents. These were generally focused on experiences and contacts with the members of emergency services and other agencies, operating outside the incident that were deemed un-satisfactory. These have been directly referred to the respective agencies to be investigated and actioned accordingly.

Early opportunity for community input and debrief immediately after large-scale emergencies will be promoted as best practice across the emergency services.

### ***Health information***

The Chief Health Officer undertook in future events such as these that DHS would encourage the relevant control agency, which in most cases will be the municipal council, to manage a process for agencies to debrief with the affected community earlier. This will ensure a full understanding and better perspective on incidents, and would better balance the need for complete information versus the community's need for more timely (ie. the 'best available') advice.

### ***Risk management – Tottenham community***

MFB's Chief Fire Officer has tasked the MFB's dangerous goods division in conjunction with Worksafe to do a detailed audit of the Tottenham area to ensure that all dangerous goods in that area are being addressed from a fire risk perspective. This work is continuing and will be ongoing.

### ***Air monitoring***

An inter-agency air monitoring network group is currently reviewing agency air monitoring capabilities and ways to improve communication of air monitoring results as part of the incident close down. A State strategy will be developed to cover detection, assessment and monitoring of chemical incidents to provide a coordinated approach to the provision of incident and community information. This group will report to the State Chemical, Radiological and Biological Committee. OESC will monitor the outcomes of the air monitoring capability.

Residents asked the EPA to investigate whether it would be possible to calculate how much chlorine gas they were exposed to via plume modelling, considering a standard house for the area etc in order to gain an estimated indoor chlorine concentration.

EPA advises that not enough data is available from this incident to make it possible to estimate indoor chlorine concentrations.

## **MFB actions**

### **MFB access to Worksafe database**

The MFB are working to identify a method to utilise Worksafe's database of approximately 4000 dangerous goods sites. This will enable MFB crews to identify these premises when attending incidents, in addition to enabling more pre-fire planning.

### **West Footscray local area inspections**

A number of premises have been identified by local MFB crews, the MFB Dangerous Goods Department and Worksafe that are likely to contain dangerous/hazardous goods. Initially this assessment was undertaken in the West Footscray area but has now been extended to other areas. These premises are being inspected.

Pre-fire planning is being undertaken by local crews and any other areas of concern will be identified and acted upon.

### **Shelter-in-place**

A review is taking place of the 'shelter-in-place' practice. At this stage it appears that shelter-in-place is still the preferred option if there is no lead time to prepare for the incident and the release of the chemical is of a short duration. Further work is required in this area.

Public advice pro-formas are being developed to assist in the effective communication of shelter-in-place strategies.

### **Notification of DHS**

For similar incidents MFB has incorporated the notification of DHS early in the MFB's Greater Alarm Response System. This is the system used to escalate the response to emergencies.

### **Communication to MFB Incident Controllers**

Processes to improve information flow between ESTA and MFB Incident Controllers has been undertaken to assist with better closing of the loop.

### **MFB personnel**

Senior MFB operational personnel have been made aware of the issues and improvement opportunities identified from the Westpoint incident. This incident will be used as a case study for training all MFB command staff later this year.

### **WorkSafe actions**

#### **Dangerous goods inspections**

Inspections of dangerous goods sites in the immediate local area (including some inspections conducted with the MFB) have been carried out to confirm that there are no other sites with risks similar to that which led to the Westpoint fire.

#### **Advice to Maribyrnong City Council**

WorkSafe and Maribyrnong City Council have met and have agreed that WorkSafe will provide guidance to assist the Council to implement the dangerous goods aspects of the Victorian Planning Provisions.

#### **Dangerous goods notifications**

Dangerous goods notifier information is now being provided by Worksafe to Council and emergency services to enable recognition of dangerous goods sites.

#### **Focus on inspections**

WorkSafe will provide a stronger focus on inspection of new dangerous goods sites and known sites that hold large quantities of dangerous goods.

### **WorkSafe investigation**

The WorkSafe investigation into the incident is ongoing and is expected to be complete by May 2008.

### **VicPol actions**

#### **Training**

Victoria Police, (Region 2 Division 1 Westgate) are using the Westpoint incident as a case study for training and have already held two sessions with a third to be held shortly.

#### **Recovery**

Victoria Police are also updating their procedures to ensure that responding officers remain at an incident scene until the recovery phase commences or an agency has been appointed to oversee the recovery phase. It has been emphasised to all officers that recovery is all a critical phase of incident response.

#### **Chemical incident procedures**

Victoria Police are also considering changing their response procedures to chemical incidents. This review is ongoing.

### **EPA Investigation**

EPA is currently undertaking an investigation into possible offences under the Environmental Protection Act with a view to the prosecution of Westpoint.

## **10. Additional work to be undertaken by agencies**

### **Closing the information loop**

Further discussions between emergency services and ESTA are required to further develop the protocols or requirements that will ensure that relevant information provided by the community is communicated in a timely and effective manner to the Emergency Management and Incident Management Teams.

### **Ambulance access to specialist personal protective equipment**

MAS in conjunction with DHS are reviewing the appropriate deployment of the centralised specialist personal protective equipment and resources to enable paramedics access within exclusion zones.

### **Community engagement**

OESC will issue a 'best practice note' on community engagement to all emergency service agencies, which outlines best practice in regard to community debriefings after medium/large scale emergencies utilising the approach adopted for bushfires.

## **Media**

Emergency services need to ensure that incidents, especially those of a short to medium term duration are effectively closed down with appropriate messaging through the media. ABC Radio, as the emergency broadcaster, needs to ensure the change over between programs does not impact on the currency and accuracy of emergency information.

OESC recommends that the emergency services strengthen their procedures to monitor the media during and immediately after an emergency, to ensure that messages and information to the community are accurate, timely and appropriate to the situation.

OESC will reissue ABC Radio emergency broadcasting contact details, and protocols for using the emergency hotline to the relevant agencies.

## **Closure of incidents**

Control agencies will ensure in chemical incidents that residents are properly advised of the closure of an incident. This is to be addressed by way of revised protocols and procedures and supported by training and exercises.

## **Cross agency communication**

OESC will ensure that work continues with all agencies to reinforce the early establishment of an Emergency Management Team. This ensures that information is shared across all agencies in a timely manner. It also assists in the assessment and subsequent response to the broader consequences of the emergency and enables consistent information to be provided to all agencies and the community.

## **Post incident debriefs**

OESC recommends that police and emergency services lead community debriefings in partnership with government and local government agencies for incidents like that which occurred at Westpoint so that the community receives the support it requires in the recovery phase of an incident.

## **Air monitoring**

OESC recommends that the issue of improving the communication of air monitoring information be addressed by the inter-agency air monitoring network group. The group is currently reviewing agency air monitoring capabilities and timely and transparent communication of monitoring data.

OESC also recommends the inter-agency air monitoring network group reports through to the State Chemical, Biological and Radiological Committee. OESC will monitor the outcomes of the air monitoring capability review, and recommends that work being done needs to be finalised as a matter of urgency

## **Victorian Emergency Information Line**

OESC will continue to progress with the emergency service agencies the evaluation and business case for a Victorian Emergency Information Line, based on the Victorian Bushfire Information Line, which allows two way feedback.

## **Community Information Warning System**

The Victorian Government is seeking to progress the development of a national Community Information and Warning System. It is noted that the State Government has put this issue on the national agenda by pursuing it at the Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Services at its March meeting.

## **Continued learning from the Westpoint incident**

The Westpoint incident will be utilised by the emergency management agencies in Victoria as a case study to further improve responses and educate emergency management agencies not involved directly in the incident. It is expected that as a case study the learning's and further improvements will be included in Victoria's emergency management arrangements.

## **Tottenham community**

OESC hopes that Tottenham residents will remain engaged with the Maribyrnong City Council and work with the Municipal Emergency Planning Committee to progress the understanding and planning for emergency management in their local area.

## **Emergency services and other emergency management agencies continuing work with the Tottenham community**

OESC recommends that emergency service organisations and government department's local representatives continue to work with the Tottenham residents and the broader community in Maribyrnong in partnership with the Maribyrnong City Council.

Further work is required to engage with the community and assist them to understand the surrounding risks and develop their own household emergency plan, similar to the bushfire model. This should be initiated at the local level through the existing emergency management arrangements and supported by all agencies.

## **Maribyrnong Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee**

OESC and the emergency service agencies and other government departments recommend that the Maribyrnong Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee places the learnings from the Westpoint incident as a high priority on its agenda, and continues to work with local representatives of the emergency service agencies, and the Tottenham residents.

## 11. Conclusion

The Westpoint incident was a serious chemical fire that occurred rapidly without warning which was challenging for emergency services to manage, and also had a major impact on the surrounding local residents.

As a result of the feedback from residents and the opportunities identified by all agencies involved in the initial response through to recovery, a number of initiatives are already underway to improve Victoria's emergency management arrangements. The learnings from this emergency will make a difference to the management of chemical incidents for all Victorians.

All agencies identified that the feedback they had from the residents of the Tottenham community (individually and from the community meeting), local members of parliament and local councillors was immensely valuable. The honesty, openness and the determination that has been shown by residents is matched by the agencies determination to implement the improvements outlined in this report.

The actions and ongoing work to be completed by the agencies will continue to be managed by the individual agencies. Ongoing communication and feedback to the community will continue to occur via the Maribyrnong City Council, and the Municipal Emergency Planning Committee, supported by all agencies. This is in accordance with the State's emergency management arrangements.