

Questions and answers from Galpins community meeting on 11 October 2022

At the outset of these notes, the council would like to acknowledge the profound grief Sana and her family are experiencing following Sahara's death. It is not right nor possible to discuss the details, but we remain in very regular contact with the family around all of their needs.

There were a lot of questions at the meeting, and we did our best to answer them on the night. What follows is a written response to all the questions we recorded.

Will you pay for our solicitors?

Throughout previous public meetings, it became clear that there were many queries relating to potential litigation that the council simply could not provide advice on. The council is therefore seeking to engage a firm of solicitors who specialise in this kind of litigation, to work with residents but also separately with the three badly affected families.

On further litigation by the three seriously affected families and the wider residents, we will help to find a law firm that meets these family's needs, but there will be no obligation to use them.

How long will the investigation take?

It is important to distinguish between the wider investigation into the cause of the gas explosion at Galpin's Road, and the demolition and search work currently being carried out.

The demolition and search work involves the controlled demolition of houses 253, 255 and 257. During this process, specialist search teams will be identifying and seizing items of evidential value to the investigation as well as recovering personal property belonging to the residents of those properties. This has been progressing since early October, and is still estimated to be completed on Friday 28 October 2022. This is of course subject to any developments which may arise during this final phase.

In relation to the wider investigation, this is a very complex matter, that will be conducted in a detailed, meticulous manner in order to ensure a thorough assessment of the evidence and circumstances surrounding the explosion.

Why are there are no weekly updates?

The panel were not able to answer this question at the meeting. But we can say that up until very recently, there has not been much by way of general updates to provide. The Family Liaison Officers have been keeping in regular contact with the three badly affected households and the Community Assistance Team have been in regular contact with others on a need basis.

Why were SGN allowed to remove the gas pipe? What legislation allows this?

There is a legal requirement for the network operator, in this case SGN, to work on the gas pipeline under The Pipeline Safety Regulations 1996.

That said, none of the removal work was carried out by SGN directly, but instead by contractors under the complete supervision of the Metropolitan Police and the Health & Safety Executive.

Why was CCTV taken from people's homes and their doors left open?

The police investigation team have seized CCTV from homes as potential evidence and those households have been informed directly. Doors were initially left open to ensure they were properly ventilated following the gas leak.

Why do the lights on the temporary road turn off early?

The temporary road has no access to a direct electrical feed, so our only option was to install solar powered lanterns. When fully charged, these can last up to 50 hours without any further charge, however on occasions, depending on weather/daylight conditions it could be possible that the lanterns may not receive the required charge. However, our Highways team have and will continue to inspect the streetlights twice weekly at varying times in the evening.

If you notice any issues with the way the streetlights are working, please let us know straight away. [You can report it online](#), and our team will come to inspect it as soon as possible.

Have you brought in an independent expert to look into the gas work?

Inspectors and Scientists from the Health & Safety Executive are providing technical support to the police investigation.

When will we know what happened?

We can't say with certainty. It's not going to be straight away as there is lots of evidence still to be gathered and analysis to be carried out. This will then need to be reviewed before any decisions can be made on enforcement action.

When can we get back into our houses?

We know that timeline may move as it has done, but we want to ensure that we have a clear plan to get you back seamlessly as quickly as possible. This has already happened at the south cordon, where we gave people time slots to move back, provided them with a pack containing information and vouchers, and offered cleaning where necessary.

There are ongoing investigations and a number of steps that will need to be taken even once these end, but we will try to get you back as quickly as possible, and we will give as much notice as possible.

Why have we heard so little from the council?

Throughout this crisis, we've tried to maintain two forms of communication – general information through text messages and the website, and the other is one-on one information from the Community Assistance Team (CAT) to meet your specific needs. We know it's not been perfect, but we're trying to improve. Going forward, we will increase our communications with you as we start to move on to our plans to get residents back into their homes.

Why was there a delay to the initial timeline?

The delay was due to Wates identifying a demolition approach which was more likely to reduce the risk of further damage to surrounding properties as well as additional work being required to ensure the demolition could be conducted in a safe manner for all involved. It also increased the chance that more personal property could be recovered from 253, 255 and 257, and restored to those families, whose homes sadly had to be demolished.

Why is there currently no plan for moving residents back in?

There is no plan yet because the site is complex, it's about specific needs in specific houses. We needed to have specific information from each house so we know what each family will have to go through. Now that we've got information for numbers 254 to 286 on the even side, and this is set out in letters for each house to give the loss adjusters a head start as to what will need to be done to get your homes ready as soon as possible. These letters have all been either given out or sent to the occupants.

There are so many needs, but we want individual answers, why not give specific updates to each zone, and have more one-to-one consultation?

The initial feeling was people wanted wide public meetings, however it has become clear that for most residents this doesn't work as a forum to get more information from us. Going forward, we will be focusing more on one-on-one, bespoke consultation with each household. This will be led by the Community Assistance Team, so if you know who your key worker is, then please talk to them.

Why are the police keeping the rest of the houses in the inner cordon, even if they were unaffected by the explosion?

Police, HSE and Wates are continuously reviewing the legal legitimacy and proportionality of the cordon area.

Unfortunately, due to the amount of safety equipment, construction plant, decontamination equipment, the entry and exit of heavy vehicles and machinery, as well as other logistical aspects and risks linked to the demolition and search, the cordon cannot be reduced any further at this stage. This will continue to be reassessed, but as we are in the final phase, is unlikely to be reduced until the investigative search phase has concluded.

What if I don't want to go back home because of the state of disrepair?

We know people are upset by what they've found, and we want to put things right by helping with cleaning. We will do everything we can to make your house as good as possible, as we have done previously for houses at the south cordon.

Is there enough time to get loss adjusters in for whole street if the current phase of the police investigation finishes in just one week?

We're starting with the north because it's more accessible, and we're going to work through it as quickly as possible so that we can move onto the other properties. Last weekend we got through eleven properties, and we already have properties booked in for this weekend. We can only bring in loss adjusters in at the weekends because it's a live construction site, but we're doing as many as we can in the given time slots.

My home has water damage, what about my contents?

This is something that our teams have discussed a lot internally, but we've been advised not to interfere with the insurance process. If you've had a bespoke letter from us detailing the damage to your property and contents, please get in contact and we'll help with insurers.

Why did you take away roof tiles?

Our Building Control Team needed to make buildings safe so that insurers and loss adjusters could get in as soon as possible. We have to remove any immediate danger, such as loose tiles or broken glass. This was done at the earliest possible opportunity once we had access to the properties.

We were told that when they remove tiles they'll put in sarking, why that hasn't happened?

It was decided that sarking wasn't necessary for any of the roofs which had tiles removed, but rather we would re-felt them using a more modern vapour barrier to make them watertight. All roofs on the adjacent evens side of Galpins Road which had damage due to the blast have been worked on and are now watertight. All roofs that remain untouched do not require any works.

How common are gas-related incidents?

Gas-related incidents can be devastating but remain extremely rare. In 2020/21 there were 25 gas-related fire and explosion incidents despite there being over 22 million households that use gas across the country. It is important to note that gas networks have responsibility and a legal duty for maintaining pipes while HSE monitors compliance and investigates incidents in certain circumstances.

Residents reported a gas leak in the days before the explosion, why wasn't the explosion prevented?

31 engineers attended this site between reports and the explosion. All these engineers' reports, as well as public phone calls and reports are in the possession of the police and will form a major part of the investigation.

What were the engineers doing when they were testing in the weeks before the explosion?

The engineers were looking for gas levels and to find the root cause.

Why didn't you mitigate damage to houses when they were left to the elements?

We entered the site as soon as we were allowed, which was the week before this public meeting. The Association of British Insurers were very clear that it would be their responsibility to fix the damage. The properties have now had a visual inspection, so we can go to the insurers and start the process of putting things right.

Some people who are being homed by their insurance haven't been receiving support, what can you do for them?

People in this situation should contact the Community Assistance Team.

If the insurers don't pay out, will SGN cover the damage?

SGN are clear that when the investigation and subsequent actions are fully complete, then any liabilities on SGN will be met.

When will we get a thought through plan, rather than changing dates?

We are working on a plan at the moment, but in truth it will be an individual plan for each household, as everyone's situation is different. In terms of the overarching issues that affect the whole community, we hope to share details very shortly.

What help is available to those without insurance?

We will source a law firm who will be able to advise you on this.

Can SGN put forward a contingency fund regardless of the investigation?

SGN has made a sum of money available to Merton Council to assist the council in their work to ease hardship.

What if my insurer doesn't cover the damage?

We advise residents to seek independent legal advice, we are currently seeking a law firm who will be able to help with this.

What happens next for those with damaged houses?

Our Building Control Team has carried out routine safety checks of the properties outside of the forensic investigation site and has identified where there is clear external damage. All dangerous elements including loose roof tiles and broken glass are currently being removed by Wates Construction. Once this work is complete, insurers and loss adjustors will be able to make closer, more detailed inspections on behalf of their customers and they must be brought in at the earliest opportunity. Whilst our Building Control team is very willing to facilitate discussions and advise residents it is the responsibility of the insurers to rectify any damage not causing immediate danger.

Will you give us the market value for our house?

That's a question we can't answer right now. We're seeking an independent law firm who will be able to help you with these issues.

SGN visited my home and changed the piping to put a meter outside, can they put it back where it was before?

The gas pipe serving this property is made of steel rather than plastic and needs to be replaced. All the residents in the street who have this issue have been contacted. SGN will work with the residents to make sure the meters, where affected, are placed in the best place for the customer, as long as that is legally compliant. Some meter boxes will need to be placed outside, where the available internal spaces are not legally compliant. SGN will work with those affected residents to resolve this in line with legal guidance.

Is it safe for people to be moving back so soon?

All agencies are working hard to ensure all properties are safe before people move back home.