

PULLING TOGETHER

A MULTI-AGENCY forum was set up last week to draw up plans for a speedy regeneration of the areas affected by the July tornado.

At a meeting chaired by council bosses last week, members of the Government Office, Advantage West Midlands, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry and West Midlands Police as well as the voluntary sector and commercial organisations in the city, all agreed to pool their expertise to help out.

Traders were concerned with the issues of insurance, loss of income and business rates and the regeneration staff are working with them to resolve some of these challenges.

A business advice surgery is set to open in the area.

Leader of the council, Cllr Mike Whitby, said: "I recognise that traders will want to resume business at the earliest opportunity and our priority is making sure that this happens."

Financial help

Council bosses are asking for financial help from the government for those residents hit

hardest by last month's tornado. Local Government and Civil Minister, Phil Woolas, has been asked by Cllr Whitby to consider offering financial support to city people whose homes and businesses suffered damage as a result of the tornado after the two men toured the stricken sites to see the problems first-hand.

Mr Woolas is being provided with daily updates on the situation.



● Residents and traders affected by the tornado discussed issues concerning them at a multi-agency forum last week

In the thick of it



● Venetta Johnston – at the centre

AT the centre of the tornado damage, a mobile emergency control centre was set up as a focal point for the efforts of the council and emergency services on the ground.

District directors Venetta Johnston (Sparkbrook), Rob James (Hodge Hill) and Jacqueline Branch (Ladywood) were the on-site team leaders at the Forward Emergency Control Centre on Ladypool Road/Newport Road.

A team of neighbourhood advisors, housing officers and representatives from Social Care and Health were based at the centre to deal with residents' queries ranging from construction to alternative accommodation.

Venetta said: "We would like to pay tribute to all the staff, residents and traders who worked in a very pressurised environment."

Rogue traders: beware!

BIRMINGHAM Trading Standards and West Midlands Police have issued a warning to tornado-hit residents to be wary of rogue traders offering to do repair work. The police are particularly concerned about bogus callers using tornado damage as an excuse to enter people's property.

They are concerned that bogus traders will try to take advantage of people's misfortune and target those who are in a vulnerable position after suffering from tornado damage. Bogus traders rip off unsuspecting householders by doing poor quality work and always overcharging. There are also fears that bogus callers will visit householders using tornado damage as an excuse to enter homes and carry out a distraction burglary.

Trading Standards advise householders faced with a doorstep seller to ask the individual to leave immediately, refuse to enter into any form of discussion and to stress that they will not purchase any goods or services from a doorstep caller.

Chair of Public Protection, Cllr Neil Eustace, said: "It is a despicable practice to prey on people at their most vulnerable but bogus callers are convincing liars and anyone can be taken in by them. Always ask for proof of identity and check it carefully, keeping the chain on the door. Genuine callers will carry identification with their photograph and details of their company or business."

If the caller will not leave, call the Doorstoppers hotline on 0121 303 9367.

Neighbourhoods rise to the challenge

THE aftermath of the tornado presented the council's Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service – the team responsible for city's network of neighbourhood offices – with one of its most exceptional challenges to date.

By early Friday morning the service had mobilised 39 officers who had answered the call for volunteers from across the city, deploying them at the three emergency centres that had been set up at the Birmingham Sports Centre, Birmingham University and – by Saturday – at the mobile advice unit on Ladypool Road.

The service was able to provide cover from 8am–10pm, including Saturday and Sunday.

In the first couple of days advice concentrated on road closures, structural conditions of property, providing accommodation for those made homeless, whereabouts of cars and contact details for the Association of British Insurers.

Many people were reluctant to leave the cordons blocking access to their homes, naturally concerned about what would happen to their property.

● Sonia Williams helps out a client at the Emergency Rest Centre based in Birmingham Sports Centre in Highgate

To further assist those affected the service sent officers with a range of community language skills to bring information and advice to residents in the affected areas.

Teamwork

Joan White, a service delivery manager from Edgbaston Neighbourhood Office, said: "The co-operation between the different council departments has been excellent."

"For example, residents contacted us concerned that they had left medication in their homes and obviously could not retrieve it. Advisors were able to liaise with colleagues in social services who then arranged for replacements."

• The city's Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service will continue to provide resources for as long as necessary at the emergency centres and through its network of 34 offices across the city.



Anna Oupohová and Miroslava Jarolímová and her baby, who were moved from Brighton Road into short-term accommodation at Birmingham University, only arrived in the city from the Czech Republic two months ago

Lord Mayor praises city spirit

LORD Mayor Cllr John Hood paid tribute to the many organisations that have pulled together to deal with the aftermath the tornado after he visited the heart of the devastation.

Cllr Hood said: "Despite the obviously difficult conditions I was heartened to see how supportive everyone was being of each other. There was a real 'war-time' spirit of which I was immensely proud.

The work being done by the emergency services, council workers and aid organisations is second to none and I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved."

Contact file

The council's Tornado Information Bureaux are at:

- Sparkbrook Neighbourhood Office Greencoat House, 261 Stratford Road, Sparkbrook Call 0121 303 9110
- Mobile unit Junction of Ladypool Road and Newport Road, Balsall Heath Open 9am–9pm, Monday to Friday

• For details of other neighbourhood offices call Contact Birmingham on 0121 303 1111 or email advice@birmingham.gov.uk



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BACK IN BUSINESS

Rapid response boosts tornado-hit residents and traders

LEADER of the council, Cllr Mike Whitby and deputy leader, Cllr Paul Tilsley have heaped praise on council staff and emergency services for their quick and effective reaction to the tornado that hit parts of south Birmingham last month.

Their actions have meant that normality has already returned to many of the streets affected by the disaster and long-term plans are being put in place to help people in the worst-hit areas.

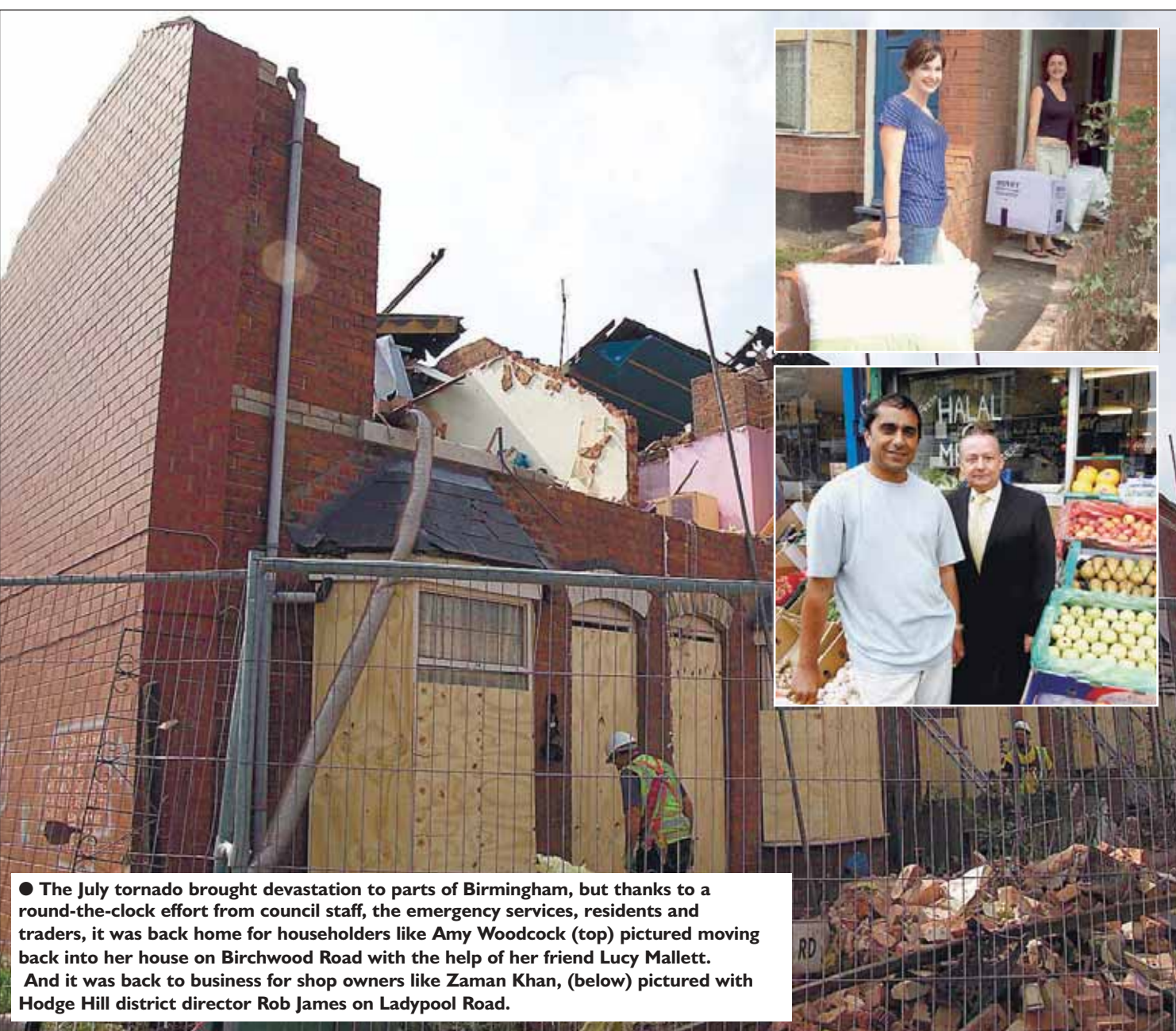
Cllr Whitby says: "The residents and business owners I have spoken to have acknowledged the enormity of the task and the fantastic response from council staff, contractors and other partners."

"The progress made in just hours demonstrates the effectiveness of the council's Emergency Planning Team to bring these dramatic events under control. The full weight of the council's resources were mobilised and staff, partner agencies and contractors have been working tirelessly to make the area safe and secure ever since."

The council's emergency plan – which had to be employed no less than five times in July in response to emergency situations – swung into action within 30 minutes of the tornado striking and swift action included:

- Evacuating the area and transporting and housing 170 residents who were displaced.
- Ensuring public safety and security of the disaster area and providing 24-hour security personnel to support the police.
- Assessing damage to 1,000 properties and making individual properties safe and secure.
- Setting up a tornado hotline and three tornado information bureaux on site to give advice to residents.

Cllr Paul Tilsley says: "After superb management of the emergency response, the council is now co-ordinating the long-term recovery of the devastated area, and is requesting that the government provide both emergency and regeneration funding."



● The July tornado brought devastation to parts of Birmingham, but thanks to a round-the-clock effort from council staff, the emergency services, residents and traders, it was back home for householders like Amy Woodcock (top) pictured moving back into her house on Birchwood Road with the help of her friend Lucy Mallett. And it was back to business for shop owners like Zaman Khan, (below) pictured with Hodge Hill district director Rob James on Ladypool Road.

All in a month's work for emergency team

THE freak tornado was just one of five emergency events that happened this July to test the council's Emergency Planning Team. The unprecedented month of emergencies for the team:

- The London bombings** Began with the London bombings of 7 July. When the news broke that morning, no one knew exactly what was to come. So, based on police advice, the team activated the council's Emergency Plan, increased security in high profile premises and placed key personnel on stand-by.
- Evacuation of city centre** Two days later, at 8pm on 9 July, Emergency Planning were contacted by the police who decided to evacuate all licensed premises in the city centre. This was a major task and council officers were heavily involved in the evacuation of 20,000 people with 750 of them accommodated overnight.
- Kingstanding fire** A different kind of emergency arose on 20 July when a fire broke out in a garage attached to a residential property in Kingstanding. The garage contained a number of gas canisters and, because of the threat of an explosion, it was necessary to evacuate around 35 residents.
- Arrest in Small Heath** The council's Emergency Plan was activated again in the early hours of 27 July when a major evacuation of residents in Small Heath became necessary following the arrest of a suspect wanted in connection with the failed London bombings on 21 July.
- Tornado** Finally, less than 24 hours later, the tornado was spotted by staff at 2.41pm and it soon became obvious that the city was facing a totally unprecedented situation. By 3pm, the emergency team was fully functioning in the Council House and the full resources of the council were mobilised.

FOR THE LATEST TORNADO INFORMATION:
 View: www.birmingham.gov.uk/tornado
 Email: emergency@birmingham.gov.uk
 Call: 0800 073 0440

TRACKING THE TORNADO

The story in pictures...



● The city council's Emergency Planning Team discuss progress on the continuing clear-up operation and securing areas damaged by the tornado.



● Council leader Cllr Mike Whitby and deputy leader Cllr Paul Tilsley visit the affected areas to see the damage for themselves.



● Kings Heath and Moseley (left and above): trees, walls and fences collapsed like packs of cards in the wake of the tornado.

For more information visit www.birmingham.gov.uk/tornado

TRACKING THE TORNADO

The story in pictures...



● The storm gathers over the south of the city – seen just before 2.40pm on Thursday 28 July 2005.



● Within minutes, the tornado had wreaked havoc in Birchwood and Alder Roads, Sparkbrook, and had gone on to flood the Bristol Road, one of the main routes into the city.



For more information visit www.birmingham.gov.uk/tornado

TRACKING THE TORNADO

The story in pictures...



● The position of this car in Church Road shows the awesome strength of the tornado.



● The tornado ripped through the roof of Majestic Towels' premises on Alfred Street, Sparkbrook.



● The devastating impact of the tornado on the historic buildings of Ladypool School (above and right). Fortunately, it happened during the summer holidays when no children were inside.



● Trees across Kings Heath, Moseley, Balsall Heath and Sparkbrook were uprooted and stripped of their leaves.



● Balsall Heath Park (above) shows the extent of the damage not only to vegetation but also to man-made structures.



● Within hours, city council surveyors and engineers were out and about assessing the damage and working to make dangerous structures like these – left and above – safe.