LOCAL GOVERNMENT NSW

Management of Asbestos after a Disaster – Kiama Council's Response

COUNCIL NAME

Kiama Municipal Council

WEB ADDRESS

www.kiama.nsw.gov.au

SIZE

258 square km

POPULATION

20,906

Overview

The Kiama Local Government Area was hit by three tornadoes on 24th February 2013. The affected area had old houses with asbestos roofing and wall sheeting and material torn from these homes was strewn over a large area by the tornadoes. An Emergency Operations Centre was quickly established and an Asbestos Response Management Plan was formulated. Non-friable (bonded) asbestos materials were identified and extensive air quality monitoring was undertaken. There were concerns about the potential for non-friable asbestos containing material to be broken and potentially release fibres on public roads where cars were travelling over the material. Accordingly, roads were closed and qualified asbestos removalists were contracted to remove the asbestos containing material. Managing the public and the media and providing timely and accurate information was essential during this time.

Background

On the morning of 24th February 2013, Kiama Local Government area was hit by three distinctly separate tornadoes in Kiama, Gerringong and Jamberoo. The most destructive of these was located in Kiama and followed a narrow path from the south end of Bombo Beach in a south westerly direction through the residential roads of Minnamurra Street, Swan Place and Colley Drive. It then passed over the Kiama Leisure Centre, crossed the Princes Highway and affected additional properties in West Kiama.

The affected area in Kiama around Minnamurra Street in particular had several older homes containing asbestos roofing and wall sheeting. Asbestos-containing material was torn from the homes and scattered over a large area and as far as West Kiama (a more modern estate with no asbestos issues). Similarly in Gerringong, although not as severely effected, a number of properties containing asbestos were damaged spreading asbestos material onto both private and public areas.

Implementation

The immediate concern was the isolation and decontamination of public areas including streets, public buildings and reserves, and informing the affected residents and public generally. The following steps were taken to address the concerns:

- The Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) at the Kiama SES headquarters was quickly established and attended by all Emergency Service Agencies and Service Authorities.
- Hazmat officers present at EOC were engaged to identify the location of the asbestos material. The material was found to be non-friable (bonded) asbestos pieces of various dimensions.
- Extensive air quality monitoring was conducted by an occupational hygienist appointed by Council.
- Concerns were expressed about the potential for non-friable asbestos material to be broken down releasing fibres on public roads where cars were travelling over the material.
- The road areas of Swan Place, Colley Street and Minnamurra Street were subsequently closed to the general public while qualified asbestos removalists were engaged to clean up these areas.
- Clearances Certificates were issued by the occupational hygienist for these roads and all subsequent clean ups of reserves and public areas before reopening to the general public.

Outcomes

The management of the public and the media and the provision of timely and accurate information during this time was essential. Council used a variety of methods including: public meetings, street meetings, letterbox drops to residents and media releases.

In addition, Council quickly appointed a Tornado Communications Officer and provided a direct telephone line contact to enable the public to ask questions about a variety of issues including the management of asbestos whether on private or public land. Details of the assistance provided under the Disaster Funding declaration were made available.

During the following week a more thorough search of private properties was conducted by Hazmat and Council officers. Small amounts of asbestos material were collected and bagged for disposal at a licensed facility. The disposal sites were mapped and recorded on a Geographic Information System (GIS). Notices were served on private property owners where asbestos was found to be present, to enable them to pursue rectification through their insurer.

The asbestos roof on the Kiama Leisure Centre was damaged during the Tornado and the Centre and surrounding area were closed until all of the scattered material could be removed. The Leisure Centre remained closed while the roof was being replaced.

Key Learnings

Key lessons for other councils:

- The coordinated efforts and response of Emergency Services is essential to a good outcome. In this regard Local Emergency Management Committees should prepare an Asbestos Response Management Plan.
- Rapid clean up of public roads is crucial to avoid the potential for dispersal of asbestos fibres.
- Early, accurate and ongoing information to the public and press is essential. This can be assisted by the appointment (or secondment) of an appropriately informed Communication Officer at Council.
- The mapping of properties containing asbestos prior to the event would have been very helpful. Due to the spread of asbestos containing material during such an event, a wider area search for asbestos containing material debris is imperative.
- The involvement of GIS officers in the early stages of the event is necessary to map affected areas as they are identified.
- Engage an occupational hygienist and appropriately qualified asbestos removal company, as soon as possible.
- Conduct ongoing air quality monitoring during the clean up to ensure public safety and public confidence in the clean up operation.

Contact

Name: Bryan Whittaker
Position: Director Engineering and Works; Chair Illawara Local Emergency Management Committee
Phone: 02 4232 0444
Email: bryanw@kiama.nsw.gov.au