

INFORMATION FROM



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AWE acts on recommendations of fire investigation

AWE is acting on all the findings of an independently led investigation into a solvent fire in a non-nuclear process building on its Aldermaston site in August last year.

“Ensuring the safety of our staff, neighbours and local community remains AWE’s highest priority,” said Dr Andrew Jupp, Managing Director, after the findings of the investigation into the causes of the fire had been presented to the AWE Local Liaison Committee.

“We are sorry that this incident occurred and have already taken decisive action to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. We know that AWE has to maintain the highest safety standards. On this occasion we fell short of this.”

He added: “We are acting on all 11 recommendations made by the investigation team as well as the learning from any other shortcomings identified. A project team has been set up and is implementing the actions required to ensure that no similar incident occurs in future.”

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The investigation concluded that the most likely cause of the fire was the solvent being ignited by an electrostatic discharge which had built up in the nitrocellulose being used in the preparation of explosives powder.

Four members of AWE staff were working in or around a process building when the incident occurred on the evening of 3 August last year. A container, holding a quantity of the solvent Methyl Ethyl Ketone, caught fire as nitrocellulose was being added to form a lacquer.

The fire had no radiological consequences – explosives facilities at AWE are by design located well away from the nuclear processing area and segregated from one another. AWE's on site emergency services, supported by local authority fire fighters, were quickly on the scene. Following assessment, the fire was allowed to burn out during the night.

The incident occurred during a process undertaken without incident at AWE approximately 2,000 times over the past 30 years. The particular operation taking place was immediately suspended and will not restart until AWE, and the Health and Safety Executive, are satisfied that a safe alternative process has been developed.

A full list of the recommendations and the company's response is attached below. A copy of the investigation key findings summary and the full investigation report is available on the AWE website under the Publications section at: www.awe.co.uk

ENDS

Investigation Report Recommendations & AWE Responses

Recommendation 1: No further lacquer preparation should take place until a full review of the process has been carried out with the objective of either eliminating the hazards or reducing to as low as reasonably practical (ALARP), the risk of harm and fire through engineered controls.

Recommendation 2: Ensure that all buildings where explosives are managed or stored are operated in accordance with Explosive Safety Orders (XSOs) which are clear, unambiguous and compliant with the Explosive Licence.

Recommendation 3: Reassess all non-nuclear high hazard processes confirming that hazards have been correctly identified, and where they cannot be eliminated, suitable control measures have been fully implemented. Those processes infrequently operated should not restart until this assessment has been made.

Recommendation 4: Review the set of product design specifications, approved processes and operating instructions to ensure they are up to date, consistent and practical to safely implement.

Recommendation 5: Ensure that a suitable training and competency system is in place and fully implemented for all high hazard non-nuclear operations.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that the formation of operating teams for high hazard batch processes recognises the importance of resource planning, team cohesion and the need to avoid significantly extended working hours.

Recommendation 7: Strengthen the arrangements which enable the Company to effectively draw on defence sector, and other external sources of expertise and experience of energetic materials and processes.

Recommendation 8: Establish a process for periodic review of high hazard non-nuclear processes against modern standards (i.e. industry best practice).

Recommendation 9: Ensure that audit and inspection programmes adequately test the process safety aspects of high hazard activities, particularly where these are infrequently performed.

Recommendation 10: Provide advice on the required level of awareness and preparedness by AWE for potential emergencies arising during out of hours working, and build into the emergency exercise programme, reinforcing the need to follow designed arrangements.

Recommendation 11: Conduct a joint review with the Local Authority to identify necessary changes to plans for responding off site during non-radiological events. This should include communications in general in a non-nuclear incident.

AWE's Response

AWE has accepted all the recommendations of the investigation into the causes of the fire. A project team has been established and resourced to implement the actions required to ensure that no similar incident occurs in future.

The lacquer preparation process was stopped immediately and will not be restarted until engineered controls confirm the safety of the process. Process restart decisions will be made in agreement with the Health and Safety Executive.

An immediate review was conducted of all explosives and flammable operations at AWE. This confirmed that this was an isolated occurrence, and that similar conditions do not exist elsewhere on our sites.

Our nuclear processes are already subject to rigorous periodic review and we have recently completed a major investment in reviewing all our nuclear operations in accordance with our Nuclear Site Licence.

Wider and more detailed reviews are being carried out to improve the inspection of the higher hazard, non-nuclear processes across AWE sites. Learning points from these reviews are being built into our systems of work.

We are challenging our documentation to ensure that the safe systems of work in place at AWE are simple and easy to follow. Our task risk assessment process has already been reviewed and improved.

Greater emphasis is being placed on human factors, the role of technical experts and demonstration of competence, to further improve safety on our sites. All Explosives Safety Orders - which restrict quantities of explosives in every building - have now been simplified and communicated to staff.

Following the fire, AWE has improved its arrangements to make it clear what operations can be safely carried out in any area of our site at any given time.

A programme of broader and more demanding training and emergency response exercises is being deployed to maximise learning opportunities. The offsite emergency response plan has been reviewed with the local authority and liaison arrangements have been improved.

Notes to Editors:

1. AWE plc manages and operates the Atomic Weapons Establishment on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, manufacturing and maintaining the warheads for the UK's nuclear deterrent.
2. All AWE press releases are available on our website: www.awe.co.uk

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