

Simple check could have avoided massive explosion

Dozens of flats, which were in the process of being converted at the site of a former hospital, were destroyed by a massive gas blast, caused when a demolition foreman cut through a cast-iron gas pipe in an underground tunnel.

Despite querying with his superiors whether the pipe should be removed, the worker was told to go ahead, Manchester Crown Court heard on 29 November. Sparks from the petrol-powered hand-held saw he was using ignited gas, which was released when he cut the pipe. This caused a huge fireball, from which the 41-year-old man suffered severe burns to his hands and face.

The explosion, on 8 December 2009, was followed by another blast an hour later, when the still-leaking gas ignited again. This demolished a large part of the entire construction site at the Didsbury Gate development of the former Withington Hospital, in Manchester. Residents from hundreds of homes were evacuated by the emergency services following the initial explosion, including 21 apartments that were occupied, as well as a number of businesses, three schools, a hospital, two health units and a police station. It was necessary for the Urban Search and Rescue team to be brought in to search the rubble in case anyone was trapped. Debris from the site also landed on a nearby primary school, damaging buildings, a play area and the school's power supply.

The court was told that PJ Livesey Group, the Trafford Park-based principal contractor for the development, had obtained a diagram from National Grid during the planning stages of the project, which showed a gas main entering the site. However, the company failed to arrange for a detailed survey to be carried out to identify where the pipe ran, and wrongly informed workers on the site that the gas pipes had been decommissioned.

PJ Livesey Group pleaded guilty to breaching s2(1) and s3(1) of HSWA by failing to ensure the safety of its employees and members of the public. It was fined £50,000 on each charge and told to pay full costs of £21,404.

Thomas Merry, the HSE investigating inspector, said: "The company failed to identify what the pipes were before they were cut. They did not know what they were, or what they contained, or whether they were under pressure or full of water. If the company had cross-checked with the service drawing from National Grid, it would have shown up the gas pipe. If those questions had been asked, this incident would not have happened. A simple check would have identified it as being live, and avoided months of disruption and heartache for those residents who lost their homes."

Source: SHP