

Care home fire leaves Scotland in mourning

Officials astounded by large number of deaths despite prompt action by emergency services

by **Stephen Khan**
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Pallid faces peered down New Edinburgh Road in search of Rosepark Nursing Home. Through snow and police cordons, they could see it was barely blemished. Yet a tiny fire that burned so briefly within its red brick walls early yesterday has left a small Scottish community shattered.

The people of Uddingston, near Glasgow, woke to discover that 10 elderly lives had been taken from them in the middle of the night. No other nursing home or residential establishment in Britain had lost so many to fire in more than 30 years.

Some locals drew their curtains as a mark of respect. Others made their way to the scene, where police had shut off access roads. Those who had lost parents or grandparents were visited by family liaison officers.

Emergency crews said the fire broke out in a store cupboard and generated a lot of smoke. They were called at 4.37am and arrived within five minutes.

But for 10 people it was too late. They died of smoke inhalation at the scene. A further six remain in hospitals in Lanarkshire and Glasgow. One is said to be critically ill.

Of the 40 residents who were in the privately run home at the time, 23 were unhurt and have been moved to a home nearby where they are being looked after by carers they know.

The Queen led the public messages of sympathy for the victims of the tragedy and their relatives. In a message to Scotland's First Minister, Jack McConnell, she said: 'I was greatly saddened to learn of the loss of life in this morning's fire at Rosepark Nursing Home in Uddingston.

'I wish to convey my heartfelt sympathies to families and friends of all those killed and injured. Our thoughts and prayers are with them all.'

The First Minister echoed her sentiments. 'This is a terrible tragedy for everyone involved,' he said. 'My thoughts are with those who have lost loved ones and those in hospital.'

The two-storey nursing home is in the Hamilton North and Bellshill constituency of Health Secretary John Reid. He said: 'I have visited this nursing home on a number of occasions and feel a great sadness at what has happened. My thoughts and prayers are with the bereaved families as well as with the staff. I pay the highest tribute to our emergency services.'

Those emergency services are today trying to figure out exactly how a small blaze that caused structural damage only to an area of around four metres either side of a cupboard, claimed so many lives.

Fire officers admitted they were surprised and deeply shocked by the number of deaths. There was speculation yesterday that some residents' bedroom doors may have been left open, thereby allowing the smoke to spread rapidly. The bedrooms and the cupboard are on the first floor of the building.

Questions were also being asked about smoke detectors, although firemen said alarms could be heard sounding when the emergency call was made.

Strathclyde firemaster Jeff Ord did not comment on how the fire started, but said: 'While it was a small fire, there have been large volumes of smoke.'

He said the procurator fiscal, fire investigators and forensic pathologists were involved in the investigation. 'Every resource is being put into this major incident,' he said. 'I believe this is the largest loss of life at any registered premises since the 1960s. It is a disaster for this community.'

The 43-bed home, which houses elderly and infirm people on a short and long-stay basis, is owned by Tom Balmer. He released a statement saying he was in a deep state of shock. 'Everyone connected with the home is devastated by this morning's tragic loss of life.'

'Our hearts go out to the families and friends of those who have lost their lives or who are now in hospital. We consider all our residents as part of our family and many have been with us for a number of years.'

In a street just yards from the home, Chris Quinn said his mother worked for the home and had rushed there to help out upon learning of the tragedy. 'I'm pretty shaken myself,' he said. 'The home is part of the community. I live nearby and see the residents going in and out every day. It is hard to believe what has happened.'

Behind Rosepark home is the Woodfield estate, where Robert Winston lives. His bedroom window looks onto the home and he woke just before 5am. 'I got up and looked out and all I could see were the flashing lights. There were about six engines and police cars. I just thought it was a false alarm. This is a real tragedy for the town. It's hard to take in.'