

Civic Centre Power Failure – 17 May 2011

Contact Officer: Geoff Eldridge / Steve Smith
Telephone: 01895 277231 / 250518

REASON FOR ITEM

At the last meeting of the Committee, Members asked for a briefing on the recent power failure which took place in the Civic Centre on 17 May 2011 and the impact this had on the Council's officers and visitors to the Civic Centre. The Council's Facilities Manager will be in attendance at the meeting to answer Members' questions.

OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO THE COMMITTEE

1. To question the Council's Facilities Manager on the detail contained in the report and to ask for clarification on any issue.

Background

1. On Tuesday 17th May, at approximately 11:00, the electricity supply to the Civic Centre failed. It was later confirmed this was due to a local grid fault. The power failure left all electrical equipment non-operational, with the exception of the battery powered emergency lighting and the uninterruptable power supply to ICT servers including the internal telephone system. Although the recently installed generator started immediately, it failed to provide power to the building.
2. The Civic Centre electrical supply is supplied from a high voltage supply which serves a ring circuit around Uxbridge. One common metered supply then serves the entire Civic Centre. This supply is then divided through four main high voltage switches 3 of the switches serve the offices in phase 1 of the building and another switch serves phase 2 of the building. The new generator has been set up to feed switch panels 1 – 3, which will provide full power to the main office of the Civic Centre but only back-up power to Phase 2.
3. The two old generators that the new generator replaced only provided back-up power to the standby lighting circuits, lifts, water services and ventilation plant. The old generators were there basically to enable safe evacuation of the building in the event of a power failure.
4. By 12.30 we were in a position to start to reoccupy the building and Customer Contact centre representatives were contacted to ask those staff to return. That aspect and the prioritisation of Customer Contact Centre services worked well. No injuries were reported throughout the incident and vulnerable residents who attended the Civic Centre were looked after by reception staff. A "triage" system was established and visitors who had been waiting outside of the building were quickly dealt with. Staff returned by 1.30pm and ICT systems were largely restored by 2.30pm. An Uxbridge Gazette article the following day contained a positive comment regarding action being taken to resolve power cut and restore services to residents.
5. Although the fault with Southern Electricity's supply was restored relatively quickly, power to the Civic could not be restored until 13:15 due to a generator control fault. Full ICT was restored by 15:00 and the emergency aspects of telephony remained active throughout. However, because of the uncertain nature of the incident the Head of ICT and Business Services instigated a shutdown of the Council's ICT

systems. Although initially protected by UPS (backup) power the loss of the cooling system to the servers resulted in rapid climbs in temperature leading to a possibility of ICT systems suffering severe damage from overheating. The UPS devices are not designed to keep ICT equipment running power for that is supplied by the standby generator. The UPS devices enable an orderly shutdown of systems only

Facilities Management

6. Facilities Management had contacted Southern Electric who confirmed that there had been a power loss in the area but that it has been quickly restored. Those within the Civic centre were unaware of the restoration of power as the generator was running and acting as a block to the restoration of Southern Electricity's supply to the building. As mentioned above the generator, despite running, was not providing power from its own source either. Whilst this was ongoing Facilities Management also made contact with the Council's contractors – Mitie. Mitie had project managed the supply and installation of the generator. Mitie contacted their project manager and electrical sub-contractor who they needed to bring the generator back on line (we were unaware that the generator itself was blocking the Southern Electric restored supply at this time) but it was some 40 plus minutes before those people attended site.

The Generator and the role of Hillingdon's maintenance Contractor Mitie

7. As mentioned above the new generator was supplied and installed in January 2011, the project was managed by MITIE and the generator was installed by a sub contractor of MITIE, Alan Electrical. The generator was tested and commissioned at the time of the installation and a failure of the electrical supply was simulated at the time of the installation. The testing at this time did not indicate any problems with the installation. A further full test of the generator had been planned to take place in July 2011 but as a result of this incident this was brought forward to the weekend of 18th/19th June.
8. This testing on the 18th June consisted of simulating electrical failures the first two tests were not successful but the final test following adjustments to the control mechanism was. Further tests carried out during the evening of the 8th July followed and the generator successfully operated on all three occasions following simulated failures. A schedule of further testing is being established to ensure that the system works well during the working day with full load being drawn.

Communications

9. As soon as the power failed, the council's emergency communications plan was activated. Staff remained working in the office to deal with internal communications issues and to respond to media enquiries. As telephones were working, the team was able to respond to media enquiries, logging calls and responses manually. Internal communications was more challenging as the team was informed the tannoy system was out of operation and once staff were evacuated from the building, it was not possible to communicate with them in a co-ordinated way.

Actions arising from the event

- Facilities Management are reviewing Civic Centre evacuation procedures with the Council's Civil Protection Service, associated signage and Horizon pages, and are re-train staff and managers as necessary.
- Facilities Management have reviewed their command, coordination and communication arrangements

- A review of where battery backed emergency lighting and alarms is being undertaken including within lifts ,at designated emergency meeting points and key evacuation locations
- 2 loudhailers have been purchased by FM. The possibility of a battery back up to the Tannoy system is being considered
- A regular regime of generator testing needs is being scheduled

SUGGESTED COMMITTEE ACTIVITY

1. Members to question the Council's Facilities Manager on the details of the report and to request further information on the incident if required.