

Organisational Resilience – Power Outages

During the last few years business continuity plans have been tested like never before. Local authorities, housing associations, charities and education establishments have shown great resilience in ensuring that they can serve the most vulnerable in their communities. The ability of these organisations to prioritise limited resources and focus on critical activities ensuring the continuation of services to those most in need when much of the country came to a standstill is to be commended.

Organisations may feel be feeling confident in their approach for dealing with major incidents particularly if they reviewed their response to the pandemic and implemented learnings to further enhance their organisational resilience. Hybrid working has now replaced the traditional office working environment with the many advantages it presents and is heavily reliant on the ability to collaborate, using information technology infrastructure and tools to deliver work activities and services remotely. Many business continuity plans focus on the loss of an office or the loss of IT services however hybrid working introduces a new consideration for organisational resilience. Having recently experienced a short power loss whilst working from home, I started to reflect on the potential challenges our customers face this winter driven by the uncertainty of power outages. How can we apply the broad principles of organisational resilience to help us be better prepared for such events?

The UK Government have been exercising Programme Yarrow, which outlines the blueprint for the country in coping with power outages for up to a week for a variety of reasons. The programme highlights that, in a reasonable worst-case scenario, all sectors could be adversely affected by an unplanned outage for up to a week. It suggests that 60% of electricity demand would be met during day 2 and 7 of an outage, when households and businesses will be given intermittent access to rationed supply. Another scenario to be considered is that of rolling black outs in response to energy shortages that will occur at prewarned core times, potentially during the late afternoon and early evening. Given our reliance on information technology and the potential of losing power, should we not be considering reviewing our organisational resilience considering new hybrid ways of working.

Achieving resilience requires resources to be focused on areas that matter most to an organisation. Organisations that are resilient are more likely to prevent shocks and recover quicker than their peers should the worse happen, but more importantly, be able to provide critical services to their customers and communities. A key component of organisational resilience is that of disruption management, dealing with the need to anticipate, prepare, respond, and adapt to disruption which can be sudden and unexpected, or gradual and happen over time. With thorough planning and effective implementation an organisation can reduce the effect of disruption and speed up their recovery. Disruption management describes an organisation's ability to

- manage risks and anticipate future disruptions and its impacts,
- reduce vulnerability via planning, training, and exercising to prepare for the disruption,
- respond and keep functioning in a period of high stress and ambiguity
- return to a functional state by adapting and improving through change.

What might this look like in the context of potential power outages?

Manage risks and anticipate future disruptions and its impacts

The first stage is to understand the risk, by assessing the impacts on customers and communities, giving consideration to those that may be more adversely affected, as well as an organisational perspective. An extended loss of power could impact building security, safety, access and environmental systems but the response to such a scenario needs to be guided by the nature of the building users; for example a “stay put” policy may be considered appropriate but would need to be supplemented with additional staff resource to ensure safety. Whilst local authorities have a clear role in emergency preparedness and coordinating with other responders to provide for their communities it is imperative that there is a collective understanding and approach to resilience across the organisation.

You have a window of opportunity to review your current business continuity plans and consider how it would support the response and decision making of the organisation. Some questions you might want to ask yourself

- How would we provide an emergency response with no power?
- Are we clear on roles and responsibilities of the various response teams with deputies in place to cover absence?
- Are Teams and individuals suitably empowered to ensure decisions can be made in a timely manner in the event of a communication systems failure?
- Do we have a preferred method of communication for the response team, our employees, and our services users, has the power resilience of the organisation’s fixed, mobile and internet services been considered, what back up arrangements do we have?
- How do we ensure we maintain our own employee’s health and safety – can we consider preprepared plans that are communicated on what to do in such an incident?
- Do we have hard copies of our plans in case technology prevents us accessing them?
- Do we have a clear understanding of our priority services to enable focus of support to those most in need and how would we deliver them?
- Do we know our plan to support the most vulnerable, particularly if power is lost for a sustained period?
- Do we have or need emergency generators or uninterruptable power supplies? Are they inspected, tested and maintained?
- How could we redeploy leadership and staff across the organisation to support the emergency response?

Organisations should also understand whether they fall under the ‘Protected Sites’ status which isn’t automatic. The criteria to be part of the Protected Sites List (PSL) includes the need for businesses to have their electricity supply maintained because of a national or regional critical need, public health and safety issues or the potential for catastrophic damage to high value plant. For full details of the criteria for receiving Protected sites status refer to the Electricity Supply Emergency Code (ESEC)

Reduce vulnerability via planning, training, and exercising to prepare for the disruption

Effective planning for such events is key, building plans that support the decision making of the organisation goes a long way to enhancing organisational resilience. Providing training to those who have responsibilities in any response helps build knowledge and awareness of potential actions and decisions that may need to be taken. Running a desktop scenario of an interruption event is also a great way to further embed this knowledge. It allows for an increased awareness of your plans and can provide comfort that there are tools in place to support decision making. It can identify potential areas of strength but also areas that need to be built upon. A blackout scenario may be a good opportunity to provide such an exercise for your plans, it will allow you to discuss the wider impact of such event on your organisation.

Consider asking yourself the following questions when exercising a scenario

- How effective was our response to the scenario presented?
- How did the plan support us in our response?
- Did we have a clear view on our critical activities, including potential impact and duration?
- How effective was our communication both in messaging and channels used?
- How would we access any information if there was no power?
- Where there any gaps or learning we can take from the exercise to increase our response?
- How well did our suppliers and / or partners respond?

Respond and keep functioning in a period of high stress and ambiguity

Our discussions on organisation resilience often focus on sudden disruption, such as a black-out but organisations are already dealing with stretched resources due to the gradual disruption of cost of living and energy crisis. When resources are stretched, not being prepared for a sudden disruption can lead to weaknesses in resilience.

Having a well-rehearsed plan is key can support any response, a plan that can support decision making and help guide you through the challenges an organisation will face. One key element of this is recognising roles and responsibilities and having the right people at the right time with the right skills to drive the response. Incident management teams will need to deal with ambiguity, communicate clearly when surrounded by chaos, make balanced decisions under pressure and adapt to changing situations. It is important teams receive suitable training to develop both hard and soft skills

As part of our organisational resilience have we considered:

- The makeup of the incident management and business continuity teams, roles, responsibilities including deputies.
- Have we exercised our plans and put teams under pressure to respond? Have we got the right people with the right skills in our teams?
- How will we look after and support our response teams and wider workforce during periods of disruption?

Return to a functional state by adapting and improving through change.

The final piece of the organisational resilience jigsaw is considering a debrief following any event (including stress testing of plans) this will support organisation be better placed to deliver.

- A hot debrief, typically undertaken immediately after an event, is used to understand any significant weaknesses in the response and allocate actions to address the situation
- A wider review of lessons learnt at a later date can allow for a more detailed review of how the organisation responded and what can be done for the future to help improve organisational resilience. Engaging with external stakeholders involved in the response, such as partners and mutual aid providers and those directly impacted by the event will see the greatest opportunity for learning and further development.

As organisations, local authorities, social landlords, education and charities providers have a key role in supporting our communities. By being resilient in themselves they are better prepared to continue to do so when faced with future challenges.

If you would like to know more on how to improve organisational resilience or would welcome support on exercising your business continuity plans, please contact....