# Heathrow CEO apologises for sleeping through emergency calls amid £1bn power outage crisis



Heathrow Airport has been navigating a turbulent period since the unprecedented power outage on March 21, which disrupted the plans of over 200,000 passengers and resulted in the cancellation of more than 1,300 flights. At the centre of the turmoil is Thomas Woldbye, the airport's chief executive, who has issued a heartfelt apology after it was revealed that he slept through critical emergency notifications during the crisis. Woldbye's phone had inadvertently been set to silent mode, and he was uncontactable during the initial stages of the response to the incident, which was triggered by a fire at a nearby electricity substation.

According to an internal inquiry led by Ruth Kelly, former secretary of state for transport, Woldbye was first alerted to the airport's shutdown around 6:45 am, leading to a heightened level of scrutiny regarding his leadership in a time of crisis. The inquiry concluded that Woldbye's absence did not hinder crucial decision-making processes, particularly the actions taken by Deputy CEO Javier Echave, who made the critical choice to close the airport approximately 90 minutes after the power loss. This decision was deemed essential to ensure the safety and security of passengers and staff.

However, the incident has spotlighted broader vulnerabilities within the UK's ageing infrastructure. Airlines had reportedly raised concerns about the resilience of Heathrow's electricity supply just days before the outage occurred, indicating a need for proactive measures. A fire at the North Hyde substation not only led to immediate chaos but also prompted discussions around the necessity of investing in a more robust energy framework for the airport, with costs estimated at around £1 billion. Woldbye acknowledged that such expenditures would likely translate into increased fees for airlines and ultimately higher ticket prices for passengers.

As investigations continue by both the National Energy System Operator and Ofgem, the root cause of the fire remains undetermined. Initial findings suggest a fault in the cooling oil system of the transformer, although there has been no evidence of foul play. The comprehensive review has also called for improved protocols for executive communications during emergencies, suggesting that a secondary contact should be appointed to ensure continuity in leadership decisions.

Furthermore, the resilience of the airport's electricity supply has been called into question, as the reliance on an aged system presents significant risks. While Heathrow does have diesel generators capable of providing backup power necessary for critical functionalities, the ongoing discussions around infrastructure investments highlight the urgent need for upgrades. The capacity for the airport to handle energy supply failures effectively is not only paramount for operational integrity but also crucial for maintaining traveller confidence.

As Heathrow endeavours to emerge from this incident, lessons learned from the power outage will undoubtedly shape its future strategy. Woldbye's assertions regarding the effectiveness of their emergency protocols, while perhaps well-intentioned, will need to be backed by tangible improvements. The review has emphasised collaboration with airlines and regulatory bodies to foster a shared understanding of necessary developments in energy resilience. Ultimately, how the airport responds to this crisis will not only determine its operational future but may also set a precedent for other major UK infrastructure operators.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/28/heathrow-ceo-thomas-woldbye-apologises-sleeping-power-outage), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/47a84949-331e-43af-833a-ca3b7a1b3b55)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/28/heathrow-ceo-thomas-woldbye-apologises-sleeping-power-outage), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/22/heathrow-boss-defends-running-of-airport-after-criticism-of-shutdown)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/47a84949-331e-43af-833a-ca3b7a1b3b55), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/28/heathrow-boss-better-energy-supply-to-avoid-outage-repeat-could-cost-1bn), [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/business/heathrow-outage-electricity-cut-power-transport-select-committee-b1220272.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/a876dd58-ed1d-4c54-a3b7-d3e4028d24ae), [[7]](https://www.gbnews.com/news/heathrow-airport-ceo-apology-fire-unprecedented-incident-thousands-cancellations)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/28/heathrow-boss-better-energy-supply-to-avoid-outage-repeat-could-cost-1bn), [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/business/heathrow-outage-electricity-cut-power-transport-select-committee-b1220272.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/47a84949-331e-43af-833a-ca3b7a1b3b55), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/a876dd58-ed1d-4c54-a3b7-d3e4028d24ae), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/22/heathrow-boss-defends-running-of-airport-after-criticism-of-shutdown)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/business/heathrow-outage-electricity-cut-power-transport-select-committee-b1220272.html), [[7]](https://www.gbnews.com/news/heathrow-airport-ceo-apology-fire-unprecedented-incident-thousands-cancellations)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/28/heathrow-ceo-thomas-woldbye-apologises-sleeping-power-outage> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/47a84949-331e-43af-833a-ca3b7a1b3b55> - An internal review into the March 20-21 shutdown of Heathrow Airport revealed that CEO Thomas Woldbye was unreachable during the power outage because his phone was on silent while he slept. Deputy CEO Javier Echave led the decision to close the airport following a fire at a nearby substation, which caused a power failure and the cancellation of over 1,300 flights. The report, conducted by Heathrow board member Ruth Kelly, confirmed that Woldbye’s absence did not impact decision-making and validated Echave’s authority and actions. It recommended improving executive contact procedures during crises, including appointing secondary contacts. The review supported the decision to close and gradually reopen the airport as essential for safety but urged Heathrow to enhance its resilience by evaluating its backup systems and collaborating with partners for needed infrastructure investments. The root cause of the fire at North Hyde substation remains unknown, though a fault in the transformer’s cooling oil system has been identified, with no evidence of foul play. The incident raised broader concerns about the vulnerability of the UK’s infrastructure to localized failures.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/a876dd58-ed1d-4c54-a3b7-d3e4028d24ae> - Airlines had previously warned Heathrow Airport about concerns over the resilience of its electricity supply days before a power outage prompted the closure of the UK's busiest airport. On March 21, a fire at a nearby electricity substation caused a power cut at Heathrow, leading to the cancellation of over 1,300 flights. The airport remained closed for more than 24 hours. Nigel Wicking, chief executive of Heathrow AOC, highlighted previous concerns about power supply following theft incidents that affected a runway. Heathrow, however, stated these incidents were unrelated to the major outage. Heathrow's chief executive, Thomas Woldbye, apologized for the disruption and stated that an internal review would be conducted. The National Grid confirmed that power was always available from unaffected substations, and the delay in reopening was due to reconfiguring the airport's power supply. Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN) assured that the resilience standards were clear and investments are ongoing to enhance the network. The fire, considered an unusual event, is still under investigation with no evidence of criminality found.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/28/heathrow-boss-better-energy-supply-to-avoid-outage-repeat-could-cost-1bn> - Heathrow's chief executive, Thomas Woldbye, has stated that it could cost about £1 billion to install a more resilient power supply system to prevent a repeat of the outage that shut down Europe's busiest airport last week. The disruption, caused by a fire at a nearby electricity substation, led to the cancellation of 1,300 flights and affected more than 200,000 passengers worldwide. Woldbye mentioned that airlines could face higher charges to help fund the new system. He expressed frustration over the incident and stated that he would like to have handled it better. The airport is assessing whether it is possible to install a 'fully resilient' power system that would allow it to switch between sources more swiftly. Woldbye acknowledged that such a system would cost at least £1 billion and that a dialogue with airlines is necessary, as they are deeply involved in the airport's investments. He also mentioned that the airport is able to recoup capital expenditure from landing charges it levies on airlines.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/22/heathrow-boss-defends-running-of-airport-after-criticism-of-shutdown> - Heathrow's chief executive, Thomas Woldbye, has defended the operation of the airport following criticism of its handling of a shutdown caused by a fire at an electrical substation. The incident led to the cancellation of about 1,300 flights and disrupted the journeys of hundreds of thousands of global passengers. Woldbye stated that while lessons needed to be learned from the fire, most other airports also operate without a separate power plant. He explained that Heathrow uses as much energy as a city every single day and does not have backup power for baggage systems, fuel systems, and other infrastructure. He acknowledged that the incident was major and not a small thing, and that the airport is looking at what can be learned from it.
6. <https://www.standard.co.uk/business/heathrow-outage-electricity-cut-power-transport-select-committee-b1220272.html> - The unprecedented shutdown of Heathrow Airport last month, which disrupted almost 300,000 passengers, cost airlines up to £100 million, MPs were told. Nigel Wicking, chief executive of the Heathrow Airline Operators' Committee, which represents airlines that use the airport, said it was 'incredible' that the airport's conditions of use meant they were unable to claim any of the estimated £60 million to £100 million losses back. He said: 'I just find it incredible that an airport can absolve itself of any liability whatsoever.' Around 1,000 flights were affected on the day of the closure. The hundreds of thousands of passengers whose flights were diverted or cancelled are not entitled to compensation. The airport was closed to all flights until about 6pm on Friday, March 21, after a power outage caused by a fire at a nearby electricity substation, which started late the previous night. Heathrow CEO Thomas Woldbye, who was also appearing before the committee, has been criticised for going to bed at 12.30am on the night of the fire. MPs on the Transport Select Committee also heard that Heathrow bosses were warned about its power supply in the days before it closed because of the massive outage, the cause of which is still unknown.
7. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/heathrow-airport-ceo-apology-fire-unprecedented-incident-thousands-cancellations> - Heathrow Airport CEO Thomas Woldbye has issued an apology to the thousands of passengers stranded as a result of the fire at an electrical substation, declaring they are 'very sorry' for the disruption caused. Europe's busiest airport was forced to halt all services after the blaze began at the site in Hayes, West London, around 11.30pm on Thursday night. After cancelling more than 1,300 flights, services are set to resume from 7pm tonight, with the first eight flights expected to be cleared for takeoff. Speaking to the media, Woldbye stressed that the 'major unprecedented incident' which caused a power outage equal to that of a 'mid-size city' will be resolved by tomorrow. He stated: 'First of all, what I'd like to do is to apologise to the many people who have had their travel affected during the day. We are very sorry about all the inconvenience.'