# Heathrow CEO unreachable during substation fire exposes emergency communication failings



The fallout from a significant fire at Heathrow Airport's electrical substation has raised pressing concerns about the resilience and management of one of the world’s busiest transport hubs. A recent report into the incident, which occurred overnight from March 20 to March 21, revealed that CEO Thomas Woldbye was unreachable during the crisis as his phone was inadvertently left on silent while he slept. This oversight not only delayed his response but also highlighted serious issues regarding communication protocols during emergencies.

The Kelly Review, a detailed investigation into the event, concluded that Woldbye, whose annual salary exceeds £3 million, was called multiple times by Chief Operating Officer Javier Echave without ever responding. The review noted that Woldbye became aware of the situation only at 6:45 am, more than seven hours after the fire began at 11:20 pm. Echave, acting in the interim, activated emergency procedures, leading to the closure of the airport, which affected more than 200,000 passengers and resulted in the cancellation of over 1,300 flights.

Leading airline executives were swift to declare their disbelief at the lapse in communication. Shai Weiss, CEO of Virgin Atlantic, stated emphatically, "The last time I put my phone on silent when running an airline was – never." His comments underscored a broader sentiment within the industry that prioritising safety and communication is paramount in such high-stakes situations. Weiss has since called for Heathrow to begin compensating airlines for the economic fallout of the shutdown, which is estimated to have cost the UK upwards of £4.8 million in lost tourism alone.

Further complicating matters, the report has prompted questions surrounding Heathrow's preparedness for such an event, especially given that airlines had warned of power supply vulnerabilities shortly before the incident. Prior concerns, stemming from thefts that impacted runway operations, brought the issue of infrastructural resilience to the fore; however, Heathrow asserted that these prior incidents were unrelated to the fire, which remains under investigation. Preliminary findings linked the fire to a fault in the transformer’s cooling system, though there is no evidence suggesting foul play.

Although the Kelly Review defended the decision to close the airport as necessary for safety, it also issued 28 recommendations aimed at bolstering future resilience. These include enhancing relationships with power distribution partners and exploring the installation of additional backup generators. The review commended Heathrow's overall emergency response but noted that issues, such as a lack of emergency lighting in terminals, hindered operations during the power outage, forcing security personnel to rely on their mobile phone torches to navigate.

The incident, which spanned almost 24 hours, has drawn attention not just to Heathrow but to the UK's broader energy infrastructure resilience, with critics suggesting that the incident exposes vulnerabilities in a critical national asset. Willie Walsh, CEO of the International Air Transport Association, described the situation as emblematic of the UK's weaknesses under current governance, further entrenching the discourse on infrastructural reliability in light of future emergencies.

As the investigations continue, including an interim report from the National Energy System Operator, which is expected to offer further insights in June, stakeholders are hopeful that the findings will illuminate the underlying causes of the fire. With this, there may be pertinent lessons that could preempt future crises not only at Heathrow but across the UK's various critical infrastructures.

The way forward for Heathrow lies not only in addressing these immediate concerns but in ensuring that its leadership structure and emergency protocols evolve to safeguard against potential future disruptions.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14769971/Heathrow-boss-slept-airport-fire-rival-airline-chief.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/47a84949-331e-43af-833a-ca3b7a1b3b55), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/a876dd58-ed1d-4c54-a3b7-d3e4028d24ae)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14769971/Heathrow-boss-slept-airport-fire-rival-airline-chief.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/21/business/heathrow-airport-closure-disruption-losses-hnk-intl/), [[6]](https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/aviation/heathrow-airports-resilience-rules-under-review-after-major-shutdown/119588221)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/cause-heathrow-shutdown-fire-still-unknown-initial-report-says-2025-05-08/), [[6]](https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/aviation/heathrow-airports-resilience-rules-under-review-after-major-shutdown/119588221)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14769971/Heathrow-boss-slept-airport-fire-rival-airline-chief.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - 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 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.reuters.com/world/uk/cause-heathrow-shutdown-fire-still-unknown-initial-report-says-2025-05-08/> - An interim report by the National Energy System Operator (NESO) revealed that the cause of the March 21 fire at an electricity substation near Heathrow Airport remains unknown. The incident led to a nearly day-long shutdown of all four terminals at Heathrow, Europe’s busiest airport, resulting in tens of millions of pounds in losses for airlines and stranding thousands of passengers. Although police previously stated the fire was not suspicious, forensic investigations by the London Fire Brigade and National Grid Electricity Transmission are ongoing. The outage has triggered concerns over the resilience of the UK's energy infrastructure. NESO plans to release a final report in June, offering recommendations for improving energy system resilience and future response plans. Heathrow Airport expressed hope that the final findings would clarify how the fire began and why two transformers were affected, aiding in enhancing the security of the UK’s power grid.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/a876dd58-ed1d-4c54-a3b7-d3e4028d24ae> - Airlines had 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.
5. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/21/business/heathrow-airport-closure-disruption-losses-hnk-intl/> - With Heathrow Airport shut on Friday, the impact of disruptions is expected to extend well beyond Britain’s largest travel hub, potentially costing the airline industry hundreds of millions of pounds. The chaos in global air travel caused by a fire at an electrical substation supplying the airport could last days, if not weeks, according to an aviation expert. As of early Friday, hundreds of flights to and from Heathrow have been canceled or diverted. Airline analytics firm Cirium estimated that “upwards of 145,000” passengers could be affected. Shukor Yusof, the founder of Singapore-based Endau Analytics, an advisory firm that focuses on the aviation industry, told CNN the financial losses from the shutdown could be in the “hundreds of millions of pounds.” British Airways said it is redirecting inbound flights already on their way to Heathrow to other UK airports, and it advised passengers on flights originally scheduled for Friday from Heathrow not to travel to the airport until further notice. “This will clearly have a significant impact on our operation and our customers and we’re working as quickly as possible to update them on their travel options for the next 24 hours and beyond,” the airline said in a statement sent to CNN. A staff member walks past a substation supplying power to Heathrow Airport where a fire broke out in Hayes, west London on March 21, 2025. Benjamin Cremel/AFP/Getty Images Seven United Airlines flights have returned to their point of origin or been diverted to other airports, according to the American carrier. Its Friday flights to Heathrow have been canceled, and it is working to offer customers alternative travel options, it said. Singapore Airlines said three flights en route to London have either been diverted to Frankfurt or Paris or returned to Singapore.
6. <https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/aviation/heathrow-airports-resilience-rules-under-review-after-major-shutdown/119588221> - The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) announced it would consider Heathrow Airport's resilience rules as part of a regular review, following a closure that disrupted global flight schedules and stranded thousands of passengers. London's Heathrow, Europe's busiest airport, was shut down after a fire at a nearby electrical substation cut its power. The closure has sparked widespread criticism of the airport's back-up plans and prompted reviews at Heathrow and National Grid, which operates Britain's power lines. The CAA's review will cover Heathrow's operations from 2027 to 2031, including investments, airline charges, capacity expansion plans, and preparedness to handle a crisis. The watchdog added it would 'carefully consider the rules on resilience' following the March 21 closure. Heathrow, which has defended its decision to shut down operations, did not immediately have a comment. The CAA also said it was in close contact with all parties over the incident and would consider what steps to take next, unrelated to the operational review. Police have said the fire was not a criminal matter.