

Report on Power Cut at Harmondsworth IRC

This report concerns events that took place at Harmondsworth IRC over 2-3 days, beginning in the early hours of Friday 4th November, shortly after midnight. People were locked in their cells for almost the entire duration of the power cut, left without heat, light, running water, toilet facilities or hot food or anything that required electricity.

We understand that people were made to stand outside in the courtyard for approximately four hours, without being provided hot drinks for the duration of the time they were outside. The guards did not check on those individuals left outside during that time and they could not use the toilet facilities while they were forced to remain outside. We understand there were older men who were part of that group who were also cold.

This situation has caused considerable distress and anxiety to many detained people. People described the situation as ‘inhuman’ or feeling like a ‘hostage’ in interviews with [The Guardian](#). One of our clients reported that he called out several times about his mental health and no one came.

The report raises serious questions about the power cut and how the Home Office dealt with it. It is inexplicable to BID that there was no contingency planning in place for such an event, and that people were left locked up in the most dire conditions imaginable. Human beings should never be locked up without running water, hot food, heating, electricity or access to the toilet and this is likely to have breached the human rights of all of our clients. Moreover, people were not told what was happening, which left people feeling ‘abandoned’ – a number of the people we spoke to explained that while a power cut is an accident that can happen, the lack of communication about it was the real injustice and one that contributed significantly to people’s distress and anger.

Thus far the Home Office has acknowledged its responsibility for what happened and is yet to apologise to the individuals. Instead, the Immigration Minister sought made [comments in the Guardian](#) about punishing people who protested in Harmondsworth.

This report pieces the series of events that unfolded, as we understand it is from the accounts that were reported to us by interviewees. We go on to address each of the following issues in turn: Food, lack of water, freezing temperatures, lack of electricity, conditions outdoors, bus journey and conditions on the bus, vulnerable people, lack of communication about what was happening or when people would be moved out of Harmondsworth.

We previously wrote to the Home Secretary to call for an independent inquiry into events at Harmondsworth. It is vital that we learn what caused the power cut, what happened during it, how the Home Office and detention centre staff responded to it. This is necessary to ensure that this is never allowed to repeat itself.



Methodology:

We called 11 people who mentioned on our advice line that they were in Harmondsworth at the time of the power cut. We carried out interviews with those individuals. 10 people were moved from Harmondsworth to Tinsley house, 1 of them was taken to Yarl's Wood. The calls were carried out on Monday 7th and Tuesday 8th November.

Series of events

The following information collates what we understand about how events unfolded from the accounts provided to us from 11 interviewees.

Four people told us the power cut began on Thursday 3rd November, two said it was on Friday and two said they could not remember whether it was Thursday or Friday. It was reported in the Guardian that the power cut began just after midnight in the early hours of Friday morning¹.

We understand that the electricity ran out before the water, with the former cutting off at around midnight of Thursday night / Friday morning. Cells were locked on Thursday at 9pm as usual, and it is unclear what time they were unlocked. Breakfast is usually served at 8:30am in the hall but on Friday morning it was brought to people in their cells, where they remained locked, at around 9:30 – 10am. Although it is unclear what time the cell doors were unlocked, our understanding is that there was a period on Friday where the detainees were allowed out of their cells with many going into the courtyard.

It is then understood that at 8 o'clock on Friday evening, when everyone was told to return to their cells, a group of individuals in the courtyard refused to go indoors as neither the electricians nor water had returned. At this point, the officers locked the doors to the courtyard, so that the people refusing to go inside were left there. We understand that the officers proceeded to lock the gates of the wings, giving the detainees the option to lock themselves in their cells from the inside or to remain on the wing corridor. The accounts that we have heard show that it was not until between 12 and 2am that the doors to the courtyard were unlocked, and those individuals were allowed back inside. The next day, individuals were locked in their cells for the entirety of the day, with all meals delivered to their cell doors.

We understand that water returned on Saturday afternoon and the most vulnerable detainees were transferred out of Harmondsworth on Saturday night. They were told to pack up their cell and gather in the gym to await transfer, whilst their belongings would be transferred to them separately. The same process took place for the remainder of detainees on the following day (Sunday).

¹ We will assume, for the purpose of this report, that this is the correct time.



“On Thursday night, everything was off. Officer did not open the door for us and no one told us what happened.” – MS

“The next day they didn’t open the door at all, we were banged up for the whole of Saturday day. We had no electric or water at the time. We couldn’t wash. We didn’t have a bell so we couldn’t ask for assistance. We were just banged up and left there.” - AK

“People started smashing things. These were the people that refused to go back into their cells. They didn’t want to return to their cells because they had no electricity or water. I was locked down in my cell with no water and electricity for two days and a half. There was toilet but no water so it was not possible to use it.” – PF

“I can’t remember the exact day but at midnight they turned off the lights and there was no light and no water for 2 days.” – EK

“Everyone was locked in their cell for all of Friday and Saturday. No officers in the corridors, no one responding to the calls of detainees.” - BS

“Around 5 o clock, things started to get more agitated. People started breaking the tables. I was frightened and scared. I spoke to my supporter on the phone, I told her I don’t know what’s going on, people are getting agitated they are breaking things, I don’t know what to do.” - PB

“I was lockdown in my cell for two days and a half so I know nothing. I called the police because I am scared because I smell fire and I can’t breathe.” – PF

“In the morning they turned off the water, our toilets were stinking because we could not flush and we could not wash our face or brush our teeth. The Intercom was off so we could not reach out to officers. We were kept locked down in our cells without any breakfast until 9:30 am...Sunday 6/11/22 detainees were still held in cells without any fresh air or hot water. When we asked officers to let us out one by one for a shower, they told us that they have been told not to give us a shower.” - PS

“3 days locked up inside, now I’m just trying to spend all day exercising. At least we get fresh air here. In Harmondsworth it’s like a prison. It’s worse than prison.” – MS

“They said come to the gym, and we will bring your property from your cell to you in the gym, we weren’t allowed to take it with us. Then they said we will bring it to you in the new place. Now, it is Wednesday and I have still not received any of my possessions, my documents, my certificates, my photos of my kids. These lot gave me boxer shorts and socks but it hasn’t been good.” - AK

Lack of water



When the water stopped, detainees were not able to brush their teeth, wash themselves, shower or flush the loos. Two people informed us that the smell became unbearable. The ECtHR recognises that a breach of a state's obligation to respect the right to water can amount to a violation of Article 3 on inhuman and degrading treatment. Although some detainees were able to access a toilet, the flush was not working and they were, therefore, unusable. We understand the water switched off between 9:30 and 10am on the first morning of the power cut. We understand that it returned at some point on Saturday afternoon, prior to the power returning.

"Toilets in the cell were not working, it smelled really bad everywhere." - AWO

"More than in the jungle, the smell was so bad on the corridors." - MS

Temperatures

Further, many individuals reported freezing cold temperatures throughout the weekend. Heating failed as the power cut out and this resulted in temperatures significantly dropping for individuals both inside and outside of their cells. Testimonies we have gathered recall the freezing temperatures and explain that fires were lit in the wings in order to create some warmth, and particularly keep the older men warm.

"It was freezing even inside the cells. I was lucky I was inside the cell, usually it is heated but it was freezing." – MS

"Someone started a fire, someone outside their cell, no guards were coming, there were no guards on the corridor. The fire was started to get warmth, not to start problems. It was started because they were freezing cold." - MY

Food

It is our understanding that people in Harmondsworth did not receive a hot meal throughout the duration of the power cut. Dinner was served as normal on Thursday night. On Friday morning, instead of gathering in the cafeteria at 8:30am for breakfast, paper bags labelled 'breakfast' were delivered by staff outside the cells of the detainees at around 9:30 – 10am. All interviewees recall that the only food provided was a sandwich and a packet of crisps for both lunch and dinner.

"They put my dinner on the floor. Since there was no electricity they weren't serving food. I received dinner but no lunch. The food was minimal. The way they are treating us is brutal. I have never seen human treating another human like this before." – AWO

"At 9:00am officer came and dumped a bag labelled breakfast on the floor and locked the door with us inside." – PS



“No hot food for the whole of Saturday. On Friday they bought cheese sandwiches and packet of crisps. On Saturday it was a croissant and a sandwich. We weren’t allowed out they were just dropping it by the door. This went on till Saturday evening.” - AK

“They came to the door when it was dinner, then asked me to sit down and wait before they put food on the floor. They treating me like a dog.” - AWO

“Then on Friday evening they gave us another sandwich for dinner and people got angry.” – MS

“At 20:00pm no dinner was served so detainees refused to go back to their cells. This is when fires were lit and people were demonstrating.” - PS

Lack of electricity

Lack of electricity meant that phones were unable to be charged, the TV and Intercom were not working and officers could not be called and there was no light or heating on the wings. For people in immigration detention who are deprived of their liberty and isolated from the rest of society, TV and mobile phones provide crucial respite. Mobile phones are the main source of connection to the outside world beyond the detention centre and a crucial means of staying up to date with an immigration case. The fact that they could not be charged would have had a severe impact on our clients.

“Couldn’t charge our phones and they all died. Couldn’t get through to our families” - PS

“The conditions were bad. We couldn’t charge our phones, we couldn’t go to the toilet because of the lack of water.” – EK

“The Intercom was off so we could not reach out to officers.” - PS

Individuals outdoors

From the testimonies that we have gathered, it appears that a number of people refused to go indoors because the electricity had not returned and there was better light in the outside courtyard.

“The people outside were refusing to come back in because it was pitch black and there was a bit of light on the yard. Those people were left until 2 o clock in the morning.” - AK

A decision was made to lock the doors to the courtyard forcing the individuals to remain there until further notice. We understand that a group of individuals in the courtyard refused to go indoors as neither the electrics nor water had returned, at which point the officers locked the doors to the courtyard, so that the people refusing to go inside were left there. Doors to the courtyard were locked at 8pm and then returned to unlock the doors and take the detainees back to their cells at some time



between 12 and 2am. Between the hours of 8pm and 12 midnight, there were no checks made by staff on the wellbeing of the individuals outside. This meant there was no opportunity for a detainee to be taken to a toilet, nor was there opportunity to ask to go inside nor to ask for a blanket or some water. Our interviewees informed us that fires were lit outside – most said this was for the purpose of keeping warm as temperatures continued to drop in the early hours of the morning, while one said “fires were lit and people were demonstrating”.

“There were no supervising staff whilst we were left outside, the doors were locked and we could not use the toilet” – BS

“They could not use the toilet at all because they were outside. No one came to check on them, they had to use nature to pee.” – MB (sister of MB’s account)

“Some people were cold but no one came to help bring blankets or respond to calls” – BS

“There were no supervising staff whilst they were left outside, there were no hot drinks provided, the doors were locked and they were simply stuck outside in the cold waiting. They could not use the toilet during this time.” – MB (Sister of MB’s account)

“At 9 at night, we usually get locked up. Instead the officers, they didn’t lock in the cells instead they locked the gates for the courtyard outside. There were a lot of detainees locked. Some people were locked in the wing and some people were locked in the courtyard. The people outside were refusing to come back in because it was pitch black and there was a bit of light on the yard. Those people were left until 2 o clock in the morning.” – AK

“I heard that people were left outside with no torches, no lanterns, nothing, they were locked in the cold. The staff who work there locked people in the wing in complete darkness until 1 o clock or 2 o clock in the morning. They left people both on the wings and on the yard. Then they opened the air conditioner, they turned it on purpose. Usually the place is warm but on Saturday afternoon I felt the air conditioning on, I remember the noise of the turbine, you can feel the cold coming. I thought to myself that the officers are doing this to encourage people inside their cells. The people from outside in the yard couldn’t get inside the wings. When people move inside their cells from the wings, only then did the officers let the people who were locked in the yard inside.” - PB

Bus Journey

In every one of the eleven testimonies that we obtained, our attention was drawn to the amount of time spent on the bus, prior to arriving at the new detention centre. The minimum amount of time that an individual spent on the bus was five and a half hours, whilst the maximum amount of time that an individual spent was 20 hours. In some of the accounts, our clients were taken to multiple detention centres and were made to wait on the bus as attempts were made to find space for them. In one



particular case, the bus went from Harmondsworth to Brook House where they waited for two and a half hours until they were told that there was no more space and they must find another detention centre. They then went back to Harmondsworth where they waited over an hour for the drivers to change, ultimately arriving at Yarl's Wood after a 5-and-a-half-hour period on the bus. It is important to remember that this is one of the shorter accounts of the journey.

"16:00pm Sunday taken from cell to Brook House, Gatwick IRC. The bus was parked outside the centre overlooking the airport. At 17:20 we were advised that the centre was full and we need to sit on the bus for 2 hours whilst they decided where they were going to house us. At 19:20 Brook House detention centre told the security officer and the coach driver that they could not house us and they need to take us to another centre [...] At 19:50 we were back at Heathrow waiting for bus driver to change. At 20:05 a driver showed up, we have been on the bus for 4 hours now. At 20:20 officer advised us that we will be on the bus for another hour and a half. We didn't know where we would end up. At 21:37 we arrived at Yarl's Wood. Altogether 5 hours and 37 mins on the bus." - PS

The conditions on the bus varied according to each individual and each trip that was made. One detainee who had been on the bus for 16 hours said that pizza was ordered to the bus whilst they waited for their entrance to Brook House to be authorised. Two detainee testimonies mentioned the lack of toilet facility on the bus, clarifying that one existed however there was no paper or running water so they were out of use. Three testimonies drew upon the police presence whilst waiting on the bus prior to check-in at the Brook House detention centre. It is understood that a number of police vans circled the bus containing the detainees as a form of security or control.

"We were surrounded by riot police, they made a line around the whole bus. It felt like we were one of them cartels. The way they handled us is unreal. The way they surrounded the bus, it felt tense. It felt so tense." - AK

"We were scared when we saw police circling the bus, that's when a man told us that we were going back to Brook House, we had already spent 10 hours on the bus. That's when I started sweating and my arms start going numb." - PB

"I spent 12 hours on the bus. From about 10 on Saturday night to 10 am Sunday morning we were on the bus waiting, we were outside brook house but they weren't letting us off the bus. The police were circling the bus with sticks." - AWO

Vulnerable individuals

Of the 11 interviewees, 7 of them have received a Rule 35 Report. We know that one of them was given Level 2 Adult at Risk (AAR) status, 1 of them was given Level 1 AAR, however, whilst we can see that the report exists for the remaining 5, we do not have access to the results. Outside of the 7



individuals who have had Rule 35 reports, there are 3 individuals who have recognised mental health issues which they have been prescribed medication for. This means that 10 out of the 11 sample members suffer from one or more recognised vulnerabilities.

Events at Harmondsworth would have been particularly harmful and distressing, or re-traumatising, for vulnerable people, such as complete darkness on the corridors, the escalation of noise, the lack of explanation of what was happening. Moreover, whilst some precautionary measures were taken in transferring some people out of Harmondsworth on Saturday night on the basis of vulnerability, that did not prevent those vulnerable individuals spending extended amounts of time on the bus waiting for admission. For example, one interviewee who has Level 2 AAR status was taken out of Harmondsworth on Saturday night only to spend 18 hours on the bus before being allowed in to the new detention centre. Relevant here is that the individuals were told to leave their belongings behind, which includes documents pertaining to their immigration case as well as their personal belongings.

“I’m vulnerable. The way they are handling me is not nice, it is not helpful. I am here asking for help and the response I get is horrible. I don’t want to ask for anything in here”. – AK

“Because of my history, I can’t stand violence, it brings back bad memories. Someone who works at the centre opened the cell and told me to stay in there, they said I did a good thing.” - PB

Staff communication

A common issue highlighted by certain individuals was the lack of information provided by the staff as to what was going on during the power cut. People were not kept informed about what was going on, how conditions and regimes were changing as a result of the power cut and how long those conditions would last, when and where they would be moved elsewhere. People felt that while the power cut was not deliberate, being left locked up in wretched conditions without a basic level of communication about what was going on was an injustice, and it was this failure in communication that contributed considerably to people’s distress and anger.

“They could have spoken to the people and asked them to go inside their cells but instead they left them locked out in the cold and that’s why people went crazy. Everyone felt abandoned” (PB).

“All they had to do was sit down and talk with us. People come from third world countries in here, there’s people in here who have lived with no electrics for years of their lives. It’s not something that’s major. People would have understood but it was made worst by the way they handled it”. (AK)

“Worst of all there was no one who came and told us what was going on, that’s the worst thing is being left in the dark and not being told what’s going on” (AK).

“Nobody told us anything about what was going on at any point” (AWO).



Indeed, two interviewees suggested that the problem was made worst as a result of poor staff communication.

Meanwhile, one individual (PF) called the police because he had not been provided any information from the staff. "Nobody told me anything about what was going on or where I was going. I called the police at night time, because I was hungry, there was no water, no food, no electrics. Called the police around 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning on the second night of the lockdown. Police came around 10 or 11am the next day. They just said that deo did well calling them."

A number of interviewees refer to the absence of staff during crucial periods in the power cut:

"No one came to help for the whole night despite our calls" – EK.

"There were 7 or 8 hours with no officers. They are lucky there is no one dead, they are meant to be controlling us but why do they leave us in the dark and with no water." – AWO.

"People were shouting for their medication but no one was giving it to them." – MS

"We didn't have a bell so we couldn't ask for assistance. We were just banged up and left there." – AK

