

Tyne and Wear lead the way in business continuity

Melanie Prested, Risk Officer, Business Assurance for Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, reports on the service's attainment of BS25999 certification for business continuity management



As an emergency responder, we are proficient in handling incidents that happen to other individuals or organisations. However, we recognised that events such as power outages and severe weather conditions could have the potential to affect how we respond. It was vital that we put measures in place to ensure we could carry out our duties, no matter what we were faced with.

In 2009, we decided to carry out a full review of our Business Continuity Management (BCM) arrangements to ensure we captured the risks and planned for any disruption and we began to rehearse how we would deal with the consequences.

Business Continuity Review

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Joy Brindle said: "People turn to us when they have their own emergencies so it's essential that no matter

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what we are faced with, we continue to deliver. Business continuity is core to our ability to do that, and we saw the BS25999 certification process as really testing us to make sure everything is the best it can be."

In October 2009 our Strategic Management Team decided to align our processes to BS 25999-2, with a strong focus on exceeding BCM best practice by achieving certification. This was an additional driver for the service to meet our statutory obligations under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) (CCA) and the recently reviewed Emergency Preparedness (statutory guidance for the CCA) which now reflects the BS25999 model.

The review began early 2010 with a series of workshops which helped us to analyse and identify reinstatement recovery times following a disruption, for all of our activities in each service area. Staff understood it was the responsibility of

every individual to know the priorities for their own area and the contingencies in place to allow them to assist with the recovery effort in the event of a disruption.

A rigorous regime was introduced to test and validate each Business Continuity Plan (BCP) including walkthrough learning, table-top exercises and live events as they happened. Each test was an opportunity to learn and improve. Once validated, each BCP became part of a robust ongoing review and maintenance process. All staff were given access to every BCP and supporting information following a review of the service intranet and this formed the 'hub' of our BCM system. This was supported by a staff awareness programme and an e-learning package for operational crews.

Improving Business Continuity

A fundamental improvement to our BCMS was the incorporation of BCM reporting into our Operational Assurance Database, developed in conjunction with Redkite Systems Limited. The database is being used to monitor corrective and preventative actions that arise as a result of real business interruptions and exercises. The database creates action plans and allocates an action owner to ensure the plans are completed within a realistic timeframe.

Station Manager Jeff Wilkinson said: "I was in charge of Gateshead Community Fire Station on June 28, 2012 when we suffered severe flooding. We swiftly moved our operations onto the first floor of the building and managed to maintain functionality. This was an opportunity to prove this isn't just theory, it really works."

Achievement of the certificate involved a formal assessment separated into two distinct stages. We successfully completed stage one in March 2012, involving a desk review of our BCM framework, including an assessment of all processes and supporting documentation. During stage two in October 2012 we invited auditors to visit four of our stations, our control room, the technical services centre, service delivery headquarters and service headquarters. The assessors aimed to gather evidence to ensure that BCM was 'embedded' across the service.

The timeframe from the initial workshops in 2010 through to certification this year was required due to the robustness of the assessment process. It goes into the detail of competency-based training, document management and preventative/corrective action monitoring. The auditors need to speak to a cross section of staff from different disciplines – not just your business continuity steering group.

Government Acclaim

Chloe Smith MP, Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform at the Cabinet Office and who also has responsibility for Cyber Security and Civil Contingencies, said: "Congratulations to all those at Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service on this fantastic achievement, the first fire and rescue service to be accredited for every activity



Author Melanie Prested

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they do. Business continuity is not just for big businesses and companies, we all need a clear understanding of continuity planning. Business continuity is about understanding risk. Having robust, tested plans and preparations in place, like the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, is vital and exactly what government is encouraging."

Fire Minister Brandon Lewis MP said: "My congratulations to Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service on achieving the British Standard on Business Continuity Management. Successfully achieving this rigorous standard demonstrates a real determination to manage any risks that could disrupt the vital services it provides to the public."

During 2012, our BCM arrangements were tested to the limit when our own locations were severely affected by power outages and the worst summer flooding on record for over 100 years. It cannot be emphasised enough how it demonstrated the effectiveness and value of our contingency plans. More importantly, it convinced staff at all levels of our organisation that effective BCM has real tangible benefits and demonstrated the benefits of their work.

The assessment process is continuous to maintain accreditation and promote improvement of the BCMS. We are expecting our first continual assessment in March 2013 and have already created an improvement plan to enhance our BCM capability.

We have worked very hard to instil a BCM culture into the organisation's routine operations and management processes and we will continue working together across our whole service to develop this further.

About the Author:

Melanie has worked in emergency planning for 10 years, the last four years she has held a specific role with the remit of Business Continuity Management (BCM) for Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service.

Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service (TWFRS) is the first UK service to receive certification for the British Standard for Business Continuity BS25999-2 across every single activity they do.

