

'Would you like ice with that book?'

Sharan Harvey, Brisbane City Council Library Services

On Thursday 19 May 2005, a severe hailstorm hit Brisbane. Brisbane City Council's Toowong Library, in Toowong Village shopping centre, was open for Thursday night trading. Toowong Library is 1000m², with a bookstock of approximately 50 000. The storm was so severe that the entire shopping centre was closed. Copious amounts of pea-sized hail filled the gutters of Toowong Village, forcing water from rain and melting ice through the ceiling of the library.

Library Services activated their Business Continuity Plan. Council's City Building and Maintenance (CBMS) section attended the library immediately, assessing the damage to the ceiling and carpet, testing electrical wiring, lighting and equipment, and assisting movement of bookstock out of the water flow. Luckily the computers were not rain-affected. Blowers and wet vacs were used to dry the carpet. The next morning CBMS, senior library services (Systems, Operations, Collections, and Workplace Health and Safety) and Toowong Library staff all gathered at the library to assess the damage in detail. A whiteboard plan established priorities and assigned tasks. The library would need to be closed for three days, opening again on Monday 23 May 2005.

Decisions about the collection were mainly based on level of water damage. Water had come through the ceiling in many places, so we had to check every single shelf in the library. It was not always easy to tell if a book was water damaged, as the water had often travelled along the back of the shelf. Books from both sides and centre of every shelf were checked. Book jackets were dried and the pages checked carefully. Slightly

wet books were laid onto couches or fanned on tables to dry them out. Nine hundred books, mostly junior fiction and adult fiction, were too damaged to save.

To ensure that water-logged items were handled only once, the irrecoverable books were checked out to a special location/status, which was created by the Systems staff. The status enabled staff to use the automated Library Management System to list and count the damaged books, calculate the total value, 'hide' the holdings for the damaged books on the public web catalogue and discard automatically. The library staff only had to check out the damaged book once, put it aside for insurance assessment and then physical disposal.

Customers were notified about the closure through signage and the media. Library staff members were also located at the front of the library to explain the circumstances. Provision was made for borrowed items to be returned or extended.

Points to note:

- Safety is the first priority.
- The Business Continuity Plan is tested twice a year.
- A prioritised work plan meant that everyone knew what they had to do.
- The lovely timber end-caps on the metal shelves touch the floor and acted as a wick to suck up water from the carpet – the watermarks are not a good look!
- Dust covers minimised water damage, in most bays only the books at each end were affected. In the one bay without a dustcover, the books were completely lost. ■



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