

# STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

## HOUSING COMMITTEE

NOVEMBER 2021

<b>Report Title</b>	<b>CORRECTIVE ACTION TO STRENGTHEN THE COUNCIL'S OUT OF HOURS CALL OUT PROVISION</b>			
<b>Purpose of Report</b>	To inform Housing Committee of the corrective action being undertaken to strengthen operational procedures in the management of Out of Hours Service provision.			
<b>Decision(s)</b>	<b>The Committee RESOLVES:</b>  <b>a. To Note the action plan and corrective actions already implemented and;</b>  <b>b. That the Lead officer shall provide an update on progress at the April 2022 Committee meeting</b>			
<b>Consultation and Feedback</b>	<b>Consultation consisted of:-</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Briefings with the Chair and Vice-Chair of Housing Committee</li><li>• Strategic Director of Communities</li><li>• ARA</li></ul>			
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<b>Options</b>	N/A			
<b>Background Papers</b>	N/A			
<b>Appendices</b>	Appendix A - Corrective action plan			
<b>Implications (further details at the end of the report)</b>	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	No	No	No	Yes

### 1. Background

- 1.1 Stroud District Council provides a routine call-handling and message-taking service outside of the council's normal working hours, which is available for use during periods when services shut down, in emergency situations, and during public holidays. This contract is currently managed within council's Contract Services team. This is because of the large proportion of calls in relation to tenant matters (repairs), but service provision actually extends beyond this and is council-wide. For example, calls relating to environmental health matters (pollution, noise, flooding, and fire), council owned public conveniences (parks, playgrounds, and cemeteries), and issues such as homelessness.
- 1.2 Following reports of service failures over the 2020/21 Christmas and New Year holiday period, an investigation into the performance of the Council's Out of Hours (OOH) service

was undertaken. A report (OOH Failure Report) was produced, which identified a number of corrective measures.

- 1.3 The Strategic Director of Communities, sought further reassurance and requested that Audit Risk Assurance (ARA) Stroud District Council's internal audit service undertake a review of the OOH service provision.
- 1.4 The final audit report presented to Audit and Standards Committee on 28 September made a series of recommendations to strengthen the management and delivery of the service going forward. These have been incorporated into an action plan.

## **2. Key Findings and Actions**

- 2.1 As noted above, this critical piece of work was referred to the council's internal audit services by the Strategic Director in order key issues could be identified and action put in place to strengthen the service and ensure lessons are learnt.
- 2.2 A summary of its key findings and actions are set out below. Most fieldwork was completed between 12-16<sup>th</sup> July 2021, so it is important to note that this audit provides a "snapshot" of the service area at this time. The council is also in the process of rolling-out a new Contract Management Framework (CMF), to be launched later this year.
- 2.3 There is strong and focused commitment to strengthening the OOH service and a number of actions have already been completed to deliver improvements and resilience.
- 2.4 The review and its scope were shaped by both the Strategic Director of Communities and Head of Contract Services, with their aim being a comprehensive investigation to identify control weaknesses and areas of improvement. Their focus and engagement with internal audit has allowed this review to be delivered in a timely manner and well in advance of the 2021 Christmas break.
- 2.5 The internal audit report specifically noted that work has already commenced on the implementation of some of the agreed actions.

## **3. Areas for improvement**

- 3.1 The report identified a number of high priority issues where improvement was required. Alongside these, it considered a range of lower order operational/medium priority areas for improvement.
- 3.2 The council's Contract Management Service is wholly committed to delivering the best possible service to our tenants and will address any identified areas for improvement. This work has already begun. This review found that:
  - i. The end-to-end process, procedures, roles, and responsibilities had not been documented in a Procedures Manual (or similar);
  - ii. The key risks and internal controls in place to manage the OOH service had not been adequately reported;

- iii. There had been no consistent reporting on contract performance from the Contract Manager to the Head of Contract Services;
- iv. The outsourced OOH repairs service, currently provided by an independent private contractor, required review;
- v. The risks associated with contracting-out the service were not captured in the risk register and potential risks were not properly reported;
- vi. An OOH heating engineer/boiler-repair service was not procured and needed to be addressed;
- vii. The arrangements for coordination with other council departments needed to be formalised;
- viii. The role of the call handling service in the council's wider flood management / flood response strategy was not clear;
- ix. The call-handling materials (flowcharts, for example) in circulation were not adequately monitored;
- x. Key business continuity planning considerations had not at the time of the audit been put in place and so posed a serious risk to the process as a whole.

3.3 In addition to these 10 findings, the audit report noted that the out of hour maintenance contact was extended shortly before the period during which service failure was identified (Christmas 2020/21) and identified three high priority issues to be considered. These are currently being reviewed ahead of specific recommendations or action being agreed.

#### **4. Improvement Actions**

- 4.1 In response to these findings, a detail action plan is now in place to strengthen the service (appendix a). The target date for most of the accepted recommendations is the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021. The aim is to ensure that key actions are completed prior to the 2021 Christmas break.
- 4.2 Significant progress has already been made in addressing weaknesses in processes, and ensuring robust back up measures are in place should there be any initial failure in delivery. An OOH Emergency Helpline Procedures Manual (Procedures Manual) will be drafted and circulated to all relevant officers. Service Leads from other departments will be identified, and their roles, responsibilities, and obligations agreed and documented in the Procedures Manual. The primary actions in the Action Plan are summarised below:
  - i. The council now has a dedicated phone line into the OOH call centre, additional call centre staff have been trained to deal with Stroud specific calls, and the on-call contractors process now includes escalation up to Director level.

- ii. The guidance in place for call-handling materials (flowcharts, for example) and the process for monitoring these will be updated in line with Internal Audit's recommendations.
- iii. An improved risk register will be developed, capturing key risks for the OOH call-handling and the OOH repairs service.
- iv. The internal controls in place to manage risk will be more clearly documented and monitored. The Head of Contract Services will reiterate to his staff his expectations and desired approach with regards to risk management across the department. Additionally, the expectations for the management of contract extensions will be reiterated to all Contract Managers.
- v. A review into OOH contractor's performance and service provision has commenced. This will involve providing clear and comprehensive service specifications to help manage their performance.
- vi. The Head of Contract Services will review all options available for service provision until in-sourcing can be achieved.
- vii. Any barriers to the in-sourcing of the OOH repairs service will be identified and addressed, to ensure that in-sourcing can proceed in a timely manner.
- viii. In advance of the winter period, there will be robust, reliable, and adequate arrangements in place to provide OOH heating, and repair and boiler-repair services for Council tenants;
- ix. The council will ensure the call handling service is provided with adequate guidance on handling calls relating to flooding.

## **5. Governance, Management, and Scrutiny**

- 5.1 Following the production and implementation of the new procedure manual monitoring and review of the arrangement will continue to be developed to ensure there is continual learning, ensuring best practice is adopted throughout the life of the contract.
- 5.2 Reviews will look at positioning and oversight of the contract within the corporate structure over the longer term.
- 5.3 The Voids and Repairs Task and Finish Group along with the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment task and Finish Group will provide input into reviews to ensure outcomes for stakeholders is considered across the widest possible spectrum.

## **6. Next Steps**

- 6.1 Officers who have been tasked to deliver the actions and outcomes have been notified.

- 6.2 Regular meetings to assess progress and delivery of the actions will be scheduled.
- 6.3 Monitoring of the Action Plan will be added to the work plan for the Repairs and Voids Task and Finish Group
- 6.4 A report will be brought to April 2022 Housing Committee which will provide an update of the progress made in delivering the action plan and lessons learned.
- 6.5 Review the resources, management, and position of the contract to ensure it delivers the necessary corporate outcomes.

## **7. Conclusion**

- 7.1 Although complaints compared to call volume was low in number, over the Christmas and New Year period we acknowledge that service provision should have been significantly better, and after reviewing the processes and service failures we implemented a number of changes immediately.
- 7.2 The initial investigation into performance over the Christmas and New Year period did not show that there was systemic failure in service provision. However, it did highlight that a more holistic approach to the management of the contract would be beneficial to all stakeholders, as well as a review of some processes and procedures, and on that basis the action plan has been developed as well as the recommendations from the audit report.

## **8. IMPLICATIONS**

### **8.1 Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

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### **8.2 Legal Implications**

None directly arising from this report but legal support will be provided, as necessary, to assist in the delivery of the action plan.

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### **8.3 Equality Implications**

An Equality Impact assessment has been undertaken, mitigations have been included in the action plan and due regard will be given to any implications.

### **8.4 Environmental Implications**

There are no environmental implications to be considered as part of the report.