

## **Out of Hours Service Issues on 17.12.2022**

This briefing note sets out the circumstances around difficulties experienced by service users with the council's out of hours call service on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2022

### **Context**

On the weekend of 11/12 December 2022 Gloucestershire experienced unexpected snow and ice. This weather had been forecast for the southeast and north of the country but not for our region. In fact, during the week commencing 12 December and throughout the week, all of the UK experienced average temperatures consistently below freezing.

By Friday 16<sup>th</sup> the consequences of this weather in Stroud district resulted in our Council Housing Property Care team receiving a far greater number of calls than usual, the majority relating to frozen pipes and lack of heating. On Friday 16<sup>th</sup> 259 calls were taken by SDC staff at our Littlecombe Property Care depot. This compares with a normally expected number of between 60 - and 80

On Saturday 17 December 2022, there was an additional fall of snow accompanied by very cold temperatures across the country. This was followed the next day by a rapid thaw. This unusual extreme weather resulted in problems with impassable roads, frozen pipes, failed boilers and burst pipes and flooding when frozen pipes thawed

It is important to note that these conditions were experienced in Stroud district, across Gloucestershire and in fact throughout much of the UK. The unusual severity and widespread nature these conditions and the impact on roads, public services and residential properties is significant as it resulted in unprecedented demand pressures on public facing call handling services over the weekend of 17/18 December.

### **Stroud District Council's call handling service**

In these exceptional weather conditions, our out of hours call handling service provider, Orbis, experienced unprecedented demand from people affected by lack of heating and hot water, frozen pipes and subsequent leaks and flooding.

Orbis had anticipated additional demand for the weekend, had made additional arrangements for extra staff to be on call. It had for example did not allow their staff to take leave in December. The SDC contact manager was in communication with Orbis in the week leading up the weekend and had received assurances that all reasonable measure were to be put in place to mitigate against significant demand.

Despite this mitigating action the level of calls received by Orbis demonstrably overwhelmed its systems.

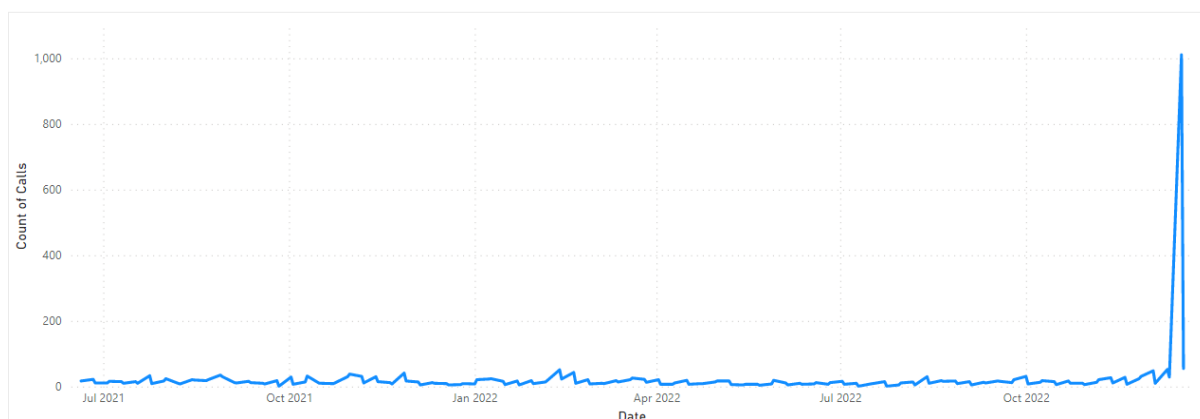
**Keith Gerrard, Strategic Director of Communities**

Orbis alerted the Council via email at lunch time on 17<sup>th</sup> December that there was a problem in answering calls, however the scale of the problems did not become fully clear until the beginning of the working week following.

A review of the period showed that the four-day average out of hours calls from 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> December was 107 per day. For the corresponding the period 1<sup>st</sup> December to the 4<sup>th</sup> the daily average of 12. This represents a 792% increase in expected call volumes because of the extreme weather.

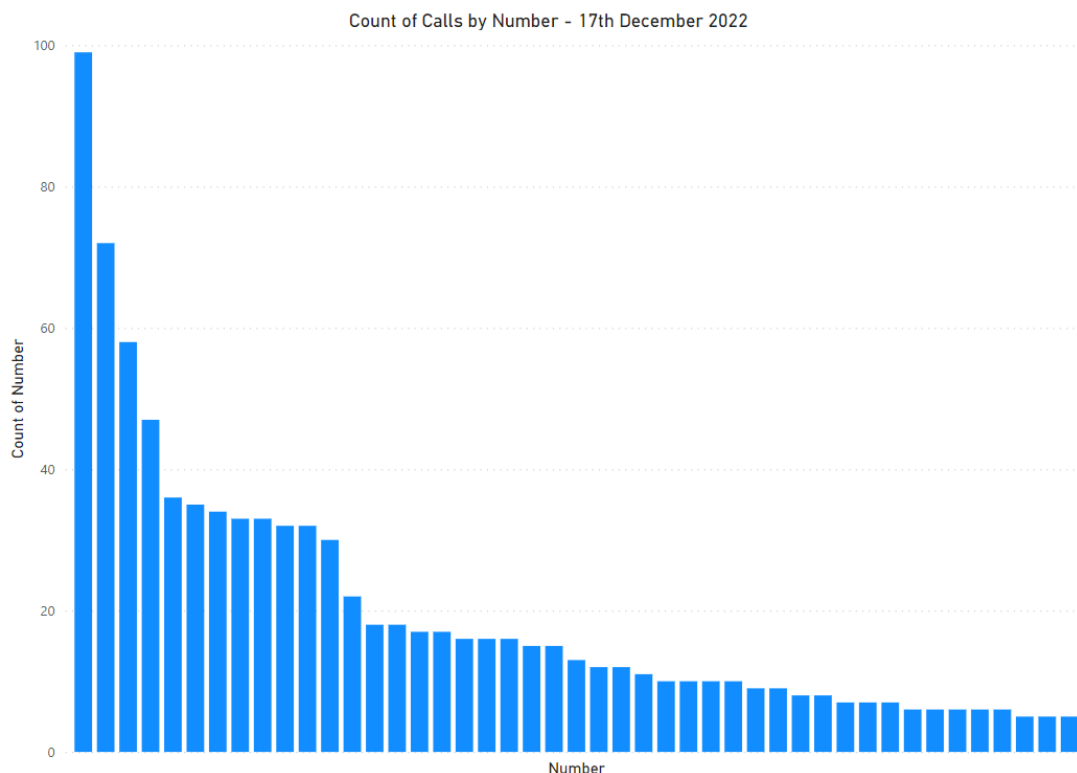
The experience of Stroud District residents was unfortunately not unique. Members of the Gloucestershire wide network of social housing providers reported additional exceptional pressures on call handling services and waiting times much longer than usual

The chart below shows weekend calls to Orbis from July 2021 to December 2022 by Stroud district residents. It illustrates the exceptional demand which Orbis experienced.



Tenants who could not get through to the out of hours service were understandably dissatisfied and frustrated.

The following chart (truncated as it would extend a long way to the right) shows the call distribution from 17 December 2022. This demonstrates that while there were approximately 1,000 calls, many of these were multiple calls from individuals who abandoned waiting and tried again later. 96 individual Stroud callers telephoned Orbis on 17 December. We know that some callers were unable even to join to call queue as every line to Orbis was busy.



### **Orbis – Service Failure**

As illustrated and explained above, over the weekend of 17<sup>th</sup> /18<sup>th</sup> December 96 different callers contacted Orbis. These callers made 427 calls, with some callers making multiple calls. One caller for example made around 100 calls and over half of the total call were made by 5 individual callers.

Over the four-day period Orbis answered 142 calls. It failed to answer 285. While taking into account the unusual circumstances, we still consider this ratio to be unacceptable and service failure.

### **Delivering Council House Repairs and Maintenance**

The same weather which caused repairs problems, hindered attempts to resolve them. Many roads, especially in more rural and higher lying areas, were impassable due to snow and ice. Staff from Property Care and our contractors worked extremely hard to visit tenants, make repairs where possible and deliver electric heaters where tenants' boilers had broken. Some boiler problems were due to condensate pipes freezing, and staff gave advice over the telephone and referred tenants to the website advising how they could resolve this problem themselves, as well as making visits to address this issue.

Our normal on call rota of four Property Care staff, plus the out of hours contractors on call rota, was supplemented over this weekend by staff called in to help with the unprecedented demand. Property Care staff and managers delivered over 40 electric

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heaters, visited to assist with thawing condensate pipes and restoring heating and hot water for tenants

The impact on the available resources held within Property Care can best be demonstrated by one gas engineer completing in excess of 70 call outs over the period. Additional support was provided by engineers and managers not on call to aid and assist in turning around the service calls.

### **Over the Christmas Period**

Following the problems experienced on 17/18 December, it was decided that the Council would put in place back-up arrangements over the Christmas shutdown to ensure that if Orbis was again unable to cope with the volume of calls, we could step in and assist.

The arrangements for Christmas cover involved:

- The on-call SDC manager testing the service number every hour to monitor response times
- A rota of volunteers covering the period 0800 to 2000 in two shifts each day. Property Care set a threshold at which Orbis would alert the Council if their systems were overwhelmed and/or waiting times for calls to be answered were over 10 minutes. If this threshold were to be met, on call SDC would directly take Stroud residents and continue to do so until demand subsided to normal levels.

In the event, the Christmas period passed without incident and additional staff were not required to log on and take calls.

### **Looking forward**

We are committed to is taking all the necessary action to anticipate server weather conditions and put in place additional resource to help ensure residents do not suffer for any failure in service deliver. This fall into two areas

#### **1. Call handling Service**

Over the weekend of the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> December 2022, the Councils Call handling provision failed to meet the required standard. Orbis has apologised for its failure to meet the expected target. Investigation into the particular circumstances of that weekend show that Orbis did take reasonable preventative action to mitigate the anticipated impact of the weather on demand, but this was clearly inadequate.

The current Orbis contract is limited in exceptional cases. Under the terms of the contact any additional request in numbers will be a chargeable event. The terms and conditions of the contact are currently being considered and discussed with Orbis to identify any financial redress which might be available and possible amendments to provide effective guarantees into the future.

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It is vital that a reliable and cost-effective solution is put in place. The use of ‘stand by’ SDC call handlers made available as an auxiliary team if very server weather is forecast (as in the model used over Christmas) is one proposal. Pending confirmation of any contact amendments with Orbis, this mechanism remains in place.

2. Council House Repairs and Maintenance

The Property Care is committed to providing the best possible service to tenants. It wants to learn from any mistakes develop strong trusting relations with those who live in our council houses.

Despite this commitment, our emergency out of hours council house repairs and maintenance service cannot always quickly respond all requests for assistance in the event of a surge in calls due either to extreme weather. Technicians and engineers on call will visit every tenant in need as quickly as they can but in some circumstances waiting times will be longer.

On 17/18 December, as on previous similar occasions, Property Care and contractor staff did their best, and staff who were not on call worked long extra hours over the weekend to respond as quickly as possible to vulnerable tenants.

The Property Care service is increasing its effort to advise and support tenants to resolve minor issues themselves and to ensure that request for service are genuine and appropriate. This will allow the available resources to be use most effectively.

One frequent cause of boiler failure in cold weather, is a frozen condensate pipe. This is something which many tenants can resolve themselves, and staff will explain over the telephone how the tenant can thaw the pipe safely and re-set their boiler. Advice about this is also available on our website, and we are making sure that a link to this is easily identifiable.

To support tenants, a new, easy to access document is being produced which will explain what the Council House out of hours service repair and maintenance service is able to cover. It will give details of where tenants and residents can find help on our website and how they can report non-urgent service requests out of hours.

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Resolving the issues which became apparent over the weekend of 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>h</sup> December 2022 is on-going. We are committed to offering the very best service we can to residents and tenants.

**Keith Gerrard, Strategic Director of Communities**