
Agenda Item: Out of Hours Service – one point of call

Meeting Date: Monday, 24 November 2025

Contact Officer: Compliance and Environment Officer

The purpose of this report is to update Members on an Out of Hours Service providing one point of contact.

Background

At the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 6 June 2022, officers presented a report concerning the development of the Witney Town Council Emergency Plan. The document has remained in draft form since that time. Several actions were recommended during the meeting, which officers are now actively investigating and progressing along with completion of the Witney Community Emergency Plan.

Current Situation

The Witney Flood Group recently raised concerns with officers regarding the Witney Community Flood Emergency Plan, specifically noting the absence of a single point of contact for the Town Council during an out of hours emergency.

Currently, the Council's arrangements involve several staff contact numbers, including that of the Key Holding Company. The key holding company primarily responds to building alarm activations and, if requested by staff, can engage contractors to carry out emergency repairs outside of normal working hours (e.g. boarding up windows to secure a property). Permanent repairs are then arranged by the Operations Manager during standard working hours, either through the in-house Operations Team or specialist contractors. The key holding company are not able to support emergency out of hours call handling from the public.

A mobile number for an officer is detailed on the Council's website and advises 'In a genuine out of hours emergency, relating only to Witney Town Council services or property, such as dangerous structures in cemeteries and play areas, that are a threat to life, please call 07423 124006.'

The Council's main telephone number does have various messages dependant on the office shutdowns during bank holidays etc. but the messaging is currently not consistent for members of the public.

Several staff roles actually include the following clauses in their job descriptions, which form part of their contractual terms and conditions:

- To be available to respond to out-of-hours emergencies on a rota basis if appropriate.
- To participate in any call-outs and out-of-hours works if required due to vandalism, public safety or property security.
- Monday to Friday inclusive (some flexibility is required to meet the needs of the business to cover such issues as occasional evening meetings, on-call rota, call-outs, events, etc.)

Officers have advised that within the last 12 months there have been a total of twelve out-of-hours call outs. Six of these related to the Council's buildings.

Officers are currently working in collaboration with West Oxfordshire District Council and Oxfordshire County Council to finalise the Witney Community Emergency Plan. As part of this process, it has been recommended that a single point of contact be established for use outside of normal working hours. Once completed, the Community Emergency Plan will also serve to complement and strengthen the existing Witney Community Flood Emergency Plan.

In an emergency affecting the community, the Council's staff would help where it can, based on its own resources and limits, following instructions from Category 1 Responders (e.g. Emergency Services, District and County Councils, Environment Agency etc.). It should be noted that the Town Council is not a Category 1 Responder in an emergency.

Out of Hours Service Support

Officers have investigated options for an out of hours call handling service where there would be one point of contact outside of normal working hours. The Council's main daytime telephone number would be transferred outside of working hours to a special number that identifies as a Witney Town Council number. The service would also offer weekend and Bank Holiday coverage. Telephone calls could also be transferred if a complete office closure were required due to training or an emergency to enable business continuity to be maintained.

Process

The call handling service would listen to the caller and identify if the call were an emergency as per the Council's specification and detail. Depending on the nature of the call and through an agreed escalation process, a contractor may be deployed. Any follow up work required will be recorded and detailed in a report, which would be emailed to the Council the next working day at the start of business.

Reports

Comprehensive daily, weekly and monthly reports will be emailed to the Council or uploaded on a secure website that the Council has secure login.

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) Equality - The introduction of a single point of contact for out-of-hours emergencies ensures equitable access to support for all members of the community, including vulnerable individuals who may be disproportionately affected during emergencies. It also supports staff by providing clarity and reducing ambiguity in emergency response expectations, whilst recognising that the Town Council is not a Category 1 Responder in an emergency.
- b) Biodiversity - There is no direct impact on biodiversity. However, timely responses to environmental incidents (e.g. flooding or pollution) may help mitigate potential harm to local ecosystems.
- c) Crime & Disorder - A coordinated out-of-hours response can help reduce the risk of crime and anti-social behaviour by ensuring swift action is taken to secure Council properties and respond to incidents, thereby supporting community safety.
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency – The implementation of an out-of-hours service aligns with the Council's Climate Emergency declaration by enabling faster responses to environmental hazards (e.g. flooding, storm damage), potentially reducing long-term environmental impacts. It also supports climate resilience planning.

Risk

Establishing and maintaining an out of hours service will require additional funding, staffing arrangements, or contracts (e.g. for call handling or emergency contractors).

In the absence of a formal system, staff may feel pressured to respond informally, leading to inconsistent responses, unclear responsibilities, and potential burnout.

Introducing a formal rota or standby system will require contractual changes, appropriate remuneration, and clear policies to ensure fairness and compliance with employment law.

There is a risk that an out of hours service could be used for non-emergency issues unless clear criteria and communication protocols are established.

As a public authority, the Council may be expected to have clear emergency protocols in place. Lack of provision could be seen as a gap in resilience planning.

Social Value

Providing a reliable and responsive out-of-hours service demonstrates the Council's commitment to community wellbeing, resilience, and public service. It enhances trust in local governance and contributes to a safer, more supportive environment for residents.

Financial Implications

An initial one-off setup fee will be required to establish the out-of-hours service.

A monthly service fee will apply.

A charge per call handled within that monthly period.

The agreement will be subject to a minimum 12-month contract term.

The initial 12-month cost excluding charges per call handled = £14,520 excl. VAT.

The costs would require additional budget allocation.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. **Assess Feasibility and Cost**

Evaluate the practicality and financial implications of introducing a third-party, out-of-hours call handling service.

2. **Explore Internal On-Call Options**

Request officers to review current internal management procedures and develop potential options for providing an on-call service to respond to out-of-hours emergencies. Officers to report back with findings and proposed options at a future committee meeting for consideration.