

# Briefing Notes

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Monday 12 September 2016

Responsible officer: Mark Sheldon, Director Resources

This note contains information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Cabinet or a committee but where no decisions from Members are needed.

If Members have questions relating to matters shown, they are asked to contact the Officer indicated.

## Telephony system outage, 24 June 2016

### 1. Why the telephony system outage occurred

- 1.1. The telephony system outage occurred on Friday 24 June, affecting incoming calls to the Council, Cheltenham Borough Homes, Ubico and the Cheltenham Trust; ie it was not possible for members of the public to contact any of these organisations by phone. The ICTSS (ICT Shared Service) became aware of the problem at 9.00am and immediately contacted the supplier, Virgin Media.
- 1.2. The problem was quickly isolated to the failure of a power supply unit within the incoming calls system. The ICT service made it clear to the supplier that the matter was urgent, but the only way to resolve the problem was to fit a new power supply unit, which needed to be sent by courier to the Municipal Offices. This did not arrive before the offices closed at 5.00pm.
- 1.3. The part was replaced first thing on Monday morning and the full telephony system was back in service by mid-morning.

### 2. Measures to mitigate the impact

- 2.1. All the affected organisations were kept informed of the situation via the intranet and through email. A message was placed on the council's website and a media release issued informing residents that incoming calls could not be received by the affected organisations and suggesting alternative ways of accessing services. This was distributed to a wide range of local press contacts including the Gloucestershire Echo, BBC Radio Gloucestershire, Breeze FM and Heart FM.
- 2.2. Virgin Media were asked to place an automated message on the system for customers who tried to ring in. Unfortunately, due to the lack of a clear documented process, the divert to a new number did not work as it should have.

### 3. Lessons learned

- 3.1. Since the incident the ICT service have reviewed and documented the process of dealing with a total failure of the telephone system at Cheltenham and the steps required to place the necessary automated messages with Virgin Media, thus improving overall resilience going forward.

- 3.2. A discussion has also taken place with the Cabinet Member Corporate Services about how communication can be improved.
- 3.3. Messages regarding the difficulties were quickly disseminated into the public domain, but it was acknowledged that communication with the lead cabinet member – and indeed other members – could have been timelier to ensure any queries addressed to members could be dealt with appropriately. It is not always clear how complex a problem is or how quickly it can be resolved; however, a protocol is now emerging to ensure ‘no surprises’. This was tested recently during a system outage that occurred on 9 August and worked well.

#### **4. Improving resilience**

- 4.1. The existing telephony system is several years old and runs on its own telephone network, so when a component fails in the system the only solution is to replace it. The impact on the telephony system depends on where any failure occurs, but it can be significant and the need to replace component parts inevitably leads to a delay in bringing the system back up. A backup telephony system is not available and so business continuity processes need to be deployed in the meantime.
- 4.2. However, over the next twelve months, the ICTSS is replacing this separate telephone system with one which will be integrated with the ICT network. This system is already in use at Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council. The immediate benefits of this type of system are:
  - a) It does not depend on a separate system of phone lines and therefore there are fewer points of weakness within the system
  - b) The network itself is resilient and has been configured to enable re-routing should failures occur at different points in the network
  - c) Telephone numbers are not fixed to a physical location. This means that:
    - in the event of a failure at a particular location, for example the council offices in Cirencester, calls can be transferred to be picked up elsewhere, such as the Municipal Offices in Cheltenham. Whilst the person taking the call may not be able to answer a query they can take messages and members of the public will get through to a person rather than receiving an automated message
    - if a significant incident occurred at the Municipal Offices, which meant it could not be occupied, staff in priority service areas, such as customer services, could be relocated temporarily elsewhere, for example the Town Hall, Coleford, Cirencester and still pick up calls coming into Cheltenham numbers
- 4.3. Over the longer term, the enhanced functionality of this system could offer increased flexibility. Examples include enabling video-conferencing from individual desks and work numbers being accessible from home.
- 4.4. This project is in its early stages and will be rolled out in phases across Ubico, CBH, The Cheltenham Trust and the Council.
- 4.5. User will be kept up-to-date with the progress of this project and further information will be released by the ICT Shared Service in due course.

Contact Officer: Gill Morris, Client Officer  
Tel No: 01242 264229  
Email: [gill.morris@cheltenham.gov.uk](mailto:gill.morris@cheltenham.gov.uk)