

WIRRAL COUNCIL

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 7TH JUNE 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF TECHNICAL SERVICES

A REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE SEVERE WEATHER IN JANUARY 2010

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report is provided in response to a request made by Cabinet on the 14 January 2010 (Minute 250 refers):

Cabinet recognises the positive aspects of undertaking a formal review of winter maintenance arrangements across the Council and recommends the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertake this work.

- 1.2 It highlights the make-up of the current winter maintenance budget and requests Committee Members views as to whether that allocation is still sufficient given the likelihood of a recurrence of this type of weather in the future.
- 1.3 It also provides Committee Members with information as to the extraordinary lengths that some departments and employees went to in ensuring business continuity and client welfare.
- 1.4 The report is purely for background and at committee a PowerPoint presentation will be made covering all areas of winter activity and to seek agreement from committee as to how best to conduct the requested review.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Weather forecasts in the first week of January 2010 suggested that snow was likely in the North West of England and the Met Office issued several weather warnings during that week. The weather forecasts predicted a 60% possibility of 5 – 10 cms of snow falling in some areas of the North West, with a risk of drifts on higher ground.
- 2.2 The snowfall that occurred on the afternoon of the 5th January 2010 on Wirral actually reached 35cms and was the heaviest recorded for over 18 years.
- 2.3 The snow was also accompanied by an unprecedented period of freezing conditions that began on the 30th December and did not relent until the middle of January. Many areas recorded their lowest temperatures for many years with Woodford (Manchester Airport) reaching –17.5 °C its lowest for over 70 years.
- 2.4 Unsurprisingly the combination of snow falling on an already frozen road network led to widespread disruption of traffic and resulted in a significant number of buses and trains being cancelled or postponed at short notice.

- 2.5 The severe weather and its impact on the transport network severely affected other businesses and agencies. Wirral NHS reported a number of appointments were cancelled and ambulance staff had to carry patients considerable distances to treated (main) roads. There was also an increased number of attendees to A&E and orthopaedic clinics to treat patients with fractures, which required a cancellation to out-patient clinics for one day and some elective operations were also cancelled.
- 2.6 It is now widely accepted that periods of high intensity weather patterns are likely to become more common. Indeed the government has taken the step of increasing the risk of a severe weather occurrence, to the highest probability section in the National Risk Register.
- 2.7 This report highlights the key findings identified from an internal review of the effects of the severe weather on the Council's Services. The review concentrated on the winter maintenance provision but also identified some good practice adopted by certain departments and also some areas for improvement.
- 2.8 What became clearly evident from the review were reports of the extraordinary lengths that many employees went to in an effort to ensure service continuity and the welfare of the vulnerable residents of Wirral.

3.0 WINTER MAINTENANCE

- 3.1 Wirral has a history of maintaining a very efficient winter maintenance programme and continuing support of the winter maintenance budget evidences this commitment to safe roads. However heavy snow followed by lengthy freezing temperatures pose incredibly difficult conditions to try and maintain safe roads.
- 3.2 Members will already be aware that Cabinet agrees the Winter Maintenance provision and any supporting budget on an annual basis. This budget is continually reviewed to ensure that it meets needs of Wirral and includes the treatment (gritting) of pre-determined primary and secondary roads, the distribution and maintenance of grit bins and other winter maintenance related activities.
- 3.3 The current budget for winter maintenance is £269,700 and this equates to approximately 31 gritting operations per year across a road network of approximately 240 miles. It also pays for the provision and maintenance of some 86 grit bins.
- 3.4 What became increasingly clear during this most recent period of freezing temperatures is that a never-ending supply of rock salt is increasingly unlikely. Following on from lessons learnt during the freezing temperatures of February 2009, in times of high demand for rock salt and other treatments, the Government establishes a national "Salt Cell". The "Salt Cell" is a central government coordination group established to ensure the fair and equitable distribution of rock salt to all LA's across the country. Local Authorities in the North West experienced the "Salt Cell" during the severe weather in February 2009 and grew to understand its importance. I am pleased to report to Members that Wirral had a 100% record reporting our rock salt stock levels to central government and in turn I believe this led to us continuing to receive deliveries and not running out.

- 3.5 However, Members must be advised that the levels of Rock Salt did get down to critically low levels. I believe this was as a result of a number of reasons:
- The actual number of gritting operations was far more than in previous years (48 compared to an average of 31 over the last few years).
 - Due to the severity of the road conditions and the weather it was necessary to increase the spread rate – this resulted in 1250 tonnes more than average.
 - There was an outstanding order of 1000 tonnes from the supplier leading up to Christmas that was never delivered.
 - Historically a number of extra roads and other areas have been added to the pre-determined gritting routes.
- 3.6 The issue of rock salt supplies not being delivered is not going to recede. Officers have attended a number of meetings with the suppliers and they have explained a number of the moves they are taking to ensure the resilience of their supply network. However based on the amount of usage nationally from the last severe weather there can be no certainty that supplies will not be affected again as they are unable to meet the demand.
- 3.7 Members should also be aware that the amount of rock salt that we can order is limited by the size of the “salt barn” storage facility. Rock Salt must be stored under cover to ensure it retains its safety properties. The current salt barn can store a maximum of 2500 tonnes. If members wish to consider further storage capacity then estimated costs are in the region of £300,000 and this will require officers to present a further paper on these details.
- 3.8 Government advice issued during the severe weather requested Councils to provide details of how they would reduce their salt usage. Wirral undertook this theoretical exercise and following these guidelines we can, in critical circumstances deliver up to a 60% reduction in the amount of rock salt we use. This is achieved by a combination of reducing the spread rate, reducing the routes that are treated, mixing the rock salt with other alternatives e.g. grit, sand, etc. However, Members should be minded that the decisions to take this action must come from clear central government directive as acting unilaterally could leave the Council at high risk of civil insurance claims and loss of life.
- 3.9 Other measures that have been taken post the severe weather are:
- A one off increase in the 2009/10 Highways Maintenance budget to facilitate a programme of road repairs following the severe weather.
 - A payment of £5000 per Area Forum as part of the You Decide initiative to be spent of winter maintenance equipment – grit bins, snow clearing equipment, etc.
- 3.10 Members should also be mindful that the current gritting fleet is part of the review of the Council’s transport fleet being undertaken by the Director of Adult Social Services.

4.0 OTHER SERVICE AREAS

- 4.1 In an effort to capture as many comments as possible from the review asked each Chief Officer to provide feedback on any issues posed by the severe weather and also to highlight any areas of good practice. These requests were followed up by a range of meetings with nominated departmental officers and a number of one to one meetings with the lead officer and various representatives from interest groups such as the Equality and Diversity Forum.
- 4.2 In direct response to the severe weather a partial emergency crisis management team was quickly established. This led to (at least) daily meetings amongst key managers within each department and a collation of the information by the Health, Safety & Resilience Team. This allowed for the production and dissemination of a briefing paper for employees and a separate one for Elected Members.
- 4.3 In addition to these regular briefings the Health, Safety & Resilience Team produced and forwarded a range of information including weather forecasts, public transportation information and safety guidance notes on dealing with and working in inclement weather.
- 4.4 Members should be aware that the national media attention and the sudden onset of the snow and the already freezing temperatures led to a great amount of uncertainty for employees and clients. The council moved as quickly as it could to coordinate a single message from each relevant service area. This led to constant media messages passed to local radio stations and the informing both employees and the public of the latest situation.
- 4.5 Both DASS and CYPD have undertaken their own respective de-briefs and they have drawn up action plans to improve their response arrangements should these occurrences be experienced here again. Both these departments experienced a tremendous sense of community spirit shown by staff with some specific examples highlighted here:
- DASS and CYPD transport staff worked late into the night on Tuesday 5th January to ensure that all children from special needs schools and clients from day care centres were able to get home safely.
 - Some day care centres acted as refuges for those people from other services who had become stranded.
 - Meals on Wheels were able to ensure that all clients continued to receive meals – to our knowledge none were missed.
 - Several offers of assistance came from the community including the offer of 4 wheeled drive vehicles – this is something that is presently being actively pursued.
 - Working with the Probationary Service on the “Community Payback” scheme, a number of people were put to clearing ice and snow from around GP surgeries, health, centres and other critical community amenities.
- 4.6 Work will continue to build on the many lessons learnt following this severe weather and where appropriate formalised plans will be written to ensure that the agreed methods of dealing with this type of occurrence is captured.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The 2010-2011 winter maintenance budget of £269,700 together with the one off additional allocation of £250,000 in 2009-2010 detailed in para 3.9 was agreed by Cabinet on 22 February 2010.
- 5.2 Members views are sought as to the future of the Winter Maintenance budget, though it is important to note that an increase in resilience and service provision will lead to increase costs.

6.0 STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 It is expected that existing staff resources will be used to implement this programme of work.

7.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Whilst there are no specific ethnic minority, elderly persons or equal opportunities implications arising directly from this report, weather of this nature gives greatest problems to the mobility of the elderly and the disabled. It is expected that any review of the winter maintenance routes will take account of community amenities where services relating to these members of the community frequent.

8.0 HEALTH IMPLICATIONS/IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

- 8.1 A well-maintained highway has positive health implications in terms of ensuring the safe and efficient movement of traffic and pedestrians.
- 8.2 Nationally periods of severe weather lead to an increase of fractures and other impact injuries from slips and falls.

9 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are none arising out of this report.

10 PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no specific planning implications arising out of this report.

11 ANTI-POVERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are no specific anti-poverty implications arising from this report.

12 SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 There are no specific social inclusion implications arising out of this report.

13 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 There are none arising from this report.

14 LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 The Winter Maintenance Programme and associated severe weather planning covers all Wards.

15 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 15.1 The following papers were referred to in the compilation of this report:

- Cabinet 14 January 2010 Minute 250
- Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee requested under Any Other Business
- Health & Well-being Overview & Scrutiny Committee 25 March 2010 – Agenda Item 10 – Report of the Director of Adult Social Services
- Lessons Learnt from the Severe Weather February 2009 – UK Roads Liaison Group 2009. <http://www.ukroadsliaisongroup.org/liaison/winter.htm>
- Department of Transport guidance Are You Ready for Winter? www.dft.gov.uk/adobepdf/165237/areyoureadyforwinter.pdf

16 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 16.1 Committee is requested to note the impact of the severe weather in January 2010 and provide views on whether the councils' current winter maintenance provision is still sufficient given the likelihood of a recurrence of this type of weather in the future.