



SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES AND TRANSPORTATION SELECT COMMITTEES' REPORT TO CABINET

13 July 2010

REPORT OF THE JOINT SCRUTINY REVIEW OF SEVERE WINTER WEATHER

Purpose of the report: Policy Development and Review

To consider the conclusions of the joint scrutiny review of the recent severe winter weather and to make appropriate recommendations to Cabinet.

Introduction:

- 1 Between December 2009 and February 2010 Surrey and the rest of the UK experienced the most severe winter weather conditions for 30 years. Whole communities, industries, schools, hospitals and other services were badly affected with widespread disruption throughout the Country.
- 2 Unsurprisingly, the Council's winter planning was based on the experiences of recent years and was not fully prepared in a number of respects to cope with the exceptional demands placed upon it.
- 3 During the severe winter conditions, there had been a 25% increase in hospital admissions over 2009¹. Three hospitals reported a fracture rate of one per minute at one stage. There were between 25,000 – 29,000 daily car breakdowns according to the Automobile Association. The cost to the national economy was estimated at £900 million per day or a total cost of £4 billion². Attention should be drawn to these statistics when Cabinet is considering the cost to taxpayers of providing a reasonable level of response capability. Surrey was 2nd from the bottom of the table of local authorities' customer satisfaction rating of our winter performance.
- 4 Following this severe winter weather, Surrey County Council's Safer and Stronger Communities and Transportation Select Committees undertook

¹ Paul Watters, Head of Public Affairs, The Automobile Association 'Snow Summit 2010'

² Ibid

a Joint Scrutiny Review to assess how the services in Surrey responded to the snow and ice.

- 5 Witnesses from Emergency Management, Adult Social Care, Health, the Council's Contact Centre, Schools and Highways were invited to submit evidence for the review. The Committees also considered additional information provided by Members, based on the events in their local communities.
- 6 There were a lot of positive comments on the response from the county, particularly with regards health and social care and schools. These are detailed in the minutes of the meeting, annexed to this report. This report aims to identify areas for improvement in the response to severe weather and therefore focuses on the problems identified. All recommendations made by the committees are listed at the end of this report.

Emergency management

- 7 There is a need to manage public expectations of the level of service that the County Council is able to provide in an emergency situation. Regular communication with residents will help to inform the public of what to expect. Members enquired whether community based schemes such as 4x4 clubs and neighbourhood watch were being utilised in emergency situations and suggested that ways of working together should be explored.
- 8 Since the snow in February 2009, the number of officers on call at one time has been increased, but there is a risk of the service being under resourced in the event of a large-scale emergency. More officers need to be trained in emergency procedures to offer greater support to the team.
- 9 Communication with councillors is identified as an area for improvement. It is important that they can access up-to-date information to enable them to disseminate it locally and respond appropriately. County Councillors can play an important role in emergencies as they have extensive local knowledge and can mobilise resources locally.
- 10 Isolated communities, particularly those on steep hills, are vulnerable in severe weather due to poor access to facilities and services. Parish and town councils have been encouraged to produce their own emergency plans³ but so far only 15 out of 80 have done so. Where isolated communities do not have a parish or town council, or where they may not be the most appropriate mechanism, the Emergency Management Team (EMT) are looking at what community infrastructure exists to fulfil this role. Members suggested this could include neighbourhood policing teams or the neighbourhood watch groups. Members stressed that local members should be involved in any discussions with local groups.

³ Emergency plans are developed in relation to a number of potential emergencies and do not exclusively consider the impact of winter weather.

- 11 Prior to the winter season, steps should be taken to remind households and motorists that winter is approaching and common sense measures should be considered; car tyres checked, some salt / grit purchased, snow shovels used etc. However the legal position concerning the clearing of footpaths by householders needs to be clarified. The expectations of partners, such as boroughs and districts, also need to be communicated to ensure planning is undertaken with a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities.

Surrey schools

- 12 Throughout the snow, parents were kept informed of school closures via websites and the text messaging system, supplied by Battle Baton. Local Education Officers are able to update the County Council website which has greatly improved the speed of communication. Members suggested that the use of automated phone calls could be explored for parents without access to computers or mobile phones.
- 13 Secondary schools remained closed for most of the snow period, however were praised for their efforts in reopening in time for the examinations period. It was suggested that schools could put in place more robust plans for 'helping themselves' in future, enlisting the services of willing parents and the community.
- 14 The Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) issued a special absence code for schools unable to open due to snow. However, this code cannot be used for children unable to access a school that had opened. It is quite possible that this could deter schools from opening due to the negative effect on absenteeism rates. This will be drawn to the attention of the DCSF.
- 15 Certain major bus routes did not open for several days, creating difficulties accessing schools. Although the routes themselves were clear, poor access to the bus depots meant that some services were inoperable. Members felt that schools, particularly those on steep hills or a short diversion from existing gritting routes, should be prioritised. It was felt that independent schools should be given the same priority as county schools as around 20% of pupils in Surrey attend independent schools.
- 16 Poor access to Surrey's 23 special and short-stay schools (formally Pupil Referral Units) caused problems for parents and teachers. Despite them being identified as a priority by the Council, the response did not match expectations. Members stressed the importance of prioritising special schools given their broader role in social care. The number of transport contractors per school played a big part in the successful opening of special schools in the county and this should be investigate further.
- 17 Many teachers were unable to get to schools safely. Members proposed a system of 'emergency cover' allowing teachers to attend schools closer

to their home address, therefore reducing the requirement to drive in unsafe conditions. This system may increase the capacity for some schools to open, however it would have implications for safeguarding.

Health and social care

- 18 Adult Social Care worked closely with Surrey Carers Association to develop a business continuity plan to cope with the snow. Care providers supported each other with mutual aid where possible, deploying care workers flexibly where they were needed most. Some hospitals had entered into contracts for snow clearance on sites and there was a need to ensure this was considered in their business continuity plans.
- 19 The identification of vulnerable people remains a priority and EMT has made significant improvements in this area, however there is particular concern about the identification of people who become vulnerable during an emergency. The Contact Centre was useful in responding to calls from the public, but there is a need for all services to work together to ensure that the information is as comprehensive as possible.
- 20 Extensive power cuts caused problems for health and social care. EMT reported that Scottish and Southern Power lacked the technology to inform the Council exactly where power outages were being experienced which in turn affected the services ability to respond to vulnerable people.
- 21 Community Hospitals are not a high priority to open in an emergency. A comprehensive priority list is being drawn up to see if any community hospitals could be used to treat patients locally and reduce the demand on accident and emergency centres

Customer Services

- 22 Feedback on the Customer Services' response to the snow has been far more positive than the previous year. The increased use of teleconferencing was very successful in reducing the need for officers to travel. The Web Operations and Contact Centre Managers were part of the daily conference calls with EMT, which helped decide what information was required to go on the website.
- 23 The Contact Centre can be operated from an alternative site if the current building is inaccessible. There is concern, however, that there is only one information management and technology (IMT) engineer designated to support the Contact Centre. This issue is top of the service risk register and work is underway with IMT to bolster resilience in this team.

Surrey Highways

Command and Control

- 24 In some areas the command and control of the incident was not flexible enough to respond to local demands. However, consistent efforts were

made to ensure a strategic overview and where specific requests were made, efforts were made to respond. The committees felt that communication could be improved to keep the public and officers informed of the situation. It is recommended that when the high level County Council Coordination Group meets, a Cabinet Member is included.

Salt Stocks

- 25 Based on the Government advice to stock six days supplies of salt and the Met Office long term weather forecast, our decision to stock nine days supplies in line with the UK Roads Liaison Group (RLG) appeared wise. It was noted that the Government Highways Agency stocks 18 days worth of salt supplies. Even at the nine day level, stocks were rapidly run down. The Council's contractors had indicated that additional supplies could be obtained at 24-hours notice. However, due to the whole country being affected by the weather, additional salt supplies were difficult to obtain as they were prioritised on a national level.
- 26 Surrey has a capacity to store 13,500 tonnes of salt. Salt does not significantly deteriorate over a number of years. Stocks can confidently be purchased to our maximum storage capacity with only 'top-up' supplies to cover actual use being required every subsequent year. Steps should be taken to procure salt stocks in September / October and arrangements put in place for additional resupply if necessary. Advantageous procurement arrangements could be made with neighbouring authorities. Local committees should consider whether some salt stocks could be dispersed to boroughs, districts and parishes.
- 27 Clearing ice is a statutory duty for the County Council and it would be a risk to the county to delegate this responsibility more locally unless it can be satisfied that it will be done safely. It is also more cost effective to treat roads on a countywide basis. Town and village centres can perhaps be more effectively treated by Boroughs, Districts or Parishes and the cost of this would need to be considered.
- 28 Work is ongoing to find a way to enable borough and district staff with HGV licences to help with driving gritters if necessary. The current winter maintenance vehicles are old and becoming unreliable and it is required that the highway contractors will supply vehicles when the new highway contract is in place.

Gritting Techniques

- 29 Various methods of clearing snow and ice are in use throughout the UK and overseas. Pre-salting, salt/grit mixes, brine, other materials are all in use. It is recommended that a technical study and research be undertaken to identify the optimum response to the clearance of snow and ice.

Gritting Vehicles

- 30 There is a wide range of vehicles employed throughout the country to clear snow/ice bound roads. These range from standard cargo vehicles spreading salt/grit manually to the very sophisticated specialist vehicles.
- 31 Surrey presently deploys around 40 vehicles, many of which are coming to the end of their life. The vehicles are provided by and manned by our contractors. With the pending re-tendering of the existing SHiP contract, it would be appropriate to consider: -
 - a. the number and type of gritting vehicles needed to service Surrey's roads.
 - b. the equipment and techniques to be utilised.
 - c. the manning and training of the drivers.
 - d. the availability locally of additional vehicles to be hired as necessary, which should be investigated locally.
 - e. the management, control, ownership and deployment of vehicles and equipment to be examined.

Gritting routes

- 32 Prioritisation of gritting routes remains an area of concern particularly when salt supplies run low. Access routes to public transport, schools and pavements in areas where foot travel is necessary should be prioritised more highly. Local Members' knowledge could be of benefit when considering gritting routes. Plans for alternative routes if salt supplies are restricted should also be drawn up.
- 33 Fitting winter tyres or snowshoes to vehicles, as is common in Europe, would reduce the environmental impact of excessive gritting of roads, but extensive Government publicity and incentives would be required to change motorist's habits.
- 34 Doubt was cast on the claim that 40% gritting of 4835km of our Surrey roads was achieved. Even the 1643km of principal and non-principal roads was not completely covered, particularly in the later snow/ice episodes. Highways officers explained that this was met when a full stock of salt was available, but not once the impact of salt shortages was felt.
- 35 Further consultation with local committees, Local Highway Managers and Members is required to determine the most effective priority routes to be gritted.
- 36 The deployment and continued servicing of additional salt bins was strongly supported. It was felt that the present assessment system for deploying salt bins was unnecessarily bureaucratic and more notice

should be taken of local committee and Member recommendations. It is already recognised that the optimum provision of salt bins is an aid to road safety as well as being the major source of 'self help' to householders and drivers. Further investigation is required, taking into account budgetary implications.

- 37 The use of Community Payback Offenders should be examined as a positive source of manpower to assist in filling salt bins, gritting town centres and other appropriate tasks.

Salt Bins

- 38 The criteria for the allocation of salt bins, agreed by the Cabinet in 2009, was criticised by Members. Particular concerns were raised as to a lack of salt bins and the delay in refilling those that are available. It is not clear where salt bins are located across the county. Members requested that this information be provided on local area maps for local members, local committees, and local groups as appropriate.
- 39 It is suspected that salt is being stolen from salt bins and subsequently used to clear residents' driveways for a fee. It is also suspected that some people are using the salt provided in the bins for their own personal use. It is not possible to police this but publicity should discourage it.

Conclusions:

- 40 Overall, Surrey's emergency response to the snow was positive. Staff were praised on their efforts to keep schools open during the snow and health and social care workers were congratulated for going the extra mile in ensuring that vulnerable people in the county were cared for. Many people had gone well above and beyond what was expected of them.
- 41 Areas for improvement have been identified, particularly with regards access to information and the prioritisation of gritting roads and pavements. Key to these is effective collaboration with partners and effective communications.
- 42 The Winter Service Plan 2009/10 produced by the Asset Planning Group was based in experiences in February 2009. It is essential that this Service Plan is comprehensively reviewed in the light of this years experience. It will in any event need to be revised as organisational structures change in the coming year.
- 43 Members welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the response to the severe weather and to make recommendations aimed at improvements for the future.

Recommendations

- (a) That the Council explores further ways of working, community groups such as 4 x 4 clubs and neighbourhood watch to see how they can provide assistance and resilience in an emergency.
- (b) That a feasibility study takes place to examine whether school teachers who are unable to commute to their usual place of work could work at their local school to allow as many establishments as possible to stay open.
- (c) That representations be made to the DCSF⁴ to ensure that schools are not deterred from opening by the effect high absenteeism may have on their attendance figures.
- (d) That independent schools be given the same priority for gritting as county schools. That consideration be given to prioritising access to schools on steep hills or a short diversion from existing routes.
- (e) That schools be encouraged to develop their own snow and ice plans involving the local community.
- (f) That the text messaging system, Battle Baton, be extended to the rest of the county. Battle Baton Technology provides a secure web based infrastructure that includes a unique set of online tools that can improve the way people manage their Operational Resilience/Business Continuity in a far more effective way.
- (g) That a strategy be put in place to state how the Council plans to identify residents who become vulnerable during emergency scenarios such as the snow.
- (h) That consideration is given to establishing a 'buddying' system, through which residents are encouraged to check up upon elderly neighbours.
- (i) That a back-up resource for the Contact Centre IMT engineer is found as soon as possible.
- (i) That consideration be given, within budget constraints, to maintaining salt stocks at the maximum level that storage permits.
- (j) That additional salt bins be provided and that the criteria for the allocation of salt bins be reviewed.
- (k) That the advice of local Members be sought through local committees showing maps of locations of bins, with the involvement of local groups as appropriate.
- (k) That gritting routes prioritise access to public transport services including bus depots, train stations and that consideration be given to gritting more pavements particularly on steep hills in isolated communities.

⁴ Since the Committee agreed this recommendation, the department has been renamed the Department for Education

- (l) That gritting routes for various levels of salt availability be made available to local committees for consideration prior to the winter season.
- (m) The possibility of dispersing some salt stocks and/ or salt bins down to boroughs, districts and parishes should be investigated though local committees. Assistance may be required from Highways.
- (n) That consideration be given to how county councillors' ability to coordinate local resources can best be utilised at times of emergency.
- (o) That more advice and information be made available to the public in advance of the winter and self-help encouraged.
- (p) That when the high level County Council Coordination Group meets, a Cabinet Member is included.
- (q) That the public be informed of their legal position if they were to clear their pavement of snow and ice.
- (r) That the Chief Executive reviews an appropriate command and control structure to manage winter emergencies.
- (s) That the use of Community Pay Back Offenders be considered to help in appropriate tasks.
- (t) That an updated and revised Winter Service Plan be considered by the Transportation Select Committee and local committees before winter 2010.
- (u) That more farmers be encouraged to take up our offer of snow ploughs to assist primarily rural communities.
- (v) That schools, hospitals, boroughs, districts and parishes be encouraged to purchase low cost winter safety equipment such as grit spreaders and snow blowers etc.
- (w) That as part of negotiations for the new highways contract, the techniques to clear snow and ice and the number, type, control, manning and deployment of gritting vehicles be reviewed.

Next steps:

The appropriate select committees and local committees will review the plans for the coming winter and scrutinise action on the above recommendations.

REPORT AUTHORS:

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Sources/background papers:

- Agenda and minutes of the Joint meeting of the Transportation and the Safer and Stronger Communities Select Committees on 10 March 2010.
- Submissions from Local Committees and Members.
- 'Data from Essex County Council regional Snow Summit'