

AGENDA ITEM

**REPORT TO EXECUTIVE
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

16 FEBRUARY 2010

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
DIRECTOR OF
DEVELOPMENT AND
NEIGHBOURHOOD
SERVICES**

REVIEW OF WINTER MAINTENANCE SERVICES

SUMMARY

Over the last few weeks Stockton-on-Tees and the Country has seen periods of extreme weather conditions with snow events lasting for weeks at a time. These have at times been combined with sub-zero Road Surface Temperatures (RST's) and air temperatures amongst some of the lowest seen in decades.

This report presents a review of the Winter Maintenance Policy in light of recent events. The report presents proposals following consultation with elected members, public and staff. The report also identifies learning points for discussion and consideration.

Any suggested increase of the Council response to severe weather events need also to be considered within the tight financial constraints that the Council faces. There are clearly some learning opportunities following recent events and detailed consideration of these will need to take place.

It is also critical to note the damaging effect the severe weather has had on the infrastructure of the Borough's roads. A full inspection of the road network has taken place and early indications show excess damage. Consideration will also need to be given to the post event activities such as road repairs and budget implications will be considered within the Council's Financial Plan.

The following will be actioned:

1. That the Winter Maintenance Plan be reviewed in light of the severe weather experienced over the last few weeks.
2. That a Snow Plan be devised with options for additional snow clearing activities and service improvements. The Snow Plan will consist of a set of actions, which can be brought into operation at the start of a Snow Event which will better meet the Public expectations
3. That details of post event reparations be investigated and costed in term of resources required following severe weather events to repair the road network. Early indications suggest the recent prolonged snow event has caused additional damage to the road network.
4. An improved Communications Action Plan be devised to improve residents knowledge and ensure regular and updated information regarding SBC winter maintenance activities is easily accessible

5. That a further report be brought back to the Regeneration and Transport Select Committee at an appropriate time with costed options associated with the above.

RECOMMENDED

Executive Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the report and endorse the submission of a further report to the Regeneration and Transport Select Committee at an appropriate time with costed options as set out above.

BACKGROUND

1. The recent cold weather seen at the end of 2009 leading into the early part of 2010 has been described as a “one-in-thirty-year event”. Recent prolonged snow and ice linked to the extreme weather seen in February 2009 suggest that a review of Stockton Borough Council Winter Maintenance policy would provide an opportunity to revise operational responses to these extreme events to more readily meet the expectations of residents.
2. The weather seen in early January 2010 was so extreme as to cause the River Tees in Stockton to freeze over. This is an indication as to the severity of the extreme prolonged weather conditions and suggests our policies will benefit from review. During the current extreme weather event Stockton has received many compliments for the work undertaken and some complaints where resident’s expectations have not been met. The Council as a Highway Authority has a statutory duty under the Highways Act 1980, to remove snow and maintain the highway and so far as is reasonably practicable that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice.
3. To ensure we do this we have a hierarchical approach to road gritting activities with link to the major road networks i.e. the A66 and A19. The current Gritting Priority 1 Routes include Principal roads, important commuter routes, roads to industrial establishments, important bus routes and roads serving shopping centres. These routes are gritted each time the gritting crews are called out. Only in extreme conditions and when resources allow do Priority 2 Routes get gritted. These routes include supporting frontline Services (Refuse-Recycling), known trouble and accident spots not covered in Priority 1’s and all other authorised bus routes.
4. During the recent extreme weather there has been significant action taken during the period from 18th December 2009 up until 10th January 2010 and during that period we have completed an unprecedented 68 gritting runs using 4000 tonnes of salt covering approximately 17,000 miles of Network.

Feedback, Comments and Complaints (Summary of Members Comments – a full list of comments as at **Appendix A**)

5. Member’s comments can broadly be summarised as:-
 - Suggestions for Extending of Priority Routes
 - Suggested additional Salt bins and policy review
 - A review and potential re prioritisation of areas to be hand gritted
 - Additional Allocation of Resources to winter maintenance to improve response times and coverage

Summary of Customer Comments/Complaints

6. From 1st December 2009 to 5th January 2010 a total of 1679 Winter Maintenance request and enquiries were received, this includes 220 requests for a new salt bin (of which 22 have been approved), compared to the same period in 2008/09 where we received 516 enquiries in total.
7. There have also been 51 complaints/comments through the corporate route, of which none were classed as a justified complaint.
8. From analysis of the enquiries and complaints a total of 31 areas had requests of 3 or more for gritting and require further action.
9. Many of the complaints received related to estate roads and pavements in particular areas with gradient slopes and bends. Also many requests related to areas where there are high numbers of elderly residents.
10. All areas have been included in the Winter Maintenance Improvement document **Appendix B** recommendations are included.

Summary of Staff Comments

11. Merge priority and secondary routes.
 - Additional 2-3 vehicles required
 - Additional standby crews required - 3 per vehicle.
 - Additional salt stocks required and
 - Secondary routes should not be ploughed due to width of the road, car parking and traffic calming schemes
12. **Salt Stocks**

SBC supplies have generally held up well. An extension to the Salt Barn could be considered. Stockton Borough council along with the majority of other council are currently trying to reserve stock levels of Salt in response to guidelines issues by Lord Adonis Secretary of State for Transport. To this end reduced amounts of salt are currently being spread until salt stock can be replenished to a reasonable operational level of approximately 1000 tonnes.
13. **Town Centre Gritting**

Winter Maintenance provisions in Thornaby and Billingham is determined by Thornfield and Stockland – consideration to be given to better liaising with Town Centre Management, ensuring clarity of proposed action to be taken as part of the Winter Maintenance Plan from the various responsible organisations
14. **Salt Bins**
 - Current supply: 320 Salt Bins
 - Currently takes 1 x 2 men team 11 days to restock all bins
 - To refill full Borough in ½ day = additional 22 vehicles/22 teams x 44 operatives.
15. **Pavement Clearance**
 - Pavement Clearance could be further prioritised. This would alter current leave arrangement for Horticultural/Highways operative who are currently

encouraged to take leave in the winter time. Time taken by these operative in the summer months will need to be covered at a real cost or significant drops in service delivery may be seen

16. **Use of ICT**

- Website updates useful
- Explore provision of tracking data via web links
- Explore provision of installing web cams on vehicles to enable live gritter viewing.

17. **Car Parks (Council)**

Current gritting arrangements of car parks are to be reviewed – consideration to be given to including this action with revised actions within the Winter Maintenance Plan.

18. In addition to the public enquiries staff have built up a database of hot spot areas in their own wards, which also require further action (see Appendix B). In addition a list of known OAP residential areas to be covered by cleansing, grounds and highway operational staff when prolonged weather persists is being developed.

Learning Points and Conclusions

19. The current Winter Maintenance Policy ensures Stockton Borough Council address their legal obligations in keeping the road network moving as far as practicably possible and has worked well.

20. It is proposed to develop a “Snow Plan” that would be a managed escalation of services in addition to the existing Winter Maintenance Policy. The current Winter Maintenance Policy is still fit for purpose in responding to normal winter conditions, and ensuring we fulfil our legal obligation in managing the road network, however, the Snow Plan will identify response levels that would be introduced during challenging conditions. It is proposed that the key aspect of the Snow Plan are worked up detailing any resource implications that will need to be considered in detail prior to any formal commitment and/or agreement being reached. The proposed Snow Plan will give consideration to issues such as:-

- Gritting during snow events or heavy snow forecast be extend so that Routes 1 & 2 are treated as a matter of course.
- Consider extending the Salt Barn to provide store of 5000 tonnes Rock Salt.
- Additional Resources be made available to add additional Gritting Routes extending the Route 1 Gritting Schedules to include new priority areas identified this year.
- Reviewing CFYA staffing requirement to carry out improved gritting activities.
- Additional gritting routes using other appropriate gritting equipment i.e. quad bikes, adapter mechanical sweepers etc are devised to support the gritting of appropriate residential street shopping areas and other areas identified as a priority.
- Prioritising areas to be treated in Snow conditions including areas such as schools and areas where high numbers of aged resident live.

- Better and planned communications to improve resident knowledge and ensure regular and updated information regarding Stockton Borough Councils winter maintenance activities is easily accessible.

Additional Aspects of the “Snow Plan” for Consideration

21. During normal working hours Cleansing and Grounds Maintenance Operatives were tasked to clear snow on footways on a priority basis. The Priority Areas were Stockton High Street, Norton High Street, Yarm High Street and main shopping precincts as determined in the Winter Maintenance Plan.
22. In addition to the main priority areas, Grounds Maintenance have a number of Service Level Agreements in place to clear snow from schools and they have also been used to clear snow from residential areas, a full list of known hotspots and priority areas (main routes, OAP residential areas) are also cleared when possible. The areas covered by operational areas are on shown in the Winter Maintenance Improvement Plan (**Appendix B**)
23. During snow events the majority of Street Cleaning and all available Horticultural and Highway operatives are diverted on to winter maintenance related activities. This is standard procedure; however the need to maintain higher staffing levels over the Christmas period will need to be reviewed as a consequence of this year’s snow event.

Risk Reduction Issues

24. Over the last 18 months the council has developed a new Salt Barn on Cowpen Lane which has increased our maximum stock levels from 1500 tonne to 3000 tonne. There is potential to extend this facility further to 5000/6000 tonne capacity. This improves our resilience over extended periods of time of snow events and freezing temperatures.
25. Additional Vehicles will enable both Priority routes and Priority 2 routes to be completed as a matter of course. Due to the need to have gritting runs of around 2 ½ hours or less any additional gritting action required will need additional bespoke gritting vehicles.
26. A critical element of the overall risk reduction approach needs to be clearly agreed communication protocols at all levels – the plan needs to be fit to deliver regular information to council members, members of the public, staff and will seek to remain proactive throughout the year as well as the winter period.

Reputational Management Issues

27. A number of improvements in the amount of information available to residents and members during the recent extreme weather have been made by including daily updates of proposed gritting actions on the Council Website.
28. The use of the website can be widened and clearer details of gritting routes and salt bin locations can also be pursued. Also greater information on the reality of salt treatments and what effect residents can expect may also help improve knowledge and manage expectations. The early notification of our winter activities and details of the information held on the Council website should be an annual feature to the Winter or Autumn Stockton News. There’s a significant frustration by members of the public regarding the perceived lack of visibility of Gritting Activities which tend to happen early morning or late evening wherever possible with commuter times being

avoided for obvious reason. There are some real issues around improving resident's knowledge and thus managing expectations which will need addressing through a Winter Maintenance communication action plan which will need to be developed with the Councils Communication Team.

Post Event Implications

29. To better meet Public expectations a number of options for improvements have been a natural result of the extreme weather events of the 2009/2010 Christmas and New Year.
30. It must be remembered that Stockton Borough Council did not run out of Salt, stocks at times were low but deliveries were received on most days and communication between the Tees Valley Authorities and Boulby Potash our Salt suppliers was good.
31. To improve our response ability over a prolonged period the Council has already started to train employees within Care for Your Area to improve the number of qualified HGV drivers.
32. There is additional equipment which can be purchased to strengthen our ability to respond and detail of this is currently been looked at with suppliers.
33. Any detailed proposals following the agreement of resources would be included within the "snow plan" which would seek to build on the effectiveness of the current winter maintenance policy (subject to resources).
34. These severe weather events also have a significant negative impact on the road infrastructure due to pot holes and consideration needs to be given to the additional resources associated with bringing the network back up to standard.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Detailed Financial Implications will be worked up to accompany the amended Winter Maintenance Plan and draft Snow Plan.

RISK ASSESSMENT

This Report is classed as Low to Medium Risk.

COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD COUNCILLORS

Consultation has taken place with ward Members and staff. Comments received from members of the public have also informed this report.

Corporate Director of Development & Neighbourhood Services

Name of Contact Officer: Jamie McCann

Telephone No: 01642 – 527071

Email Address: jamie.mccann@stockton.gov.uk