

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	Improving Places Select Commission
2.	Date:	Wednesday 2nd September 2015
3.	Title:	Winter Maintenance – Review of service response to the severe weather over Christmas 2014
4.	Directorate:	Environment and Development Services

5. Summary

The report provides a commentary on the severe weather event over the Christmas holiday period in 2014, and sets out the actions that have been taken to improve the Council's response in future.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 6.1 The report be noted, and
 - 6.2 Members identify any further actions that they may wish officers to consider to improve service response to severe weather events.
-

7. Proposals and Details

7.1 Background

Christmas Day 2014 fell on a Thursday, so the Council's front line service were effectively 'stood down' until the following Monday; only emergency standby arrangements were in place, and these included Winter Maintenance (gritting) crews. The Council subscribes to a weather forecasting service provided by the Met Office; during Christmas week the 5-day forecast was reviewed and there was no forecast of snow through to the weekend. On Boxing Day the forecast was again checked by the winter Coordinator and at lunchtime no snow was predicted; the forecast changed with about 1½ hours' notice; too late to make any additional arrangements to call in staff. Prior to the snow starting, there was rainfall which prevented the gritters being deployed; when the snow arrived up to 4" fell within an hour in some places.

Because of the amounts of snow the winter maintenance went immediately to 24-hour working, Strategic routes were treated overnight, and principal routes were treated the following day, but as the snow became quickly compacted, the salt was not as effective as it could be. In spite of this only a couple of reports from the emergency services/SYPTE, evidencing that these routes were clear or at least passable with care.

All available gritters were salting continually around the clock from 19:30 hrs on the 26th December (Boxing Day) to 29th December. The Teams rotated from principal routes to secondary routes to side roads and where possible we were able to respond to ad hoc requests after the primary routes were manageable.

While normal standby arrangements were in place, the level of back-up (for hand-salting etc.) was minimal as skeleton staffing levels operated as normal over the holiday period. We will reconsider the how far we stand down services at Christmas, and what are the levels of staffing required to meet such an exceptional event.

Public (and Member) perception was that they have been abandoned - "we didn't see a gritter" – this is at odds with the facts and we can evidence where we have been (through the Exactrak system) but how effective were we at getting the message across?

7.2 Waste

The winter of 2014 was the first year when the Green Waste service was suspended during the winter months. Temporary and Agency staff had been brought in to deliver the weekly (black bin) collections over Christmas but there were no 'spare' resources to provide additional back-up in the event of unexpected problems.

Saturday 27th December was a scheduled catch-up day, but hardly any collections could be completed; by Monday, ground conditions were such that the service fell progressively behind and by Wednesday collections were up to 4 days behind. A decision was then taken to resume the schedules albeit one day behind; in hindsight, too much detail of the recovery plan was published, and some of the detail was confusing both internally to staff handling customer contacts, and to Members and members of the public.

In order to get schedules back in place as soon as possible we had to accept that some premises were going to have an extended period between collections; in the worst case it was 19 days for blue box and bags. Further slippage occurred because of the volumes of waste that were being presented, many households took the opportunity to put out side waste which couldn't be left on the streets; this slowed down collections meaning that rounds weren't being completed to schedule. This resulted in even more calls to the contact centre and contacts via social media.

Over the period we collected about 200 tonnes more waste than the same period last year.

7.3 COMMUNICATIONS

Waste collection is seen by many as probably the most important service they receive from the Council, so we shouldn't underestimate the impact that disruption has onto the volume of customer contacts and complaints. Most of these were channelled through the Council's Contact Centre.

7.3.1 Contact Centre

The Contact Centre handled up to 10 times the normal call volumes. Many of these were repeat calls because we'd fallen behind the revised schedules that were published. Some calls could have been anticipated (and avoided) through having FAQs on the website.

A number of callers asked why we weren't maintaining the normal schedules once the snow had gone. In fact we were effectively doing so (just a day late), but this wasn't clearly communicated.

Handling Winter Maintenance calls – while a lot of calls did go to the Winter Coordinator's mobile, many people resorted to calling the Contact Centre when they couldn't get through. The lack of an up-to-date script on the real time situation exacerbated the problem.

The new (Waste) Bartec system was set up to be able to report against scheduled refuse collections only; this meant that staff in Waste Management resorted to using a paper-based system to control/monitor completed collections. There was no real-time information available for Contact Centre staff which provided details of the backlog of missed collections.

7.3.2 Website

The Emergency banner (Large purple banner on every page) was deployed from 10am Saturday 27th Dec following snow during the previous night; this provided links to the latest information about bins and gritting. The highest number of searches that week was related to refuse collections rather than snow clearance or gritting. Many people had turned to the search engine (30%+ of all searches that week) rather than following the links. In previous years the Emergency Banner had proved very effective at directing people to key information; but the conclusion was that customers have become so accustomed to seeing the CSE message which had been continuously posted for some time that they didn't even register it was now a snow disruption message.

Later on, the CSE message was reinstated, and this also deflected customers from seeing the message about disruption to services. There was a single 'website' complaint saying the info was difficult to find – when contacted, the customer apologised for not actually reading the banner. She went on to explain that she wanted/expected the info for bin collection disruption to be on the main homepage.

There were many complaints about lack, clarity and speed of updates. Because service information was complex it was difficult to re-write quickly for customers (e.g. use of week one / week two) which contributed to misunderstandings. Information seemed disjointed in several places, with reliance on the news section rather than use of central page.

Timing about the change of message on the front page from 'adverse weather' to 'disruption of refuse collection' was not as effective as it could have been; this meant that customers had to search for information elsewhere.

We had only one compliment about the updates – in the past, we have had multiple compliments about the speed and clarity of updates.

7.3.3 Social Media

High levels of customer enquiries and complaints were being handled initially by the Communications Team, but there were not enough resources to deal with the volume. As a result we possibly missed the opportunity to understand where more critical service pressures may have been.

Many contacts through social media were abusive in tone, so did they not receive a response.

Many contacts were re-directed to operational staff, which diverted them from managing the situation, especially in Waste Management.

Rather than trying to answer individual messages in detail, a simpler reply such as "we are doing our best to recover the situation, and leave bins out we will get to it by the end of the week" would have been easier to manage.

7.3.4 Member Communications

The Cabinet Member asked that all Member requests went through him as a single point of contact. For Winter Maintenance this worked well.

We placed a great deal of reliance on e-mails to update members, but messages didn't get through to everyone as some Members' inboxes were full, as a result there were more telephone contacts than there needed to be. For the coming winter we will provide the key points of contact for members, and what the protocols are for recovering service disruption. A **Members workshop** would be helpful to establish and clarify these protocols, as it isn't always practical to respond to them individually.

Once protocols are in place these will help provide inform and manage Members' expectations.

7.3.4 Other issues

Salt bin policy - members feel this should be relaxed to increase the number of bins, but consideration needs to be given to practicality of refilling. This could be supported through the snow warden scheme and work with Parish Councils.

Bus routes - SYPTE do not contact us if they are terminating routes early and or taking services off; there were some instances when services were cancelled which may have kept running if they had contacted us to clear specific locations such as 'turning heads'.

7.4 CHANGES

The review of the events over last Christmas holiday period has identified a number of areas for change and improvement.

- **Standby arrangements** – staffing levels over the Christmas period have been reviewed to provide greater resilience if we have another severe weather event.
- **Daily communications meeting** - Operations/Contact Centre/Communications team will now meet to consider and agree media messages; this will include working together to simplify the format, and to focus on critical service issues.
- **Frequency of updates** – the frequency of updates during periods of service disruption will be at 8am / 1pm / 4pm to ensure latest information is available; these will be provided in scripts to the Contact Centre, on the website and in Member updates.
- **Establish a single officer lead** –one Communications Officer will take an overview of all channels, agreeing key messages with service and co-ordinating with colleagues to update website / social media
- **A bespoke web page for winter maintenance** – Consider creating a web page that can be activated quickly (or sit in the background permanently). This would include links to all key information as in the example from Derbyshire: http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/transport_roads/roads_traffic/road_maintenance/snow_info/default.asp
- The web page will need to have a **clearer message about what the priorities are** as not everything can be the No.1 priority. Precautionary Routes ('A' Roads) need to be shown visually rather than through lists of roads, and a commentary on how we prioritise service request e.g. for emergency services requests or waste collection etc. needs to be included.
- Reinstatement of Google Maps onto the website will allow us to show gritting routes and location of salt/grit bins via the website.
- **FAQs** need to be developed, and links provided via website
- **Development of 'branding' for weather and service updates** - so that, during a period of disruption, updates are highly visible across all channels including website, social media and internal communications.
- **A process and protocols for briefing Members** is in development by service managers and Communications Team, and once formulated needs to be agreed by Members
- **Use of GovDelivery email alerts** – how can we get more people to sign up for alerts?
- **Internal communications** – how do we make better use of the intranet and other channels to get information out?

- **Reaching those not on the internet, e-mail or social media** – need to consider how we reach others e.g. local radio.
- **Other stakeholders** – a wider update list of key contacts such as Parish Clerks, Emergency Services and the Bus Companies has been developed, but others need to be identified.
- A **workshop with the SYPTE and Bus Operators** has been held and a winter protocol has been agreed.
- **Snow Wardens** - we need to work with Parish Councils and Community Groups to publicise the scheme and to sign up more volunteers
- Information from **the Bartec System** is being reviewed to provide better real time information about the status of waste collections in the event of service disruption by the weather. This in turn will enable the Contact Centre to handle calls better.

8. Finance

There are no direct financial implications arising from the report.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

The weather is the most uncertain element in planning and delivering many front line services; it can be unpredictable in its pattern and intensity, so service (continuity) plans are constantly reviewed in the context of the experience from severe weather events.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

The Winter Maintenance service makes a direct contribution to the delivery of the Corporate Plan 2013-16, specifically **CP 3 - ensuring all areas of Rotherham are safe, clean and well maintained.**

11. Background Papers and Consultation

- RMBC Winter Service Manual
- Rotherham Bus Partnership - Winter Liaison Protocol
- Service Business Continuity Plans

Contact Name: *David Burton, Director of Streetpride*
Telephone 01709 822906
e-mail david.burton@rotherham.gov.uk