

## ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	<b>Meeting:</b>	<b>Cabinet</b>
2.	<b>Date:</b>	<b>22 February 2012</b>
3.	<b>Title:</b>	<b>Winter Weather Review</b>
4.	<b>Programme Area:</b>	<b>Resources Directorate</b>

### 5. Summary

The winter of 2010/11 was one of the harshest experienced across the United Kingdom in over 30 years. The freezing temperatures and significant snowfalls from 30<sup>th</sup> November 2010 to 15<sup>th</sup> December 2010 impacted on the entire country. In Rotherham, the road network came to a standstill under the sheer volume of snowfall, the majority of schools were closed and Council & local health services were impacted by the severe weather.

Responding to feedback from the public on a wide range of issues arising, such as widespread boiler failure, demand for residential road clearance and access to information, Elected Members commissioned a review to examine the Council's ability to respond to such extreme conditions.

The review was commissioned by the former PSOC and undertaken jointly by two of our former scrutiny panels; the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel and the Regeneration Scrutiny Panel and commenced in February 2011.

The review was completed in November 2011 and a first draft signed off by the review group in early December. The Overview & Scrutiny Management Board (OSMB) received a briefing on the main issues arising on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2011, with the full report being presented to OSMB on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

The report is attached as Appendix 1.

### 6. Recommendations:

- i) That the recommendations associated with the review are considered;**
- ii) That Cabinet determine what action they wish to take, if any, in light of the findings of the review.**

## 7. Proposals & Details

In January 2011, two of our former scrutiny panels received separate reports relating to residential boiler breakdown<sup>1</sup> and road clearance & gritting;<sup>2</sup> subsequently, a joint review group was commissioned to look at a range of issues that arose during this period. In particular, members wanted to look at the robustness of the Council's Emergency Planning process and other business continuity plans in place to tackle the impact of severe weather conditions on essential services. The review also looked at how our plans & arrangements linked to our partners and local communities. Members set out to establish areas of good practice and lessons that could be learnt from the experience, what worked well, what didn't work so well and what the lessons learnt.

Members have taken into account the useful evaluation and recommendations arising from the post incident report for the A57 incident, whilst focus of this review is on the broader impact of the extreme snow conditions across the Borough.

The review group wish to ensure that all Members are informed of the full range of issues arising in relation to severe winter weather and what lessons can be learnt for future with regard to business continuity in similar circumstances.

This report acknowledges how public service providers, businesses and communities worked together to keep Rotherham Borough moving, despite the challenging weather conditions.

### **The review gathered evidence from:**

Council officers from EDS, NAS, Communications & Area Assemblies; Cabinet Members; Area Assemblies; Parish Council's; Voluntary Action Rotherham; South Yorkshire Police; Ambulance Service; PCT ; South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive; National Farmers Union.

### **An overview of the impact on Rotherham of the adverse weather in November & December 2010 & January 2011:**

- The Road Network severely disrupted with a high level of demand to clear residential roads in addition to managing the clearance of network priority routes;
- A Critical Incident was declared on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2010 by South Yorkshire Police relating to stranded vehicles on the A57. During the evening of 29<sup>th</sup> November and the following day, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2010, the road became impassable as a result of the severe weather.
- Public transport was suspended for 2-3 days depending on location;
- The majority of schools were closed;
- Many council staff were unable to get into work, instead working from home where possible or attending an alternative work location to assist with business continuity;
- Council Services such as waste management, adult social care & corporate communications activated service business continuity plans;
- In our rented sector, 2,645 condensing boilers froze and required emergency repairs;

---

<sup>1</sup> Former Regeneration Scrutiny Panel 12 January 2011 – Item 96

<sup>2</sup> Former Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel – 27 January 2011 – Item 58

- GP Surgeries & chemists were closed;
- The PCT & Ambulance Service activated their relevant business continuity plans in conjunction with organisational emergency planning arrangements.
- The Ambulance Service was under severe pressure to transport people to & from hospital with a high demand for service;
- South Yorkshire Hospitals were on Red Alert due to bed blocking & lack of availability;
- Adult Social Care agencies varied in their ability to respond to business continuity arrangements with the Council stepping in to ensure service continuity for vulnerable residents;
- The RBT Call Centre system went down due to 40,000 calls in December 2010 – the average call number is 10,000 per month.

## **Summary of Findings**

### **Resilience**

- The review found that many officers, councillors, members of the public, emergency services and other partners worked extremely hard during this period to ensure that a minimum level of essential public services were provided across the Borough, in addition to assisting with the critical incident on the A57.
- Without this effort & determination, the impact on individuals & communities would have been much greater than it was.
- The high level of neighbourliness and community spirit in Rotherham was underestimated - one of the key conclusions to this review is that this community resilience needs to be harnessed by the Council to achieve a more co-ordinated response in similar adverse weather conditions.
- The importance of communicating in a timely manner with residents, schools, emergency services, public transport providers and the different levels within local government and partners was a key theme that emerged throughout the evidence gathering process.

### **Council Borough Emergency Plan**

- Under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) the Council must be able to ensure that our response integrates with that of all other relevant agencies, such as the emergency services, neighbouring local authorities, the NHS, public utilities and voluntary agencies.
- The legislation is set out to ensure emergency preparedness, including Business Continuity, is embedded as part of the Council's integrated emergency management system.
- The critical issue arising from this review was the non-activation of the Council's Emergency Plan in December 2010, despite the prolonged duration of the severe weather and its borough wide impact.
- The review found the main benefit of this action would have been to escalate the situation to a strategic level command, co-ordinated from a Control Room operated by the Council and partner agencies.
- The review found an over reliance on the emergency services to advise whether the Borough Emergency Plan should have been fully activated or not at this time.

The Council may activate the plan either by taking advice from the emergency services, and/or by internal observations of a developing situation and it is recommended that this process is revisited to provide clarity.

- *Many witnesses reflected that had this occurred during the adverse weather conditions, coordination between both internal council services and that of the emergency services and other local agencies would have been more robust.*
- However, some officers directly involved in the co-ordination of services during this incident did agree with this finding, claiming that the full activation of the Borough Emergency Plan would have reduced resources elsewhere.
- *The review group has recommended that the Council's Borough Emergency Plan is amended on the basis that escalation of the emergency planning arrangements must be designed to support service resilience (business continuity) against disruptive factors that may arise from both internal and external operating pressures.*
- A related issue for the Council & their partners is the different interpretation of emergency levels and the terms used to describe these; we have recommended that this issue is resolved by the Council working with all partners to develop a common understanding of emergency planning arrangements.

### **Business Continuity**

- Business Continuity worked well for individual directorates and with co-operation from staff, partners & volunteers; but all staff need to plan their response & location in these severe conditions;
- We are recommending that Business Continuity is reviewed for essential services in the light of a reducing work force.
- Service Managers need contact lists and location of their staff and a log kept of where people are.
- Area Assemblies, Elected Members & Parish Council could not fulfil their responsibilities due to a lack of communication & co-ordination. This was an opportunity missed by the Council;

### **Recommendations**

An overview of the challenges faced by all service sectors is set out in the attached report which makes 47 recommendations. These are designed to support the further development of strategic & service plans to improve our ability as a council to respond to adverse weather. We understand that some of these proposals have already been implemented and the review group welcomes this.

### **8. Finance**

The production of the report is financed from the Scrutiny budget although the recommendations of the review will have financial implications subject to the consideration of Cabinet.

## **9. Risks and Uncertainties**

Severe weather sits 5<sup>th</sup> on the National Risk Register as one of the nations most feared risks. In line with the recommendations of this review, the Council should seek to reduce local risks from adverse weather by strengthening the links between our emergency planning arrangements and business/service continuity.

After the severe snow in December 2010, the Secretary of State for Transport sought advice from HM Government's Chief Scientific Advisor on the probability of severe winter weather over the next 20 to 30 years.

The advice indicates: "consistent with historical records, climate model projections typically show large fluctuations between consecutive winters. The occurrence of one or two cold winters is therefore not necessarily a good indicator of a further cold winter."

It also advises that gradual warming is predicted by climate models as greenhouse gases increase. However, natural annual variability is expected to dominate the warming signal for at least the next decade or two. The outlook, therefore, remains variable and difficult to predict over the forthcoming 20 to 30 years.

The risks for road users in heavy snowfalls include low temperatures leading to an increased risk of ice and road blockage in severe snowfalls. The risk to the Council is twofold; firstly, the ability of our gritters to keep the network clear and passable given that even after treating with salt, road conditions may still be challenging; and secondly, the potential for vehicles to become stranded presenting a wider risk for all emergency, road clearance & care services.

Other risks associated with this type of severe weather relate to the increase in demand for GP, Hospital & Ambulance Services due to a spike in respiratory conditions & fracture injuries caused by falling. These Services review plans on an annual basis to continually improve the management of high demand for service relating to severe weather.

Finally, there are risks associated with levels of community resilience being too low to cope effectively with adverse weather. The recommendations of this review highlight the need to further develop emergency planning & community resilience arrangements with Parish Councils, Area Assemblies & voluntary community groups.

## **10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications**

- Rotherham Borough Emergency Plan;
- Department of Health's Cold Weather Plan for England; November 11;
- NHS Rotherham Winter Plan – December 2011;
- Winter Service Operational Manual;
- The Community Resilience agenda led by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat within the Cabinet Office.

## **11. Background Papers and Consultation**

All background papers & references are set out in the report; page 55 sets out witnesses giving evidence to this review.

### **Contact:**

Bronwen Moss – Scrutiny Adviser – 01709 - 822790

[bronwen.moss@rotherham.gov.uk](mailto:bronwen.moss@rotherham.gov.uk)

Deborah Fellowes – Scrutiny & Policy Manager – 01709 - 822769

[Deborah.fellowes@rotherham.gov.uk](mailto:Deborah.fellowes@rotherham.gov.uk)