

COUNCIL SEMINAR 6th January, 2015

Present:- Councillor Hussain (in the Chair); Councillors Andrews, Atkin, Beaumont, Clark, Cutts, Dalton, Doyle, Ellis, Godfrey, Gosling, J. Hamilton, N. Hamilton, Jepson, Kaye, Lakin, McNeely, Pitchley, Read, Rushforth, Sansome, Sims, Swift, Watson, Whelbourn, Wootton and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hoddinott, Reeder and Reynolds.

WINTER WEATHER RESPONSE

Councillor Hussain, Cabinet Member for Environment, welcomed David Burton (Director of Streetpride), Stephen Finley (Principal Officer, Highways Maintenance), Colin Knight (Highways Network Manager), Adrian Gabriel (Principal Officer, Waste Manager) and Mandy Atkinson (Communications and Media Manager) who gave a presentation about the Council's response to the severe Winter weather conditions which occurred during the period from 26th to 31st December, 2014. The presentation highlighted the following salient issues: -

(a) Council Policy

Local authorities have a statutory duty (Highways Act 1980 and Traffic Management Act 2004) "to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice." This Council's Winter maintenance plan is reviewed and re-published annually. The priority is to grit principal roads and other key routes within four hours. Previous years' experience has shown the importance of keeping the principal roads (mainly the 'A' roads) gritted in order to keep traffic moving. Other smaller, estate roads would be gritted afterwards. There is also a policy for the provision and distribution of salt bins around the Borough area.

(b) Winter Maintenance Budget

The current, annual revenue budget is £465,000 (funding the use of the gritting vehicles and the workforce placed on stand-by for Winter maintenance duties). This budget amount does not fund the cost of the rock salt, nor the cost of the workforce actually undertaking the gritting and Winter maintenance. There is consequently a £400,000 average deficit, as the average annual cost of Winter maintenance is some £875,000. The Winter maintenance reserve funding is contained within the Council's general financial reserves.

(c) Winter Maintenance Service

This out-of-hours service operates annually from November until March, including during the statutory holiday periods. Details of the workforce

were noted and there are ten gritting routes served by twelve gritting vehicles, two of which are spare vehicles. In order to comply with Driver's Hours Regulations, there are 40 drivers on a scheduled rota to ensure that vehicles can be deployed two hours per day, if necessary

(d) Weather Forecast and Gritting/Salting Operations

The Council subscribes to the 'MetDesk' Weather Forecast service and obtains the seasonal weather forecasts for the wider region (2-5 days forecasting), as well as a daily forecast specifically for the Rotherham Borough area. The daily forecast is provided at around 12.00 noon.

On Boxing Day, Friday 26th December 2014, the original daily forecast had detailed Wintry showers and rain, with cold temperatures overnight into Saturday 27th December. At 1800 hours on Friday 26th December, an updated forecast was provided by 'MetDesk', warning of the heavy fall of laying snow in two hours' time.

Officers reported on the gritting and salting operations which had been undertaken at that time. It was noted that the heavy rain had hampered the gritting operations, as the rain washes away the rock salt, thus reducing its effectiveness upon the highway surface. Overnight gritting operations focused on the strategic routes (which amount to some 14%-15% of the Borough's highway network) to try and ensure that these routes remained passable by vehicles.

From the morning of Saturday 27th December 2014, the precautionary gritting of highways continued (50% of the highway network). Later on the Saturday and also on Sunday 28th December, the Streetpride workforce dealt with enquiries from the general public and gritting took place on the non-principal road network as well as on the community/estate roads.

From Monday 29th December onwards, requests from the general public were responded to only on a priority basis, because the workforce provided support for the waste collection rounds and also replenished the contents of the grit/salt bins situated around the Borough area. The Emergency Services had asked for one vehicle to be freed (from Delves Lane, Wales) and every effort was made to ensure that routes to hospitals remained passable. Other reports and requests were dealt with on a reactive basis, generally within 24 hours. By New Year's Eve, Wednesday, 31st December 2014, the snow was already thawing. The very cold temperatures had continued and the further gritting of routes was therefore necessary. There was no indication of specific problems experienced by the bus companies, although some buses had been taken off their routes.

(e) Communications

The Council's on-call media officer took the first media call at around 7.00 am on the morning of Saturday 27th December 2014. The communications response started at that point, in liaison with key officers and with Cabinet Member. Over the period of the disruption, communications included:-

- Updates about key services (gritting / refuse) on the Council's website - including activation of the emergency banner which appears on every page and links to key information;
- Regular e-mail updates for all Members throughout the weekend on gritting issues;
- Updates on the Council's corporate Twitter account – including answering customer queries, in liaison with relevant officers;
- Out-of-hours media service and regular media updates – press releases agreed with key officers and Cabinet Members and distributed to all Elected Members.

It was noted that since the last severe weather event, the use of social media has grown significantly and this has posed new challenges within available resources, including dealing with a high number of customer enquiries and complaints via the Council's Twitter account. It was noted that some other local authorities allocate more resources dedicated to managing social media communications. Key officers would meet with the Cabinet Member to review the communications approach in relation to severe weather response, to identify where improvements could be made in the future. The discussion noted the importance of also addressing the public's perception of what is happening, as well as the reality of service delivery.

(f) Supply of Rock Salt

At the beginning of the Winter season, a supply of 5,000 tonnes of rock salt is stored in the salt barn at Hellaby (adjacent the M18 motorway). In addition, there is a reserve of a further 1,000 tonnes at Scotch Springs in Maltby. During the period from Friday 26th December, 2014, gritting crews used 1,400 tonnes of rock salt, supplies had reduced to 2,800 tonnes and the store will be re-stocked whenever the amount of rock salt kept at Hellaby reduces to 2,000 tonnes.

(g) Waste Collection

Members received detailed information about the impact of the severe Winter weather upon waste collection rounds during late December. All of the waste collection schedules had been completed, as planned, up to and including Christmas Eve, 24th December 2014. However, the severe weather conditions, including the snowfall on Boxing Day, had a detrimental impact upon the waste collection schedules from Saturday 27th December onwards.

Officers described the difficulties of the weather conditions, all around the Borough area, including icy roads, the limited impact of gritting, refuse vehicles having difficulty gaining access to smaller side roads and manoeuvring around parked vehicles. Initially, in an attempt to catch-up on missed collections, some of the refuse collection vehicles had been required to travel and assist with collection rounds in other parts of the Borough area. This extra travelling time had reduced the amount of time spent on waste collection and the backlog of missed collections was increasing.

By Friday 2nd January, 2015, there was a considerable backlog of missed collections. Senior Elected Members had been asked to approve a recovery plan enabling (i) some of the backlog of waste to be collected during the weekend (3rd and 4th January 2015) and (ii) regular collections to re-commence on Monday 5th January 2015. However, some areas of the Rotherham Borough had not received a waste collection service since before Christmas 2014.

The refuse collection workforce and vehicles continue to be managed carefully in order to reduce the backlog of collection in as short a time as possible.

(h) Collection of Recycled Waste

The pressure on the refuse collection service had necessarily had an impact upon the collection of waste for recycling. There would be an additional collection service for recycled waste on Saturday, 10th January 2015, to try and clear the backlog.

Members raised the following issues during the question and answer session:-

(1) The Council has previously undertaken a scrutiny review of the impact of Winter weather conditions and all of the review recommendations had been accepted (Minute No. C152 of the Cabinet meeting held on 22nd February 2012 refers).

It was confirmed that the Council's Winter maintenance plan is reviewed and re-published annually and that the outcome of the scrutiny review has been used to inform and improve the Winter maintenance services. The Winter maintenance plan operates alongside both the Severe Weather Plan and the Borough Emergency Plan. Principal roads and other key routes within the Borough area are gritted as the first priority. The scrutiny review had advocated the use of community resilience, snow wardens (residents) and co-operation with Parish Councils on snow clearing and gritting footpaths; these arrangements have subsequently been implemented.

(2) Members acknowledged the element of misfortune on Boxing Day, 26th December 2014, when the heavy rain had impaired the effectiveness of gritting operations. There had been some criticism from the public about the apparent absence of rock salt on the highway.

Officers explained that the vehicle's spreading equipment permits a more even spread of rock salt. The modern storage facility at Hellaby ensures that the rock salt is kept at its optimum moisture content. Both of these factors mean that the rock salt is not as visible, after being deposited on the highway, as had been the case in previous years. Vehicles travelling along the A631 Bawtry Road (Bramley/Hellaby) are not always gritting, simply because they are travelling to and from the rock salt store at the Council depot there.

(3) There was criticism of the Council's communications on 3rd, 4th and 5th January 2015 in relation to both refuse collection and the collection of waste for recycling. It was noted that some of the information briefings had not been forwarded to Elected Members in a timely manner. Key officers would meet with the Cabinet Member and review the communications approach in relation to severe weather response, to identify where improvements could be made in the future, including the way in which the social media response might be better resourced.

(4) Salt Bins located around the Borough area – Members asked whether there should be a review of the provision of these road-side bins.

The usefulness of the grit/salt bins was acknowledged, from the point of view of public safety and the perception of safety. However, at the same time there were significant limitations. One such limitation was the budget available to supply the bins and the resources required to keep them replenished with fresh supplies of rock salt. Furthermore, the rock salt was not always used for its intended purpose (spreading on the public highway and footpaths), but instead was sometimes used by residents within their own property. At times, supplies of rock salt had been stolen from the bins. One example cited was at Church Street, Wales, where a funeral had been disrupted by the Winter weather (the area did not have a salt bin). In such cases, it may be possible to make arrangements with the local Parish Council, or snow wardens, for the gritting of smaller roads and footpaths. Officers agreed to affix information notices about the snow warden scheme onto every grit/salt bin.

(5) Members made further comments about the communications process and also about the need to ensure that principal bus routes were gritted (eg: Rawmarsh and Thorogate).

(6) Members referred to the absence of gritting vehicles on certain principal roads (eg: the A633 Warren Vale, Rawmarsh; A629 Wortley Road and Upper Wortley Road). Reference was made to the customer service standards of the out-of-hours telephone response service. It was agreed that this issue should be reviewed. Members were informed of the hazardous conditions experienced on principal roads in other local authority areas (eg: the A630 Sheffield Parkway was closed, the M1

motorway was closed north of Nottinghamshire, the A631 was closed between Gainsborough and Bawtry).

It was reported that only a small number of requests had been received from the emergency services, throughout the severe weather conditions and that there had been no reported problems of patients being unable to attend hospital for important medical appointments.

(7) The importance of clearing the refuse collection backlog, during the next few days, was emphasised.

(8) Members questioned the priority of gritting on certain highways (eg: Glasshouse Lane, Kilnhurst) and on roads serving aged persons' homes. The priority of gritting principal roads and other key routes was once again confirmed. This priority would benefit any aged persons' homes which are situated alongside such roads. It was noted that the vehicle driver has sole responsibility for the gritting vehicle and its safety.

(9) Several Members made reference to specific issues affecting their electoral Wards and it was agreed that the effectiveness of communications and the provision of grit/salt bins should be the subject of review.

Members thanked the officers for their informative presentation. It was agreed that there will be a further review of the Council's Winter maintenance operations at appropriate meetings of Elected Members. All Councillors are to be provided with details of the waste collection recovery plan which had been approved at the beginning of January 2015.