

## **REGENERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**18 MARCH 2010**

### **MEMBER'S ITEM: WINTER SERVICE**

Report from: Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture

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#### **Summary**

This report is in response to a request from Councillor Godwin and seeks to advise Members on how the Winter Service operates and to show some of the difficulties encountered. Members are requested to support the Winter Service Policy and Plan.

#### **1. Budget and Policy Framework**

- 1.1 Under Medway Constitution Overview and Scrutiny rules (Chapter 4, Part 5, Paragraph 9.1) Councillor Godwin has requested that an item on this matter is included on the agenda for this meeting.
- 1.2 The Council has a Winter Service Plan and officers are working within the context of that plan. Finances are allocated to this service area and are generally contained within existing budgets. Clearly during extensive and prolonged adverse weather conditions expenditure is greater than predicted budgets and is reported to cabinet through the monthly budget monitoring regime.

#### **2. Background**

- 2.1 Councillor Godwin has requested that a report on the winter gritting schedule and associated deployment of contractor resources and, in particular:
  - How roads are prioritised – assuming that main roads/bus routes are dealt with first, what priority is given (if any) for other roads?
  - Does the Council take into account the gradients of roads, how many people are affected, how long a road is?
  - What flexibility does the Council have with contractors? Can the contractor ask all its staff to help in urgent circumstances?

- 2.2 At Full Council on 14 January 2010, when asked during Member's questions, the Portfolio Holder for Front Line Services agreed that the following information should also be included in this report - that the calls from Customer First are checked to find out where the specific problems were and also that comments on a Facebook group with 1400 members should be analysed and reported to the Committee. These are reported in paragraphs 8 and 13.
- 2.3 The Children and Adults Overview and Scrutiny Committee also requested on 19 January 2010, "that information on school closures during adverse weather be included in the Member Item being presented to the Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 18 March 2010, and this is included in the report at paragraph 11.
- 2.4 The Council operates a published Winter Service Plan in order to undertake its duties as contained in the Winter Service Policy.
- 2.5 Members approved the Winter Service Policy and Plan soon after the formation of Medway Council in 1998 and this has been updated in recent years with minor modifications, mainly around the location of salt bins and the inclusion of a few roads to the winter service routes.

### **3. Winter service Policy and Plan**

#### **3.1 Winter Service Policy**

The Winter Service Policy details the duties and responsibilities that the Council has in ensuring wherever practicable that safe passage along its highways is not endangered by snow or ice. This policy prioritises the actions taken by contractors during icy and snowy weather between mid October and mid April. It states that the priority starts with keeping the main roads and bus routes clear and passable followed by other precautionary salting routes.

#### **3.2 Winter Service Plan**

The Winter Service Plan details how the Winter Service is run and the actions taken. It contains the list of precautionary salting routes, which are classified as primary, secondary and third tier carriageways.

The Winter Service Plan also lists the position of all the highway salt bins.

The Winter Service Policy and Plan are published on the Council's website at

<http://www.medway.gov.uk/index/environment/streets/22060.htm> which can be accessed by the public.

To further assist the public a leaflet has been produced entitled "Keeping our Roads Safe This Winter" which is available at all customer contact points.

#### **4. Precautionary Salting**

4.1 Within the Council's Winter Service plan there is the following mileage of precautionary salting routes: -

Primary routes (360Km) 224 miles  
Secondary routes (183Km) 114 miles  
Third Tier routes (23km) 14 miles.

4.2 Priority is given to the primary and secondary routes, which make up the main road network and are roads that have bus routes, emergency service routes and access to places such as schools the hospital and shopping areas.

4.3 Ideally the Council would like to treat all roads but with a network of around 600 miles of roads officers have to prioritise resources in vehicles, operatives and salt stocks to ensure the main routes are maintained clear, which has generally been achieved during this recent cold spell. Apart from one evening when all routes out of Medway were grid locked, mainly because of the closure of Bluebell Hill, which resulted in extensive traffic jams in Chatham, Rochester and Strood all Medway's main roads have remained passable which is considerably better than many other UK local authorities. The contractor's eight gritting vehicles have been running since the start of the cold spell throughout the Medway network. All eight vehicles are used every night when there is a gritting action.

4.4 The Council receives a weather forecast with suggested salting action each day at 14.00hrs. This information is assessed by the Winter Service staff and the appropriate instruction then passed to the contractor for action, so these decisions are made on a daily basis according to the conditions and forecast at the time. Often there are updates during the day or night that also require assessment and instruction to the contractor.

4.5 Generally precautionary salting is carried out on primary routes only but in more severe conditions secondary routes are also salted. Third tier routes would not normally be salted but were actually salted twice in December whilst salt stocks were still available. Due to the recent, well publicised, difficulties in salt replenishment it has not been possible to salt third tier roads.

4.6 Since the beginning of this Winter period the number of salting runs, up to 15 February 2010, has been: -  
Primary routes: - 142 no.  
Secondary routes: - 35 no.  
Third Tier routes: - 2 no.

4.7 The Winter Service forms part of the Highways Term Contract, which Volker Highways undertake for the Council. Volker Highways is contracted to hold 3,200 tonnes of salt for the duration of the contract but, because the Government has stepped in to ration salt and distribution to prioritised areas, this stockpile has been greatly reduced.

This is an issue that officers are taking up with GOSE (Government Office for the South East) and the Department for Transport (DfT).

## **5. Salt Rationing/Salt Cell**

- 5.1 A group called Salt Cell comprising DfT, the Highways Agency (HA), the Local Government Association (LGA), County Surveyors Society, Met Office, Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office was established on 6 January 2010 with the aim of providing advice to suppliers on the most effective distribution of available salt supplies in order to minimise the risk to public safety. Salt stock and resilience levels have been gathered and supplied to the salt producers since 29 December 2009.
- 5.2 Despite actions taken since last year, the recent severe weather has again stretched salt supplies held by highway authorities. The position on salt supplies has been monitored as supplies have been depleted with the continuing severe weather and central coordination has been required. The Highways Agency and Local Authorities were asked to reduce their salt usage to achieve an overall 40-50% reduction.
- 5.3 The prioritisation process was based upon information provided by the Highways Agency and local highway authorities on salt stocks, estimates of future usage derived from Met Office forecasts and an assessment of the available market supply. Advice was given to the producers and any additional or further inter-agency / authority mutual aid encouraged.
- 5.4 The Head of Highways and Parking Services has been dealing with the Government Office South East (GOSE) regarding salt stocks and resilience levels and more locally with the Kent Salt Cell. Local negotiations worked well with 150 tonnes of mutual aid being received by Medway from the Highways Agency and Kent County Council. However the Regional/National Salt Cell did not work well for Medway. The Council was prepared to store 3,500 tonnes at the Cliffe depot and following the pre-Christmas period ordered from Salt Union (one of two national salt providers) 500 tonnes on the 16 and a further 1000 tonnes on the 20 December 2009. None arrived until 4 January 2010 and then only 50 tonnes.
- 5.5 The Council should always have over 7 days worth of salt in stock but throughout much of this Winter it was down to one or two days stock even though Kent County Council was receiving regular supplies. The Council is currently taking this matter up with GOSE and the Department for Transport.
- 5.6 It is only because of the mutual aid received from the Highways Agency and Kent County Council together with prudent use of salt stocks and mixing salt with sand that the Council has been able to keep its resilience level to a few days.

## **6. Salt Bins**

- 6.1 Salt bins are provided in accordance with the Winter Service Plan, generally on steep gradients leading to a main road where serious accidents could occur. These bins are placed out on non-primary salting routes for the public to assist themselves in spreading it over the road to aid passage of vehicles and pedestrians. All salt bins have been replenished four times so far this winter and will be likely to be filled at least once again this financial year.
- 6.2 Unfortunately what has happened in this recent bad weather is that a small number of people have been helping themselves to the salt for their own use on front drives etc so it is difficult to tell if the salt taken from roadside bins has been used appropriately or not, other than it appears evident when visiting some sites that private paths are clear and the roads are frequently not. The Council is at present actively seeking prosecution of an individual who was seen stealing bucket loads of salt from one of the bins. This type of activity is seemingly becoming more prevalent now. There have also been 17 salt bins completely stolen from the public highway in recent months.
- 6.3 The Council has tried securing salt bins by means of bolting them to the pavement but this has met with limited success, as they appear to become more of a challenge to some local residents. The Council has chosen not to lock the bins, as the whole idea is to allow the public to access them for the purpose of spreading salt over the highway.
- 6.4 At the beginning of the winter period there were 294 salt bins maintained by the Highways Group, which, in the majority of cases met with the published criteria for the provision of a bin. However because of the severe conditions 12 requests for salt bins have been received from councillors this winter that have been or are being progressed through the Ward Improvement Fund. The current cost to councillors for each bin is £733, which includes the provision of the bin and filling for the first year together with maintenance and fillings for the following three years. After year four the financial burden passes to the Highways budget.

## **7. Out Of Hours Emergencies**

- 7.1 There is an emergency contact number for the Council to be used by the public out of office hours being 01634 304400 after customer services closes at 20.00hrs. This number should also be used for highway related emergencies such as dangerous icy road conditions, which would be passed through to the duty call-out engineer but not for everyday service requests. The situation would then be assessed by the duty engineer and actioned as necessary. Any road closure due to icy conditions would generally be a last resort agreed in conjunction with the Police. Generally, officers would solve the problem by sending out a salting vehicle for a spot salting run.

## 8. Customer Service Requests

8.1 Due to the severity of the weather the number of complaints, customer enquiries and requests received this winter has been high with over 1400 of the 1800 received being dealt with by the small team in Highways who deal with the winter service. These are received through the 'Confirm' and 'eshop' systems by telephone and email. Although these requests were actioned at the time, many customers did not receive a reply or acknowledgement within the deadlines allowed.

8.2 Typical service requests include: -

My road hasn't been gritted.

The pavements haven't been gritted.

Our salt bin is empty.

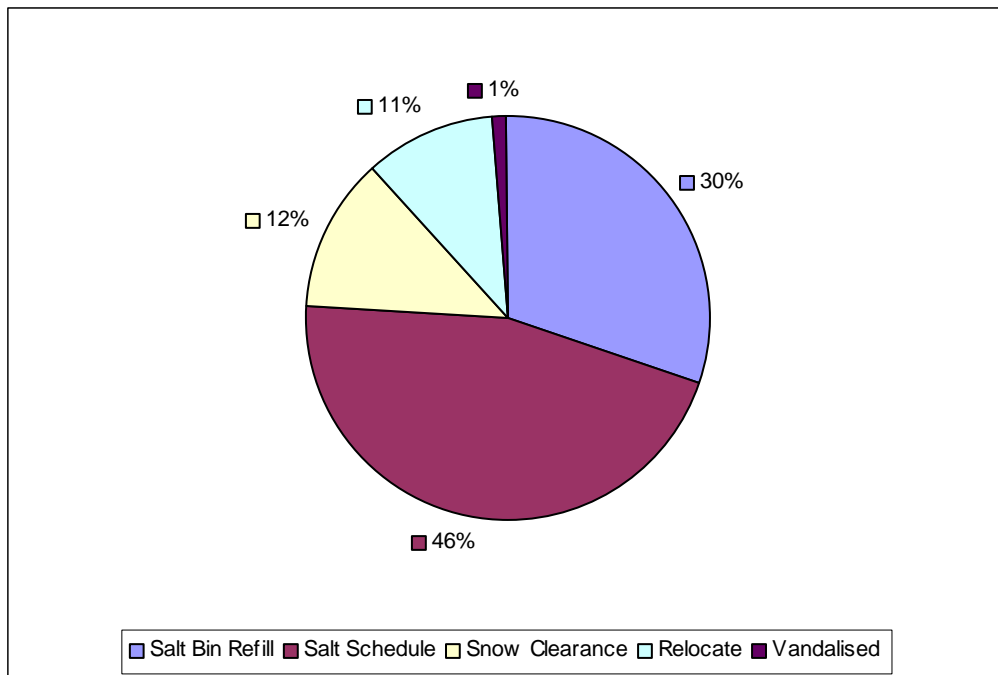
Can we have a salt bin?

How am I supposed to get to work if I can't get my car out?

There are lots of elderly people live round here and they are all housebound because of the snow.

8.3 The service requests received through Customer First are categorised and the numbers dealt with are shown on the following chart.

	<b>Number of Calls</b>
Salt Bin Refill	546
Salt Schedule	819
Snow Clearance	223
Relocate Bin	191
Vandalised Bin	18
Total	<b>1797</b>



## **9. Salting of Pavements**

- 9.1 Whenever snow prevents manual road sweepers, employed by Veolia, from doing their job they are reallocated to the clearance of snow on pedestrian areas. Officers are also looking at the possibility of supplementing this labour force with Quadron employees, who work for Green Spaces.
- 9.2 The priority for the clearance of pavements starts with those areas with the highest footfall i.e. shopping centres and routes to stations. After the main High Street areas have been salted the Council is able to attend to some of the more highly used car parks.
- 9.3 Whilst the Council fully appreciates that all residents would like the pavements in their localities kept clear of ice and snow unfortunately this is totally impractical. Although the contractor is required to carry such a large stock of salt throughout the winter period there is still a need to act prudently due to the difficulties in stock replenishment in severe weather.
- 9.4 Members may recall experiences from the 1960's and 1970's when local authorities may have had a workforce of many hundred employees undertaking highways, grounds maintenance, housing repairs and general maintenance duties and when adverse weather hit, focused on clearing pavements and shopping areas. With externalisation of contracts, this in-house pool of staff can no longer be drawn upon.
- 9.5 The general principal is that people need to go out prepared for ice and snow and although the Council will do its best it would plainly be unreasonable to expect it to ensure all 600 miles of roads and pavements are absolutely clear of ice and snow 24 hours a day.

## **10. Salting of Car Parks**

- 10.1 It is acknowledged that this year many car parks appeared not to have been treated. This was, however, not always the case, but may have appeared to be so due to the heavy and continuous fall of snow. Unfortunately, gritting does not remove the snow, only continuous traffic along with gritting can do this and most people chose not to use the car parks. Those car parks that did get trafficked remained usable throughout the weather. That said, improvements are being considered, which may bring about more frequent treatments of the car parks. Officers are currently considering the use of mini salt spreaders that can be towed behind a van or 4x4 vehicle for future use in car parks so as not to use up the larger gritting vehicles, which must focus on the priority routes.

## **11. Schools**

- 11.1 The Highways Group has been working with schools and the Director of Children and Adults to review salting arrangements. A priority list of schools has been received and this has been linked into the precautionary salting routes, which has been adapted to accommodate routes to school wherever possible.
- 11.2 The Council aims to support schools in staying open during bad weather and has regular dialogue with head teacher representatives about strategies to minimising closures. The recent bad weather raised a number of issues that require careful consideration. It has therefore been agreed to establish a short-life working group comprising representatives from key Council services together with head teachers to explore and, if possible, resolve these issues. This group will meet for the first time in March 2010 and will consider the role education and the individual schools have to play in providing robust business continuity plans for each and every school that they consider to be essential in ensuring they remain open. Clearly Highways has a role to play in maintaining access to the schools over the public highway, but inside the school grounds needs to be addressed by the school themselves.

## **12. Hospitals and Emergency Services**

- 12.1 Medway Council responded to a request from Medway Maritime Hospital to salt the section of their private access road from Montgomery Road to the Accident & Emergency ambulance drop-off point within their grounds. This was initially due to the hospital running out of salt stocks but this section of private road will now continue to be salted as part of the primary salting route.
- 12.2 The Council has also received requests for help from the Fire Brigade and the contractor salted the forecourts where fire stations were located adjacent to salting routes.

## **13. Facebook Group**

- 13.1 A group was set up by a Medway resident on the Facebook social networking website called "Medway Council should grit pavements as well as roads"
- 13.2 The founder of the Facebook group clarified why it had been created: -  
"For anyone that has misinterpreted this group as having been made by and for whinging people just to have a moan, you are wrong. I am not an angry person. I was genuinely worried when I saw so many people walking in the road or slipping on pavements. The ice was there for days after the initial snowfall.



And as much as I enjoy a debate I refuse to enter into any discussions with people that are prepared to be abusive to others in any way. Everyone is entitled to their opinion; please respect them as much as you would like them to respect you.

For the record- I work, as does my husband. Our jobs are important and we will do our best to get to them. He drives, I walk. We do not want to pay any more taxes, although I'm sure we will. I do not have the knowledge involved that I could suggest to the local council where they could find more money for what I am suggesting. I do my job, they do theirs.

What I do want, after seeing and hearing about many people being hurt, is for the council to be aware of the feelings of many. The majority of the people who have joined this group have done so because of the title. Exactly what it says on the tin- because they believe that Medway Council should grit the pavements as well as the roads. There are solutions and if this group can bring to the councils attention how many of us feel strongly about it, then we have made a start.

Thank you to everyone for the comments, they are appreciated."

- 13.3 Currently there are 1450 members; the last post was dated 3 February 2010.
- 13.4 The group page mainly consists of comments regarding the lack of salting on Medway's footpaths.
- 13.5 In addition to this, members have also uploaded photos of their local roads. Typically, most of the photos are of estate roads, which would not be covered by the salting routes.
- 13.6 Members may recall in their childhood scenes of residential roads being cleared by the residents. Each pavement in front of the house was cleared by the householder or a friend's neighbour. This does not tend to happen now due to a misconception that residents cannot clear their pavements, as they may become liable to claims if someone injures themselves. Officers cannot find any sources to this claim and in fact numerous solicitors and barristers were interviewed over the recent period to try and dispel this myth. They all appeared to be saying that if a resident cleared the snow reasonably well, by brushing or shovelling the snow to the kerb, but not into the road, a court would not find them liable, as they took reasonable action to assist others on their journey. However officers can understand resident's apprehension in taking that action.

#### **14. Cold Weather Damage to Roads**

- 14.1 The recent snow and freezing conditions has caused extensive damage to the road surfaces in Medway. Some defects are immediately apparent whilst other damage may take weeks if not months to materialise.

- 14.2 So far, on both major and minor roads, over 1000 potholes have been temporarily reinstated whilst a further 3000 potholes have been issued to Volker Highways for permanent repairs in both roads and pavements. Additional sub-contractors have been engaged to help with this work.
- 14.3 Any defects below the intervention levels of 20mm for pavements and 50mm for roads will not generally warrant an immediate response.
- 14.4 Residential roads, not on the gritting routes, have fared quite well but the distributor roads to and from and inside residential areas have deteriorated quite dramatically. Main roads (A, B & C including the rural roads) have suffered quite badly as well. Many of the defects are associated with repairs previously done or service companies' patches.

## **15. Recently Re-surfaced Roads**

- 15.1 An inspection has been made of recently re-surfaced roads and it was found that all the conventional plane and re-surface sites are performing well and no defects attributable to the icy weather have been found. However, eighteen roads that were overlaid with micro surfacing during September and October 2009 were found to have defective areas. These areas are mainly at high stress points where the micro surface has not been laid deep enough and they will be remedied early next season at the contractor's expense.
- 15.2 It would appear that the severe freezing temperatures have caused the aggregate in the micro surfacing to become unbound and in turn cause a large amount of stone loss. This is a concern because the micro surface should be impervious to moisture because of the dense grade material and high bitumen content. It should not allow any water to pool between the new surface and existing surface that could then freeze, creating a void and result in the material becoming unbound and breaking out.
- 15.3 Other reasons for the material to become unbound could be that the contractor had not cleaned the existing surface correctly leaving dirt and oil behind not allowing the bitumen to adhere 100% or that the damp weather late in the laying season may have affected the adhesion. This matter is being taken up with the contractors.
- 15.4 Micro surfacing is a thick asphaltic slurry applied as a screed over existing road surfaces. The thickness of the slurry allows for a certain amount of regulation to take out minor irregularities in the road surface. It is more economical than plane and resurfacing schemes but in the short-term does not leave such a good quality surface finish and has a shorter life span.

15.5 The Council has been using Micro surfacing technology for over 10 years. It has gradually replaced the old surface dressing (tar spray and chip), which was not user or customer friendly and resulted in numerous claims to the council for vehicle damage. It demonstrates best value in the surfacing schemes that are chosen to make full use of the available budget limits. There is no real replacement for Micro surfacing and preventing the use of this material further would severely limit the options available and reduce the number of carriageways that could be resurfaced in future years.

## 16. Risk Management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk
<p>Medium</p> <p>However, this year's snow has been acknowledged as a once in 25 year event.</p>	<p>That the contractor runs out of salt due to lack of deliveries from normal sources due to intervention by the Government's National Salt Cell.</p>	<p>To purchase additional salt (perhaps an additional 3600T) and store in a suitable salt store within Medway.</p> <p>This additional store could be sourced from alternative suppliers and would not show on Salt Union returns.</p> <p>Exert pressure on regional government offices to establish regional salt stores which are replenished over the summer months, so Local Authority's can replenish their stocks locally rather than relying on stock being transported from northern England, by road in adverse weather conditions.</p>

## **17. Financial implications**

### 17.1 Financial Year 2009/2010

The current Highways revenue budget for the Winter Service is,

Precautionary salting, 4T812	£140,000
Salt bins, 4T814	£ 36,760
Total budget	£176,760

Estimated out turn for Winter Service 2009/10                    £494,000

### 17.2 Financial figures for the last two years

#### 17.2.1 Financial Year 2008/2009

Precautionary salting, 4T812	£115,000
Salt bins, 4T814	£ 36,760
Total budget	£151,760

Final out turn for Winter Service 2008/9                    £320,736

#### 17.2.2 Financial Year 2007/2008

Precautionary salting, 4T812	£115,000
Salt bins, 4T814	£ 36,760
Total budget	£151,760

Final out turn for Winter Service 2007/8                    £264,307

## **18. Legal Implications**

18.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

## **19. Recommendations**

19.1 That Members note the Winter Service Policy and Plan and support its continued use.

### **Lead officer contact**

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### **Background papers**

Winter Service Policy 2008-2012.  
Winter Service Plan 2008-2012  
Various documentation relating to the Highways Term Contract