

REGENERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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HIGHWAY WINTER SERVICE TASK GROUP - UPDATE

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Summary

This report provides Members with an update on the outcome of the Task Group review on winter services in respect of future provision of gritting and snow clearance services in Medway from 2010 – 2017 and improved communication with the public about the proposed services.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

- 1.1 Under Section 41 of the Highways Act, the council has a duty to maintain the highway. The current winter provision is provided under the Railway and Transport Safety Act 2003 which amended the Highways Act by adding a statutory clause 41(1) which requires the council to deliver winter service. The highway authority is “under a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice.”
- 1.2 Medway's Transport Asset Management Plan sets strategic objectives and includes provisions for winter service.
- 1.3 The budget for the operational Winter Service period is set at the beginning of each financial year. This covers precautionary salting, salt bins and the provision of the contractor's facilities, ie. Salt barn, salt stock management and salt spreaders.

2. Background

- 2.1 The winter of 2009/2010 was the coldest in over 30 years, with the worst snowfall since 1981/1982, causing chaos on the roads and difficulties for many people. Following concerns raised with local councillors by residents, the Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a Task Group to review current policy and practice for keeping the roads, town centres and main car parks snow and ice-free and whether any improvements could be made within available resources.
- 2.2 The Task Group considered the challenges faced by the council during prolonged bad weather with regard to keeping the highways open and met with officers and contractors to review the current Winter Service Policy and Plan. This included consideration of the criteria for which routes are gritted (in particular the primary and secondary road networks) and the location and arrangements for filling salt bins.
- 2.3 The feedback and experiences from winter 2009/2010 showed that Medway was very good at precautionary salting and throughout January 2010 the primary network remained open.
- 2.4 The task group acknowledged that there had previously been some criticism about the lack of attention to quieter residential roads, pavements (as a whole), town centres and a lack of clearance from street cleaning operatives.

Salt bins

- 2.5 Regular refills for the 300 salt bins were carried out between October 2009 and April 2010 but there was little or no evidence of the previous contents having been used on the roads where they are provided. Following complaints from some residents that during the particularly bad weather their salt bins always seemed to be empty, the contractor will be electronically recording the date and time of each, and all, salt bin refills in future.

Steep residential roads with limited access

- 2.6 The Task Group asked officers to consider if there should be provision to deal with steep residential roads with limited access in very severe weather conditions. The result of the research was that only one area was found that satisfied the criteria of there being over 300 properties with a single point of access via a steep incline and this area was already currently on a secondary salting route. The Task Group agreed not to amend this in the updated policy.

Clearance of car parks, town centres, rural areas and medical centres

- 2.7 The Task Group was informed that the council's new waste contract contained provision to allow the council to request assistance from the contractor for snow clearance, gritting and other duties, as and when necessary.
- 2.8 However the Green Spaces contractor was not under the same contractual obligation. There is an emergency call-out, snow clearance, gritting and salting provision offered by the Green Spaces contractor at set hourly rates.

Car parks

- 2.9 There had been a number of complaints received by councillors and the council about un-cleared car parks and requests that the car parks were treated in the early morning before cars started parking there.
- 2.10 The task group found that some car parks had been salted prior to snow but when the stock of salt fell during mid-January 2010 this no longer happened. It was also apparent that the public often believed that if there was snow on the ground, the roads had not been gritted.
- 2.11 However, the type of salt used required traffic disturbance to activate it. The public were reluctant to drive on snow or use a snow-covered car park and the Task Group considered that improved communication was required so the public could know which car parks would be treated to remove snow/ice and gritted and therefore safe to use with caution.

Town centres

- 2.12 In town centres, if there was a prolonged cold period with snow and ice, street cleansing operatives are mobilised to carry out clearance work and to spread salt.
- 2.13 Gritting lorries also visit town centres as part of the primary route network before most people are up and about in the morning.

Rural areas

- 2.14 There had been only one night where the road to the Isle of Grain was closed in 2009/10 but the snow ploughs kept working through the night and the road was open the following morning. Assistance from farmers was used in rural areas during the bad weather and the council was looking to expand this operation in the future.

Medical centres

- 2.14 The Task Group suggested that gritting the areas around Healthy Living Centres should be considered, as they provided a wide range of services – more so than doctor's surgeries. Officers agreed to add this to the policy and the centres would be prioritised in liaison with NHS Medway and included on footway salting plans, if practicable.

3. Community participation and public liability

- 3.1 The Task Group discussed the difficulty of public confusion and uncertainty about personal liability for accidents and injuries sustained on pavements or areas of road cleared by private individuals. This was known to be one of the main reasons why shop owners often did not clear the pavements outside of shops and businesses.
- 3.2 In view of this, the Task Group suggested that the Council should publish clear advice for residents/businesses in the Medway Matters newsletter and on its website.
- 3.3 The Task Group recommended that publicity should clearly highlight any changes made to the current policy and plan so that residents who would experience a different level of service were notified.

4. Vulnerable people at risk

- 4.1 Effective communication of information with the public, key public services, stakeholders and other highway authorities was obviously extremely important. However, communication within the authority was also critical. Preparation and planning of communication in advance would assist in the effective delivery of the service.
- 4.2 Following the severe winter weather of 2009/2010, council-wide consultations were held with Highways, Education, Safer Communities, Customer First, Emergency Planning, Business Support, Cleansing and Greenspaces to review the performance of the winter service and consider changes and improvements to the policy and plan.

5. Feedback from winter 2010/2011

- 5.1 The winter of 2010/11 turned out to be more severe than that in 2009/2010 with heavier snowfalls and national salt stocks again having to be rationed according to need around Britain. Road salt had to be mixed with sand and spread rates reduced to conserve salt stocks. Medway utilized salt that was made available from the national strategic stockpile held by the Department of Transport when stocks started to run low. This was in addition to the improvements made locally raising our own stock from 3500 tonnes to 5100 tonnes, following the previous years experience where Medway had to rely on surrounding authorities providing mutual aid. The extreme weather in November and December 2010 was followed by average conditions in January

and a sudden change to milder conditions in February / March 2011 with very few salting runs.

- 5.2 Salt bins in Medway were bulk refilled four times during the winter period using the salt / sand mix. Salt bin numbers have been steadily increasing due to Ward Improvement requests and the number now stands at 365 bins.
- 5.3 At the peak of the heaviest snow there were some short temporary blockages of roads on a slope such as Four Elms Hill, Chatham Hill and Star Hill. Vehicles blocking the route where they had lost control caused these problems. These routes were opened again once salting vehicles attended the sites.
- 5.4 Following the end of the 2010-11 season Medway's Highways term contractor (VolkerHighways) has restocked their barn to full capacity of 5,100 tonnes of rock salt ready for the 2011/12 winter.

Car parks

- 5.5 Car park salting and clearance works were carried out during December 2010 utilizing the Cleansing and Greenspaces workforce as well as the highways term contractor. Due to forward planning many more car parks were treated than any other winter before. The winter service policy and plan were revised to include salting to the main town centre car parks. These revised documents were included on the internet site and advised residents which car parks would be treated after heavy snowfall. In reality the treatment went well beyond the main car parks due to the severity of the snow events and the availability of the Cleansing and Greenspaces workforces to assist with clearance and salting work. During late December 2010 this work had to be scaled down to conserve salt stocks.

Town centres

- 5.6 Town centre footway salting plans were expanded and improved to include links to nearby local services such as car parks, railway stations, post offices, footbridges and public conveniences etc. Prior to the winter season starting the Cleansing and Greenspaces teams were issued with bulk salt / sand stocks to their depots which allowed their workforce to deliver the salting operations seamlessly. These were replenished when their supervisors advised that stock levels were low. The salting operation moved onto other priorities of local shopping centres, hospitals, healthy living centres, surgeries, footbridges and three other levels of footways that allowed areas such as Chatham and Walderslade to be linked. All of these priorities were treated within a few days and more areas were treated in the last winter than ever before.

Rural areas

- 5.7 Some drifting of snow occurred in rural areas however the work carried out by Medway's term contractor prevented any roads from being closed to traffic. Local farmers were employed to clear roads in rural areas and were a great

help to the rural communities. In a couple of instances they also helped clear snow in built up areas.

Medical centres

- 5.8 NHS Medway provided officers with a list of prioritized medical centres where footway salting was requested. All of these sites have either been included in town centre plans or have been placed on a priority list for treatment after the hospital sites.

Schools

- 5.9 Highways were asked by the education team to review precautionary salting operations to see if improvements could be made to help schools. Education officers provided a priority list of schools and these were checked against the precautionary salting routes list. As a result a number of sites were increased in salting priority and others were added to the list where possible to do so.

Communications

- 5.10 The Medway Council website has been updated with the revised winter service policy and plan. Improved A to Z search facilities and quick links for each section are being developed so that winter related matters can be more easily found. Maps of the primary and secondary salting routes have been added together with footway salting plans for shopping centres, local shopping centres, hospitals, medical centres, surgeries and footbridges. Snow clearance guidance is also now included giving advice to members of the public who wish to obtain self-help information regarding clearance of snow from pavements and public spaces.
- 5.11 A revised version of the winter service leaflet is being progressed and will be ready in time for the start of the next winter period. This will also be available in an electronic form via the Internet website.
- 5.12 Prior to the next winter service period starting (October 2011) an article will be placed in Medway Matters detailing improvements to the winter service programme, self help information, along with the appropriate use for salt bins. This information will also appear on the council's website.
- 5.13 Members will be pleased to note that a number of letters, e-mails and telephone calls were received by officers both during, and for many weeks after, the extended fall of snow in December 2010 congratulating the council on the way the council dealt with the snow and also on the way information had been made available to them both in the press and on the internet.

6. Director's comments

- 6.1 The joint member/officer working group has proved to be invaluable in bringing improvements to the overall winter service. Improved planning and

co-ordination of resources has greatly assisted the travelling public especially pedestrians using town centres and other local amenities.

7. Risk Management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk
Reliability of the highway network in winter weather conditions	Keep Medway moving by maintaining accessibility to services through the availability and reliability of the highway network during the winter period	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. By using the policy and plan but with freedom for flexibility when necessary. 2. Through real-time provision of information about routes.
Safety of the travelling public	To keep road users safe through effectively managing the risk to the travelling public from the hazardous effects of ice and snow on highway surfaces	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being pro-active and managing operations using the latest forecast information together with appropriate and timely treatments to deliver an effective and efficient service.
Public awareness	Communication on the message " <i>Don't travel unless you have to</i> " and when and where the public can expect to be gritted/cleared and where to access that information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. close links with the media. 2. improved communication through Medway Matters, website, real-time information, etc.
Isolation of some residents	Long-lasting and severe winter conditions can lead to isolation for vulnerable people in both rural and urban situations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promotion of community spirit and removing the myth of fear of prosecution for members of the public who clear snow and ice for others. 2. Use of other contractors and staff, if and when necessary.
Liability for accidents	Members of the public who injure themselves whilst on council property or highways and sue the council	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Full and detailed information sent to all residents about where and when will be treated. 2. Precautionary work (salting <i>before</i> the bad weather happens), rather than re-acting to the bad weather after it has arrived.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 2009/10 had the most severe winter weather in many years, resulting in a spend of £439,000 against a budget of £177,000. Even in 2008/09, which was more representative of a 'normal' year, expenditure on winter maintenance was £320,000 (budget £152,000). This under-funding has had to be met by reductions in other highway maintenance activities.
- 8.2 2010/2011 had another severe winter resulting in a spend of £469,471 against a budget of £177,000. The under funding again resulted in reductions in other maintenance activities.

9. Legal implications

- 9.1 Section 41(IA) of the Highways Act 1980 places a duty on the Council, *so far as reasonably practicable*, to ensure that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice. This is not an absolute obligation, the Council's duty is to comply with the obligation to the extent that it is reasonably practicable for it to do so. Where the Council has a reasonable policy for dealing with snow and ice on the highway and acts in accordance with its policy, it is not liable for any damage or injury caused as a result of the deposit of snow or ice on the highway.

10. Recommendations

- 10.1 The committee is asked to consider the update report on the Winter Service Policy and Winter Service Plan 2010 – 2017.

Background papers

Railway and Transport Safety Act 2003

Medway Transport Asset Management Plan

Well-maintained Highways - Code of Practice for Highway Maintenance and Management

Department of Transport - "Winter Resilience Review" interim report July 2010 and final report October 2010.

Department of Transport "Snow Code"

Winter Service Policy 2010/2017

Winter Service Plan 2010/2017

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