

Winter Maintenance Review- Analysis of Parish Council Responses

The winter weather conditions during 2009/10 were the worst experienced across England in 30 years. This was a challenging period for all concerned in Buckinghamshire and especially the County Council who have the responsibility to clear roads and pavements.

As a consequence of residents raising concerns with Councillors and negative press publicity, a Task and Finish Group (T&FG) was commissioned by the Overview and Scrutiny Commissioning Committee (OSCC). The aim of the T&FG is to examine what aspects of the Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan worked well, consider what worked less well and suggest where improvements can be made.

The T&FG, consisting of County Councillors (non-Cabinet), within its scoping document identified that they wanted to consult with key stakeholders and local residents in order to inform the final report and recommendations.

As part of the consultation process a questionnaire was sent out to all Parish Councils across Buckinghamshire to gather their views and ideas about how the County Council and its partners performed during the cold snap and how they could improve in the future.

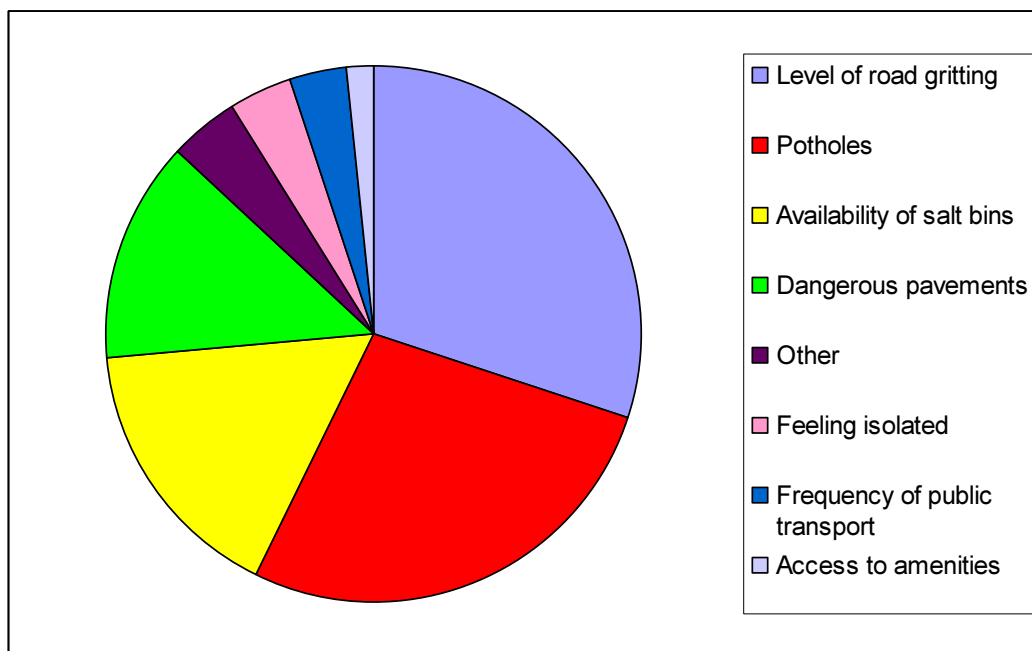
The consultation received an extremely high response rate, with 149 Parish Councils responding. The T&FG would like to thank the Parish Councils for their informative and valuable contributions.

The following questions were sent to all Parish Councils across Buckinghamshire:

1. What were the parish's three major concerns in relation to winter maintenance during the recent cold snap?
2. What three actions do you feel the County Council and its partners could do to reduce the impact of the winter weather in your parish?
3. How do you feel local people could assist with mitigating the impact of wintry conditions on roads and pavements in your parish?
4. How do you feel the County Council performed its statutory winter maintenance duties during the recent wintry conditions?
5. In the aftermath of the winter weather, the roads and pavement across Buckinghamshire suffered a high level of damage. How do you feel the Council have reacted to the maintenance and repair of the damage in your Parish? What do you feel could be improved?
6. Any other comments?

Analysis of Responses

1. What were the parish's three major concerns in relation to winter maintenance during the recent cold snap?

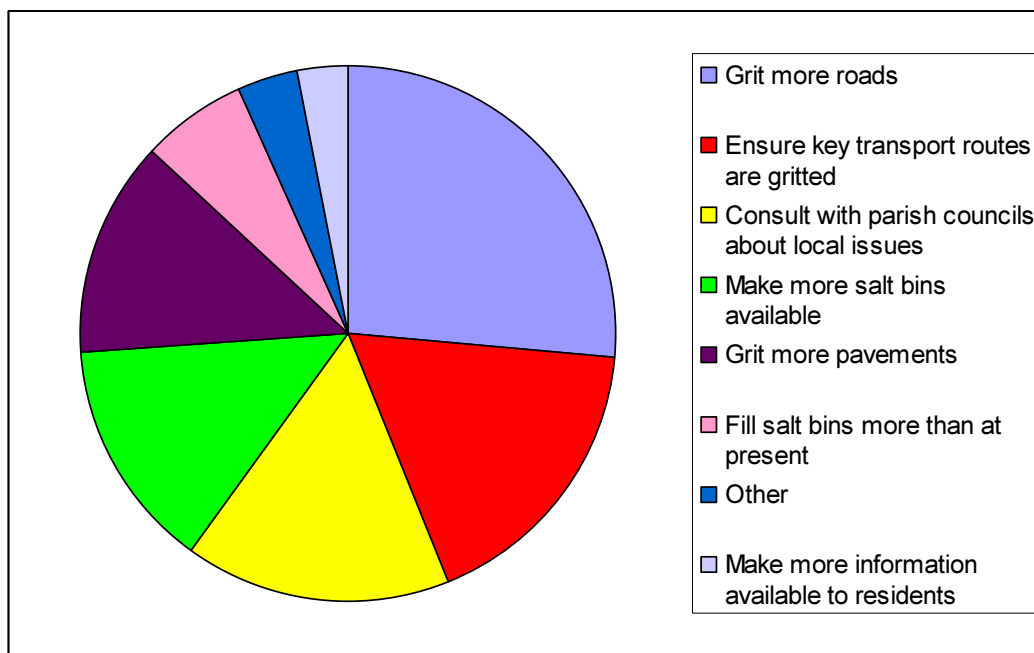


Parish Council's were asked to state their three major concerns relating to winter maintenance (Please note that the segments do not equal 100% as each Parish had to choose three options). Of the 149 respondents to this question there were four major areas of concern in relation to winter maintenance. The concern that ranked highest was the **Level of Road Gritting** (83.22% of respondents), followed by Potholes (75.84%), the Availability of Salt Bins (45.64%) and Dangerous Pavements (37.58%).

Parishes were also given the opportunity to provide supplementary answers to this question. Of the 17 received, the following were the most common concerns from Parishes:

- Lack of snow clearance
- Communications
- The level of precautionary gritting on minor roads and steep inclines

2. What three actions do you feel the County Council and its partners could do to reduce the impact of the winter weather in your parish?

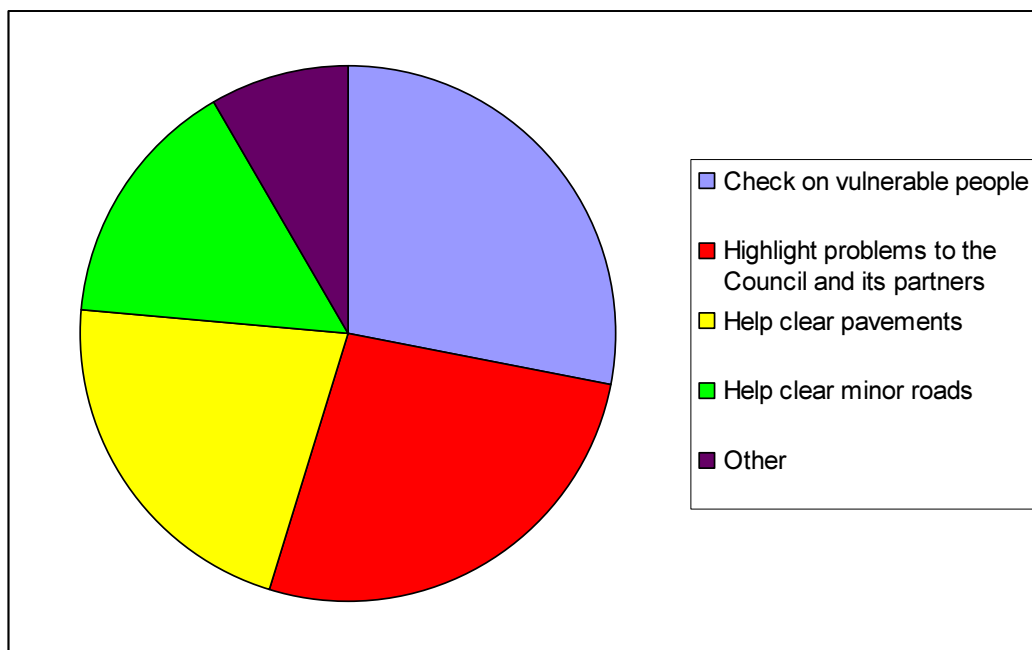


Parish Councils were asked to identify the three actions that the County Council and its partners could take to mitigate the impact of the winter weather in their Parish. Of the 143 responses received the overwhelming action that Parishes would like to see taken is to have More Roads Gritted (75.52%). Of the other actions, the second most important the County Council and its partners could take would be to Ensure Key Transport Routes are Gritted (49.65%) and following in a close third is Consult With Local Parishes about Local Issues (46.15%). The availability of salt bins, similarly to question one, is also a big concern and a large proportion of Parishes (39.16%) would like more to be made available.

Parishes were also given the opportunity to provide supplementary answers to this question. Of the 15 received, the following were additional actions that Parishes felt the County Council and its partners could take to reduce the impact of winter weather in their area:

- Communicate more effectively with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in Buckinghamshire
- Ensure that the County Council has sufficient salt stocks to deliver its Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan

3. How do you feel local people could assist with mitigating the impact of wintry conditions on roads and pavements in your parish?



In a rural county such as Buckinghamshire the onset of heavy snowfall and icy conditions can lead to towns and villages being isolated (Please note that the segments do not equal 100% as each Parish had to choose three options). Parishes were asked how local people could assist with mitigating the impact of harsh winter conditions in their parish, 140 responses were received. The most important action that Parishes felt local people could take would be to **Check on Vulnerable People** in their local area (71.43%). Of the other options, Parishes felt that local people have an important role to play in **Highlighting Problems to the Council and its Partners** (67.14%) and residents could have an important role to play in **Helping to Clear Pavements** (55%).

Parishes were also given the opportunity to provide supplementary answers to this question. Of the 30 received, the following were actions that Parishes felt local people could take to mitigate the impact of winter weather in their area:

- Allow farmers to clear local roads
- Clarify/reassure local residents that they will not be held liable if they clear snow from footpaths
- Provide and fill salt bins to allow local action

4. How do you feel the County Council performed its statutory winter maintenance duties during the recent wintry conditions?

Buckinghamshire's Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan sets out which roads and pavements will be treated during harsh winter conditions. There are statutory duties contained within this plan to clear major roads during extreme winter weather, this may be at the detriment to those roads which are classified as less strategically important.

There were 135 responses to this question from Parish Councils, in answer to this question there were extremely mixed responses, with marginally over half leaning towards being negative. The positive responses included comments such as:

- ‘...feel the Council did well in rather extreme conditions’
- ‘I think the County Council did its best considering the unusual amount of snow that fell and the restrictions on spend’
- ‘Generally quite good’

The negative responses included the following:

- ‘abysmally’
- ‘extremely badly’
- ‘it was a shambles’

There were several supplementary comments from Parish Councils, some of which show that there is not a full understanding/communication of the Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan, these included the following:

- Rural roads were neglected
- The poor maintenance of roads
- Treacherous conditions on pavements
- Insufficient gritting
- Bus routes need to be cleared, especially those that serve schools
- Access to train and bus stations needs to be cleared

Within the comments submitted there were several references to specific roads, these will be passed on to Transport for Buckinghamshire for them to consider during their planning process for the 2010/11 winter.

5. In the aftermath of the winter weather, the roads and pavement across Buckinghamshire suffered a high level of damage. How do you feel the Council have reacted to the maintenance and repair of the damage in your Parish? What do you feel could be improved?

There were 134 responses to this question from Parish Councils, in answer to this question there were mainly negative and constructive comments, there were very few comments that were positive in nature.

The general themes from Parish Councils covered the following topics:

- The need for more communication and information about road maintenance
- The need to repair damage in inclines
- Potholes that exist on a stretch of road should be filled simultaneously and not be priority categorisation
- The plain and patch approach to road maintenance should be taken, not just short term fixes

Some examples of the comments submitted by Parish Councils are as follows:

- ‘In the circumstances the Council reacted well, although more work needs to be done’
- ‘I understand that funding is an issue, but the cost of damage to vehicles will be more if everyone claims against the County Council’

- 'Better information is required to advise parishes/residents on when road repairs will take place'
- 'Despite numerous requests for pothole repairs, to-date nothing has been done'
- 'Early liaison with Parish Councils to prioritise the repair of dangerous pavements and roads'

6. Any other comments?

The final question gave Parish Councils an opportunity to add any additional comments which they thought would be useful for the Task and Finish Group to consider. In total 79 respondents submitted additional comments.

The general themes from Parish Councils covered the following topics:

- The lack of road and pothole repairs
- The longevity of patching potholes
- Communications to Parishes/residents/RAF
- Improved consultation with Parishes
- The County Council should access and take notice of Parish Emergency Plans
- Major inclines must be treated
- The redeployment of District Council staff during harsh winter weather to help clear roads and pavements
- The need to treat the roads and pavements around local schools
- The need for the County Council to clarify and provide information on whether residents and businesses will be liable if someone falls and injures themselves on an area of pavement they have cleared