

Minutes

WINTER MAINTENANCE TASK & FINISH GROUP

**MINUTES OF THE WINTER MAINTENANCE TASK & FINISH GROUP HELD ON TUESDAY
1 JUNE 2010, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 2, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT
10.05 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 1.25 PM.**

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr B Allen, Mr D Anson MBE, Mrs M Baldwin, Mr M Brand, Mr M Edmonds (Chairman),
Mr W Lidgate, Mr D Polhill, Mr D Rowlands, Mr D Schofield and Ms R Vigor-Hedderly

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr H Cadd, Local Member, Buckingham South
Mr M Chard, Policy Officer - Overview and Scrutiny, Buckinghamshire County Council
Mr T Fowler, Area Maintenance Manager North, Bucks County Council
Mrs V Letheren, Cabinet Member for Transport
Ms K MacDonald, Democratic Services Officer
Mr E Meek, Group Manager Area Maintenance, Buckinghamshire County Council
Mr S Rooney, Compliance Manager (Contract and Locality Strategy)
Mr J Stevens, Head of Transport

1 APOLOGIES/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies of absence were received from John Cartwright.

Hedley Cadd attended as a local Member and the Chairman granted permission for the local Member to ask questions.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Chairman of the Task and Finish Group outlined the purpose of the Task and Finish Group. He highlighted that during the extreme weather there were 30 days of sub zero temperatures. The gritting teams went out both during the day and night. The Chairman recognised that there were problems with public services and complaints received regarding the conditions of the roads. At this meeting the purpose of the task and finish group is to



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



examine the County Council performance against the Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan.

Members were advised that a winter maintenance questionnaire had been sent to Parish, District and Town Councils, County Councillors, public transport providers, emergency services and Buckinghamshire residents have also been invited to contribute to the review through published press releases.

Members were asked to concentrate on winter maintenance which primarily involves keeping the traffic moving as road and footway maintenance including potholes will be discussed at a future meeting of the task and finish group.

4 STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

The Cabinet Member for Transportation and Jim Stevens, Head of Transport for Buckinghamshire attended the meeting to provide Members with a strategic overview of issues relating to Winter Maintenance.

The following points were highlighted:

- Last winter was the worst winter experienced in the last 30 years.
- Buckinghamshire salt over 40% of roads. There is an annual review undertaken at the end of the season where some changes may be made to the winter maintenance plan.
- Buckinghamshire have Primary and Secondary gritting routes.
- There were discussions with Parish Councils to ensure that the routes to the main roads were salted.
- Buckinghamshire County Council has now entered a partnership with Ringway Jacobs, who operate contracts in Scotland where snow is more prevalent, so they bring this experience to Buckinghamshire.
- The actual stock of salt had been increased by 20% over the normal start of season quantity, in view of the experience of February 2009 snow event.
- Buckinghamshire had full salt stocks and went into the winter fairly confident.
- The worst of the cold weather started before Christmas. Due to the rate of salting, supplies began to run low. On January 6 routes were re-looked at to preserve salt stock and the decision was made to concentrate salting on Primary routes – this decision was in line with the winter maintenance operational plan and influenced by national guidance, low salt stocks (local and national) and emerging/predicting weather forecast conditions.
- Salt is cheaper if purchased in the summer, which is when Buckinghamshire stocked up. More salt was on order during the winter but the supplies ordered did not arrive due to national demand and available stocks.
- The grit bins proved very popular. As quick as they were filled they were emptied. The use of grit bins need to be addressed as some members of the public were taking salt from the bins for personal use, which is not the purpose of the bins.
- The current grit bin policy is that Parish Councils are required to fund the bins, at a one off cost of £450, and the County Council will ensure the bins are maintained and topped up from that point.
- Farmers are longing to help by clearing roads and there is good community spirit.
- Salt is not the answer to everything as it has a corrosive effect on the roads and can have negative environmental impacts.
- In Germany they try to use salt as little as possible.
- The Cabinet Member said she was glad that Members had paid tribute to the staff involved in winter maintenance as they worked very hard over the period.
- The winter maintenance policy is on the internet, which has been reviewed as an effective Local Authority (LA) winter maintenance policy.

- The Department for Transport (Dft) Transport Research Policy have previously said that Buckinghamshire has a good plan.
- The winter maintenance policy was developed inline with national policy guidance.
- The delivery of the plan can be demonstrated on the ground as the plan describes the process and operational practice regarding salting.
- The pre salting network was established by looking through various criteria for example; traffic flow, community links and bus routes.
- In excess of 40% of the network is precautionary salted.
- Daily weather forecasts are received for Buckinghamshire and this information is used to help make the decision to salt.

Members then raised the following comments/questions:

The Local Government Act (LGA) document ‘Weathering the Storm’ indicates that as a result of climate change the UK is likely to suffer from more severe weather with less notice.

We don’t know what the weather will bring, although it will have a global impact. Ringway Jacobs have a Scottish arm and have experience of severe weather conditions. This review along with Transport for Buckinghamshire (TfB’s) own review plus the national review will help Buckinghamshire with its resilience to the effects of climate change.

How can you maximise efficiency of salt stores and use of salt? If salt supplies were not delivered what will be done differently next year?

There is a current review being undertaken by Transport for Buckinghamshire. Buckinghamshire did have a large supply of salt and during the worst period was able to secure additional salt through Ringway Jacobs from North Africa. As a result Buckinghamshire did not run out of salt. Costs of significantly increasing salt stocks and new salt barns need to be looked at and balanced against the risk. The Council, through Ringway Jacobs, are continuing to explore options to buy salt from abroad.

Salt cell was set up in the winter of 2009 by the government to attempt to manage salt supplies and stocks nationally. There are discussions regarding a South East branch of salt cell to address salt storing and process.

Salt Cell, is responsible for advising on the distribution of salt supplies around the Country. The main supplier of salt, which is based in Cheshire, were not able to produce the tonnage of salt as required nationally. The price of salt has also increased significantly; this may be due to increased demand or less salt available.

Salt is very effective. When salt stocks were low emergency routes were implemented, furthermore sharp sand was used on some routes. Ringway Jacobs are also bringing in new methods such as pre-wetting which is expected to reduce salt use by 30%. Ringway Jacobs has specific route based forecast system which allows specific cold spots to be dealt with differently.

Why is the farming community not employed to help clear snow and ice off roads?

Many years ago farmers were used and then over time used less. This needs to be re-visited. Farmers wanted to help and through Local Area Forums (LAFs) there is the possibility of building up a new workforce. Although funding for this practice must be reviewed prior to the County Council entering into any agreements with local farmers.

The conditions on the main roads such as the A413 were not bad. The problem is getting off side roads onto the main roads, could this be looked at for future years?

Running alongside this review is TfB own winter review. TfB is engaging with Parishes and third parties such as farmers. The view of the Parishes suggests that there is a desire to engage with farmers, which mirrors the national message. The National Farmers Union has resolved the issue around insurance and there needs to be consideration of how this could work.

Could third parties clear residential estates?

This would need to be considered carefully. Householders are wary of clearing roads and pavements and national advice says that the risk of liability issues is low providing individuals act carefully and sensibly. In relation to third party help, the District and Town Councils helped clear town centres and footpaths in some areas. This is an area which requires further consideration.

The route to the tip in Gawcott and Calvert was not gritted. The route is approximately 3.5 miles and should be treated.

The Cabinet Member said she noted the point and would be considered in the TfB review.

It is good to see that Buckinghamshire's winter maintenance policy is regarded as a 'good plan'. However a good plan may not necessarily have good results. Winter Maintenance should also be done in the summer/ early autumn, ready for the roads to be in a good condition for the winter.

The priority routes, are the main roads such as the A412, A413 and A418 and are used frequently and therefore often do not have the same problems as residential roads which take longer to clear. The plan needs to be looked at slightly differently to take this into account. Farmers also need to be engaged.

TfB responded well to the worst winter for 30 years and implemented its policy accordingly. The We're Working on It project starts in March and continues through until October. Other maintenance work is also carried out in the summer to prepare for the winter. Repairs are more difficult in periods of wet weather. Dangerous pot holes need to be fixed as a priority and these often develop in the winter as a result of the weather conditions. Primary routes still get affected by the weather conditions and any change to routes has a cost implication which needs to be considered. The current TfB review will consider this.

Did something happen to the plan which was unforeseen on 7 January date?

The decision was taken on 6 January to only grit emergency routes as salt stocks were running low and experience of February 2009 was taken into account, along with government guidance. It was very clear that action had to be taken to preserve the salt supplies and protect key routes. In February 2009 the Council crisis management team met and as a result a decision was made to design a number of emergency routes which are the critical network of roads which would be salted as a minimum to conserve supplies.

It had been a mild winter until mid/end November 2009 and predictions said there was no snow expected. However preparations were ongoing behind the scenes. Following the first snow fall the winter maintenance plan was implemented. Over Christmas the snow and ice began to thaw, but on 5 January fell in significant volumes. The salt stock was assessed in the lead up to 6 January and it had been significantly depleted.

How was the figure of 9000 – 10000 tonnes of salt determined? Should the County be investing in more?

Huge quantities of salt were used and nationally additional salt supplies were not being delivered. Salt cell said to reduce use of salt to preserve stocks and the decision was taken to implement the emergency routes. The emergency routes are effectively the priority routes which would enable Buckinghamshire's economy to keep moving.

With regards to increasing salt stocks the risks must be considered and trends and future predictions looked at. Last winter the weather conditions were bad but in comparison there

were many years before that which were ok and the winter was fairly mild until mid/late November 2009. After February 2009 when extreme weather was experienced salt stocks were increased but salt barns were full and outside storage was being utilised as well. For any further increase in tonnages there needs to be suitable storage facilities (salt barns), which would require capital investment.

With reference to page 17 of the Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan after 7 January virtually none of the plan was implemented.

The decision was taken to implement emergency routes in accordance with the plan – to protect these routes and conserve salt.

Would you do anything differently this winter?

The TfB and Overview and Scrutiny review will influence this and Ringway Jacobs will be implementing new technology (pre wetted salt), which will make more effective use of salt supplies.

If the Council enlists the help of farmers salt would need to be stored locally. If farmers need to store the salt in their barns they would need to forward sell their grain to make room. Farmers therefore need notice and discussions should be had soon.

There is also the issue regarding red and white diesel which needs to be explored.

The fundamental issue is the capacity of the salt union to mine salt and the probability to supply salt is low.

Other countries use ploughs and blowers – could they be used in farming communities?

Buckinghamshire also has better snow ploughs now. Blowers are used in Scotland, however the real question is how much is the County Council to invest in plant and equipment based upon the experience on the 2010 winter.

It is pointless for the refuse collections to collect rubbish unless the County Council is able to keep the tips open. There also needs to be communication with the public regarding self help. Could the outside storage areas for salt be increased?

There is a need to get the public more involved.

Should Councillors be promoting salt bins?

Communities like salt bins but there is an issue around filling them as they take a huge quantity of salt and staff time to fill. Some members of the public have been taking salt for personal use and there needs to be education regarding what the salt is to be used for. There is a need to look into a policy on grit bins. Officers were also unable to access some salt bins, although on the whole they provide a great local need.

Areas such as Marlow which have an ageing population should be given priority during the extreme weather.

TfB worked with the Resilience team and the Adults and Family Wellbeing team for those whose care may be at risk. The gritters were available to ensure care could reach those residents. There is a need for greater self help and neighbours could check in on elderly residents. Business Continuity Plans for all Council services and working in partnership with the resilience team is important to ensure the Council is not reactive but proactive.

Highways own land on the A412 by the Crooked Billet. This land is currently disused and would be ideal to store salt. Could it be utilised for the winter season? Will the Winter Maintenance Task and Finish Group be consulted on the review document compiled by Transport for Buckinghamshire?

The Winter Maintenance Task and Finish Group review and Transport for Buckinghamshire's review will work in partnership.

Action: Jim Stevens/Michael Chard

Are the vehicles used to fill grit bins equipped to get to grit bins?

Buckinghamshire was more prepared than some other Counties. It is currently very difficult to obtain salt and there are only 60 mining days left. To purchase salt from abroad cost twice the price. Using sharp sand in grit bins may be an alternative.

What is the cost of importing salt compared to repairing the roads?

Buckinghamshire has four good salt barns. The cost of salt has doubled. Using salt on roads also has environmental issues.

If sufficient supplies of salt are unlikely to arrive – would the winter maintenance policy need to be revised?

It does not appear that nationally the supplies of salt are available.

The Task and Finish Group may like to ask Mathew Lugg (Chairman of the UK Roads Board and the national lead on winter maintenance) for a statement regarding the national salt supply shortage.

5 DELIVERING THE WINTER MAINTENANCE SERVICE ON THE FRONTLINE

Tim Fowler, Area Maintenance Manager North, Transport for Buckinghamshire and Erik Meek, Area Maintenance Manager South, Transport for Buckinghamshire attended the meeting to discuss the delivery of the winter maintenance service on the frontline.

- The first precautionary salting took place on 29 November 2009 and snow was seen from 17 December 2009.
- There were a further three snow fall events and continuous below zero temperatures.
- It was difficult to make contact with the salt suppliers and on 30 December 2009 an order for more salt was made. Although there was no certainty of delivery.
- On 6 January 2010 the Cabinet Member for Transport signed a non-key decision to postpone the winter maintenance policy.
- The government introduced salt cell which took over control of the distribution of salt.
- On 11 January 2010 Buckinghamshire received its first delivery of salt from salt cell.
- 1000tonnes of salt were received over the winter period which was about 20% of the amount ordered.
- Ringway Jacobs through their purchase power arranged for delivery of some imported salt and 2000 tonnes were received from their suppliers.
- 17 January 2010 saw the end of the intense freeze period.

Members then asked questions. The questions and answers are summarised below:

Could Parishes be involved in clearing pavements as many residents sustained injuries?

Buckingham Town Council and Aylesbury Town Council were engaged to help clear pavements. As part of the TfB review Parish Councils will be asked if they are able to offer any support. It is very labour intensive to clear pavements and there needs to be greater engagement with communities. Wycombe District Council provided 8 free gangs to help with this, utilising staff who would normally carry out grass cutting and refuse collections.

Based on the Operational Arrangements detailed on P13 of the Winter Maintenance plan which shows target rates of Salt spread - what calculations are made to forecast the range of salt stock levels which might be required during the winter.

Calculations are based on the priority 1 network, not the whole network.

Action: Tim Fowler to supply information

There are no budget figures in the plan. How much extra was spent on the winter period?

The Policy document is not a costed document. There is a cost model based on the document which identifies man hours and quantity of salt estimated etc. There are specific additional costs such as the salt ordered by Ringway Jacobs, the District Council teams and the costs of not being able to undertake routine works.

Action: Tim Fowler to supply cost information

If there are only 60 mining days left, Buckinghamshire is unlikely to have the same amount of salt stocks as last winter. Why aren't Officers working with other Councils to place a bulk order of salt from abroad or Buckinghamshire sourcing salt for themselves from other suppliers?

Ringway Jacobs are still in discussions with suppliers. The cost of ordering from abroad must be factored in.

A Member commented that costs was a decision for Members.

As a LA there is constraints regarding storage of salt would that also apply to Parish Councils?

It has to be on a solid base – it does not have to be sheeted.

Should roads be ploughed prior to salting?

The snow has to be at least 2" on the ground. Problems arise due to freezing and thawing.

Even if Buckinghamshire obtains the same salt stock levels as last winter it may not be enough as it was not sufficient for last winter. Will the winter maintenance plan reflect this with changes from last winter?

8,500tonnes of salt can be stored in depots. There is also capacity in Saunderton to increase this by a further 2-3,000 tonnes. Increasing road side storage is being considered.

The plan implemented for the snow routes needs to be looked at. The snow routes need to be treated but there may be a number of other untreated routes. This will be part of the review undertaken by TfB.

Do we have vehicles equipped to fill salt bins?

The gritting fleet is purposely built, however the remaining vehicles are normal lorries, although a small number are fitted with snow tyres.

If the vehicles are better equipped it would ensure the vehicles could get to the salt bins to fill them and enable people to self help.

It is an issue in severe weather. The vehicles could be equipped however this has a cost implication.

When will salt bins be filled?

By the middle of October 2010

Could advice on the use of grit bins be provided?

There are approximately 1000 grit bins, which take approximately 500 tonnes of salt. Last winter grit had to be used rather than salt. Pre-wetting will be introduced to reduce rates of spread to use salt more efficiency.

Consultation with farmers should be undertaken now.

Farmers have their own priorities and could not be relied upon to do things at specific times. A Member commented that there is a balance, farmers could help with filling bins and clearing village centres rather than be relied upon for the road network.

There is space available in Haddenham and Gawcott for outside storage, which used to

be used. Why are these areas no longer used?

This will be looked into

There were only 30 public responses to the winter maintenance questionnaire received. How is the public going to be engaged and manage levels of expectation?

Public are consulted with through Members, Local Area Forums (LAFs) and Parish Councils.

How much salt has been ordered and when is delivery expected?

7000 tonnes has been ordered with the normal supplier. It is anticipated that delivery will begin to arrive from September 2010. Other options for obtaining salt are being looked at.

The Officers were thanked for their attendance.

6 LUNCH

7 DISCUSSION OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES AND RESEARCH

Members discussed the consultation responses and research and made the following points:

- There was a very high response rate, which should give greater weight to the comments.
- Communication was highlighted as an issue. Consideration of how members of the public can be communicated with better needs to be looked at to find a system to feed down to residents and back up to through the 3 tiers of local government.
- There is an assumption that Parish and Town Councils communicate the issue directly to residents.
- The quantity of salt supply expected has not yet been established and it has been said that not all roads will be treated.
- Clarification is necessary whether salt can be stored outside or whether this must be under cover.
- If correspondence is sent to Parish Councils, clerks may not necessarily pass on to the Chairman. Correspondence to Parish Councils should be sent to the clerk and Chairman.
- Members should insist that a minimum salt stock level is obtained.
- Salt is ordered according to storage space not according to need.
- There is a lack of information regarding the winter maintenance budget
- There should be an extra point added on page 12 of agenda item 7, appendix 1 under the heading 'Residents helping themselves' that "Residents in extreme rural areas should be encouraged to self help".
- Members should be consulted on the winter maintenance policy
- Member suggestions on roads to salt should be given due consideration
- Pavements should be gritted into the car parks. Drivers could access the car parks but then faced difficulty getting out as the pavements had not been treated. There was no strategic thinking.
- The purchase of salt should be counted differently - perhaps treated as an asset rather than a commodity.
- The County Council website crashed during the period when residents needed it most.
- Councillors had no information for a period to pass onto residents. Members need to be kept informed on a daily basis during extreme weather.
- The parties listed in the winter maintenance policy and operational plan's communications plan does not include Members.

The Chairman suggested that a list of questions be drawn up and submitted to Officers with a deadline and that there be a pre-meeting on 15 June at 9.30am to discuss the responses.

Action: Policy Officer/Clerk

CHAIRMAN