



Report to Overview and Scrutiny

Date: 1st June 2010
Title: Overview and Scrutiny Review – Winter Maintenance
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Background

1. The Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group requested a brief paper on the Transport for Buckinghamshire response to the extreme weather experience during December 2009 and January 2010.
2. The report is split into 6 sections

Plant

3. Transport for Buckinghamshire operates a fleet of 25 front line spreaders on behalf of the County Council. The fleet is a mixture of dedicated equipment (bulk gritters) and demount gritters that are operated from the back of 18T or 26T tipper lorries.
4. The fleet is distributed across the network and, for 2009/10 was based at:

Gawcott Depot:- 3 spreaders
Griffin Lane Depot:- 8 spreaders
Amersham Depot:- 7 Spreaders
Handy Cross Depot:- 7 Spreaders

Labour

5. Transport for Buckinghamshire operates a “winter rota” for winter maintenance operations. As a consequence of both the working time directive and drivers’ hours regulations the rota needs a minimum of 50 drivers to work successfully. All drivers are Class 2 LGV qualified and are also holders of the NVQ level 2 Winter Maintenance qualification.

Salt

6. The County Council invested a significant sum of money prior to the contract commencing which enable the construction of 4 salt barns at the 4 formal depot locations. The barns each have a notional capacity of 2000t with the exception of the one at Handy Cross which has a capacity of 2500t. In practice the notional capacity can be exceeded by around 20-25%. With the reduced number of spreaders operating out of Gawcott the barn there is traditionally seen as our strategic stock.
7. Salt can also be stored at the Saunderton Landing, around 1000t was available for the 2009/10 season. Following the apparent theft of some salt from Saunderton over the winter period a new fence and secure gate is to be erected prior to the 2010/11 season.
8. A total pre-season stock of around 9500t was available for use across the county.

Operations

9. Winter "starts" for the County Council in mid-October and runs through to mid April the following year. This last season saw no spreading runs until the end of November, a quiet start to the season.
10. The first snow arrived on the night of the 17th December. Spreaders were in operation all night and had cleared the A road network by the time rush hour next morning had commenced. The closure of the M40 and the subsequent diversion through High Wycombe did however bring the network to a halt. Operations continued through out the day of the 18th and, by close of play that day, all of the priority routes were running relatively freely. No treatment of secondary routes was considered necessary at this time.
11. The second snowfall occurred on the 21st December and started at around 14:00hrs. Spreaders were deployed onto the network but were faced with an already congested network as many residents had chosen to use the first day of the holiday to go shopping. Indeed the A404 Marlow Hill was at a standstill as spreaders left the Handy Cross depot. The combination of traffic and deteriorating weather conditions thwarted much of the operation, and total gridlock of much of the urban network occurred during the late afternoon. Treatment of the whole

network was not completed until around 23:00hrs, some 9 hours after the commencement of the operation.

12. Spreaders continued to work throughout the night, slowly clearing the network and focussing on the A and B class networks first. In parts of the county spreaders worked closely with the Thames Valley Police authority to focus attention on discreet parts of the network to allow free running of certain roads.
13. As the week progressed new fleet arrived on the contract and allowed for better penetration on the network.
14. During this week of heavy activity further deliveries of salt were expected. Unfortunately the levels of activity in Buckinghamshire were also being experienced by much of the United Kingdom, with salt being spread at the rate of some 195000t during the week. No salt deliveries were forthcoming and the decision to scale back treatments to the emergency routes (see Winter Maintenance Policy and Plan) was made on 7th January, reducing the network coverage from around 40% to 26%. With snow still lying on much of the network sharp sand was spread on those parts of the precautionary network that were not covered by the emergency routes.
15. The third snow event occurred on the night of 6th January. Again spreaders worked hard to remove the snow but were restricted to the emergency routes only in the first instance.
16. In all, the County experienced around 30 days of freezing conditions, with parts of the network reaching -8 degrees Celsius.

Public Action

17. Salt bins are provided at around 450 locations around the county, in addition there are around 550 locations where salt heaps are formed (predominantly rural areas). These bins and heaps are for the use of residents and are intended solely for use on the public highway. It quickly became apparent that salt placed in the bins was being removed almost as soon as bins were replenished, and was not being used in the way it was intended.
18. Refilling of the bins also caused problems. Bins are traditionally placed in areas where salting is not carried out, it was therefore, at times, almost impossible for our vehicles to access the locations themselves as the road conditions were so poor. It was also apparent that the lack of a re-filling plan was reducing the efficiency of the operation, this will be addressed for the

forthcoming season and the plan will be made available to the public along with our progress against it.

Winter Review

19. As with all winter seasons a post-season review is undertaken. Normally this involves only operational staff and focuses on apparent difficulties experienced during the season. This year, albeit later than had been hoped, we are also approaching Parish, Town and District Councils to find out what we can do to work together to deliver the service more coherently. All responses will be considered and will be set against what we can operationally deliver.
20. Salt supply was again our most significant problem, reports from Salt Union (our supplier) are indicating that at current production levels the UK will struggle to achieve its pre-season stock levels before November 2010.
21. Transport for Buckinghamshire is exploring alternative options, as it did during the crisis, to deliver salt into Buckinghamshire to achieve our maximum stock levels prior to the season start.
22. Work is also underway to refine the winter operational plan, with the focus shifting towards 4 strategic and 21 local routes. All fleet for next season, except our reserve vehicles, will be equipped with a pre-wetting facility. Pre-wetting allows the treatment rate to be significantly lower and will deliver benefits in terms of a reduction in the environmental impact and conservation of salt stocks.
23. More drivers are also being trained to allow for a more resilient workforce.