

Winter Maintenance Review- Summary of Public Submissions

Background

1. The winter of 2009/10 was one of the worst experienced across England in over 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.
2. 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.
3. As part of the evidence gathering process members of the Task and Finish Group were keen to engage with key stakeholders in order to ascertain their views. Residents, as the Council Tax paying public, are the people who are most affected when events such as snow and ice form on Buckinghamshire's roads and pavements. Therefore two press releases were put out periodically to make residents aware of the review and to ask for submissions to the review.
4. The Task and Finish Group would like to thank all residents who have taken time to submit their views. These will be used as vital evidence to substantiate the findings within the final report.

Summary of Findings

5. As a result of the two press releases circulated to the local press we have received over 30 submissions from the residents of Buckinghamshire. The themes of these submissions covered a number of areas and can be summarised using the headings below:

Gritting the Highways and Pavements

6. From the submissions received by the Task and Finish Group the general consensus was that residents felt that more roads across the county should be treated. Many residents seem either unaware of the County Council's Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan and also the decision taken by the Cabinet Member for Transportation (6 January 2010) to suspend the plan temporarily.
7. Some of the comments received about this subject area were as follows:
 - 'In 60% of cases there was no treatment at all. I read this is Council policy, apparently arrived at without any discussion with the hard pressed council taxpayers'
 - 'We were disappointed that the local councils were unable even to keep some of the main highways open...'
 - 'I think the gritting staff did a sterling job...'
 - 'If Bucks policy is to grit roads and pavements according to the Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan then there should be resources available to achieve the targets specified in the document'

Road Maintenance and Pothole Repairs

8. Much of the public feedback centred on the state of the roads network across Buckinghamshire both before and after the harsh winter weather. Many contributors felt that a poor level of roads maintenance over a number of years exacerbated the impact of prolonged period of snow and ice. Another major concern from residents centred on the number of potholes emerging across the County as a result of the harsh winter of 2009/10.
9. Some of the specific comments received about this subject area were as follows:
 - ‘Even before the onset of the unprecedented winter conditions the local road network was worn out and in serious need of repair/major resurfacing’
 - ‘We consider the state of Buckinghamshire roads, like many others, unacceptable with numerous potholes and many ineffective temporary repairs being made’
 - ‘Repairing them properly (roads) must be more cost effective than constantly patching them up and paying compensation for damaged vehicles...’
 - ‘The other question that has to be asked is, do we get more potholes due to the lack of maintenance during the rest of the year?’
 - ‘If £2m could suddenly be found now, why wasn’t it found before so that on the basis of a stitch saves nine, the roads being in a better state of repair to the tune of the same £2m before the frost/snow then wouldn’t have cracked up so much, and so the same £2m might have achieved a lot more...’

Working with Partners

10. The need for the County Council to work with partners, such as bus companies, to keep access to work, education and key amenities open during periods of exceptional weather was a suggestion put forward by some residents. The need for local solutions, run by District or Parish Councils, was also a theme of residents’ submissions.
11. Some of the comments received about this subject area were as follows:
 - ‘If it’s a bus route, grit it...’
 - ‘In such weather conditions, there needs to be a local response, a partnership of local councils, businesses and residents.’

Residents Helping Themselves

12. There seems to be uncertainty around whether residents and businesses are able to clear pavements without fear of litigation. The importance of providing residents with this information and also the tools to clear snow and ice from pavements, like grit bins, was a theme within the submissions.
13. Some of the comments received about this subject area were as follows:
 - ‘Residents had to wait typically two weeks for grit bins to be filled’
 - ‘Residents and shops are willing to clear paths but are unclear about litigation if they do so’

Communications

14. Residents have raised concerns about how the County Council communicates with the public and how the public can obtain information during unusual weather events. The issue of how the public can report potholes, roads of concern and grit bins to be filled were also topics raised through correspondence to the Task and Finish Group.
15. Some of the comments received about this subject area were as follows:
 - 'There is little or no communication from highways- such as matters reported via the highways fault reporting page on the Bucks CC internet website, yet the only comment when tracking requests is that they have been recorded'
 - 'On the day (7th January 2010) I was unable to get information from your web site about the state of roads under your control and your phone system was only taking emergency calls!... These systems must be capable of servicing emergency traffic. This is when citizens need the information.'
16. Any information relating to specific roads and pavements will be submitted to Transport for Buckinghamshire (TfB) for their consideration whilst planning for the winter of 2010/11.