

Minutes

WINTER MAINTENANCE TASK & FINISH GROUP

MINUTES OF THE WINTER MAINTENANCE TASK & FINISH GROUP HELD ON THURSDAY 29 JULY 2010, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 1, COMMENCING AT 1.32 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.40 PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr B Allen, Mr D Anson MBE, Mrs M Baldwin, Mr M Edmonds (Chairman), Mr W Lidgate, Mr D Polhill and Mr D Schofield

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr M Chard, Policy Officer - Overview and Scrutiny, Buckinghamshire County Council
Ms K MacDonald, Democratic Services Officer

1 APOLOGIES/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies of absence were received from Ruth Vigor-Hedderly, Michael Brand, David Rowlands and John Cartwright.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2010 were confirmed as a correct record.

4 CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT- QUESTIONS

The Cabinet Member for Transport, Jim Stevens, Head of Transport for Buckinghamshire and Tim Fowler, Area Maintenance Manager North, Transport for Buckinghamshire were welcomed to the meeting.

This was an opportunity for Members to ask questions in relation to Winter Maintenance issues. The questions and answers are summarised below:



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



There appeared to be a lack of preparation last winter and the reaction to the winter weather slow, particularly in relation to the second period of snow. There appears to be a general feeling that the County Council should have responded quicker and sooner. What are your thoughts?

Nationally there had not been a continuous period of bad weather as was experienced last year with cold periods lasting 3 to 4 days each time. This winter Buckinghamshire County Council and nationally authorities should be better prepared. There is also a need for the public to be better prepared should there be a similar weather conditions this winter and need drive in accordance with the road conditions to consider whether they will fit snow tyres to vehicles.

The review of the Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group, the national review regarding resilience and the review carried out by Transport for Buckinghamshire will enable the County Council to be better prepared next winter provided salt supplies are delivered.

Buckinghamshire County Council activated their Winter Maintenance Plan and undertook a huge amount of activity 24/7 mobilising the work force to carry out gritting and assist Adult Social Care. Officers were in contact with the Chief Executive discussing procedures at all times including midnight and early mornings. The sheer scale of the event took the Council by surprise but it was not due to inactivity. On receiving forecasts action was taken.

Lessons have been learnt and include issues around:

- How Buckinghamshire County Council talks with other Local Authorities
- Footway clearance
- The secondary network and how resources can be mobilised to keep on top of it

There was a usually prolonged period of severe weather.

What is the situation regarding salt supplies?

There is currently just over 2,500 tonnes of salt in stock, through Ringway Jacobs an extra 2,500 tonnes of salt has been secured – delivery of which will commence next week. There is also a further 7,200 tonnes on order with Salt Union. A delivery schedule for this has been received and the salt should be delivered by October 6 2010. There is therefore an anticipated 12,500 tonnes of salt which is 25% more than last year and 50% more than the year previous. The salt is also likely to go further due to the new technique of pre-wetting which uses approximately 30% less salt than normally. Effectively this is equivalent to having approximately 16-17,000 tonnes of salt which is double the stock level of salt 3 years ago which was 8,500 tonnes.

How confident are you that you will receive delivery of the salt supplies?

As Officers have been able to schedule and plan delivery there is a reasonably high level of confidence. There is a good storage level in Buckinghamshire and Buckinghamshire County Council never ran out of salt last year. There was a policy to treat primary routes and this was achieved.

What about funding/payment for the salt?

Ringway Jacobs has a strong Scottish influence. They have used their contacts to purchase some foreign salt which they have paid for. The County Council will pay for this salt if and when it is used. One of the benefits of having an outside contractor is that they have greater flexibility and are able to provide these options.

Last year there was an issue with regards to the elderly as they were not given top priority with regards to the treatment of their roads.

Transport for Buckinghamshire worked closely with social workers and Adult Social Care. There was an assurance that resources would be provided to those who needed it.

Last year Buckinghamshire County Council was operating a priority salt network where A and B roads and major class 3 routes were treated. Residential roads are picked up on secondary routes. In normal winter conditions secondary routes would be treated and the elderly

population would be picked up in that way. Last year however was not a normal winter and the snow fell quickly. Emergency routes were implemented and therefore secondary routes were not treated. Without the implementation of emergency routes there was the prospect of running out of salt.

Transport for Buckinghamshire worked with the Adult Social Care team to identify very vulnerable clients within the County which social workers would need to reach to ensure the roads were clear and that staff could gain access. If this year the County Council should be faced with similar circumstances the service areas should have Business Continuity Plans which should specify how they would reach clients identified and how staff who support them will reach them. Officers have been liaising with the Resilience Team as Business Continuity Plans may need smartening up.

As part of Business Continuity Plans is the Council looking to better equip Local Area Technician vans and other small vehicles with winter tyres so that they can assist with the filling of grit bins in villages?

It is a very good idea to fit winter tyres to Local Area Technician vans. During the extreme winter weather however Local Area Technicians helped with gritting by working as a navigator.

Are we going to look at other storage facilities as outside storage is possible?

If salt is stored outside it needs to have a base. There are other issues with storing salt outside such as insurance implications. It is better to store salt inside, although there will be some salt stored outside although this will be used first.

Officers from Arriva had commented that they did not want to invest in snow tyres, if they did they may be able to go further. They should be encouraged.

London was unable to operate buses effectively. In Buckinghamshire, Transport for Buckinghamshire worked with bus stations. Officers have regular meetings with bus company staff and will raise this point.

There will be different experiences in various parts of the County due to geography. Areas such as Chesham and High Wycombe for example have a lot of hills.

What is pre-wet?

Pre-wet is a technique which happens at the point of application where a brine solution is added to the salt as it is spread on the road.

Will salt bins on private roads be filled?

The County Council has a statutory duty to maintain the public highways, which does not include private roads. There may be an opportunity to purchase salt from the Council for this purpose as self help needs greater encouragement.

Can you provide assurance that the waste disposal sites such as High Heavens and Waspeys Wood will be open to use.

This forms part of the lessons learnt. Last year the emergency route was activated. Waspeys Wood would have been accessible as it is on the A40. Calvert and High Heavens were not included in the emergency route. This will be taken on board and be included in the emergency route network.

The responsibility in terms of transportation is to maintain the public highway and there would be an expectation that the waste team as part of their Business Continuity Plan would discuss this with Transport for Buckinghamshire.

The Officer commented that a recommendation around waste would be useful as it could help encourage waste colleagues to encourage the contractor to be more proactive.

Have there been discussions with farmers?

It has been many years since the country has experienced weather like last winter. Historically farmers had helped with ploughing. However as the weather conditions have been milder this

lapsed over time. It is being looked into to ensure that every local area office obtain a list of available farmers. This is still at the discussion stage and Members will be invited to be involved in the discussions.

Where will farmers get salt from? And has the issue of red diesel solved?

It is envisaged that farmers will use ploughs for snow ploughing not gritting. The issue regarding red diesel has not been taken up with Customs and Excise. Farmers will need to have appropriate public liability insurance.

Public liability insurance is not an issue but if farmers used red diesel and then put white diesel in the machinery for ploughing/gritting the fact that red diesel had been used in the machinery would show up in any testing. This point needs clarification.

Advice is needed. This is a national issue and Officers will take up through salt cell.

There needs to be joint working with partners. We have heard from other services that it is important to keep schools open otherwise other services are affected as staff numbers are affected. The fire service commented that they had vehicles with capacity travelling around the county and that they could have taken or picked up other key personnel. There needs to be better communication and co-ordination. How helpful would this be to Transport for Buckinghamshire?

The Service Information Centre website has the ability to show where the gritting vehicles are during the gritting process as they are fitted with trackers. It is important to have joined up thinking.

The County Council should take the strategic lead

Without the County Council taking a strategic lead it probably would not happen. This has to be targeted at key personnel.

There should be a consistent approach to the opening or closing of schools

Transport for Buckinghamshire can not tell a school to open or to close and there does not appear to be a consistent approach. Some schools may be concerned that to close would affect their absenteeism figures. Schools need to talk to each other to discuss policies as it appears to be ad hoc which also makes it difficult for school transport services.

Did the Resilience workshop happen in July as previously advised?

This would have been undertaken by the Resilience Team. Enquiries could be made of the Resilience Manager.

In relation to Calvert disposal site non primary routes should be treated to enable access.

It might be that not all access routes to disposal sites are treated but that there is an access route open. This Committee has made a clear point regarding keeping disposal sites open. Feedback will be considered and highlighted as a need to be prioritised as a key facility.

What about Household Waste Recycling Centres – will these be kept open?

Disposal sites and Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC) are different. It needs to be considered if it is a priority to keep HWRCs open.

A Member said that if the Local Authority is unable to collect waste is it important that residents be able to self help and take waste to a local HWRC.

Could there be some arrangement with Waste disposal sites that they treat some of the access area to the site?

It is a very contentious issue regarding what roads are gritted. There was a budget overspend and there needs to be a realistic expectation. It is also very difficult to ascertain at what point to initiate the emergency route plan. The Transport for Buckinghamshire annual plan will be

reviewed following the recommendations from the Task and Finish Group. A Cabinet Member Decision is then likely to be taken in October 2010.

The Officer then asked the Committee for their views on how Transport for Buckinghamshire could improve communication on winter maintenance with the public. Currently leaflets have been produced, the Service Information Centre launched and Cabinet Member briefings undertaken with Members.

Members made the following comments:

- The leaflet produced assumes computer access. There are many residents who have no computer access. Is there any other way they can find out what routes are open/treated without the internet access.
- There is no mention of people looking after their neighbours.
- Schools have websites – would it be possible to put information on those.
- Schools also have parentmail with text/email facilities to parents – it may be possible to utilise this.
- Do not be afraid to say that there are things which the County Council is unable to do.

The Cabinet Member and Officers were thanked for their contribution to the Task and Finish Group.

5 TASK AND FINISH GROUP DISCUSSION- FORMULATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chairman said that the work of the Task and Finish Group had been interesting and that the Task and Finish Group had heard many times that it was the worst winter experienced for 30 years. The Committee were now asked to prepare draft recommendations. The recommendations will be discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Commissioning Committee on 7 September 2010 and then taken to Cabinet on 27 September 2010.

Member discussed draft recommendations and formulated the following:

1. Communications:

The County Council should provide a practical guide advising members of the public of the safest methods to clear snow and ice without fear of litigation. This will ensure local areas are safer and more accessible for the local community.

The following resources should be used to communicate information about snow and ice events by the County Council:

County, District, Town and Parish Council websites

Local radio

Local press

County Council internal communications

Email alerts to schools and a governing body representative

Members of the public given the opportunity to sign up for email and text alerts from the County Council

Thames Valley Police (TVP) Community Messaging

2. Use of Farmers:

The Council, with the assistance of the National Farmers Union (NFU), Local Area Forums (LAFs) and Parish Councils, develop a list of farmers from across the County to clear local roads on its behalf.

3. Government Lobbying:

The County Council, in partnership with the local authority representatives on the South East Winter Group, should lobby Central Government to allow farmers to use red diesel on public highways when gritting the roads on behalf of Highway Authorities.

4. Business Continuity Plans:

All County Council services ensure that their Business Continuity Plans include a section on how they will continue to provide a core service during periods of prolonged snow and ice.

Services must be proactive rather than reactive. Including the following:

Requesting bus providers adapt their vehicles to be useable during periods of prolonged snow and ice

Keep schools open, where possible, to ensure key workers are available to work

5. Community Resilience Plans:

The County Council's Resilience Team should engage with and support Town and Parish Councils to establish and implement Community Resilience Plans. These plans must include details of how the local community can mitigate the impact of prolonged snow and ice events.

6. Gritting access roads to key strategic sites:

The County Council should ensure that access routes to key strategic sites, such as bus depots, waste sites, household waste recycling centres, railway stations and schools, are included on the list of primary routes within its Winter Maintenance Policy and Operational Plan.

Cross border consistency when gritting priority routes:

The Council should ensure that they work with neighbouring authorities to ensure that there are consistent levels of gritting on priority routes crossing county borders. This will enable the emergency vehicles to travel safely during ice and snow incidents.

7. Utilisation of Council Staff in their Local Communities:

The County Council should seek to utilise the good will of staff that are unable to travel into central offices during periods of prolonged snow and ice. These staff could be asked to check on vulnerable people within their communities.

8. Social Services Staff

The County Council should equip social care staff and carers appropriately in order for them to access the most vulnerable during prolonged periods of ice and snow, e.g. snow tyres

9. Utilisation of 4 x 4 vehicles

The County Council and its partners should develop a database of 4 x 4 drivers and vehicles. This database should include vehicles owned by all partners and volunteer staff that would be willing to assist during periods of prolonged snow and ice.

Draft Key Observations

If farmers are employed to spread salt on behalf of the Council, additional salt depots should be considered. For example, storage within grain barns on farmers properties

The Task and Finish Group note the increase in predicted salt levels for the forthcoming winter.

Members were thanked for their contribution to the Task and Finish Group. It was agreed that the recommendations would be circulated to Members for comments.

CHAIRMAN