



Briefing 10/32 July 2010

# Evidence to Winter Maintenance Review.

To: Chief Executives and all contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

## Key issues

Winter of 2009-10 coldest for 30 years with significant challenges for council services. Winter Resilience Review is looking for evidence from range of interested parties including local authorities. Evidence refers to highways and winter maintenance, refuse collection and parks services.

### 1. APSE's evidence to the review

APSE has provided evidence to the Winter Resilience Review on behalf of its members and this is copied below. The content is based on information from meetings we have held, the Great Salt Debates (held during our last 2 Annual Highways Seminar) and surveys carried out.

### 2. Introduction

The Winter Resilience Review will consider practical measures to improve England's response to severe weather across its transport systems – road, rail and air. Building upon previous studies, it will report in two parts, with the immediate focus being to identify measures that should be adopted in preparation for winter 2010-11. The second phase of the report, which is aimed at being published in the autumn, will move beyond this initial stage to consider wider aspects of resilience across the various transport modes

The review outcomes formally recommended to the Secretary of State for Transport will only apply to English authorities, but will take account of the wider UK context. The Scottish and Welsh administrations will be fully involved in the work of the review. It will be for Scottish and Welsh Ministers respectively to decide what action is required in those countries.

### 3. Impact on winter maintenance services and highways

The immediate focus of the poor weather over the past 2 winters has been on highways and pavements and the ability of councils to keep these clear of snow and ice and so enable movement of goods and delivery of services. Of course the knock on effects impacted on all the delivery of council services.

APSE members with the responsibility to keep roads and pavements clear found that the main

factors impacting on their ability to deliver services were

- the supply of salt
  - driver hour's legislation
  - the duration of the bad weather and
  - communications and the need to keep interested parties updated on weather conditions.
- (Following paragraph numbers relate to questions in the review terms of reference document)

## 1.2 The complete salt supply chain and treatment strategies by highway authorities

- the supply of salt

The supply of salt is a major issue. No council ran out of salt but there were examples of councils who had to reduce their spreading rates and the network that they were treating in order to make the salt stocks that they had go further as well as keeping traffic on main routes moving.

As noted in the table below some but not all salt orders were met. The following questions and responses are from our annual state of the market survey covering highways and winter maintenance issues.

Q) Have the orders you placed for salt to cover winter maintenance over 2009/10 been met by your suppliers?

Answer Options	2010 Number (%)	2009 Number (%)	% Change
Orders met in full	8 (19%)	15 (40.5%)	-21.5%
Order partially met with our full knowledge of shortfall	7 (16.7%)	17 (45.9%)	-29.2%
Order partially met without our full knowledge of shortfall	6 (14.3%)	1 (2.7%)	+11.6%
Significantly less delivered than ordered with our full knowledge of shortfall	13 (31%)	3 (8.1%)	+22.9%
Significantly less delivered than ordered without our full knowledge of shortfall	8 (19%)	1 (2.7%)	+16.3%
Total	42 (100%)	37 (100%)	

Last winter only 19% of respondents felt their salt orders were met in full with the remainder having either a partial or significant shortfall. The comparison with the year before is stark when over 40% felt their orders were fully met. The message from the responses to this question appear to show that communication was confused – some felt that they were given adequate information from suppliers whilst others said their information came mainly from the wider media rather than directly from suppliers and Salt Cell could have been more helpful. 33% of respondents (14 councils) felt they were not kept informed of the status of their orders.

The situation regarding the extreme weather conditions and the available levels of salt are well known especially as this is virtually a re-run of the previous year. The issue was raised in the equivalent document to this last year that lessons had to be learnt from the poor conditions in 2008-09. In that year nearly 11 % of respondents (4 councils) received significantly less salt than they expected whereas in 2009-10, 50% (or 21 councils) found themselves in this position.

Q) How do you purchase salt supplies (jointly with other authorities, via Highways Agency, independently, via consortium such as YPO or other)?

18 councils that responded purchase salt independently whilst another 18 purchase it in consortia, one council uses both methods and another is likely to switch from independent to joint purchase. The proportions have not changed significantly from last year which indicates that neither method is better at delivering salt to order based on the answers to question 21 above.

Q) Which company supplies your salt?

Of the 35 responses, 7 were supplied by Cleveland Potash, 22 by Salt Union and 4 by Irish Salt Sales and 1 by Holmes Dodsorth with one using more than one supplier. Some councils have considered altering their arrangements so that they get supplies from a range of suppliers rather than a single organisation. This may have an impact but there will always be circumstances beyond the control of suppliers such as the intervention of the Salt Cell, conditions on the roads stopping deliveries from all suppliers and depletion of stocks due to higher demand in previous years.

Q) Would you be interested in being involved in a salt sharing brokerage with other local authorities in future?

29 out of the 42 councils that responded would be interested in a salt sharing brokerage with other local authorities if the need arose again in future. Some discussions are taking place between councils following on from the problems experienced in 2008-09 and regional salt stores was one of the recommendations of the UK Roads Liaison Group which has prompted further discussions. There may well be financial efficiencies to be gained from storing salt jointly with neighbouring councils and this may prompt councils to look at this in future.

Q) Do you have any suggestions for how councils or suppliers can act to avoid salt shortages in times of very bad weather in future?

The most common response was the simple one - that councils should simply store more salt prior to winter. There has been a gradual reduction in storage facilities both due to less severe weather and to perceived savings to be made by selling of assets and storing less salt. There is a danger that moves will be made to increase salt stocks over the next few years only for the same pattern to be followed we do not experience heavy snow falls. Collaboration with other councils, regional stockpiles and the intervention of central government were also noted.

Q) What changes did you make to service arrangements as a result of poor weather in 2008/09?

The most common response to this question was to increase stock holdings prior to winter with other responses being to reduce spread rates and length of priority routes; increased stock prior to winter; replenished used material immediately; followed the recommendations of the UK Roads Liaison Group; review of where and when to grit; utilisation of all staff to do jobs which ensured no drop in service and make sure snow and ice removed; utilised mixes of sand and grit; re-prioritised highways programme and spend.

9 councils noted that made no changes at all either because they experienced no severe weather in 2008-09, because they are located physically close to salt suppliers or because they felt they dealt effectively with the situation in 2008-09. Most changes which can be made will have a cost and at a time of limited budgets this may be considered investment which is not appropriate.

General

A number of councils were annoyed that they had adequate salt stocks because they had planned for poor weather. They were subsequently 'punished' for planning well because the stocks they had were diverted to other councils who were in danger of running out. All agreed with the idea of sharing supplies and helping neighbouring councils but felt that there was an element of punishment from Salt Cell activities. Some felt that the Salt Cell did not communicate what it was trying to do adequately nor did it work well enough in tandem with regional government offices.

The fact that the haulage industry virtually closes down over Christmas and New Year is also a influential factor meaning access to vehicles is difficult.

- the duration of the bad weather

The fact that the bad weather lasted as long as it did simply exaggerated problems which were experienced after the first snow falls. It meant that further supplies of salt needed to replenish stocks were less likely to arrive, that demand for salt remained at a high level and that demands on drivers were difficult to manage.

Some councils had sent lorries to collect salt from mines and due to long queues at the mines the drivers simply turned around and came home. The call for regional stores which are accessible ideally from road and rail appears a valid one in such circumstances and a lot of councils feel this is a positive way forward.

- driver hour's legislation

Q) Did the working time directive act as a barrier to operations? Which of the following best describes your views?

Answer Options	Number (%)
Yes it is a barrier but it is necessary to maintain sensible driver hours	10 (26.3%)
Yes it is a barrier and should be amended to accommodate emergency situations	15 (39.5%)
No - the working time directive had no direct impact on operations	13 (34.2%)
Total	38 (100%)

The working time directive did act as a barrier for some but it is by no means seen as a universal barriers. A number of councils noted that it had no direct impact on operations. Comments noted that any problems could be overcome with proper shift patterns whilst another said that the main shifts are rotas which complied fully with the directives but exemptions were applied when necessary in emergency situations. A further comment noted that the directive was not followed to any degree.

## 2.6 Communications and public expectations

- Communications and the need to keep interested parties updated on weather conditions.

Some councils found that communications with different government offices, Local resilience Teams, Salt Cell and DfT were difficult and involved duplication and mixed messages. Clearly there is a need for councils and other public service providers to work to an established plan in emergency situations.

Councils used a range of methods to keep local people and businesses up to date with the weather and services including local newspapers, websites and radio.

Q) Did the 'salt cell' operation where government took control of supplies help or hinder the situation?

15 councils (40% of respondents) thought that the Salt Cell helped the situation whilst 16 thought they hindered and 6 thought they had no impact at all. Some thought that those with the right connections may have benefitted more than others whilst the need for Salt Cell should have been noted earlier. There were comments about communications from Salt Cell and this is perhaps the most worrying as this is fundamental to the operation of Salt Cell. Some councils who had planned their stocks well in advance were disadvantaged because they were not able to get the deliveries they had ordered because they were diverted elsewhere to councils who did not have good plans in place. One

commented that it did give the council a degree of confidence that in the event of serious difficulty support from other suppliers or Authorities outwit our partnership would have assisted. Others have noted that the arrangements in London and Wales were more effective than national arrangements.

Q) Would you support future central intervention in salt supplies in a critical situation?

81% (30 councils) of respondents would support central intervention in future although the comments made above should be borne in mind. It is important to understand the interpretation of 'intervention' – it must be effective and add value rather than just be intervention for the sake of it and communication and responsibility must be clear. However there does appear to be recognition of the fact that there is a role for central government.

Q) Did your service experience an increase in complaints with regard to lack of gritting in general or on specific roads, salt bins, removal of snow/ice on footways, subsequent damage to roads/footways or other highways related issues?

Answer Options	Number (%)
No increase in complaints	1 (2.6%)
Estimated increase of up to 25%	13 (33.3%)
Estimated increase of up to 50%	6 (15.4%)
Estimated increase of up to 100%	6 (15.4%)
Estimated increase of greater than 100%	13 (33.3%)
Total	100%

Public expectations have risen with regard to council services and the same appears to be true of the support councils are expected to provide during severe weather. Clearly councils act to help their communities as much as they can but resources are limited and there are practical difficulties of access to smaller roads, commercial properties and domestic homes which mean their hands are tied in some respects. All but one of the councils that responded experienced an increase in complaints over the level they would expect during the severe weather. There will be issues of interpretation here with some citizens requesting roads to be gritted or snow to be cleared on roads about which council decisions have already been made or requests for service may be deemed as complaints. Although there is no doubt that there has been an increase in contact with the councils, it is difficult to put a figure to the scale of increase.

## Further information

The knock on impacts of bad weather upon highways is now clearer and the table below reflects the level of damage to infrastructure and how it will be tackled.

Q) Has your authority experienced any of the following (you may answer more than one)

Answer Options	Number (%)
Excessive 'freeze-thaw' damaging road surfaces	35 (92.1%)
Increase in demand for urgent highways repairs	35 (92.1%)
Increase in damage to street lighting columns	5 (13.2%)
Increase in damage to street furniture/signs/traffic lights	8 (21.1%)

There are a range of potential problems which occur following poor weather conditions and responses point to further damage especially to road surfaces. By dealing with the increased demand for urgent highway repairs there is a chance that deterioration has been halted but there will be areas where budgets have not been made available for repairs leading to expanding areas of deterioration. Damage to street lights, street furniture, signs and traffic lights has also been experienced by a number of councils.

Q) Do you think that the 'big freeze' will lead to any of the following (you may answer more than one)

Answer Options	Number (%)
Increase in legal claims for slips, trips and falls	35 (92.1%)
Review of gritting / salt routes	29 (76.3%)
Review of clearing /gritting pavements outside schools/key public buildings/civic centres/residential homes	27 (71.1%)
Review of clearing / gritting pavements outside of shops and in town centres	28 (73.7%)

Responses to this question have seen majority agreement with all the above questions reflecting the need to review operations in the face of severe weather. Comments included that public demand and expectation will always outweigh what is reasonably practicable; that complete service reviews will be undertaken in summer and that grit bin policy will be reviewed.

Q) What has been the impact on your budget?

Answer Options	Number (%)
We have had to overspend on our budget	27 (69.2%)
We have had to work within existing budgets and limit the service provided	1 (2.6%)
We have been given additional resources to cope with demand	10 (25.6%)
We have overspent on our budget but we must recover these costs within the current financial year	7 (17.9%)
We have overspent on our budget but we must recover these costs within the next two to three years	3 (7.7%)

Nearly two thirds of respondents had to overspend their existing budgets which will come as no surprise. Comments from 5 councils pointed to extra funds being provided either by the corporate centre or from contingency funds and this is not surprising either bearing in mind

the nature of severe weather being outside the normal financial planning process which would consider normal weather.

Q) What will be the likely additional costs of repairing pot holes which have come about as a result of the poor weather?

Answer Options	Number (%)
No expected additional costs	1 (2.6%)
Less than £50,000	1 (2.6%)
£50,000 - £100,000	8 (21.1%)
£101,000- £250,000	8 (21.1%)
£251,000- £500,000	7 (18.4%)
£500,000 - £1,000,000	8 (21.1%)
In excess of £1 million	5 (13.2%)
Total	100%

Although it is difficult to allocate a figure for the whole cost of pothole repairs across local government the table shows that only one out of 38 councils does not envisage extra costs related to pothole repairs. Nearly all councils will have a cost and for some it will be very significant.

Q) When do you expect road repairs due to damage from poor weather to be completed by?

27% of councils thought that damage will be repaired within 3 months with 50% repaired within 6 months and the remainder within 12 months. It is likely that temporary repairs will be made immediately with more permanent repairs held over until resurfacing schemes. The danger of further deterioration taking place is increased when repairs are not tackled immediately so the cost is likely to be higher. In the meantime the damage to vehicles will be greater over a longer period.

Q) During the big freeze did you:

Answer Options	Number (%)
Deploy resources from within your department (but from services areas that would not normally work on highways issues) to address the impacts of the snow/ice?	23 (56.1%)
Deploy resources from other departments / services to address the impacts of the snow/ice?	22(53.7%)
Resources were sufficient within the department / service area to avoid using extra resources	6 (14.6%)
Total	41 (100%)

In the main councils deployed resources from within their own departments and other departments to address the impacts of snow and ice. A number also received help from external contractors and partners to clear snow.

## Impact of the weather on refuse collection

We carried out a survey gaining 172 responses. The main findings were

- 66% (or 100) of responding councils suspended the service between 4-15 January 2010
- Number of days (total) refuse collection service suspended

No. Of Councils	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
No. Of days	20	27	15	8	6	4	4	1	0	5	1

- Number of days of limited refuse collection service

No. Of Councils	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
No. Of days	10	15	17	6	15	7	8	6	1	15	6

Clearly there were issues of catch up following suspension or limited services.

Of those that operate a no side waste policy, 78% agreed to collect side waste during catch up.

As part of catch up - 78% of respondents paid overtime; 41% used agency staff; 27% used staff from other departments to undertake work; 52% of refuse staff were diverted on to other duties or activities such as training when services were suspended

During the delivery of waste for treatment or disposal the main problems experienced were

- Tip unavailable due to road conditions/access to landfill site
- Delays/queues
- Capacity issues –needed extended opening times
- Closure
- Much higher contamination rates of recycling
- Reduced inputs to the EfW plant

### Complaints

There was an average of 118 complaints amongst all respondents ranging from 0 to 4,000

With regard to a suspended or limited service, 70% of councils communicated every 2 or 3 days with local people whilst 23% communicated when necessary.

With regard to catch up arrangements, 63% of councils communicated every 2 or 3 days with local people whilst 26% communicated when necessary.

Elected members were updated on a daily basis about the weather situation and impacts on services every day by 77% of councils, every 2 or 3 days by 17% and weekly by 6%

Examples of special equipment, vehicles or clothing introduced are as follows

- Slip on spiked overshoes/ice grips to fit on shoes/boot chains
- Hand operated grit spreaders
- Pedestrian operated pavement gritters
- New gritters/towed gritters for car parks/small push along gritters for the depot
- Demountable skip salt spreaders for side roads
- Snow shovels/shovels for salt distribution

- Drop down snow chains for vehicles
- Snow tyres/modified tyre "socks"
- 4WD Land rover with tow hook, quad bike and two trailers
- Used our 4by4 tractors on hilly areas
- Spreading vehicles for the compact sweepers
- Inner gloves as insulation layer to standard PPE issue gloves
- Brine spraying machine

Examples of new procedures introduced are as follows

- Daily safety checks on conditions
- Instructions for crews to follow if the weather was too bad
- Scouting team in 4X4's to assess conditions
- Manual handling of wheelie bins onto flat bed and open back refuse collection vehicles using webbing
- Priority pavement gritting routes/amended Winter maintenance routes to include back lanes
- Risk assessments on road by road basis
- Emergency plan procedure to include what we did during the bad weather
- Strengthened business continuity plan
- We were at the time developing our Snow and Ice Policy (since adopted)
- Set up a working group on working in adverse weather conditions
- Project to develop communal waste collection points/mobile collection points for residents to bring their refuse and recycling to us at shopping parades
- Adopted a more lenient approach to finishing times if the work was completed
- Alternative staffing arrangements and duties
- Used Council employees to grit household roads
- Suspension of services to help others
- Establish joint working arrangements with Street Scene Services
- Sharing resources with our neighbouring council/liaise more closely with County gritters to grit roads round the depot so refuse freighters can get out
- Web system

## **Impact of the weather on parks services**

In a survey of local authorities, we found that council parks services have been significantly affected by the adverse weather during January, mainly due to staff being diverted onto other duties such as gritting pavements, snow clearance in cemeteries, schools and day centres, delivery of meals on wheels to elderly residents, waste collections and clearance of recycled material from residents properties.

The APSE snapshot parks survey found that 91% of councils have had a gap in planned work as a result of the weather conditions and 95% of councils said that staff have been diverted onto duties outside their normal work.

Other areas of impact from the salt and icy conditions include:-

- 50% said their crops and plants have been affected
- 23% have seen an impact on their highways verges
- 32% said there has been an impact on fine turf
- 36% said arboriculture has been affected
- Other areas affected included a backlog of sports fixtures especially with football and rugby league games.

When asked what arrangements councils were putting in place to repair the damage and catch up with planned work, this included:

- 50% said their crops and plants have been affected
- Programming of repair work
- Reprioritisation of minor work
- Treatment of fine turf to control diseases
- Extending the current sporting season
- Prioritising health and safety issues
- Bringing in additional staff

When asked about lessons learnt as a result of the weather conditions, some councils thought that other services would have been severely impacted if it was not for the ability to call upon resources from the parks section and also commended the ability of staff at the council to respond to the conditions. Other comments included the need for a contingency plan for periods of adverse weather conditions or to improve the current plan, to review gritting/slating procedures in parks and to always plan for disruption.

## **Summary**

One general fact which emerged from our surveys and interaction with council representatives is that the flexibility of council services to respond in emergency situations was a key factor in keeping services moving and disruption to local residents minimised. Given that this review is considering how to keep the country moving in times of severe weather, the fundamental role of councils should be understood and every reasonable action taken to enable them to be in a position deliver services in future. This includes an adequate supply of salt as well as support on how to make the best use of stock and how councils can work better together. Some councils have had to deal with floods recently as well and the recent budget announcements reducing the resources available to local government will mean that responding to emergency situations will be much more difficult.

**Phil Brennan**  
**Principal Advisor**