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State of the Market Survey 2014

Winter Maintenance

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LOCAL SERVICES LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Winter Maintenance

State of the Market 2014

Introduction

APSE conducted an on-line survey during Summer 2014. A series of questions were asked covering a range of issues of interest to those officers and councillors responsible for highways issues in general and winter maintenance specifically. 43 responses were received from local authorities throughout the UK. This report identifies the key findings of the survey.

This is the fifth year APSE has undertaken a state of the market survey for highways, street lighting and winter maintenance so a comparison over time is available and this comparison will be highlighted where appropriate. It must be noted that the councils and individuals responding may not be the same from year to year. In previous years there has been a combined survey for highways, street lighting and winter maintenance whereas for the past 2 years they were sent out separately and so will be reported separately.

45 responses were received to the highways survey and a further 43 to the street lighting survey making a total of 131 responses to all 3 surveys.

The surveys are an attempt to understand perceptions of the market amongst people directly involved in delivering services rather than a survey of the same individuals from year to year.

Context

The 3 severe winters prior to the last which resulted in bad weather across the whole UK certainly prompted a significant response from local authorities, central government and suppliers. There were problems with salt supplies and deliveries, communications between customers and suppliers and significant traffic problems with knock on impacts for local people right through to the national economy. The Quarmby review and local government reviews of winter maintenance service policies were undertaken and lessons learnt. Extra funding has been allocated to the service area with investment in new vehicles, training, extra salt supplies and increased storage facilities.

The weather over the most recent winter (2013-2014) was not as bad as the previous three and it will be interesting to see how councils respond in terms of allocating resources. The service remains a reactive one and so having up to date plans in place which can be activated promptly and are effective remains fundamental to deliver a good service.

The most recent The Transport Resilience Review 2014 focussed more on high winds, heavy rainfall and flooding. All of these have a significant impact on the highways network and the outcomes of coastal flooding and damage, high groundwater levels, local flooding and fluvial flooding alongside landslips and earthwork problems affect all those delivering highways services

Note

The tables below show figures for 4 or 5 years but the questions were asked of the winter maintenance service only in this year's survey whereas in previous years questions had been asked of the highways, street lighting and winter maintenance services combined. Therefore the tabular data provides contextual information for the winter maintenance service.

Results from the survey

1) How do you expect the budget for the winter maintenance service to change over the next 12 months?

Answer Options	2014 Number (%)	2012 Number (%)	2011 Number (%)	2010 Number (%)	2009 Number (%)
Increase	4 (10%)	4 (20%)	10 (24.4%)	10 (13.9%)	5 (7.6%)
Stay the same	29 (70%)	14 (70%)	23 (56.1%)	58 (80.6%)	55 (83.3%)
Decrease	8 (20%)	2 (10%)	8 (19.5%)	4 (5.6%)	6 (9.1%)
Total	41	20	41	72	66

41 Councils responded to this question and of those only 4 responded that their budgets had increased whilst the vast majority 29, had seen their budgets remain the same or similar. 8 councils saw a reduction in their budget. The mild winter last year has had little impact on the budget which was set prior to potential severe weather. The real challenge for those setting budgets will come in future years when they must judge what level to set budgets at in order to balance delivery of the service with prediction of the severity of the weather.

2) What has been the impact on your budget?

Answer Options	2014 Number(%)	2012 Number(%)	2011 Number(%)	2010 Number(%)
Underspent	11 (28.2%)	0	0	0
On budget	10 (25.6%)	0	0	0
Overspent on our budget	8 (20.5%)	11 (68.9%)	22 (61.1%)	27 (69.2%)
Worked within existing budgets and limit the service provided	7 (17.9%)	3 (18.8%)	5 (13.9%)	1 (2.6%)
Given additional resources to cope with demand	2 (5.1%)	2 (12.5%)	18 (50%)	10 (25.6%)
Overspent budget, must recover costs within financial year	1 (2.6%)	0 (0%)	4 (11.1%)	7 (17.9%)
Overspent budget, must recover these costs within next 2 - 3 years	0	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (7.7%)

A number of councils pointed to the mild winter as the reason they stayed within budget last year. Clearly this will have an impact for most councils and only 45% have had difficulties either with managing the budget or limiting the service. This figure had been up at nearly 100% in previous years when the weather was worse than last winter.

Financial planning may become a little easier if weather prediction becomes more reliable and there are efforts being made towards this. It is very rare that drastic measures such as road closures are taken to deal with severe weather and normally the resources needed are found from somewhere within council budgets. Nevertheless savings in the costs of the service have been made and more will be expected.

3) How are your services currently delivered?

Answer Options	2014 Number (%)	2012 Number (%)	2011 Number (%)	2010 Number (%)	2009 Number (%)
In-house - combined service	25 (59.5%)	10 (50%)	34 (82.9%)	35 (72.9%)	26 61.9 %)
In –house – client/contractor split	11 (26.2%)	4 (20%)	3 (7.3%)	8 (16.7%)	11 (26.2%)
Externally provided	5 11.9%)	5 (25%)	3 (7.3%)	4 (8.3%)	4 (9.5%)
Arms length organisation	1 (2.4%)	0	1 (2.4%)	0	0
Joint venture company	0	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.1%)	1 (2.4%)
Total	42	20	41	48	42

The majority of responses were received from councils were the service is delivered in house with most of these being combined services. Overall this sample shows a minor change towards delivery by external providers / JVCs. There is a mix within some councils where the bulk of the service is delivered in house with support from the contractors; elsewhere decision making is in-house and treatments are provided by contractors. In another council there is a 24 hour duty officer rota shared with two other councils.

4) Do you expect the service to remain in-house over the next 12 months?

All of those whose services are provided internally expect the current arrangement to remain the same in the foreseeable future except for 1 who has a joint venture out to tender.

5) Do you have a dedicated training budget for winter maintenance? If so, what has happened to it over the past 12 months?

Of the 40 councils that responded 29 have no dedicated training budget for winter maintenance. In 10 of the 11 councils that that do have a budget it has remained the same and in only 1 has it decreased. Anecdotal information points to training had a higher profile for these services over recent years but it appears to come from departmental or corporate budgets in the main.

6) Do you currently sell your services to organisations external to the council?

Answer Options	2014 No. %	2012 No. %	2011 No. %	2010 No. %	2009 No. %	% change 09-12
No & not considering for the near future	25 (61%)	10 (50%)	18 (53%)	33 (72%)	26 (65%)	-2.9%
No, considering as option in near future	8 (20%)	4 (20%)	8 (245%)	1 (2%)	2 (5%)	-3.5%
No, likely to start doing it in the near future	0	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	0	1 (2.5%)	+5%
Yes and expecting to continue	7 (17%)	5 (25%)	8 (24%)	11 (24%)	9 (22.5%)	+2.5.0%
Yes, not expecting it to continue long term	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	2 (5%)	0%
Total	41	20	34	46	40	

The answers from responses to this question show that the proportion that are not trading nor considering it in the near future has increased slightly even though the number of respondents has more than doubled. 20% of all respondents are looking to move into selling their winter services to others in the near future. A further 17% are looking to continue doing so in future.

It is of course vital to ensure you are providing your own services well prior to looking at selling externally and the capacity to do so must also be in place. However the temptation to look at this as a source of income will remain as long as budgets cuts continue.

7) Where do you see growth areas over the next 12 months?

Clearly there will be differing opinions in relation to this question all dependent upon local priorities. Some responded that further resources would be needed to address areas of growth. Further areas of growth that were noted include the following

- Footway treatments
- Volunteer schemes
- Community resilience activities
- Increased requirement for response to social media
- Salt/additive technology
- Review of existing service arrangements
- Route optimisation
- Upgrading older fleet
- Commercial treatments
- Private roads and accesses

Some considered that there would be no areas of growth over the coming year.

8) Where do you see areas where work may decrease over the next 12 months?

Again there was a mixture of responses to this question with some people claiming there would be no reduction in work whilst others thought all areas of work would experience cuts. Once again the items noted will reflect local circumstances. Some specific responses included

- Budget pressure may see a reduction in pre salt routes especially secondary routes
- Defined network may be reduced to include only A and B roads
- Footways and grit bins are under review so service may be reduced
- Generally decreases in the service with decreasing budget
- Gritting of unclassified roads (i.e. potentially concentrating on other key route corridors)

9) Have the orders you placed for salt to cover winter maintenance over 2012/13 been met by your suppliers?

Answer Options	2014 No.(%)	2012 No.(%)	2011 No.(%)	2010 No.(%)	2009 No.(%)	% Change 2009-12
Orders met in full	36 (95%)	18 (90%)	11 (31%)	8 (19%)	15 (41%)	-9.9%
Order partially met with our full knowledge of shortfall	0	0	12 (33%)	7 (17%)	17 (46%)	-12.6%
Order partially met without our full knowledge of shortfall	0	1(5%)	2 (6%)	6 (14%)	1 (3%)	+2.9%
Significantly less delivered than ordered with our full knowledge of shortfall	1 (3%)	1 (5%)	5 (149%)	13 (31%)	3 (8%)	+5.8%
Significantly less delivered than ordered without our full knowledge of shortfall	1 (3%)	0	6 (17%)	8 (19%)	1 (3%)	+14%
Total	38	20	36	42	37	

The proportion of councils who had their orders for salt met was nearly 100% last year. The reasons are clear and the mild winter is certainly the main one. Lack of immediacy has clearly had an impact even though many councils have expanded capacity with many new barns and extra storage facilities. It appears that the suppliers are improving provision and delivery with many councils having stocked up much earlier in the year than had previously been the case.

On the surface this looks a good news story but there are still some cases of breakdowns in supply or communication within the sector. Although this looks like an unusual occurrence, if one local authority does run short of salt there is immediate pressure placed on the supplier to deliver and if they are unable to (as has been the case in the recent past) the pressure falls on to neighbouring councils to support.

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

Only 9 of 37 councils that responded purchase salt independently whilst 27 by far the majority purchase it jointly or through consortia which include AGMA, YPO, ESPO, West Yorkshire Collaborative Group, Midlands Highways Alliance and Scottish Excel. One council relies on its contractor to purchase salt for them.

Throughout the five years of this survey there remain a relatively large number of authorities continuing to purchase salt independently despite a lot of promotion around joint purchasing.

Also some councils avoid relying on a single method of purchase and so buy from more than one source.

11) Which company supplies your salt?

Of the 36 responses, 17 were supplied by Salt Union, 8 by Cleveland Potash, 5 by Irish Salt Sales and 1 by both Peacock and Cleveland Potash and Irish Salt Sales, 3 by Salt Sales and 2 by Boulby Potash

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

Previous responses to this question have mainly referred to the obvious answer of simply storing more salt prior to winter. As all councils have taken up this message now the most common response this time was to ensure there are strategic stores organised and that mutual aid arrangements were in place and agreed between neighbouring councils. Collaborative arrangement were also noted with the example of the Welsh salt network highlighted. Replenishing stocks adequately is another simple arrangement which should be in place. The correct management of stocks, ensuring they are secure, reduced spread rates and that Appendix H directions are adhered to are further suggestions which are made.

Review of routes is suggested as is the calibration of equipment. This latter point is significant if vehicles are single use and other equipment such as ploughs are only used in winter. Getting accurate forecasting is also very useful but often out of the control of the local authority.

13) With regard to your road network, which of the following are salted?

Out of 39 responses, 28 said they salted all primary routes and some extra other routes. 9 councils said they salted all primary routes whilst 2 more said they salt some primary routes and some other routes. Experience from the last few winters points to reductions in the amount of salt used per run and the number of runs, rather than reductions in the number of routes treated.

14) Do you salt footways?

Of 38 respondents, 8 replied they did not salt footways, a further 10 said they salt footways as a precautionary measure following forecast whilst the majority, 20 councils, said they salt footways after ice has formed.

Salting of footways has received a higher profile over the past few years due to guidance issued from government about risks to those clearing snow in front of their homes or premises against claims, what was previously seen as concentration on roads rather than footways, a move by a number of local authorities to establish snow wardens on a volunteer basis to help clear snow and a specific recommendation in the Quarmby Review addressing footway salting.

15) If you do salt footways, approximately what percentage of the footway network do you salt? Which areas do you salt?

Of the footway network 4 responded that they salt less than 5%, 5 salt between 5% and 10%, 1 salt between 10% and 20% and 4 salt more than 20% of the network

When asked which facilities are salted ,responses included some footway bridges near schools, high elevation main footways, council buildings, police stations, elderly complexes, sheltered housing schemes, routes to schools and walking bus routes. Other noted that all category 1 footways are salted. One stated that the routes salted were dependent on the resources available at the time.

16) Do you have a snow warden scheme in place?

13 responded noted that their council does have a snow wardens scheme in place. 25 responded that they did not whilst one more is in eh process of establishing a scheme.

Snow warden schemes have received both positive and negative comments with some claiming they are simply a PR exercise with little value. Others work with parish and district councils and other voluntary organisations by providing grants or de-icing agents free of charge to encourage them to contribute to de-icing and clearance whilst others have schemes in place which are all year round and have a wider remit than purely snow clearance.
Some may see this as the local authority ignoring its duties and passing responsibilities on to community groups and they should be wary of facing such criticism.

17) What changes did you make to service arrangements as a result of poor weather over the last 4 years?

Actions taken over last 4 years	
More training for staff.	Improved fleet.
Full service review undertaken in 2010. Annual reviews carried out since.	Annual review and update Winter Plan including amending carriageway salting routes.
Precautionary salting of community routes.	Introduced a resilient route.
More salt in stock, salt conservation procedures developed.	Considered utilising vehicles from Grounds Maintenance section.
Community resilience.	Extra resources for storing salt.
Provision of additional footway tractors with spreaders (as opposed to drop boxes).	Use of Agency drivers to provide additional cover.
Route based forecasting	Additional small demountable/towed gritters.
Community groups helping with footway snow clearing.	Changes to emergency response plans.
Severe weather working group established.	Working with schools.
External assistance in snow conditions using contractors/ farmers.	Responsibility for pavement treatment passed to Local Neighbourhood Teams.
Added weather domains.	Increased route coverage.
Been out to the private sector for back up.	
Introduced snow angels scheme.	Improved customer information.

The variety of actions noted reflects local circumstances as well as previous actions taken and differing priorities. Those experiencing regular severe weather may need to change less whilst those who experience heavy snowfall infrequently may have more to learn and therefore to change.

Most changes made will have a budget impact and although most expect budgets to stay the same (as noted in question 1) extra spending will have to be carefully considered at a time of limited budgets. Nonetheless there are those who have seen budgets increase over the last few years for capital investments some of which are noted above.

19) Has the severe weather over the past 3 years led to any of the following (you may answer more than one?)

Answer Options	2014 No. (%)	2012 No. (%)	2011 No. (%)	2010 No. (%)	% change 2010-14
Increased legal claims - slips, trips & falls	8 (19%)	11 (55%)	23 (67.6%)	35 (92.1%)	-37.1%
Review of gritting / salt routes	32 (76%)	13 (65%)	28 (82.4%)	29 (76.3%)	-11.3%
Review of clearing/gritting pavements of schools, key public residential bldgs	23 (55%)	14 (70%)	30 (88.2%)	27 (71.1%)	-1.1%
Review of clearing / gritting pavements outside of shops and in town centres	21 (50%)	13 (65%)	26 (76.5%)	28 (73.7%)	-8.7%
Encourage others to clear snow e.g. local people, parish councils, farmers	28 (67%)	18 (90%)	27 (79.4%)	n/a	+10.6%

There has been a significant reduction in the percentage local authorities seeing an increase in legal claims for slips, trips and falls between 2010 and 2014. This will have been because of better treatments reducing the likelihood of such events and more robust defence against claims by many local authorities as well as the introduction of more rigorous procedures. Review of routes and clearing outside of public an commercial premises now appears to be an annual occurrence in many councils whilst collaborative working with other bodies is also extensive. Regular contact with parish councils is a common occurrence.

Conclusions

The survey covers a range of questions and provides a lot of information. Some issues emerge clearly such as the variety of changes made to winter maintenance services over recent years. There is no doubt that innovation is alive whether that involves the use of new technology, snow warden schemes or external trading and there are many examples within this survey to justify such a statement. The budgetary situation will remain challenging for this service, as it will for all in public services, and the added complication of unknown weather conditions only adds to difficulty of planning for and providing the service.

The lessons learnt during heavy snow fall and ice formation are relevant to other scenarios such as flooding, heavy rainfall and high winds. Use of social media to keep the public informed of conditions and available support is certainly a case in point and this must be maximised. Engagement with the community expands the use of available capacity and review of existing plans and procedures is another exercise which is applicable to all elements of emergency planning.

The Association for Public Service Excellence

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular advisory groups, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The advisory groups are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

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- Service transformation and performance management
- Sports and leisure management
- Vehicle maintenance and transport
- Waste management, refuse collection and street cleansing