

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
15 JULY 2010**

**RESPONSE TO SEVERE WEATHER WORKING GROUP REPORT
Lead Working Group Member**

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report presents the attached report resulting from the review of the Council's response to the severe weather experienced in Bracknell Forest during December 2009 and January 2010, undertaken by a working group of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission.
- 1.2 The report incorporates amendments made by the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel at its meeting held on 22 June 2010.

2 SUGGESTED ACTION

- 2.1 **That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission adopts the attached report of the review of the response to the severe weather in Bracknell Forest undertaken by a working group of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, for sending formally to the Leader of the Council.**

3 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 Snow and ice caused widespread disruption across the Borough on 21 December 2009 and during the period 5 -14 January 2010.
- 3.2 The Working Group was established at the request of the Leader to review the Council's response to the severe weather conditions with a view to making recommendations on any action to be taken based on lessons learned from these events. The review covered the actions taken across the council, thus bearing on the portfolios of many Executive Members.
- 3.3 The amendments determined by the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel are shown in underlined text in paragraphs 5.1, 6.2 and 6.7 of the attached report.

Background Papers

None.

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**RESPONSE TO SEVERE WEATHER
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORKING GROUP REPORT**
Overview and Scrutiny Working Group

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. On 21 December 2009 and then during the period 5 -14 January 2010 freezing temperatures and snowfall were experienced across the borough and nationally. Snow and ice caused widespread disruption across the borough on both occasions.
- 1.2. The Working Group was established at the request of the Leader to review the Council's response to the severe weather conditions during December 2009 and January 2010 with a view to making recommendations on any action to be taken based on lessons learned from these events.
- 1.3. The Working Group review took into account the Officer Review of the Council's response and hoped to provide any further comments or amendments on actions to improve the Council's future response.

2. MEMBERSHIP AND SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

- 2.1. The Working Group was established with the following membership: Councillors Harrison (Co-Chairman), Turrell (Co-Chairman) and Finnie.
- 2.2. The scope of the review was to consider:
 - The Council's ability to maintain traffic movement on the highway;
 - How the Council maintained its normal services;
 - Use of resources;
 - Information available.

3. MEETINGS

- 3.1. The Working Group met on 6 occasions:
 - 15 February 2010
 - 3 March 2010
 - 14 April 2010
 - 4 May 2010
 - 14 May 2010; and
 - 7 June 2010
- 3.2. In addition Bracknell Forest Borough Councillors were contacted for their views on the Council's response to the severe weather and any issues that may have arisen in their wards during the periods of severe weather. The Group received a number of responses which were taken into account and considered during the review where appropriate.
- 3.3. The Working Group also contacted the Borough's Parish and Town Councils to ask for their views on the whether the Borough Council's response was appropriate and timely and if anything could be done to improve the response during future severe weather events.

- 3.4. The Group held discussions with Bracknell Forest Council staff from the Adult Social Care & Health, the Children, Young People & Learning and the Environment, Culture & Communities departments.
- 3.5. Discussions were also held with representatives of SITA and Ringway, two of the Council's partners.
- 3.6. Councillor Edger joined the working group for their meeting held on 4 May 2010.

4. FINDINGS

Context

- 4.1. The Group noted that occurrences of severe weather were rare and recognised that the Council was not able to keep all services running as they would in normal circumstances. The two severe weather events that occurred in 2009 and 2010 were different in their nature and so impacted on the Council in different ways with each event requiring a different response.

Borough Councillor responses

- 4.2. Input was received from several councillors, which taken together cover most of the Borough. The Working Group would like to thank Councillors Thompson, Brossard, Mrs Fleming, Beadsley, Kendall, Kensall, Mrs Pile, Brunel-Walker and Mrs Shillcock.
- 4.3. A number of key points were raised by members:
- 4.4. Communication - Members appreciated the regular severe weather email updates although they generally felt that the updates to the public-facing website could have been better co-ordinated. Members felt the Council's team had done a good job but that the full extent of the effort to keep the Borough moving could be improved upon.
- 4.5. Travel - Members noted that the severe weather was an exceptional event out of keeping with the relatively mild weather experienced by the UK over recent years. It was noted that the combination of rain on the 21st December 2009, followed by freezing temperatures and snow during the rush hour had prevented salting of roads from being effective. This led to traffic delays in many areas, not just Bracknell Forest. Once the snowfall had stopped, major routes were cleared relatively quickly allowing access for residents and the major stores to re-stock.
- 4.6. Following the snowfalls, people in many areas of the Borough had difficulty moving their vehicles out of residential roads to access the primary routes which were passable. There was praise from councillors for residents who got together in numerous cases to clear their own roads.
- 4.7. Refuse Collection - Several members noted a number of complaints from residents about the time it took for the refuse collection service to return to normal.

Officer recommendations for improvement/action

- 4.8. The working group received an interim report from the Director for Environment, Culture and Communities which summarised the results of the officer review of the

severe weather and set out potential recommendations for improvement/action following the snow events in December 2009 and January 2010.

- 4.9. The report by officers looked at two aspects of the council's response to the severe weather which were; firstly the Council in its role of 'highway authority' and secondly, how the various service areas in the Council were managed and how robust their continuity plans were.
- 4.10. The action plan drafted as a result of the report covered key issues identified during the severe weather and recommendations to address concerns raised.

Highway impact - first event

- 4.11. The first event occurred on 21 December 2009 and resulted in massive traffic congestion and gridlock across the Borough and the Region. Although the snow and ice caused disruption on the roads during the afternoon and evening of the 21 December and to a lesser extent the following day, the short lived nature of the event meant that there was not a big impact on the Council or the services provided. The Councils' response during the event was focussed on trying to keep the main highway network in a safe condition by salting as per the borough's Highway Winter Service Plan.
- 4.12. The extreme traffic congestion during this period of time occurred for a number of reasons; firstly heavy rain during the morning of the 21 December meant that the roads could not be gritted in anticipation of the forecast snow as the brine solution would have been washed away. Secondly when the snow began to fall as had been forecast, the wet roads turned to ice which led the Met Office to issue a severe weather warning. In response to this warning the majority of staff from organisations in and around the borough were advised to make their way home resulting in hundreds of staff leaving their places of work within a short period of time. The large volume of traffic on the roads prevented the gritting machines from spreading on the roads both within the Borough and the Region. This situation was repeated throughout the region and there was gridlock even on the motorways as a result.

Highway and other impacts – second event

- 4.13. The scale of the impact on the Council and its services during the second severe weather event was far greater. The Police Gold Command was open during the second period of severe weather. The Police opened up their command and control centre to help facilitate joint working across the region and better work together to respond to issues where appropriate. Information was given to Gold each day by the Emergency Planning Officer under the direction of the Chief Officer: Environment and Public Protection. The Council did not formally activate its emergency plan.
- 4.14. During the first days of the snow the Chief Officer: Environment and Public Protection focused the main highway resources on the maintenance of the Borough's highways as before. Help was also provided to ensure the delivery of meals by using the Parks and Countryside Rangers and their four wheel drive vehicles. Help was co-ordinated via a multi-service group which fed back to the Chief Executive and via him to all Members. However by day 3 other service areas in the Council were requesting help to meet their service demands. These requests meant that resources within the ECC Department needed to be reprioritised across the Council, altering the focus of the response. Through the multi-service group some help was made available by redeploying landscape and/or refuse collection crews to key sites to assist with snow clearance work as by then many of the priority areas had at least been gritted.

Material resources – grit and salt

- 4.15. The total length of the road network in Bracknell Forest is 450km. The borough has over 700 km of paths/ cycleways. The primary salting route (principle and heavily trafficked roads) is 164km and the secondary salting route (less frequently used roads) is 63km. In light of the experience in 2009 the Council had increased its stock level in advance of the winter in excess of the 5 days supply recommended by Government. At the beginning of winter the Council had 600 tonnes in stock in a salt barn owned by Surrey County Council located in Bagshot.
- 4.16. Keeping all primary routes serviceable throughout the severe weather proved to be a challenge. Not all secondary routes could be salted as salt supplies ran low and priorities had to change caused by the uncertainty in the supply chain. In some instances parked and abandoned cars obstructed the gritting vehicles from accessing roads. However, most primary and secondary routes were kept passable throughout the severe weather.
- 4.17. Bracknell Forest Council has access via the highways contract to 4 gritters which were also used as snow ploughs. Prior to winter the Council had stored in excess of the government recommended level of grit. On the onset of the second phase of severe weather the National Salt Delivery Scheme process was under the control of the Government. They monitored stock levels through daily reporting. They also issued a briefing to all councils to reduce their use of salt. Bracknell Forest had a lack of salt stock due to uncertainty in the national salt supply chain.
- 4.18. Salt Bins were located throughout the borough according to council approved policy. Keeping them restocked required two full time crews working all day. Some residents took grit to use on their own driveways from these bins. More salt bins in the borough would not be practical without more crews being available to restock them. Also, salt bins are an attraction for anti-social activity during the rest of the year and are regularly upturned and moved.

Public expectations/perceptions

- 4.19. It was noted that one of the problems with public perception and expectation was the fact that roads were salted with wetted salt which was white. It can not be seen until after the snow has gone and the roads then have a white sheen on them. At the time many residents claimed the roads were not being salted. Below minus 5°C salt becomes less effective and below minus 10 °C no longer works. For the salt to work it needs traffic as soon as possible after the fall. Temperatures at these low levels were experienced in Bracknell Forest during both periods of severe weather.

Demands from other services

- 4.20. The car parks of residential homes were initially an issue as access was needed particularly for ambulances and the sites had made no provision to help under the circumstances experienced. However once this problem had been highlighted staff from the landscape department were deployed to help clear the snow from these areas.

Schools

- 4.21. At the beginning of the severe weather there were problems with access to some school sites not directly on a primary route. The responsibility within the grounds falls

to the schools and many sites were cleared by school staff, parents and members of the community, some of whom had access to diggers which could remove the snow from car parks and playgrounds. Some schools required additional help to open and the Council's landscape team was contracted to assist with snow clearance. Priority for clearance was given to Kennel Lane School due to the nature of the school site and to those schools with examinations due to take place. Initially a number of schools opened only for the year groups who were required to take the exams. As resources allowed then priority was given to helping clear areas outside schools for parents to drop off children. Some help was also given to a number of schools located off a primary route e.g. St Josephs but cars were often found causing access problems.

Contractors

- 4.22. The Group discussed the issues faced by the Council's contractors SITA and Ringway to gain their perspective on the Council's response to the severe weather and if resources and support were focused as well as they could have been in the circumstances. The Group met with Steve Holgate from SITA and Ian Thorpe from Ringway.

Ringway (highways and street cleansing)

- 4.23. Ringway use a localised weather prediction service and ice monitoring stations on the highway network to predict weather conditions and when the roads would need salting. Plans were made based on these predictions however they could not always be 100% accurate. Sometimes salt is applied in anticipation but it transpires not to have been necessary. Sometimes the forecast changes during the period and by the time the salt is applied it is later than we would wish.
- 4.24. The cost of Ringway providing an additional gritting vehicle for Bracknell Forest would be £60,000- £80,000. The gritting vehicles used in Bracknell Forest were modern with the fleet renewed 3 years ago. On the market there are other items of equipment such as quad bikes that could be used in a limited way e.g. for clearing pedestrian paths. The cost of a demountable unit would be circa £5,000- £6,000 and would sit on an existing flat bed truck. The possibility of increasing the number of these units was being investigated by officers. The use of other equipment such as the quad bike needs careful consideration to ensure that it has a use during the rest of the year for different Council services.

SITA (refuse collection)

- 4.25. During the first period of severe weather in December 2009 the refuse collection provided by SITA was not affected. The severe weather in January 2010 was for a longer period of time and caused major collection disruption not helped by it being the Christmas period. Collections had to be suspended because the estate roads were not safe due to ice and the many parked cars. When collections were resumed crews still had to be very careful when accessing estate roads and there were many issues along footpaths and pavements used by refuse collectors. The crews were given assistance by landscape services particularly in relation to them facilitating access for the trucks by gritting key points.
- 4.26. It was suggested that the licensing restrictions preventing Longshot and Smallmead from opening on a Sunday could be lifted during periods of severe weather allowing the refuse collection to 'catch up' if weather allowed. The issue of additional opening times did not have to just consider the capacity of these sites but also take in to account access to landfill sites. Normally during the severe weather landfill sites are closed for

health and safety reasons. Refuse could not be moved on from Longshot and Smallmead in these circumstances. With the two sites having a limited holding capacity for refuse additional opening hours would not allow refuse from bins to be collected any faster. When Longshot Lane opened the staff there kept the weighbridge open beyond normal hours in order to help.

- 4.27. Once the weather began to clear, SITA brought in extra vehicles to increase collection capacity. Joint working between SITA, Ringway and Council Departments also took place to ensure that services ran as smoothly as possible during the severe weather and that the clean up operation was efficient once the weather allowed.

Vulnerable residents

- 4.28. The biggest problem for vulnerable residents was snow and ice on pavements which meant access was very difficult. For the most part it was understood that the Council would not be able to clear all areas of pavement and pathway in the borough. Public expectations needed to be managed through improved use of communication as council resources meant it was not possible to clear and grit all roads and pavements in the borough. The highway plan includes for the clearance of key areas of pathways.
- 4.29. Although many vulnerable people were not able to leave their homes due to the severe weather, staff from the Adult Social Care Department were able to keep in contact with them or members of their family by telephone on a daily basis to make sure that their needs were met and issues were resolved. In many cases staff were able to visit vulnerable people on foot or a 4X4 vehicle aided by Parks and Countryside officers.

Communications

- 4.30. The communication between schools and the Council was good. During the severe weather the Council's website received 40,000 hits and was continually updated from 6.00am each day with current information about which schools were open. Local Radio was also kept up to date with the latest position although they also had difficulty keeping up with the volume of calls. A SOCITM report on council use of digital channels in local emergencies dated February 2010 indicated that, after assessing 121 councils over two days, the BFC website was rated as very good and was listed as one of the top 15 'examples of good practice'. The Council's website stated that the opening of schools was the decision of the head teacher and that the Council would do everything they could to help schools to open.
- 4.31. IT systems were crucial for keeping officers, staff and parents informed. It was important that the public website and the internal staff site had regularly updated and consistent information to allow staff and the community to stay up to date. Many schools used the online learning platform which allowed children and teachers who were at home to access work. Some schools used a text messaging system to keep parents informed of whether the school was open that day. These systems proved to be very successful and helpful in keeping staff, parents and pupils informed.
- 4.32. Daily briefings were given to customer services staff and Members to allow them to deal effectively with resident's queries. Whilst there was much praise from around the Borough for all of the efforts communication could have still been improved with the public to keep them better informed of the situation and what was currently being done to resolve issues. Officers reported concerns in being able to effect this at the time due to capacity problems.

- 4.33. The Council received a particularly high volume of calls from residents requesting assistance during the second period of severe weather. To help ensure good intelligence rather than just react to calls Council highway inspectors were sent to locations to report back an objective view of the situation. This meant that response to issues raised may have been slightly delayed but it ensured that resources were focused on areas most in need.
- 4.34. From Wednesday 6 January to Friday 15 January the customer services centre took 8,583 calls which was 3,000 more calls than the same period the previous year. From Tuesday 5 January to Sunday 17 January 12,730 people visited the severe weather webpage and it was viewed 14,924 times during this period.
- 4.35. An issue that needed to be addressed was the promotion of the good work undertaken by staff and volunteers under difficult circumstances during the severe weather. Whilst good use was made of the Council's intranet to keep staff informed and seek volunteers, better use could have been made of the Council's website and local media to keep the public informed of what services were being provided. Many older vulnerable people did not have access to a computer or the internet. By promoting the councils work on local news and radio vulnerable people would have been better informed of the work council staff were undertaking.

Departmental preparedness

- 4.36. All departments were required to have business continuity plans in place which meant that most service areas in the council were in some way prepared for an unexpected event. Departments who already had good procedures in place were able to better cope with the severe weather than those who were not as well prepared. There was a combination of unusual circumstances which lead to the severe weather experienced and existing plans provided a good basis for action. The nature of some departments work meant that solutions to issues had to be found to protect the borough's vulnerable residents.
- 4.37. Many staff worked extra hours to ensure services were delivered. Contingency was needed to make sure staff were remunerated for the extra hours of work they undertook.
- 4.38. The severe weather incidents had resulting in learning points which could be acted on to improve the Council's response to severe weather events in the future. The Council's Highway Plan was implemented successfully and effectively given the constraints imposed. Practical improvements (e.g. extending snow clearance routes) could be made however were likely to need significant additional resources and the Council will have a choice between additional investment during a period of budget constraints and improved response to relatively rare severe weather events.

Parish and Town Council experience

- 4.39. The Working Group contacted the Borough's Parish and Town (P&T) Councils to ask their views on whether the Borough Council's response was appropriate and timely and if anything could be done to improve the response during future severe weather events. The Working Group asked P&T Councils 8 questions, as a result of the observations from Parish and Town Councils the following points were noted: (the full response from each of the P&T Councils can be seen in Annex A).
- 4.40. Whilst some P&T Councils were understanding of the unexpected nature of the severe weather, many felt that the Borough Council did not react fast enough to grit and salt

roads across the Borough and roads were then not re-gritted on a regular basis. The Northern Parishes in particular felt that the level of road salting in their areas was not sufficient and prevented residents from leaving home.

- 4.41. There were mixed views from the P&T Councils with regard to issues dealt with particularly well by the Borough Council. A couple of P&T Councils felt the Bracknell Forest Council did not perform well in any area, however many of the P&T Councils recognised that the Council gritted the primary routes across the borough well, replenished the grit bins as far as was possible to do so and that many Council staff had made great efforts to continue to provide services, particularly to vulnerable residents.
- 4.42. It was felt by all P&T Councils that the Borough Council should ensure that a sufficient supply of grit and salt is available to deal with prolonged periods of severe weather. The frequency of road gritting should be increased and snow ploughs should be used to clear roads. More focus should be given to clearing residential roads as residents were unable to reach the primary routes that had been gritted. Schools and doctors surgeries should be given priority for snow clearance.
- 4.43. P&T Councils suggested that a larger supply of salt that was kept closer to hand would ensure that BFC had a sufficient supply to last through a period of severe weather. A larger supply would allow for more salt bins to be provided and kept fully stocked for residents to use. It was also suggested that residents could be provided with snow shovels. Some P&T Councils felt that additional snow ploughs should be purchased to fit on Council vehicles and provision should be made to ensure outside contractors and operators could be contracted in if required.
- 4.44. All P&T Councils felt that keeping primary roads clear and gritted was a priority. Access to facilities such as schools and doctors surgeries was also a priority. The welfare of all residents particularly the vulnerable was mentioned by a number of P&T Councils. It was suggested that clear advice should be more readily available for residents, such as whether clearing of residential roads and pavements could result in being sued.
- 4.45. All P&T Councils had their own salt bins which were placed strategically in their area. Many staff from the P&T Councils assisted with snow clearing where required.
- 4.46. All the P&T Councils experienced problems with roads that had a gradient and found that even a small gradient resulted in problems for roads users. A list of problem areas was provided by each of the P&T Councils and can be seen in Annex A.
- 4.47. P&T Councils felt that advice given to residents was not always easy to find and needed to be more consistent and easily accessible. Planning and provision for future events should be taken seriously, particularly holding a sufficient supply of grit.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1. The working group consider that, overall the Council coped very well with the severe snow and ice on 21 December 2009 and during the period 5 -14 January 2010. The working group noted that occurrences of severe weather were rare; however they could happen with little or no warning. It was important that the Council had clear plans in place to be able to successfully cope under extreme circumstances and ensure that essential services continued to run as smoothly as possible.

- 5.2. The working group fully support the recommendations made by officers as a result of the officer review of the response to the severe weather, and note that it will be a matter for the Executive in determining which recommendations can be taken forward.

Highway impact - first event

- 5.3. During the severe weather on 21 December 2009 there was major disruption to the highway network within the Borough and the region generally. The weather forecast predicted snow and the crews were on standby. However, during the morning there was heavy rain and salt could not be put down. When the rain stopped heavy snowfall and freezing temperatures resulted in icing and a thick covering of snow.
- 5.4. Whilst this caused major disruption to traffic movement for a time the normal Council services continued to operate satisfactorily although there was disruption to household waste collection due to refuse vehicles being unable to access all areas. Local employers should be advised to stagger staff leaving times on any similar occurrence as the mass staff departure created considerable traffic congestion.

Highway and other impacts – second event

- 5.5. The second occurrence of severe weather in January 2010 created greater difficulties than the first. During this time the Police opened their Gold Command to aid with communications with national government agencies. However, the severity of the weather and the lack of resources meant that Departments of the Council, who may have been caught unprepared through a failure in not having up to date action plans for such an event, did very well in taking innovative action to deal with the problems they faced. This was evidenced by the way in which meals supplied to, and contact with vulnerable people unable to leave their homes were dealt with.
- 5.6. The Council did not activate its emergency plan but the arrangements referred to above were very much based upon it. In retrospect it might have been better if the Council had activated its emergency plan but whether or not this would have improved the overall response to the problems faced is a matter for further enquiry by the Corporate Management Team (CMT).

Material resources – grit and salt

- 5.7. The Council pre-salt approximately 36% of the total road network length which is at the higher end of the Audit Commissions recommendations for this service. This may need to be reviewed in a period of severe weather such as that experienced over the period under review.
- 5.8. The Council held in reserve in excess of the government's recommended salt stock supply which because of the inadequacy of the national supply chain was insufficient to meet demand and the spreading rate had to be reduced even before the national advice to do so was given. Future stock holdings need to be re-assessed.
- 5.9. The location of the salt barn in Bagshot proved to be a further problem to the Council under such conditions. The difficulties in getting vehicles to Bagshot to stock and re-stock in road conditions that had deteriorated resulted in poor turn around times and inefficiencies in the use of the gritting vehicles available to the Council.
- 5.10. Gritting bins located around the Borough place a heavy demand upon Council resources to fill and refill. Given that the contents of these bins were misused in some cases, the Council, in times of emergency, should review restocking in view of the

restricted resources. It may be possible to agree access for Parish & Town Councils to the Boroughs salt supply if there was found to be an excess to allow them to restock grit bins in their areas.

Public expectations/perceptions

- 5.11. A judgement always has to be made about public expectation and perception and what the Council can sensibly provide in times of emergency. If the Council is seen to be doing what it can to deal with an extreme situation the general public will endorse this.

Demands from other services

- 5.12. In the case of severe weather one of the priorities, after primary routes have been cleared, is to ensure that access to those facilities and accommodation used by elderly and vulnerable people is maintained. It is essential that there is free movement to and from these places by emergency vehicles.

Schools

- 5.13. The safety of school grounds is a matter for head teachers. However the Council has a responsibility as far as it can to keep the access, footpaths and routes to schools as free as possible. Whilst the closure of school is again a matter for head teachers every effort must be made to keep them open for the benefit of the children. Whilst the issue of staff attendance is perfectly understood, closure of schools must be seen as a very last resort and head teachers should be held to account to explain the reason for closure when this decision is made. The fact that some schools remained closed whilst others remained open may be due to the different nature of school sites however should be a matter for investigation.

Contractors

Ringway (highways and street cleansing)

- 5.14. The cost of extra equipment needs to be considered relative to risk and ability to use it. There is little point in having equipment that is never used. Equally there is no point in having additional salt spreading kit that needs salt if we don't have sufficient salt stocks to be able to use in it. If we have more equipment available at the time then the effectiveness of the whole operation should improve. The value of having more large gritting vehicles is questionable because of salt supply restrictions. Having a demountable unit might be a worthwhile investment. The dilemma over a decision to have more vehicles and equipment on permanent standby must be measured against the way in which those resources available to the Council are managed. If vehicles are engaged in journeys to Bagshot for supplies then clearly they not being used efficiently. The working group consider this issue has to be resolved.

SITA (refuse collection)

- 5.15. Decisions to cancel waste collection are a matter for management and however problematic this is for residents common sense has to prevail. Taking collection vehicles into roads that have not been cleared of snow and ice and where cars parked or abandoned on the highway are causing obstruction is not conducive to safety of crews, residents, or resident's property.

Vulnerable residents

- 5.16. There were key areas that needed to be properly cleared but the speed in which they were attended to was not as fast as would be wished for. However, the WG understand that with limited resources this will always be a problem and officers and home managers must do what they can to overcome the obstacles.
- 5.17. The fact that contact was maintained with vulnerable people throughout the period of severe weather and that no serious emergencies occurred that could not be dealt with says a great deal about the dedication and efficiency of our staff.

Communications

- 5.18. In time of emergency and in a civil context the importance of creating and maintaining clear and regular lines of communication are crucial. Whilst there is evidence that our communication function was adequate to the task our systems must be tested against a worse case scenario and every effort made to ensure the public are kept informed. In this context it should be realised that not all residents have access to computers and so local radio announcements are an essential tool in keeping the population informed.
- 5.19. One potential issue in the current system relates to the diverse role of Executive Members. With three members responsible for different aspects of our infrastructure i.e. Emergency Planning, Highways and Environment, the information pathway was in some ways obscure. If one Executive Member was given the responsibility of ensuring that there was a co-ordinated response in place across the council once the Emergency Plan function had been activated, this would allow a strategic overview of the Council's response to be maintained. Importantly, it would also provide a single source of contact for all Members should they perceive a strategic failing in the Council's response to the emergency.
- 5.20. In many cases the severe weather brought together community members as neighbours worked together to clear driveways and purchase groceries for those who were not able to leave their homes. It was noted that there was local and national concern that individuals could be sued if they attempted to clear a pathway and someone slipped on the cleared area. Best practice guidelines for path clearing could be of use for residents.

Departmental preparedness

- 5.21. The WG acknowledge that whilst the majority of staff responded extremely well to the challenges that presented themselves during the two periods of severe weather they are concerned that some Departmental Plans may not have been sufficiently robust to give a proper and instant response to the situations that developed. In this respect they believe that it would be helpful if all Departments took immediate steps to update their emergency procedures, and test them against an extreme scenario, in preparation for future climatic consequences of the type we have recently experienced.

Parish and Town Council experience

- 5.22. The conclusion reached after reading responses from the Parish and Town Councils was that they highlighted the problems already raised in this review. In the more rural parishes of Binfield, Winkfield and Warfield there was inevitably greater concern over the perception that less effort was spent on keeping their roads clear of snow and ice than was the case elsewhere.

- 5.23. Open lines of communication between Towns and Parishes and BFC are essential so that they are able to help input to the overall situation, the WG are conscious of the fact that it is very easy for Parish and Town Councils to feel isolated and neglected if they are kept unaware of what resources are available and what of these are being allotted to help them. This issue is worthy of discussion at the Town and Parish Liaison Group held in the autumn so that a fair discussion can take place on arrangements being made for the forthcoming winter.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Working Group makes the following recommendation to the Executive:

- 6.1. The Council's strategy for dealing with emergencies and severe weather should be reviewed. The overall strategy should include an instruction to all Departments to review their individual plans and responsibilities and ensure that their staff are aware of these. This review must include an update of strategy for keeping primary and secondary routes open especially those known to have caused particular problems over this period of severe weather.
- 6.2. This review has established that for the conditions that prevailed in December 2009 and January 2010 the Council is not well enough equipped with severe snow and ice clearing equipment by way of small gritting machines to service secondary roads or 4x4 vehicles to support vulnerable areas where normal vehicles cannot cope. The Council should consider this deficiency in detail to decide if the investment in more equipment, including snow chains for staff cars, quad bikes and other items is appropriate. Additionally, the Council should consider entering into contractual arrangements with local plant hire companies to provide priority hiring of snow moving equipment to the council in the event of severe weather.
- 6.3. Whilst reserves of grit and salt were adequate to cope with normal winter weather they were insufficient to meet the demands of a sustained period of severe weather without regular restocking. This and the storage of stocks should be given immediate consideration. The fact that the Council's reserves of salt and grit are located at Bagshot should be reviewed. It is an inefficient way of safeguarding reserves and causes further logistical problems of recovery in periods of severe weather. Reserves, or at least a proportion of them, must somehow be located in central Bracknell as a matter of priority.
- 6.4. Since some gritting bins appeared to be misused during the severe weather the Council should review whether to replenish them when resources are scarce. The Council is concerned that contents were misused in some cases. A judgement will have to be made at the time as to which bins can and cannot be maintained, in view of demand and available resources. Officer judgement should be used in this respect. A review of partnership working should be undertaken with Parish and Town Councils to investigate the sharing of resources available to re-fill grit bins during severe weather if salt stocks were sufficient.
- 6.5. Access to facilities such as sheltered accommodation, doctor's surgeries and schools must be high on the Council's list of priorities. These routes should be considered as part of the officer review.
- 6.6. Whilst the closure of a school is ultimately the responsibility of Head Teachers and the Governing Body every effort must be made to keep them open. Closures should be

justified and only be undertaken where the safety of pupils and staff is clearly shown to be compromised if such action (as closure) is not taken.

- 6.7. Sustaining clear communications in extreme circumstances is essential. The Council should review its communication procedure and practice to ensure that these are robust enough to cope with all emergencies. The use of local radio, web links, text messaging and other media is also essential. The Council should remind itself that not all households in Bracknell Forest have computers and that the Council should communicate accordingly.
- 6.8. In respect of paragraph 6.7 above a dedicated communications officer should control and update the Council's website and be responsible for the input of public information.
- 6.9. Some concern has been expressed about whether or not property owners are vulnerable to litigation if they clear the front of their premises or accommodation in the instance of accident. The Borough Solicitor should consider this and give appropriate advice in the autumn issue of 'Town and Country'.
- 6.10. It is recommended that in the event of another occurrence of severe weather an Executive Member is given the responsibility of ensuring that the Council's response is co-ordinated at a strategic level once the Emergency Plan function has been activated.
- 6.11. That officers look outside the borough for learning points highlighted from the experiences of other local authorities and organisations and that these are incorporated into planning for future occurrences of severe weather where appropriate. It is strongly recommended that the results of the Central Government Review of Transport Response to Severe Weather are also taken in to account.
- 6.12. In the autumn meeting of the Parish and Town Council Liaison Group, officers should explain how severe weather will be dealt with in their areas next year based on the lessons learned this year.

Background Papers

Recommendations for Improvement/Action following the Snow Event in December 2009 and January 2010 – 3 March 2010
Severe Weather Overview and Scrutiny Working Group Scoping Document

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Doc. Ref

O&S Severe Weather WG Report May 2010

	Binfield Parish Council	Bracknell Town Council	Crowthorne Parish Council
Was the Borough's response appropriate and timely?	<p>No. Whereas we absolutely recognise the difficulties of keeping roads free from snow and ice as far as possible, there was very little attempt that we could see to even try to keep the primary gritting roads clear within the Borough. Even if these roads had been gritted, the additional falls of snow on top of the gritting ensured that the entire exercise was a waste of time and money. Roads need to be gritted and then re-gritted regularly in order to keep them clear.</p> <p>A Councillor who lives at the top of Forest Road in Binfield reports "The first day the snow fell was horrendous with cars abandoned everywhere on this road. No effort appeared to have been made to clear the road. In fact it seemed as though the Borough was expecting vehicles to clear the way. Forest road was almost a single lane track for the entire length of time that snow lay on the ground. I work at Bracknell and Wokingham College, which closed for two days at the start of the snowfall because people could not get in to work. I used that time to help dig out the road I live in because this is not a road that the Borough would clear. When more snow fell later, the problems were even more severe because snow fell on top of ice and nothing was gritted anywhere. On this occasion, I left home and went to work at 7.15 am (a ludicrous time to go as I only live a couple of miles from the College). I was really glad that I did, because, even at that time of the morning, Bracknell Town was gridlocked! One of my fellow lecturers was disgusted at the lack of gritting in the Borough. He lives in Maidenhead and had</p>	<p>Council felt that the Borough's response was appropriate and timely given the very exceptional weather but there are improvements that could be made and lessons to be learned – see below. It was understandable that to some extent people were caught out but there was insufficient salt, grit, equipment etc. to go round.</p>	<p>The weather reports predicted heavy snow fall and therefore more resources should have been put in place to ensure main arteries were kept open. Unfortunately the severe weather started falling in the early afternoon and by Rush Hour the roads were impassable with snow and traffic jams and the Crowthorne Bypass was closed, which made it impossible to use any machinery.</p>

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	no difficulty getting to work until he came to the Borough boundary".		
What was done particularly well?	Nothing.	Clearing the main roads (however this was at the expense of minor roads) The efforts of staff to get out to and help vulnerable residents Clearing the Town Centre Clearing at the Great Hollands shops	The placement of the grit bins and replenishment during the prolonged severe weather. Gritting of the main road arteries in Bracknell, although this had little affect on the prolonged snow fall.
What could have been improved?	<p>Either increase the frequency of gritting (at least the major roads) and consider the possibility of using snow ploughs to clear the roads.</p> <p>In fact, clearing the major and primary gritting roads is an almost useless exercise for many of the residents of Binfield. Many people could not get out of the roads they live in because of the gradient of their road. None of the residential roads in the Borough are gritted and there are very few salt bins. The number of salt bins should be increased immediately and kept full or refilled during the winter months. Residents are more than willing to dig themselves out so long as the tools are available for them to use.</p> <p>You might even consider buying job lots of large shovels for residents to purchase at cost in order for them to do the job. Garden spades are too small and heavy for the labour of snow clearance.</p>	<p>School access should have been a priority Clearing around doctor's surgeries. Early clearing footpaths so people could get to work – when the snow is compacted it is more difficult to shift. More salt and grit made available Abandoned cars should not have been clamped and / or ticketed. Communication with and advice to residents must be improved. The problem was exacerbated by residents who were confused about whether they should clear the snow from outside their own properties – they were frightened by advice that they might be sued. The TV gave mixed messages. In 1963 everyone cleared their own properties. People don't know how to drive in the snow and ice, or what to do when they got stuck. People don't understand the purpose of salt The Borough could have used its website better to give advice and forewarn people</p>	<p>Planning for such severe weather Continued overnight gritting and snow clearance on major Roads and Hills. Clearance of the snow in the High Street, which was not completed until two weeks after the first snow fall. The gradients on the Crowthorne Sandhurst Road caused significant problems. There was no 'grading to keep the roads clear' as defined in the winter plan. Clearance of snow from public footpaths and walk ways To help reduce the volume of traffic during rush hour large local companies to allow staff to leave work on a rotational basis.</p>
What precautionary measures could reasonably be taken, bearing in mind that we may not experience these	You say that the conditions may not prevail again for a number of years but we had almost exactly the same problem in 2009. Our weather is changing (due to global warming) to wet winters and dry summers. You cannot guarantee that many years will pass before a	The Borough must have stocks of salt and grit stored closer to hand. Consider purchase of multi-task equipment – can tractors and 4x4s be adapted? Better monitoring of the weather forecast through the Met Office web site	To ensure that BFC have an appropriate stock pile of grit and can easily replenish to stock should it run low. BFC to investigate if there is a better alternative product to keeping roads clear other than gritting, which could be used during very

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conditions again for many years?	<p>wet winter is also very cold.</p> <p>In our view, residents should be provided with salt bins and snow ploughs should be provided that can be fitted to a number of different Council vehicles. Even using a JCB or two would help surely. You might consider increasing the frequency of gritting as well during very severe weather. We did not see one gritting lorry at any time anywhere in the Borough during the severe weather.</p>	<p>Doctors surgeries need their own locked grit bins.</p> <p>Messages should be given out well before the onset of bad weather advising people to prepare and take responsibility for themselves and their neighbours 'don't wait for someone to dig you out'. Low cost measures should be encouraged for individuals i.e. the purchase of snow shovels, salt and snow chains.</p> <p>The Borough needs a comprehensive Plan including how to get its own workforce to work.</p>	<p>heavy snow fall</p> <p>To include an emergency action plan which can be invoked should extreme conditions such as these occur in the future</p> <p>To ensure outside contractors with the required machinery and operators can be contracted in if required. Also local farms with ploughs/ tractors could be put on standby.</p>
What does your council consider to be the most important priority in responding to severe weather?	<p>Keeping the roads clear (including helping to keep residential roads clear - and that means the main roads through residential estates like Turnpike Road and Benetfeld Road!)</p>	<p>Clearing safe access to schools, doctor's surgeries and so vulnerable people can get to the shops etc.</p> <p>Clearing main roads for emergency vehicles and so people can get to work.</p> <p>Proper advice e.g. on being prepared and on clearing without the risk of being sued</p> <p>Have a robust plan in place (including the Parishes) – don't rely on DIY and last minute solutions</p>	<p>Over night gritting of main arteries to keep roads clear</p> <p>Keeping Roads and Footpaths safe,</p> <p>Ensuring that there is enough Grit in stock, operators and machinery</p>
Did your council have any plan in place for severe weather events? How did your council cope, and what actions did it take?	<p>The Parish Council has discussed some of the issues arising from the severe weather. We are currently conducting a survey of all the roads in the parish and looking at the gradients of each road. We already fund several salt bins and are considering where further bins can be placed in the future. Our concern is for the residents and their ability to get out onto the so-called gritted roads.</p>	<p>No plan was in place. Many staff walked in to work and they were used to clear paths to the Pavilion entrances and to help out with snow clearing where required. On the worst days they were instructed to stay at home. The Council was conscious of the danger it was putting its own staff to and the added affects of putting more vehicles onto the roads.</p> <p>The Council's tractors were well used.</p> <p>After the snow the Council's tree surgery team were kept busy for several weeks and were able to help out the Borough.</p>	<p>Crowthorne Parish Council has Grit Bins in strategic places in the village and tried to ensure that they were kept filled.</p>

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Were there any particular places in your area where the gradient of the roads caused problems.	<p>Binfield is a particularly hilly parish. These roads have experienced particular problems:</p> <p>Forest Road, Emmets Nest, Emmets Park, Red Rose, Rose Hill, York Road, Tilehurst Lane, Cressex Close, Alben Road, Chase Gardens, Knox Green, Mill Green, Boltons Lane, Holbroke Gardens, Dunford Place, Hitherhooks, Fletcher Gardens, Tippits Mead, Farley Copse.</p>	<p>Wooden Hill was terrible Couldn't get out of Great Hollands Crowthorne Road past St Michael's church Churchill House development (car owners were parking their cars on Crowthorne Road making it dangerous). Anywhere where cars had to stop at a junction and then take off up-</p>	<p>All the roads leading up to Broadmoor, the Sandhurst Road and Crowthorne High Street.</p>
Are there any other comments you wish to make?	<p>We am well aware that snow clearance costs money, but people still have to get to work, buy food, take the kids to school etc. Our experience of the snow was that non-residents (people passing through the Borough) were treated far better than the residents, who pay Council Tax and should expect a better service from you. You ought to be concentrating on us, not strangers.</p> <p>We believe that Bracknell Forest Council and other agencies should ensure that the advice given to residents in these circumstances should be entirely consistent. For example - schools should not record "unauthorised absence" for a child when the advice for from the police is not to travel unless necessary.</p>	<p>A comprehensive assessment of troublesome gradients should be made.</p> <p>Schools should be encouraged to develop a People Power Policy to work together to clear snow etc.</p> <p>When are the pot-holes going to be mended? Reconsider the positioning of grit bins and their use – do residents understand what they are for and how to use them?</p> <p>Can BFBC indemnify volunteers who help with snow clearance in the way it indemnifies SID volunteers?</p>	<p>Although this weather was severe and not common to our area, the threat of climate change may suggest that this could become frequent in years to come. Therefore procedures and improved planning for possible future events should be taken seriously. Also as climate change affects all seasons, does BFC have any emergency plans in place for summer flooding?</p>

