

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
28 OCTOBER 2010**

**REPORT OF THE REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO SEVERE WEATHER
Assistant Chief Executive**

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report introduces the attached Executive response to the 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. The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bettison, has been invited to attend the meeting to present the Executive's response.

2 SUGGESTED ACTION

- 2.1 **That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission considers the response of the Executive to 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.**

3 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Executive is due to consider the attached recommended responses to the report on the Council's response to severe weather at its meeting on 19 October 2010. Any changes to the recommended responses agreed by the Executive on 19 October will be reported orally at this meeting.

Background Papers

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, July 2010.

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TO: EXECUTIVE
19 OCTOBER 2010

**RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMISSION
WORKING GROUP: RESPONSE TO SEVERE WEATHER
Director of Environment, Culture and Communities**

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report sets out the Executive's response to the recommendations in the report by the Overview & Scrutiny Commission in respect of the Council's response to the severe weather 2009/10. In view of the cross-council implications the Leader has been asked to attend the Overview & Scrutiny Commission meeting on 28 October 2010.
- 1.2 This report comments on the findings and sets out how the Council intends to take on the learning and recommendations of the Working Group.

2 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 **That the Executive thank the Overview & Scrutiny Commission for the excellent work undertaken by their Working Group and respond to the recommendations as shown in bold in the body of this report.**
- 2.2 **That, subject to the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review and continued analysis of the Council's financial out turn in the current financial year, authority be delegated to the Director of Environment, Culture and Communities in consultation with the Executive Member: Finance and Resources, to determine how, if at all, the equipment described in recommendation 6.2 be funded.**

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 3.1.1 The procedural process relating to reports from the Overview and Scrutiny Commission require an Executive response;
- 3.1.2 The recommendations contained within the report were derived from a comprehensive review of the Council's response to severe weather and where practical should be considered for action; and
- 3.1.3 While weather as severe as last Winter is relatively rare, it is considered reasonable and appropriate that the Council should make further investment in equipment and plant which makes any future response more efficient, effective and further reaching.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 The Council could decide not to acquire the equipment listed on the basis that the Borough experiences severe weather infrequently and therefore against other

priorities such expenditure cannot be justified.

5 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

5.1 The Overview & Scrutiny Commission Working Group looked into the Council's overall response and preparedness following the severe weather incidents in December last year and then shortly after in January this year. The report was produced using information derived from interviews with contractors and officers, reviewing real time accounts of the events, and the report produced by the Director of Environment, Culture and Communities. In addition officers have undertaken a full review of the relevant plans to deal with extreme weather such as was experienced during this period. This response takes due account of the findings of the Working Group and the experience gained by the officers.

5.2 The Working group have made 12 recommendations. The response to each of these is as follows:

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED.

Ensuring that the Council has an effective strategy for dealing with exceptional periods of severe weather is acknowledged. That strategy like all others needs to be tested periodically to ensure it is fit for purpose. The relevant plans have all been reviewed and updated to reflect the learning and comments made during the various reviews that have been undertaken since.

The issue of how to keep primary and secondary routes open is addressed in the Highway Winter Service Plan. Unfortunately, that Plan cannot include an open ended commitment to keep all primary and secondary routes open during a period of severe weather. The resources simply do not allow for it.

Resources have to be prioritised having due regard to legislation, national advice and the circumstances at the time. The Plans work on a priority hierarchy and an additional plan has been produced to take account of a similar situation arising as was experienced last year ie low salt supplies nationally. In such a situation the Council would have to reduce its salt use to deal with the key strategic transport network only. With additional salt supplies in stock this potential risk has been substantially reduced.

Because of the frailty of the national salt supply and the ever changing weather patterns the Council has to have plans that allow for flexibility to changing circumstances. The relevant plans have been reviewed to ensure that they are able to meet that need and those plans will be published on the Council's web

site. Taking on feedback and learning is considered a key element of the plans.

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED

The 4x4 capability within the Council has been increased and now equates to 15.5% of the fleet. The need to invest in even more of such equipment which is more expensive is hard to justify. It is however, evident that with a little investment in other forms of equipment we could deploy what we already have in a more effective manner. Accordingly it is proposed to purchase the following additional equipment:

- **Two transit van mounted salt spreading units totalling £40,000. To be used by Highways and Landscape (in periods of severe weather) to support spot salting, difficult to access areas and problematic gradients generally including some estate roads.**
- **Replacement snow plough for the large landscape tractor and an additional plough/bucket attachment for the small landscape tractors totalling £9,000. To be used to support snow clearance from key corporate properties, schools under contract and access routes.**
- **Conversion work to the tractor at Downshire Golf Course to include a snow plough attachment, a salt spreader attachment, conversion so the tractor can run on white diesel and a white diesel storage tank located at the site totalling £10,000. To be utilised to provide the support and snow clearance at leisure centre sites including the access road to Easthampstead Park thereby better protecting income streams.**
- **Two turbo castors which are manually operated pedestrian salt spreaders totalling £3,000. To be used by the street cleansing contractor teams to increase efficiency of salt spreading in neighbourhood shopping areas, footpaths etc.**
- **Two towable turbo salt castors which are attached to the back of vehicles totalling £10,000. To be used by highways and or landscape teams utilising existing 4x4 equipment to support spot salting, problematic gradients, etc as above thereby providing additional capacity to deal with access routes to doctors surgeries for example.**
- **Two 400ltr salt bins for Easthampstead House and Time Square plus 10 snow shovels, £550. Other service areas have already made their own provision.**

Total proposed one off expenditure £72,550

Having such equipment enables better use of labour at times of severe weather. It would also enable a better response even during a normal winter as some of the above equipment would be used in support of the normal highway winter maintenance programme. The use of all salt spreading equipment is dependent upon the surety of the salt stock. In the current year we have increased our capacity and by next year we hope to have done so again.

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED

The Executive have approved the funds to enable the relocation of the current highway maintenance depot and salt barn from Bagshot Road the Lorry Park in Downmill Road in Bracknell at its meeting on 14th September 2010. This is a much more central site and subject to planning this new facility will be available next year.

In the interim period a salt stock has been provided by Ringway on a temporary site and will be used to support the Bagshot site over the coming winter in the event of need. Our salt stock for this coming year at the start of this winter season is 1500 tonnes. The recommended level last year was 600 tonnes. The proposed salt barn has a capacity of 2500 tonnes. With an increased stock level we will not only have increased resilience but also the capacity to supply salt for the wider corporate need.

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED

The usual demand during a normal winter for salt bins is high. During a period

of severe weather the resource demand is exceptional. Each year as part of the Highway Winter Service Plan the Council reviews the need/location of such bins. There are no proposals to increase the number of bins in the current year.

With the additional equipment as listed above the officers will have other options available to salt key roads during periods of severe weather. The role of the Town and Parish Councils will be explored particularly in light of opportunities that may arise when the new salt barn is built.

Additionally, the Director will write to local DIY retailers to identify a potential opportunity for them to sell salt / grit to the public since the experience gained suggests there is a demand for this.

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED

Access to key sites such as these forms is covered in the Highway Winter Service Plan. The Plans have been updated to reflect the learning. They seek to ensure priority is given to providing safe drop-off points are available outside such premises. With the additional equipment the Council will be able to better respond to specific needs and ensure areas previously not treated can be covered. The majority of such sites are on priority routes already and many require only modest extensions to allow access.

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED (as far as is practical)

This is ultimately a matter for the Head Teachers. The Council's plans seek to ensure reasonable access can be given to such sites as a priority. The majority of such sites are on priority routes already. The additional equipment will help ensure that such needs can be addressed. However, access into the school (as opposed to the school gates) will require the Headteacher and Governors to develop better site specific plans to deal with whatever specific problems the weather brings

Recommendation 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 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.

Response

AGREED

The communication strategy particularly in the event of severe weather needs to be effectively coordinated and maximise all potential means of communication.

The emergency planning arrangements have been reviewed to ensure this suggestion is actioned and to take on wider learning. With the ever increasing use of Facebook, Twitter etc this is an area that the Council needs to keep under review as its potential use in an emergency should not be underestimated.

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED

This need has been addressed in the review of the relevant plans.

Recommendation 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'

Response

AGREED

There is a national need to promote community stewardship (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8443745.stm>). In a statement from the Department of Transport (26-7-10) it was recognised that "whilst highway authorities have a duty as far as practicable, to keep their highways clear of snow and ice, it was clear from last winter that many members of the public were keen to show community spirit in clearing the footways outside their property. It was equally clear however that many were uncertain of their rights and liabilities if they were to act in this way".

The Department for Transport stated that they intend to produce a brief guide to help the public understand this area of the law by the end of October. The intention is not to lay down what people should or should not do but in the spirit of empowering those who wish to act in a neighbourly way. We will

respond further when we have this detail.

Recommendation 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 once the Emergency Plan function has been activated.

Response

AGREED

The Executive Member to be given such responsibility would need to take account of the nature of the event and the impact that it is having on the Borough. The decision will be taken by the Leader in consultation with the Chief Executive and communicated to all members as part of the emergency plan activation process.

Recommendation 6.11

That officers look outside the borough for learning points highlighted from the experiences of other local facilities and organisations and that these are incorporated in to 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.

Response

AGREED

Officers have taken into account their own learning points, those around the region and within their professional bodies. This is standard practice after any emergency. The findings from the Working Group and others have helped considerably in this overall review process.

All learning has been used to re-inform the plans that are in place to deal with emergencies.

Recommendation 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.

Response

AGREED

This will be the opportunity to not only discuss how we have taken on the learning but also how we may be able to better work together in the future particularly once we have use of the new barn.

In making these responses the Government have yet to publish their findings and recommendations following a review of the resilience of England's transport system in winter. An interim report was published in July and the relevant recommendations

have been taken into account in the review of our plans. However, our plans for this coming winter may yet have to be subject to further review to take account of any as promised new national advice.

6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Solicitor

6.1 The Borough Solicitor has no comments to add to this report.

Borough Treasurer

6.2 There is no explicit approved budget for the purchase of the £72,550 of equipment identified in the report. However, there is a contingency provision within the revenue budget which could be used for the purchase of this equipment. It is appropriate to use the contingency to purchase this equipment as it has become apparent after approving the budget that these items are required. Currently the budget monitoring suggests that there will not be any major overspend of the budget in the current year therefore the contingency is available. Alternately, a supplementary capital approval could be sought from Council since there is no budget for this scheme within the 2010/11 capital budget.

Equalities Impact Assessment

6.3 Not applicable.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

6.4 Addressed in the report.

7 CONSULTATION

Principal Groups Consulted

7.1 None.

Method of Consultation

7.2 Not applicable.

Representations Received

7.3 Not applicable to this report.

Background Papers

Report - Response to Severe Weather Overview & Scrutiny Commission Working Group
Highways Winter Service Plan 2010/11
Report the Director of Environment, Culture and Communities

Draft Corporate Severe Weather Plan
Operational procedure for the deployment of Environmental Services teams during a period
of adverse snow conditions

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Document Reference

CO/Ctees&Gps/Executive/2010/Oct-Dec/ReportoftheOverview&ScrutinyCommission
WorkingGroupResponsetoSevereWeather19-10-10 (b)