

**Environment
Scrutiny and Performance Panel**

**Agenda Item
No.**

8 March 2011

Review of Winter Service

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor Tom Ansell - Transport

Executive Summary:

The Winter Service Operational Plan is written on an annual basis and presented to Cabinet for approval prior to the forthcoming winter season.

Due to the move to the new depot in Brownhills in April and the need to revise the gritting Priority 1 and 2 routes it has been decided that this is an opportune time to review the whole of the Winter Service.

Reason for scrutiny:

The move to the new depot at Brownhills necessitates the Priority 1 and 2 gritting routes to be revised and it seems an opportunity to review the whole of the Winter Service.

The development of a suitable and workable Winter Service Operational Plan is of particular importance to the Council in terms of its duty under the Highways Act 1980 and to maintain the operation of the highway network and other public services to the local community and travelling public under winter weather conditions.

The development of the new arrangements will benefit from the Panel's scrutiny and input to ensure a successful output.

Recommendations:

That:

1. The Panel note progress to date.
2. The panel consider the appropriateness of the review and suggest additional topics if thought appropriate.
3. The panel consider the appropriateness of a working party to finalise the Winter Service Operational Plan.

Background papers:

There are annual reports for the Winter Service Operational Plan the latest being the Report of the Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services Winter Service Operational Plan 2010-2011 Cabinet Meeting -13 October 2010.

Resource and legal considerations:

The Council, as Highway Authority, has a statutory duty under Section 41 (1A) of the Highways Act 1980 to 'ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that safe passage of the highway is not endangered by snow and ice'.

Citizen impact:

Residents will be able to input to the review via Area Partnerships. All residents are affected by the successful execution of the Winter Service.

Environmental impact:

Salt is used as the medium for ice and snow prevention and clearance. It is a commodity which is mined in two areas of the country. One of the areas it is mined as a primary source material specifically for the use as preventative agent, the other source is a secondary product of a potash mine.

Where road gullies discharge to a watercourse there is a potential the salt can contribute to elevated levels of sodium and chloride in the watercourse. This can have a potential impact on some invertebrates but fish are quite tolerant for short durations. It is also recognised that a relatively low level of dilution is all that may be required to harm aquatic communities. A mitigating factor is that salt is only used in the winter months when generally watercourses will have a higher flow than normal thus diluting the salt concentration. As all highway discharges are by their very nature intermittent and of a short duration the exposure is likely to be low.

To minimise the environmental impact salt should be used sparingly and the minimum amount of highway treated without compromising road safety and operation of the highway network.

Performance management:

There are performance measures contained with the Tarmac contract to ensure standards are maintained.

Equality Implications:

An equality impact assessment will be undertaken as part of the review and this will influence the outcome of the revised plan.

Consultation:

Initial consultation will be through the Area Partnerships and concurrently with our Neighbouring Authorities, motoring organisations and emergency services.

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1. Report

The move to the new depot at Brownhills necessitates the Priority 1 and 2 gritting routes to be revised and it presents an opportunity to review the whole of the Winter Service.

The Highways Act 1980 places a statutory duty under Section 41 (1A) of the Highways Act 1980 to 'ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that safe passage of the highway is not endangered by snow and ice'.

To defend and ensure 'reasonably practicable' a Winter Service Operational Plan is produced annually and presented and approved by Cabinet before the commencement of the winter season. The plan contains the 'reasonably practicable' actions that the Council takes in exercising their statutory duty.

Nearly all complaints/enquires that are received about the winter service are during snow events. The review will take all these complaints into account. Routinely schools close during snow events and in **Appendix C** the school closures allegedly due to the snow event in December 2010 are located on a plan.

The Winter Service is carried out by three different areas:

- Engineering and Transportation (E&T)
 - Authors of the Winter Service Operational Plan
 - Coordinators of the plan
 - Decision makers
- Tarmac National Contracting
 - Winter Service delivery (gritting)
- Fleet Services
 - Servicing of the gritter vehicles

The decision to mobilize the gritters is taken by trained E&T staff based on weather forecast information supplied by expert meteorological forecasts procured jointly by the seven district councils which comprises the West Midlands and continuous information from weather stations located within the borough. There are three staff members that comprise the decision makers in E&T and work on a weekly rota.

Tarmac is our partner for highway maintenance and carries out the Winter Service delivery with eight gritter vehicles. They are due to replace four gritter vehicles at the end of this season.

For each area the winter service is carried out by volunteers. This presents a risk should any of the volunteers decide not to volunteer for the winter season either before or during the season. Options, such as short term contracts, are being investigated to minimise the risk associated with the volunteer basis of the winter service.

The roads that are treated currently are categorised into Priority 1 and 2 routes.

- Eight Priority 1 routes comprise roads on the primary network and other roads carrying substantial volumes of commercial traffic together with some roads with high risk of early ice formation
- Eight Priority 2 routes comprise:
 - a) most bus routes in residential areas
 - b) important industrial estate roads
 - c) roads used by heavy commuter traffic at peak periods

These routes commence and finish at the Cable Drive Depot (part of Norfolk Place Depot). Due to the move to the Brownhills Depot these routes will have to be revised. Tarmac has engaged a company to optimise the routes and investigate whether savings can be achieved e.g. reduced mileage. Optimisation produces routes that minimises the free running (the distance, which has to be driven while not spreading salt) and obtain the most efficient utilization of plant, materials and labour.

The new depot location presents an opportunity to investigate the suitability of the existing routes that are treated and whether other routes should be included e.g. all bus routes and roads serving schools. There is a limited budget for winter service, at present £300,000 and should there be changes in priority and lengths then there will be an impact on budget or should additional roads be added an existing road will have to be deleted.

Appendix A contains a plan showing existing treated routes and schools.

Footways are not routinely treated but important pedestrian precincts are included on the precautionary salting routes. However, during periods of snow fall and lying snow, labour is deployed to move snow from footways in town centres and other sensitive areas.

Cycle routes remote from the highway are not treated but cycle lanes within carriageway on priority routes are of course routinely treated.

In addition residential estate roads, public rights of way and safer routes to schools are not routinely salted.

In addition to treating routes there are grit bins provided at strategic locations (steep hills and bends), many of which are not on the normal precautionary salting routes. For environmental reasons, salt is not deposited at the roadside without any form of containment. **Appendix B** is the plan showing the location of grit bins.

Grit bins are provided for self assistance on the highway. However, they are an expensive way of providing help and create anti social behaviour and are prone to misuse or abuse. Options are being investigated to eliminate or reduce the number of grit bins.

A concern has been raised regarding schools closing due to snow. Information obtained from Serco indicates that the first bout of snow around the first 1, 2 and 3 December 2010 there were eight schools closed on the 1 December, none closed on 2 December and seven closed on the 3 December 2010.

On the first day of closure six of the schools have an entrance on a priority 1 or 2 route which is gritted. Similarly, of the second day of closures five of the schools have an entrance on a priority 1 or 2 route. A copy of the list of school closures is in **Appendix C**.

It is intended to consult on the review commencing with the Area Partnerships in March and April. Other organisations will also be consulted such as neighbouring Highway Authorities, motoring organisations and emergency services.

After the consultation events it is proposed that another report is presented to this scrutiny and if suitable a working party is formed to finalise the Winter Service Operational Plan.

A suggested timetable for the work streams is as follows:

- Scrutiny - March
- Area Partnerships – March and April
- Neighbours, Emergency Services etc – May/June
- Scrutiny Working Group – July
- Finalise all Routes – July to Aug
- Draft new Winter Service – September
- Presentations to Groups – September
- Cabinet Approval – October 2011

A question often raised is regarding self help on the highway and a misconception that shop keepers or householders cannot clear snow in front of their own property. In **Appendix D** the advice given on the Directgov website is reproduced.

School Snow Closures

Date	School name	Notes
03/11/2010	Kings Hill	Heating problem
01/12/2010	Barr Beacon	School entrance on priority route
	Willenhall College	School entrance on priority route
	The Jane Lane School	School entrance on priority route
	Sneyd Community School	100m off school entrance on priority route
	Lodge Farm Primary	Priority part of Willenhall College complex
	Harden Primary	20m off school entrance on priority route
	Pheasey Park Farm School	School entrance on priority route
	Meadow View School	School entrance on priority route
03/12/2010	Willenhall College	School entrance on priority route
	Barr Beacon	School entrance on priority route
	Aldridge	20m off school entrance on priority route
	Barcroft	School entrance on priority route
	Frank f Harrison	School entrance on priority route
	Pheasey Park Farm School	School entrance on priority route
	Blue Coat College	School entrance on priority route
06/12/2010	Millfields Nursery	Heating broken
07/12/2010	Millfields Nursery	Heating broken
	Park Hall Infant	Heating broken, call received at 9.10am
	Holy Trinity Primary, nursery, reception, Yr 1 & 2	Heating problems - call received at 9.30am
	Alumwell Infant	Power cut and problems with heating.
	Alumwell Junior	Same as above
08/12/2010	Edgar Stammers Children's Centre	Heating broken
	Willenhall College	closed to yr 7 & 11 due to heating problem
09/12/2010	none reported	
10/12/2010	none reported	
13/10/2010	none reported	

Clearing snow and ice from pavements yourself



There's no law stopping you from clearing snow and ice on the pavement outside your home or from public spaces. It's unlikely you'll be sued or held legally responsible for any injuries on the path if you have cleared it carefully. Follow the snow code when clearing snow and ice safely.

The snow code - tips on clearing snow and ice from pavements or public spaces

Prevent slips

Pay extra attention to clear snow and ice from steps and steep pathways - you might need to use more salt on these areas.

If you clear snow and ice yourself, be careful - don't make the pathways more dangerous by causing them to refreeze. But don't be put off clearing paths because you're afraid someone will get injured.

Remember, people walking on snow and ice have responsibility to be careful themselves. Follow the advice below to make sure you clear the pathway safely and effectively.

Clear the snow or ice early in the day

It's easier to move fresh, loose snow rather than hard snow that has packed together from people walking on it. So if possible, start removing the snow and ice in the morning. If you remove the top layer of snow in the morning, any sunshine during the day will help melt any ice beneath. You can then cover the path with salt before nightfall to stop it refreezing overnight.

Use salt or sand - not water

If you use water to melt the snow, it may refreeze and turn to black ice. Black ice increases the risk of injuries as it is invisible and very slippery. You can prevent black ice by spreading some salt on the area you have cleared. You can use ordinary table or dishwasher salt - a tablespoon for each square metre you clear should work. Don't use the salt found in salting bins - this will be needed to keep the roads clear.

Be careful not to spread salt on plants or grass as it may cause them damage.

If you don't have enough salt, you can also use sand or ash. These won't stop the path icing over as well as salt, but will provide good grip under foot.

Take care where you move the snow

When you're shovelling snow, take care where you put it so it doesn't block people's paths or drains. Make sure you make a path down the middle of the area to be cleared first, so you have a clear surface to walk on. Then shovel the snow from the centre of the path to the sides.

Offer to clear your neighbours' paths

If your neighbour will have difficulty getting in and out of their home, offer to clear snow and ice around their property as well. Check that any elderly or disabled neighbours are alright in the cold weather. If you're worried about them, contact your local council.

