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**From:** Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member – Environment, Highways & Waste  
John Burr – Director of Highways and Transportation

**To:** Environment, Highways & Waste Cabinet Committee

**Date:** 23 April 2013

**Subject:** Highways and Transportation Winter Service Review for 2012/13

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Summary:**

The report reviews the winter service actions taken with a focus on the two snow emergencies declared in the 2012/13 winter season and outlines the continuous improvement initiatives planned for the summer to be implemented in the 2013/14 winter season.

**Recommendation:**

That the Environment, Highways & Waste Cabinet Committee note the review and endorse the proposed initiatives for the Cabinet Member to approve.

## **1. Introduction**

The highways winter service began on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2012 and ends on 26<sup>th</sup> April and has been carried out in line with the Winter Service Policy 2012/13 approved at the Environment Highways and Waste Cabinet Committee on 20 September 2012. This winter has been particularly cold and prolonged with snow days in several months, the most severe occurring in February and March when snow emergencies were declared. This report sets out the key elements of decision making in winter and the effectiveness of actions that were taken in relation to these snow emergencies. It also discusses lessons learnt and provides detail on current and future actions which contribute towards the continuing improvement of the winter service.

## **2. Bold Steps for Kent and Policy Framework**

2. (1) The review of the winter service activity meet the objectives of the Council's Medium Term Plan for 2014/15, Bold Steps for Kent. One of the priorities of Bold Steps is to ensure that the Council gets ever greater value

for money from our services and seeks more efficient provision of those services. The proposals for the winter service review support this approach. Working in partnership with other authorities and farmers contributes towards achieving a better service and value for money for Kent residents.

2 (2) Another Bold Steps objective “Putting the citizen in control” is achieved by working closely with local district and parish council partners, encouraging self-help during winter conditions, improving communications through the website and local media, including road safety tips.

2 (3) The service aims to ensure a safe operational highway network thus providing access to KCC services for all.

### **3. Financial implications**

(1) The allocated budget for winter service for 2012/13 is £3,237,704. The cost of both winter emergencies was approximately £1,133,141 (final costs for March still to be submitted)

### **4. Winter decision making**

(1) A detailed road weather forecast is provided by Meteogroup under a term contract arrangement. A forecast is received at lunch time each day during the winter season and the forecasters are available 24 hours a day so that the designated Highways and Transportation (H&T) Winter Duty Officer (WDO) can discuss weather issues whenever needed. The forecasted nature and timings of weather events determine when the salting runs are carried out. When icy conditions are expected, it is vital that the salt goes down before the road surface temperatures fall below zero.

Salting works by lowering the freezing temperatures of any moisture on the road surface, but it generally only works with relatively small quantities of snow and in temperatures down to minus 5 or 6 deg C. When heavy snow falls, it quickly overcomes the salt and road surface temperatures drop very quickly, meaning that the salt cannot activate and prevent freezing. Ploughing is the only effective way to deal with more than a few millimetres of snow and all our gritter lorries are fitted with ploughs when snow is expected.

### **5. Snow emergencies**

(1) A countywide snow emergency is declared when significant snow fall (50mm or over) is expected across the county (if the snow is confined to specific areas then the emergency will be limited to that area). All available resources are deployed to grit roads, remove snow, and farmers go out to clear snow in their allocated part of the county. Local winter plans

are activated and partnership work with the district councils is put into operation. For this season a winter service communication campaign had been developed and key messages were put out to the media, the KCC website and on social media, including our 'GritterTwitter'.

- (2) The winter service is well planned and routes are reviewed annually and amended as necessary. The partnership work with districts that was formally adopted in 2010/11 has proved to be highly effective and has resulted in great improvement in the clearance of town centres during snow emergencies. The gritter drivers are trained and run their routes prior to the winter to ensure they are familiar with them and able to grit effectively during the season.
- (3) **January snow emergency** –all resources were deployed to deal with the snow received on the weekend of 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>. Conference calls took place before and during the event to ensure that actions were communicated to all relevant parties including the KCC Emergency Planning team. Salt stocks were high and all salt bins had been filled in preparation for the winter service. Parish councils who had requested them had received one tonne bags of a salt/sand mix to use in their local communities. Throughout the week as the local plans were activated snow clearance extended to include areas outside of the primary route network such as doctor's surgeries, care homes etc. Many secondary schools are on the primary network for road clearance but footway clearance was also carried out outside schools as resources allowed. Our use of Twitter was well received by many people and 'tweets' were on the whole very complimentary. The 'We're prepared....are/have you?' campaign was designed to increase awareness of the service and also encourage people to be prepared and use self-help when possible. The winter page on the website was well used with a peak of over 28,000 hits on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January and 64,516 hits in total for that month. This compares with 35,831 in February last year when we had a snow emergency. Overall the service provided during this snow emergency was very successful and well received by local people across the county with the H&T winter team receiving more compliments on the service than ever before.
- (4) **March snow emergency** – on 11<sup>th</sup> March heavy snow fell across the county the highest accumulations being in the Sevenoaks and Shepway areas. The snowfall unfortunately coincided with the rush hour and this meant large volumes of traffic were on the network as people tried to get home. Although we had prepared by pre-salting all primary and secondary routes, the heavy traffic inevitably impeded the movement of the gritter lorries across the network as we tried to plough and spread more salt. This was exacerbated by various problems on the Highways Agency network (the motorways and trunk roads) which resulted in additional volumes of

traffic diverted onto KCC's network. This did cause extremely difficult conditions in some areas, which led to some criticism and the false perception that we had not treated routes fast enough. Additionally high winds led to drifting snow in some places up to depths of several feet. On March 10<sup>th</sup> all primary routes had been treated across the county.

- (5) The same approach to managing this snow emergency was taken as in January. In most areas of the County this again proved to be effective, with major routes being kept clear allowing people to get home safely. However, in some areas the outcome was quite different where there was heavy snow and drivers got caught up in stationary traffic. The ongoing winter service review will closely examine all contributory factors to the disruption in these areas and where possible, service improvements will be made to help prevent similar problems in future.

## **6. Future actions**

Over the past few years a number of improvements have been made to the winter service which has resulted in a more effective and efficient service. These have included the provision of salt/sand bags to parish councils, new contracts with farmers, a formal partnership arrangement with district councils and improved communications and messages for the public. For the coming winter further initiatives are being planned for the continuous improvement of the service as outlined below:

- a. Snow treatments – currently we plough snow lying at 50mm or above leaving a thin layer of snow which is treated with salt. This helps avoid damage to the ploughing equipment, the road surface itself and to street furniture such as cats eyes and manhole covers. In Scandinavian countries, however, many roads are ploughed to the road surface ('ploughed to black') using specialist ploughs and then treated with grit. This method minimises the build-up of compacted ice. Research will be carried out to determine if this method could be cost effectively adopted here.
- b. Route based forecasting – this would lead to more specific forecasts and targeted salt treatments saving salt and improving efficiency.
- c. Route optimisation – review existing routes and develop a new set of criteria for the assessment of roads for gritting.
- d. Partnership working – explore extending the use of farmers and district councils to include assistance on primary and secondary routes at key times in strategic areas.

- e. Communications – provide live messages to the public via the website and social media in respect of gritting and the location of the gritting vehicles. Also provide more information on the service and the impact of snow on the network.
- f. Self-help – explore the use of ‘snow wardens’ in areas across the county.

## **7. Conclusion**

Overall this season’s winter service has been successful with many compliments received by members of the public and organisations and businesses. The two winter emergencies were managed well though it is acknowledged that difficulties did occur during the second one and steps are being taken to review this, some of the initiatives being considered during the summer will no doubt contribute towards any improvements that could be applied to a similar situation in the future. A report outlining the results of these initiatives will be presented to a future meeting of this committee.

## **Recommendations**

Members are asked to note the contents of this report and endorse the proposed initiatives for continuous improvement of the service

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