

Lancashire County Council

Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on Friday, 11th October, 2013 at 10.30 am in Cabinet Room 'B' - The Diamond Jubilee Room, County Hall, Preston

Present:

County Councillor Bill Winlow (Chair)

County Councillors

A Barnes	M Parkinson
C Dereli	N Penney
M Green	J Shedwick
R Newman- Thompson	D Watts
Mrs L Oades	D Westley
D O'Toole	G Wilkins

County Councillors C Dereli, M Green and N Penney replaced County Councillors C Pritchard, C Wakeford and T Burns respectively for this meeting.

1. Apologies

None were received.

2. Disclosure of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None were disclosed.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 13 September 2013

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2013 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

4. Review of Winter Service

The Chair welcomed Steve Browne, Interim Executive Director for the Environment; and Sue Procter, Assistant Director Highways Operations to the meeting.

The Review of Winter Service Report built upon the reviews undertaken for the winters of 2009/10 and 2010/11 and aimed to implement further improvements and new initiatives to deliver the Winter Service for 2013/14 and beyond. The Winter Service would continue to exploit the benefits of more comprehensive engagement with partners, better communication with stakeholders and a more

innovative approach to tackling the problems that arose during severe and prolonged winter conditions.

Public Perception of the winter services provided by Lancashire County Council had continued to show an increase in satisfaction levels. The service had also received compliments and messages of thanks from local residents and County Councillors.

The County Council's Winter Service Plan was reviewed and updated as necessary prior to each winter season. This review took account of lessons learnt within the service and also ensured on-going compliance with national codes of practice. The 2013/14 Winter Service Plan would be published by 31 October 2013. Public satisfaction levels would continue to be monitored through the 'Living in Lancashire' survey commissioned for February 2014.

The County Council had allocated £3.642m for the provision of Winter Service in 2012/13, and actually spent £5.348m. Of that sum £1.387m (26%) accounted for fixed costs, including:

- Provision, maintenance and servicing of the gritting fleet;
- Provision, maintenance and servicing of facilities, infrastructure and systems;
- Standby payments during the winter season.

The remaining £3.961m (74%), represented the variable costs of the service and covered expenditure on salt and other materials as well as gritting operations. These costs vary from year to year depending on the severity of the winter.

For the 2012/13 winter season, the County Council stockpiled 32,500 of salt, exceeding the recommended pre-season resilience standard by a considerable margin. However, the County Council recognised that its ability to maintain a continuous minimum stockpile would depend on the national salt supply chain situation and the capacity of Lancashire's supplier to deliver 'in-season' re-stocking. Experience during the previous winters suggested there was a risk salt deliveries would not always be available. Salt stocks were monitored through the season and were kept deliberately high through the high season (December – March). During the 2012/13 winter the County Council used just over 33,000 tonnes of salt on the carriageways.

Steps to ensure salt usage was adequate and proportionate would continue, complemented by refresher training for those involved in delivering the Winter Service, including salt use decision makers and gritter drivers.

During the snow events of the 2012/13 winter, the County council's resources were fully deployed and were supplemented by mutual aid from the district council's and resources from the snow clearance contract which gave the County

Council access to 39 operators ranging from local farmers to construction contractors to provide and operate snow clearance equipment at a local level.

There was an established partnership between the County Council and the Lancashire Constabulary to ensure that emergency situations were reported through to winter service teams. The Police notified Environment Directorate officers of any roads they identified in need of treatment and the Environment Directorate officers undertook their own inspections to identify how best to assist the most vulnerable with regard to deep snow or persistent ice.

Review actions for dealing with snow were as follows:

- Pre-winter season training programmes would incorporate lessons learnt from last winter, particularly with regard to snow ploughing and snow blowing given the increased emphasis on removing snow in national guidance
- The snow clearance contract had expired. A new contract specification had been tendered to allow for the provision of an enhanced service removing some of the restrictions on the times and locations of operations for contractors.

The national Winter Resilience Review found there was a wide gap between public expectation and local authority resources on the issue of footway treatment, with few local authorities prioritising the treatment of, or clearance of snow from footways. The Review concluded that whilst public expectation was reasonable, it would never be possible to resource local authorities to perform the task other than in selected pedestrianised areas and accesses to hospitals, bus and railway stations and schools.

The County Council had currently over 1,800 grit bins and over 700 salt heaps and for winter 2012/13 over 3000 tonnes of salt/salt mix was used in restocking them. The County Council continued with the policy of using a 50/50 sand/salt mixture for restocking the bins and heaps and continued to apply the approved decision making criteria to all requests for additional grit bin provision. The role of grit bins and how they were utilised was part of ongoing discussions with District and Parish Councils. These discussions were focussed on ensuring the grit provided through grit bins was for use on the highway only. All County Council grit bins would have a 'Highway Use Only' label attached to discourage misuse of the material and each bin would be identified by a unique reference number.

For the winter of 2012/13, the County Council had engaged with District Councils, Parish and Town Councils, through the Lancashire Association of Local Councils (LALC), and also farmers and contractors to improve resilience in dealing with prolonged severe winter weather.

The Winter Service Plan included a method statement for agreements with District Councils and Parish and Town Councils covering the treatment of

footways or areas maintainable at the public expense and arrangements for the supply and storage of the salt/grit material.

The current method of service delivery required drivers to learn at least one route from their depot. Using satellite technology the County Council had invested in devices for each gritter that would allow more flexibility with the drivers to treat different routes in severe weather conditions. The satellite navigation devices would be available for use in the 2013/14 season.

Route based forecasting was introduced in the winter of 2011/12. The forecast provider was able to produce a route specific forecast for all of the Lancashire routes which enabled the decision makers to plan actions for each route. The use of route based forecasting had enabled the County Council to make savings on the nights where the temperatures were marginal by not having to treat all routes in a particular domain.

There was an expectation from the public about what the County council could deliver in relation to winter service. There was a need to clearly communicate to a wide audience, County Council policies and procedures and the circumstances in which they were implemented. There was also a need to ensure effective communications internally and externally on a day to day basis throughout periods of inclement winter weather so that all stakeholders could access information appropriate to their needs. A communications strategy to support the delivery of the winter service had been developed. The three objectives of this strategy were:-

- Clearly communicate and manage expectations of the level of service the County Council provided.
- Raise awareness of the public's own role in dealing with severe winter weather.
- Improve perceptions among relevant stakeholders that the County Council is well prepared for winter and that it provided an effective winter service during periods of cold weather.

Meetings had taken place with Representatives of District Council Chief Executives, Emergency Services and the Primary Care Trusts, and, Bus and and Rail industry representatives.

Councillors were invited to ask questions and raise any comments in relation to the report, a summary of which is provided below:

- Members were informed that there was not a stock of grit bins kept. If the County council knew alot of grit bins were requested then a bulk order would be placed pre-season.

- On the subject of weather forecasts Members enquired how far in advance forecasts were received from the Met Office and did we get winter forecasts each year. They were informed that the Highways Services Team had a strong relationship with the Met Office and were provided with a weekly forecast. The Team also got a daily forecast in the morning for each day which was key in the decision making for each day.
- The Committee were told that the County Council had stocked up with 32,500 tonnes of salt for 2013/14. This was because the Highways Services Team had found difficulty in restocking salt in previous years due to an increase in national demand for salt which led to limited providers. The 32,500 tonnes of salt meant a minimum restock when salt supplies ran low. If more salt needed to be stocked, more salt barns would be required.
- The cost of the treated salt pre-season was around £41 a tonne. In season it was £45 a tonne. The County Council bought at the cheaper rate which was a significant difference when buying 32,500 tonnes.
- The breakdown on what LCC paid on salt and on staff was about half/half with general overheads on top of that.
- On the topic of manpower, there was a rota of drivers who were on call 24/7. The timing of the grit runs was usually early evening. The drivers would go home after this unless there was a major weather change. If there was uncertainty about when the frost was going to settle or if there was going to be a wet band of weather followed by freezing conditions, the grit runs had to be timed between the two events. On these occasions there would be crews in the depots waiting. The drivers were drawn exclusively from the Highways Operations Teams.
- There were exceptions to the gritting of residential streets such as emergency situations e.g. ambulances. There were a lot of individual cases like this where the Highways Services Team could not offer a gritting service first hand. In these situations self help would have to be looked at, because the Team were trying to keep 'A' Roads open.
- Members asked if salt was not effective below a certain temperature. They were informed that untreated salt was effective up to -5 degrees centigrade. Below -9 degrees centigrade it has no effect. Treated salt is effective at slightly lower temperatures and stays on the ground for longer.

- The Committee enquired if the Highways Services Team were working with Non- Parish areas. They were told that this was not a category the Team had looked at but welcomed any suggestions on how it could work with these areas more effectively. If these areas were predominantly urban areas, the Team would work with the Districts to look at these areas.
- Regarding grit bins and if they met the specified criteria, the Committee were informed that a review had been carried out three years ago. If the grit bin was broken or not fit for purpose anymore then a review would be carried out to establish if it was in an appropriate location.
- Councillors requested that the Priority Footway Networks in each of the 12 District Council areas be e-mailed to them so they would have advanced knowledge for when their constituents contacted them.
- Members expressed concern that areas with high pedestrian movements such as to local centres and public transport interchanges, including railway stations were not always provided with grit bins.
- There was a Grit Bin Assessment Form which was part of the Winter Service Plan available on the intranet for Members. It was a document developed by the Public Realm side of the Service
- The Committee were informed that the contract for snow clearing was advertised openly to all individuals and companies who could provide a snow clearing service. No-one was excluded from the tendering process.
- Sue Procter, Assistant Director Highways Operations, informed Members that briefings had been provided for Parish Councils. In 2012 there had been joint seminars for Parishes with about two or three turning up to each seminar. The team had also accessed the Parishes through the Lancashire association of Local Councils (LALC). LALC confirmed they communicated details of the winter service with all authorities. LALC carried out functions for the County Council with all Parishes. It was pointed out however that a number of Town and Parish Councils were not members of LALC and therefore were not getting information passed on to them from LALC. Sue assured the Committee that she would check with the Public Realm managers to make sure information was conveyed to all Town and Parish Councils.
- With regards to staffing, Members were told a rota system was in operation for the drivers. The drivers worked one week in four as

there were enough drivers on the rota to enable this. There was always a crew on standby 24/7/.

- The salt provided a de-icing function on the roads and did not scour the roads.
- Members asked what assurance there was that snow ploughing the middle of roads would not happen again. The Committee were told that this was caused by snow ploughs which used V-shaped blades. Snow ploughs did not use V-shaped blades anymore instead they used blades which pushed the snow to one side and the snow ploughs would now do a double run on the roads. This was a service improvement that the Highways Services Team had made.

The Highways Operations Team were praised for all the work they had done. Steve Browne, Interim Executive Director for the Environment, wished to thank Phil Barrett, Director of Lancashire Highways Services, who was unable to attend the meeting, for all the work he had done.

Resolved: That the Committee,

1. Commend the Environment Directorate and the Highways Operations Team on how well they have done and to keep up their good work.
2. Ask the Highways Operations Team make sure that all Town and Parish Councils will be contacted as well as making sure all non-parish areas receive information.
3. Request a list of priority footpaths for all County Councillors.
4. Request the subject of Highways Maintenance continues to be brought up at future Scrutiny Committee meetings possibly 6 December.

5. Work Plan and Task Group Update

A report was presented to Members summarising the work to be undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee in the coming months, including an update of task group work.

The Chair stated he had a meeting with Mike Kirby, Director of Transport and Environment, about Transport Plan for Lancashire, in particular to do with railways. Mike Kirby's team would like to do a bitesize briefing to County Councillors first, then look at the Transport Plan for Lancashire at a later date with the Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved: That the Committee:

1. Agree to the Transport Plan for Lancashire at a future meeting.
2. Note the report.

6. Urgent Business

There were no items of Urgent Business

7. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee will be held on Friday 8 November 2013 at 10:00am at County Hall, Preston.

I M Fisher
County Secretary and Solicitor

County Hall
Preston