Herefordshire Council

Scrutiny Review of the Impact of the Winter Weather December 2009-February 2010 and the Response to it.

Agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 July 2010

People
Excellence
Openness
Partnership
Listening
Environment

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the findings of the review at its meeting on 2 July 2010. Subject to slight amendments to recommendations (p) and (r) the Committee agreed the findings and that the report be forwarded to the Leader of the Council for consideration.

This version contains the slight amendments referred to above.

Foreword

The severe winter weather from December 2009 to February 2010 had a substantial impact on the community. The prolonged disruption was County-wide affecting both rural and urban areas.

The disruption was also national, creating significant pressure on the national salt supply. This reduced the amount of gritting the Council could undertake which had a number of consequences. The Committee is mindful that, subsequent to the Executive's request to the Committee to undertake this review, a national review is being undertaken of the transport industry's response to the winter weather. The aim is to identify practical measures to improve the response of the transport sector – road, rail and air, to severe winter weather. That review is to report in two phases: by July 2010, identifying and reporting on measures that can be implemented relatively quickly in preparation for winter 2010/11, and reporting in Autumn 2010 with a longer term view of preparedness for severe winter weather in future years and measures that can improve future resilience.

The Committee considers that there are still some local considerations that it can bring to the Executive's attention and invite them to consider. It believes that these may well supplement or complement the findings of that national review.

The Committee recognises and commends the considerable efforts made in response to the winter problems. The submissions made to the Committee in the course of the review did, however, identify some areas where improvements could be made. The Committee has made a number of recommendations. In doing so the Committee has sought to be proportionate. The general consensus is that by and large the response was good and appropriate. Regard must also be had to the financial constraints within which the Council must operate.

The written submissions made to the Committee also contain a wealth of background information and details of reviews that Services themselves have undertaken, or are undertaking of their response to the winter weather. All this information will be made available to the Executive. The Committee does not therefore intend to replicate the bulk of this material in this report. In particular the Committee would wish to draw the Executive's attention to the thorough submission prepared by the Highways Network Manager. The analysis in that report speaks for itself and needs to be read as a whole.

The Committee has instead sought to identify a selected number of areas that it considers would merit consideration in making preparations for Winter 2010/11 and beyond.

On behalf of the Committee I should like to thank all those who contributed to this review.

PJ Edwards
Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee's recommendations are summarised below:

(a) **That the Communication Strategy be revisited to try to ensure that communities really understand the financial and practical constraints on the Council and are provided with practical information to enable them to help themselves in dealing with the difficulties posed by severe weather conditions, such information should include clear legal advice on the ability of people to help themselves by clearing pavements and on effective, safe methods of snow clearance.**

(b) **That the arrangement for all calls to be handled by the Customer Services Contact Centre and no separate emergency line operated should be monitored to ensure that it is resilient and robust.**

(c) **That action be taken to improve the website so that winter information can more readily be accessed than it is under the current system of placing information in the news section.**

(d) **That the Communication Strategy seeks to ensure that in such situations there is clarity about what the Council's plans are for the next day.**

(e) **That Services be reminded again of the importance of keeping material on the Council website up to date and of removing out of date material and ICT services consider what prompts could usefully be implemented to facilitate this process.**

(f) **That progress in implementing the automated system for school closures should be closely monitored, to ensure that it is operational before Winter 2010, noting also ICT's view that a corporate solution would be desirable.**

(g) **That the specific recommendations put forward by ICT Services in relation to the need to review information flows across all communication channels, the development of a corporate SMS system and the use of social networking sites should be explored.**

(h) **That the implementation of the policy prepared by the Joint Emergency Planning Unit to ensure business continuity planning is embedded should be monitored to ensure appropriate arrangements are put in place, and it should also be ensured that the work of the Severe Weather Group to updated emergency plans relating to weather is completed before Winter 2010.**

(i) **That the Winter Service Plan should provide that salt stocks at the start of the winter season should be no less than 6,500 tonnes.**

(j) **That the gritting of school bus routes and accesses to schools would repay investigation as part of the review of the Winter Service Plan, given the community impact of school closures.**

(k) **That noting the extent of what footway treatment can be delivered is to be reviewed as part of the annual review of the Winter Service Plan, the Committee requests that this will include consideration of pavement clearing machinery in addition to gritting, and the prioritisation of footways for gritting.**

(l) **That the proposed Winter Service Plan for 2010/11 should be the subject of Pre-decision scrutiny by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the report to the Committee setting out the draft plan, including information on how prioritisation of routes has been arrived at, options considered and the costs of those options, mindful of the Committee's view that there is scope to extend at least some priority routes to some schools and sheltered housing facilities and urban estate roads.**

(m) **That the initiative for Parish Councils to organise their own gritting operations on minor roads be supported and encouraged.**

(n) **That consideration be given to extending and strengthening the arrangements to use contractors and farmers to assist with snow clearance in isolated areas during severe winter weather conditions.**

(o) **That action be taken to ensure that the acknowledged safety benefits of improvements to the drainage of the highway and maintenance of effective land drainage are realised.**

(p) **That any bureaucratic barriers regarding the treatment of Council owned car parks and interchanges such as the County bus station should be removed, with consideration also being given to the gritting arrangements for the city bus station.**

(q) **That consideration be given to formally inviting Partners to make a financial contribution to gritting of hospital entrances and the frontages of key emergency service premises and that the gritting of pavements or other means of clearing snow and ice from pavements and possible redirection of funding for this purpose also merits further investigation and consideration.**

(r) **That given the considerable pressures that disruption placed on parents and employers there should be an even greater emphasis placed on schools to try to open, perhaps with clear reasons for closure having to be given, and that further consideration needs to be given to what the Council can do to facilitate schools being kept open and to encourage local resilience.**

(s) **That given the apparent remaining uncertainty over the potential for there to be criticism from Ofsted if schools open but there is limited attendance because of the weather, it is recommended that further guidance is issued clarifying this matter.**

(t) **That guidance be issued to schools on what practical steps they could take to stay open or for more help to be provided to them to enable them to do so including information on the most efficient way to keep playgrounds safe and usable.**

(u) **That consideration be given to how the decision to close schools can be co-ordinated with, or better informed by, the highway service.**

(v) **That consideration be given to methods of ensuring that household waste sites remain operational.**

(w) **That contracts with providers should be reviewed and if necessary revised to require providers to ensure they communicate any inability on their part to deliver the contracted service so that alternative arrangements can be made.**

(x) **That providers be required to confirm that they have business continuity plans in place to deal with winter weather and arrangements for reviewing and updating those plans regularly.**

(y) **That clear guidance be issued to managers and employees about their responsibilities in bad weather and a more robust approach to redeployment be implemented supported by an appropriate policy document.**

(z) **That action should be taken to increase the provision of mobile working opportunities and/or more local access points for workers to work closer to home.**

(a1) **That, given concern that the Emergency Co-ordinator Scheme may not prove as robust as hoped, take up should be monitored and, if insufficient, alternative action considered.**

(b1) **That formal negotiations take place with the Highways Agency with a view to bringing their treatment regime within the County into line with that of the Council.**

(c1) **That the Joint Emergency Planning Unit ensure that appropriate provision is made within Severe Weather Plans for 4x4 vehicle usage.**

(d1) **That West Mercia Police be asked to review the resilience of its arrangements to secure an adequate supply of 4x4 vehicles and the trained staff to drive them.**

Background

1 The Leader of the Council invited the Committee to conduct a review of the impact of the recent severe winter weather on communities in the County and across the public services including partners in Health, Schools, Police and the Voluntary Sector. He requested that this review was completed and the report submitted to Cabinet before the end of July in order to give sufficient time to build on any recommendations into future winter planning.

2 The Committee has conducted the review with the following terms of reference:

- To review the impact of the recent severe winter weather on communities in the County and across the public services including partners in Health, Schools, Police and the Voluntary Sector.
- To establish what lessons can be learnt, what was done right and what can be improved.
- To identify whether there are any bureaucratic barriers which should be removed at times of communities under stress.
- To consider recommendations for partners locally and nationally.

Method of Gathering Information

3 Members of Herefordshire Council and all Town and Parish Councils were invited to give their views on what went well; what did not go well, and what improvements it was thought could be made. Town and Parish Councils were also asked to comment on any actions they had themselves taken. Comments from the public were invited through Herefordshire Matters. Officers of the Council and NHS Herefordshire were invited to comment. Information was also sought from bus providers, the emergency services, Fire and Rescue Service, Hereford NHS Hospitals Trust, the National Farmers Union, schools and the voluntary sector.

4 The Committee identified the following service areas: as those which most warranted further investigation and questioning to supplement the submissions received from those areas and other respondents:

- Children and Young Peoples Directorate
- Adult Social Care
- NHS Herefordshire Provider Services
- Highways Services
- Communications, and Information Communication and Technology (ICT)
- Joint Emergency Planning Unit (JEPU)

5 A formal meeting of the Committee was held on 21 May to question officers from those service areas in public. The submissions from these service areas were published with the agenda papers for that meeting.

6 The Committee also took account of Scrutiny Reviews published by Durham County Council, Hertfordshire County Council and North Yorkshire County Council.

Next Steps

7 Subject to approval by the Committee this report will be presented to Cabinet for consideration.

8 The Committee expects that within two months of receipt of the report Cabinet will consider the report and recommendations and respond to the Committee indicating what action Cabinet proposes to take, together with an action plan.

Introduction

9 The winter weather had a considerable impact on the Community as a whole. Effects included:

- A total of 89,537 pupil days lost through school closures, which equates to 2.1% of the total number of pupil days in the school year. This had a considerable knock on effect on working parents and carers and their employers.

- Significant disruption to the County's bus services and school transport.

- Amey had to undertake some 111 gritting runs with 24 hour shift patterns. Over 12,000 tonnes of salt were used. The response cost some £2.1 million. This meant an overspend of £975k on the Winter Maintenance budget. The Winter Maintenance Reserve of £500k was also exhausted and had to be replaced as part of the 2010/11 budget.

- The damage to the County's roads was also significant - a 3% increase in the defectiveness of A roads and a 34% increase in the defectiveness of the rest of the highway network. An additional £4.7 million is being invested in the highway network in 2010/11 which will enable a programme totalling £11.7 million of highway maintenance to be delivered. A significant number of insurance claims have been received relating to vehicle damage caused by potholes.

- Emergency activity in the Accident and Emergency Department increased by 6.5% across January and February compared with the previous year. Emergency Inpatient activity rose by 21% across the same period. Elective inpatient and day case surgery was initially suspended and fell by 9.8% in January compared with the previous year. Approximately 600 outpatient attendances were lost (7%).

10 The actions the Committee thinks the Council should consider in seeking to improve the response to future episodes of severe weather are discussed under the following five aspects of the Council's role: Community Leader, Service Provider, Commissioner of Services, Employer and Partner.

Community Leader

11 This section covers the Council's role in communicating with residents about the impact of the severe weather on communities and services, what the

12 Communication is a key thread in responding to episodes of this type. It is important that there is clarity about what the Council's role is and what it can do. In particular the Committee supports the need to ensure that the Community is informed of what the Council is planning to do the next day, as far as possible, to help inform people's decision making (being realistic in the light of conditions that are then actually experienced; and explaining the overall circumstances and how it is planned to work through them).

13 This is a significant challenge. The Committee was informed that the Communications Unit found that although it was widely reported that the County was experiencing the worst weather conditions for 30 years it was difficult to get the impact of this across to residents who continued to compare winter conditions and response of services with the previous year. There were also calls from the public unclear about why school buses were not running but the schools were open.

The Multi-Agency Silver Group

14 The Major Incident Response Plan was not activated. It was considered that the establishment of the multi-agency Silver Group was an appropriate response. The Silver Group comprises the Local Authority – Highways & Contractor, Joint Emergency Planning Unit (JEPU), Children and Young People's Directorate including schools and the Communications Unit, Provider Services, Hereford Hospitals Trust, Operations Director, Adult Social Care, West Mercia Police, Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, West midlands Ambulance Service, Primecare - Out of Hours GP Services provider, and Patient First – Non Acute Patient Transport. This Group met a number of times a day via tele conference to ensure there was a co-ordinated response to conditions. A daily update was provided on weather conditions and challenges faced by partners and emergency services which informed regular communication updates and media statements.

15 The consensus of those who submitted evidence to the Committee was that the operation of the Silver Group worked well.

16 Some examples given where the work of the Silver Group was of real assistance include roads being prioritised for gritting, police vehicles helping to get supplies to vulnerable older people, and the communications team arranging press appeals for people to look in on elderly neighbours .

17 It is noted that the Joint Emergency Planning Unit (JEPU) considers that whilst the role of the Silver Group was to co-ordinate the priorities of the multi-agencies to ensure these agencies' needs were known and addressed, the process could be improved by detailing 'priorities' as a specific agenda item. In turn, the JEPU would produce an agreed and visible prioritisation of tasks available to multi-agencies. This priority list could encompass details such as road clearance, actions surrounding school closures and access to key infrastructure, such as GP surgeries.

Surge Information Line

18 During the disruption the JEPU activated the Surge Information Line (SIL) (formerly known as the Emergency Information Line.) The SIL prevents disruption to existing switchboards and can be requested by multi-agency partners. It operates on a single dedicated number and is manned by volunteers. It provides a public telephone information service, largely relating to school and road closures and public transport disruption and accurate and up to date information for all closures.

19 The Committee notes that the line will not operate in future and all calls will be handled by the Customer Services contact centre. The reason for this change in approach is that a corporate identity has been developed, seeing customers use the 01432 260000 number as the 'one stop shop'. Introducing another number (ie, that of the Surge Information Line) during an emergency is considered confusing, and potentially frustrating to the Customer. Instead, it is thought better to augment the existing capability on a phased approach according to the requirements of the incident.

20 The Committee is aware of the considerable pressures that the contact centre can face. For example, the volume of calls associated with the introduction of the new recycling arrangements increased by 220% (from about 8,000 calls overall to 22,000 calls coming into the contact centre in one month at the peak of demand) creating pressure on the service at that time.

21 The Head of Customer Services has reported that as the winter weather began from the end of December onwards, there was a marked, steep rise in the level of calls coming into the call centre. The average weekly number of calls expected should be in the order of 3100. For the whole of January and February 2010, this level was exceeded. This unexpected, unprecedented demand peaked at approximately 7000 calls per week and was very difficult to manage.

22 It will be important therefore to ensure that the arrangement for all calls to be handled by the Customer Services contact centre is robust and resilient. It is noted, for example, that whilst, in the long term, “augmentation could be provided by non-critical staff (identified in the soon to be implemented Business Continuity process) across the partnership, short/medium term augmentation should be provided by existing SIL volunteers.”

23 The Head of Customer Services also considers that the dissemination of information to customers could have been greatly improved. Because the information being published was not sufficient, for whatever reason this added to the pressure on the service. The more difficult people found it to access the council, the more they tried to make contact. The Committee notes the importance of the link between service areas and customer services in this regard and the need for this therefore to form part of the consideration of the resilience and robustness of the service.

Communication Of School Closures And Information On Other Services

24 The Committee recognises that staff made considerable efforts to update Council web pages and radio stations.

25 It is noted, for example, that the BBC commended the Council on its responsiveness and quality of information.

26 There was, however, a consensus that communication could be streamlined. The submission by ICT Services highlighted several issues that could be improved including ensuring the timeliness of key information; utilisation of the Web, improvements to the communication chain; and the fact that core service information was only contained in the news section of the website.

27 The ICT submission reported that only just over a third of the visits to the website (36,946) during January and less than half of the pages viewed (46,475) were to the Press releases content. Yet this was where the web emergency information efforts were focused. The other service pages were not managed as part of the emergency information communication plan but accounted for the majority of the searches and visits. The submission stated that it was clear from these figures and the independent reports that although information was available, publishing it in news articles was not as effective as updating relevant service areas on the website where the public would expect to find it.

28 The ICT submission added that this year Local Directgov has requested that all local authorities provide a link to the information on their websites for school closures and for gritting routes. This requires a service page for each. The gritting route information is on a service page but although there was information on school closures on the website it was not presented in the same way.

29 In its submission ICT made a number of specific recommendations. The Committee considers that the following merit further exploration:

- review information flows across all channels of communication to the public to support the automatic distribution of service information e.g. implementing service information pages on the Council website for school closures, containing auto-published details of school closures;

- mechanism(s) to improve the flow of school closure information, for example through Short Message Service (SMS) texting. (ICT considers this should be a corporate tool as the statistics clearly show that the public require timely as well as accurate information for a number of service areas such as transport (e.g. road usage and buses), refuse and recycling, public spaces e.g. libraries (but could also be clinics), and bus timetables);

- Utilise social networking sites such as twitter and facebook to distribute the information as widely as possible and as soon as possible.

30 The Committee has commented on previous occasions on the importance of ensuring that material on the website is up to date and that out of date material is removed. The Committee reiterates this point. Some information

31 The Children & Young People's Directorate is working with a company to develop an automated, web based, system that will allow secure access for school Headteachers (or their nominated substitutes) to inform by email the local authority, school transport contractors and radio stations of their school's closure and reopening in one action, by using the web, telephone or text. The action will also update Herefordshire Council's web site automatically, with the page being refreshed every 5 minutes. It is planned to have this system tested and in place for the new school year in September 2010.

32 The Directorate indicated that it will also investigate whether a link could be created to enable this automated system to inform a schools' text messaging system for parents.

33 This development is clearly seen as making a major improvement. It is important that progress in delivering this project is monitored to ensure that is delivered and implemented on time. The connection between this project and ICT's recommendation that there should be a corporate solution also needs to be considered.

34 The issue of providing updated information on disruption to other services does remain. Information was being received from drivers of waste collection vehicles and information from other groups such as the voluntary 4x4 drivers who had a good experience of local conditions. Yet difficulties were experienced in updating the web promptly to reflect this new information.

35 The ICT submission reported on a survey of information published on websites about service disruptions during the first two weeks of January. Whilst the survey rated the effectiveness of the Council's promotion of service disruption as satisfactory it noted that refuse and recycling collections, road gritting and school closures were highlighted as being disrupted but no other services, for example libraries, and services for older people.

36 The overall rating of the website in this survey was poor. Several questions related to links to Twitter and Facebook of which the Council has none.

37 Whilst the Committee's view was that Local Members should not be part of the formal communication network, given the pressures on communication systems, Local Members are both a source of information and link to the local community alongside Town and Parish Councils and communication strategies should take account of their role. It is noted that updates from Silver Group were sent to Councillors.

38 NHS Herefordshire's commissioning arm suggested wider public information on alternative services/provision during the winter period to offset some of the undoubted pressure experienced from acute care (e.g. diversions from A&E to alternative provision inc. pharmacists and GP surgeries) would also be helpful.

Communication of Self Help Information

39 Members thought that it was important that communities really understood the financial and practical constraints on the Council. This meant that communities, including key local voluntary and community sector organisations had to help themselves. To enable them to do this it was important that they were aware of some practical steps everyone could take and consideration should be given to how such information could be provided.

40 One aspect of this was the clearance of pavements. The Winter Service Plan (WSP), which sets out what winter maintenance measures are "reasonably practicable" for the County, provides that treatment of walking routes will only be carried out upon completion of the priority routes and subject to the availability of resources (eg salt/grit and staff). It is clearly impossible for the Council to clear every part of the County and this needs to be clearly communicated to residents.

41 The Highways Network Manager's (HNM's) submission stated that the high profile shopping areas in the County such as High Town, Hereford were cleared of snow and treated to prevent the formation of ice on a regular basis. However, the vast majority of footways in the county remained untreated throughout the period. Some areas were treated through self help grit bins and footways were treated on some of the main thoroughfares, either as a 'by-product' of having treated the carriageway or through the use of towed spreaders and Amey Herefordshire's maintenance gangs. The Committee notes that the extent of footway treatment that can be delivered is to be reviewed as part of the annual review of the WSP.

42 The Committee believes a significant difference could be made if shopkeepers and householders cleared their frontages. People feel inhibited about doing this because it is frequently suggested in the media that they will be liable should someone injure themselves on a cleared stretch of pavement. It is essential that this confusion is dispelled. The Committee has received a statement on the legal position to the effect that liability would only arise in the unlikely event that those clearing their frontages have made it worse, or piled snow up somewhere else nearby. It believes the Council should take the lead in widely communicating advice on the ability of people to help themselves and on effective, safe methods of snow clearance. This could be supplemented by guidance to the community on self-help.

Recommendations

(a) That the Communication Strategy be revisited to try to ensure that communities really understand the financial and practical constraints on the Council and are provided with practical information to enable them to help themselves in dealing with the difficulties posed by severe weather conditions, such information should include clear legal advice on the ability of people to help themselves by clearing pavements and on effective, safe methods of snow clearance.

(b) That the arrangement for all calls to be handled by the Customer Services Contact Centre and no separate emergency line operated should be monitored to ensure that it is resilient and robust.

(c) That action be taken to improve the website so that winter information can more readily be accessed than it is under the current system of placing information in the news section.

(d) That the Communication Strategy seeks to ensure that in such situations there is clarity about what the Council's plans are for the next day.

(e) That Services be reminded again of the importance of keeping material on the Council website up to date and of removing out of date material and ICT services consider what prompts could usefully be implemented to facilitate this process.

(f) That progress in implementing the automated system for school closures should be closely monitored, to ensure that it is operational before Winter 2010, noting also ICT's view that a corporate solution would be desirable.

(g) That the specific recommendations put forward by ICT Services in relation to the need to review information flows across all communication channels, the development of a corporate SMS system and the use of social networking sites should be explored.

Service Provider

43 This section shows the impact that the severe weather had on the Council's responsibilities as direct provider of services in particular highway and pavement gritting, school closures and waste collection.

Business Continuity Planning

44 The submission from adult social care stated that there was duplication and excessive e-mails at times as services did not have joined up business continuity plans. It said that co-ordinated business continuity plans and nominated service leads would prevent some duplication and increase effective working. NHS Herefordshire Provider Services also commented on its intention to develop the business continuity planning process to ensure that staff were aware of their role and the emergency planning function. Hereford Hospitals NHS Trust also proposed to review major incident and business continuity plans in conjunction with the JEPU. The submission from the Communications Unit commented that business continuity plans did not specifically prepare for the severity of weather conditions experienced. The Joint Emergency Planning Unit also identified the need for Business Continuity Plans across the Partnership to incorporate a contingency for severe winter weather as one of the improvements that could be made.

45 The Committee considered that the evidence presented to it suggested a need for business continuity plans to be reviewed under the leadership of the Joint Emergency Planning Unit to ensure that appropriate regard was had to the need to prepare for severe winter weather and that linkages between plans could be assessed and any gaps addressed. It is understood that the JEPU has already prepared a policy and this was agreed by the Joint Management Team on 15 June and that a Severe Weather Working Group has also been formed to ensure that all emergency plans relating to weather

Salt Stocks

46 The report of the HNM stated that, "the availability of salt became the single biggest influence over treatment regimes across all highway authorities." It added that the national review will consider the question of national resilience. At regional level considerations would include an assessment of the feasibility of establishing bulk storage facilities within the region.

47 The HNM also reported that a stock of 6,500 tonnes of road salt was held at the start of the winter season. This is the capacity of the environmentally sound three main salt barns in the County. In the past decade 3,500 tonnes have typically been used each winter. In 2008/9 10,000 tonnes were used and in 2009/10 12,000 tonnes approximately. Establishing and stocking a further environmentally sound store of salt in the County would result in significant expense.

48 The Committee noted that there might appear to be a temptation to reduce salt storage to save money. The lowest price for a tonne of the variety of salt currently used by the Council is approximately £40, but this more than doubled during the last winter. However, mindful of the pressures on supply, there was unanimity that the stock level should be maintained at no less than 6,500 tonnes at the start of each winter season. It was noted that contingency arrangements were in place to replenish stocks during the winter.

Prioritisation of Gritting Routes

49 The current WSP provides:

*"**2.6 Priority Routes***

We are responsible for the maintenance of 3291 kms of roads throughout the county. Of these 95 kms (29.1%) have been identified as a first priority whenever carriageway and footway surfaces become, or may become, dangerous through ice and snow. These routes have been established using the following criteria:

strategic routes
other heavily trafficked routes
commuter routes
routes of importance to the emergency services
regular rural public transport routes with weekday frequencies of 2 hours or better
topography
transport Interchanges

Secondary Routes

During severe winter periods treatment may extend to other routes. These secondary routes have been established using the following criteria:

links to rural communities
regular public transport routes with daily frequencies

to within 500 m of schools
prestige walking zones
primary walking routes
cycleways

Treatment of these routes will only be carried out upon completion of the priority routes and subject to the availability of resources.

Other Locations

If severe conditions persist, then treatment of other roads may be carried out as needed, subject to the availability of resources.

Car Parks

The treatment of public car parks, that are accessible by our gritters, will be done as needed when treating secondary routes.

Public Bus Routes

Rural bus routes which have weekday frequencies of 2 hours or better are included as priority routes. Bus routes with daily frequencies are included as secondary routes.

Other Routes

On roads not given priority treatment, small quantities of salt/grit will be placed at potential trouble spots. Wherever practicable, this material will be placed in dedicated salt/grit containers."

50 The Committee acknowledges that a strategic approach to gritting must be adopted and that this could be undermined by piecemeal additions to routes. It also acknowledges that the pressure on salt supplies nationally prevented the gritting of the secondary routes, that has proved possible in previous years, and the circumstances may therefore be considered exceptional.

51 It also acknowledges that whilst it might be possible to accommodate some additional routes, beyond a certain point there would be significant step changes in the capital and ongoing revenue cost of service delivery.

52 However, it does consider that the gritting of school bus routes and accesses to schools would repay investigation as part of the review of the WSP given the community impact of school closures and recommends that this is done.

53 Two specific examples where gritting would have been of immense benefit at little apparent cost were given in responses: the key area of access to Aylestone High School (Broadlands Lane); and access to St Weonards Primary School, 50m off the A466.

54 It also notes that priority (and even secondary) routes do not extend into many of the urban estate roads, where a high percentage of the county's population reside. The HNM comment that any extension of service and hence reduction in risk here needs to be balanced against the risk presented in other areas, such as in isolated rural communities is also noted.

55 Problems identified by the Bus Operators at the Bus Operators Forum included, “the condition of the County and City Bus Stations in Hereford, the difficulty in getting access to school premises to load and unload, the condition of residential area roads in Hereford, particularly Newton Farm, Tupsley, Belmont and Redhill, a particular problem on the A44 at Stoke Lacy and with the road between Colwall, Wellington Heath and Ledbury.

56 The Public Transport Manager reported that most principal bus services operate along roads that are included in the schedule of winter gritting routes and this schedule has been adapted to ensure that such bus routes are covered. However, significant disruption was experienced on secondary bus routes and, in particular, on local services in Hereford City. First Bus in its response suggested that it would be beneficial to concentrate on the estates with the largest demographic of workers using the public transport system. It also suggested agreeing alternative Emergency Routes for when the weather deteriorates, and advertising these. Then when there is a problem, a simple ‘Emergency Routes in Use’ announcement on all available Media will inform the public, and they will already have the appropriate route information allowing them to continue to use the Transport system.

57 The Committee also considers that access to sheltered housing schemes and other similar vulnerable sites should be considered as part of the review.

58 In making its recommendation the Committee welcomes the fact that routes are reviewed as part of the annual review of the WSP and the assurance that there is liaison with Parish Councils throughout the year and their views on gritting routes are taken into account in the annual review.

59 The Committee has also welcomed the assurance that the provision of grit bins is regularly reviewed with Parish Councils.

60 However, the Committee considers the definition of what constitutes a priority route such a significant issue that the proposed WSP for 2010/11 should be the subject of pre-decision scrutiny by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the report to the Committee setting out the draft plan, including information on how prioritisation of routes has been arrived at, options considered and the costs of those options, mindful of the Committee’s view that there is scope to extend at least some priority routes to some schools and sheltered housing facilities and urban estate roads.

61 A number of specific roads where gritting was requested or where there were defects such as poor drainage exacerbating the dangers were referred to in submissions to the review. These have been brought to the attention of the HNM.

62 Alongside the need for effective gritting the Committee has also considered the fact that there has been a significant rise in accidents occurring on gritted routes where water running across roads has washed off the salt and then frozen causing sheets of ice. It was reported to the Committee that, “in almost all the instances the drainage of the highway is insufficient or adjacent landowners have made alterations or failed to maintain land drainage” meaning water simply runs onto the highway. The Committee has noted that the HNM recognises that improvements can be made in this area and that

63 In the previous section on Community Leadership the gritting of footways was discussed. In the context of service provision, noting the extent of what footway treatment can be delivered is to be reviewed as part of the annual review of the WSP, the Committee requests that this will include consideration of pavement clearing machinery in addition to gritting and the prioritisation of footways for gritting. Further reference to the gritting of footways is made in the section below on treatment at county hospital and emergency services premises.

Self help

64 The Committee notes from the HNM's report that several Parish Councils have expressed a desire to organise their own gritting operations on minor roads that are not usually the subject of treatment regimes. The extension of the lengthsman scheme would form part of any such consideration. The HNM notes that to take this forward, even if initially on a limited trial basis, a number of matters would have to be addressed. The cost implication if the scheme were to be extended county-wide would also be a consideration. However, this is clearly an excellent example of communities willing to improve their own situation and the Committee supports exploration of this initiative.

65 The National Farmers Union (NFU) in its response also commented that farmers and rural businesses are also keen to take action to help themselves and their communities. A frequent concern has been the lack of salt supplies that farmers could spread on rural roads themselves. An NFU member was advised by Amey that salt and grit could not be left in remote locations because of environmental concerns.

66 The NFU expressed particular concerns over dairy farms unable to send liquid milk off the farm which had a large financial impact on businesses that operate on tight financial margins, and livestock and poultry farmers who had experienced difficulties receiving deliveries of animal feed. The NFU was interested in exploring the potential for dairy and livestock farms to receive priority gritting and/or regular supplies of salt and grit. Given the discussion above about the implications of extending the priority routes this suggests that facilitating self-help is the only viable option.

Snow Clearance Contractors

67 The HNM reported that snow was cleared from many minor roads providing important access to rural communities using a established network of snow clearance contractors, who are 'activated' following significant snowfall in their locality. *(The WSP provides for contractors once snow has taken hold in their locality and reached a depth of approximately 100mm (4"))* and are paid for their work at tendered rates. These contractors provide an invaluable service linking many remote communities with the priority gritting routes enabling a degree of access during times of severe winter weather. The scope of these activities is currently limited to snow clearance. Compacted snow and ice does still present a significant hazard and can still limit access, particularly to the more remote/elevated areas. Currently these contractors are paid when

68 The HNM added that extending the scope/nature of the service they deliver may mean having to pay retention monies and/or invest in equipment such as tractor mounted salt spreaders.

69 These contractors are usually available to provide this service in times of severe weather, as many are farmers/small civil engineering contractors and other work cannot be accessed (due to the weather) in these events. However, individuals may not be 'on site' or available on all occasions for a variety of legitimate reasons. Neighbouring contractors can often provide cover, but this ultimately impacts on the timeliness of response. Service provision can vary across the county and some areas are less well covered.

70 The National Farmers Union in its response said they would be interested in discussing the potential for farmers to contribute to a winter highways response by undertaking snow clearing and salt spreading. Farms have equipment such as tractors and telehandlers that could be used to assist the Council with snow clearing. The NFU said it had helped other local authorities to contact interested farmers and would be happy to discuss this with the Council.

Bureaucratic Barriers

71 The Committee notes the HNM's report that the maintenance of car parks and the County bus station are not the responsibility of the highway service. This states that the WSP recognises their status as transport assets and as such those car parks that can be accessed by a gritter are treated whenever secondary routes are treated. Whilst maintenance gangs were directed towards the treatment of car parks and the County Bus Station during the severe weather, their treatment was not administered in a preventative way. This meant that drivers/passengers who had completed their journey on treated roads were (on many occasions) then faced with untreated surfaces once they alighted. The HNM suggests council owned car parks and transport interchanges such as the County Bus Station should be considered as transport assets. He proposes their maintenance be brought into the control of the highway service and their treatment incorporated into the WSP as part of the priority routes, so they do receive preventative treatment throughout the winter season.

72 The Committee supports the removal of this barrier. It also notes, however, that the city bus station is privately owned and was therefore left untreated, leading to its closure for three days with buses operating from unauthorised on street stops. It suggests this issue too needs to be revisited.

Treatment at County Hospital and Emergency Services Premises

73 The HNM reported that the access to the County Hospital is treated as part of the priority gritting routes. Treatments were extended through a request made to the Silver Group to include the footways at the Hospital entrances and to the frontages of all key emergency service premises, such as fire and ambulance stations. The HNM acknowledges it makes sense to treat these sites, particularly in times of prolonged severe weather. He comments that

74 A number of respondents, including Hereford City Council, have commented on the cost of personal injury accidents arising from trips slips and falls. The question has arisen as to whether, aside from benefits to the health of the population, it would be cost effective for NHS Herefordshire to redirect funding from the treatment of injuries incurred.

75 Hereford Hospitals Trust itself suggested that one of the improvements to be considered would be gritting of pavements tactically on the worst inclines to reduce the risk of falls with resultant fractures. However, it must be noted that Silver Group was asked to identify particular areas where there was a risk of slips but found the problem to be a general one rather than site specific.

76 A report was submitted to the Committee by the Public Health Directorate on this issue, raising a number of considerations. This reported a lack of evidence to suggest that new investment in gritting of pavements would reduce the risk of admissions due to falls or accident claims. However, it also concluded that further exploration of the cost of gritting pavements universally needed to be undertaken and that alternatives to gritting of pavements which may be done without use of heavy machinery and can be done by local people should be explored.

77 The Committee considers that the gritting of pavements or other means of clearing snow and ice from pavements and possible redirection of funding merits further investigation and consideration.

School Closures

78 Some dissatisfaction was expressed to the Committee about the number of schools closed, the duration of those closures and the associated impact on working parents and employers and the effect on Children's education.

79 The Committee considers the impact of school closures to be a key issue. Aside from the effect on public service employers in Herefordshire, as reported for example by the Hospitals Trust, it notes the findings from a National Federation of Small Business support that 11% of those surveyed said staff were unable to get to work because of school closures.

80 The HNM also highlighted that, "when a decision to close a school is taken part way through the day it has resulted in an immediate increase in traffic volumes as parents leave work and home in order to transport their children home and make appropriate childcare arrangements. This peak in traffic can and has occurred at the very same time that Amey needed to grit roads, thereby impeding treatment. As a result parents have made their journeys from work/home to school and then back to home/work etc. on roads that have yet to be treated in response to the then current snowfall. Treatment of the roads has taken longer as gritters have to make their way through traffic." The HNM suggested the decision to close schools could be coordinated with,

81 He added: “The cost of sharing information between services and schools is small. If the level of liaison required is on a one to one basis with all schools then clearly the cost of achieving this will rise. The benefits could be significant in terms of improved welfare and reduced disruption to the wider community.”

82 The Committee acknowledges that it may be difficult to find a practical solution and that schools face considerable pressure in seeking to ensure that pupils can get home safely. However, the benefits outlined by the HNM seem sufficient to warrant further exploration of this issue.

83 The Committee has investigated a number of issues raised in responses including whether, a decision to close schools should be taken centrally rather than locally, gritting of access routes to schools, clearance of school sites and playgrounds, varied school opening times and the potential for teachers to work at the school nearest to them.

84 The Enforced Closure of Schools and Children’s Centres – guidance for Headteachers and Centre Managers does state *“Schools and children’s centres are expected to stay open if at all possible – closure should take place only if health and safety is compromised, for example where staffing levels fall below a level to manage pupils or children’s centre services effectively. A school or children’s centre can remain open even where the majority of children, customers and staff are unable to attend at all or cannot arrive at the usual time. The fact that some or all of the school buses are cancelled is not in itself a reason for closure.”*

85 The procedure also states: **“***If considering closure part way through the school/centre day, consult nearby Headteachers/Children’s Centre Managers in an attempt to ensure consistency and co-ordination of action, particularly with regard to transport.”*

86 The Committee agreed that because schools across the County experienced widely differing weather conditions decisions on school closure were best taken locally rather than centrally, unless the circumstances were exceptional. However, it considered that given the considerable pressures disruption placed on parents and employers there should be an even greater emphasis placed on schools to try to open, perhaps with clear reasons for closure having to be given, and that further consideration needed to be given to how the Council can assist in facilitating schools to be kept open and to encourage greater local resilience.

87 It was clear, for example, that there remained some uncertainty over the potential for there to be criticism from Ofsted if schools opened but there was limited attendance because of the weather. In contrast it was believed that a total closure did not affect the statistics. This seemingly created a perverse incentive for schools to close. The Committee has been advised categorically that this as a myth and that the Directorate issued guidance to schools from the former Department of Children, Schools and Families, informing them of the provisions for recording absence in such circumstances. However, in

88 It was also suggested that schools closed because of snow and ice on car parks, footpaths, playgrounds etc. Legal advice is that that a decision to close should be in the form of a risk assessment that should include the following matters:

- the nature of roads leading to the school and whether these are passable, will/have they been gritted etc.
- the ability for transport providers to collect and drop off children safely
- the ability to heat the school adequately
- whether to clear snow and ice from car parks, footpaths, playgrounds etc. If a decision is made to clear certain paths, every effort should be made to keep these areas cleared during the whole period of bad weather as parents would come to expect this and should be notified accordingly
- the distances staff have to travel to and from school and the roads they would be using
- consideration as to whether there are enough qualified people to run the school if some staff cannot get in (eg. if all teacher assistants get in but no teachers, or have no first aid staff, or not enough one to one mentors)

89 The Committee noted that clearance of school sites was delegated under a schools grounds maintenance contract. Schools themselves are responsible for the removal of snow from playgrounds. It is understood that some schools do pay the grounds maintenance contractor to clear the school site. At other schools this is done by supportive parents or the caretaker. Property Services writes to schools every October asking them how much grit they require. A number of schools had run out of grit over the last winter. Property Services had tried to make more grit available where possible.

90 The Committee suggests that there is potential for guidance to be issued to schools on what practical steps they could take to stay open or for more help to be provided to them to enable them to do so.

91 Some respondents asked why teachers, many of whom travel to work at schools outside their immediate locality could not be redeployed to a school local to them. The Committee did test this point. It was advised that teachers were governed by the terms and conditions of the Burgundy Book. Although it could be argued it was out of date, this did still contain a provision that teachers should seek to work in the school nearest to them if unable to work at their normal school. This was a general principle but not one that was promoted. It was not custom and practice for teachers to seek to work at alternative schools. The provision did not take account of the different types of school now in existence, with the local authority not necessarily the direct employer and different conditions of employment applying. A number of teachers also had their own children to care for in severe weather conditions making them unable to attend work.

Waste Collection

92 A number of concerns were expressed to the Committee about the waste collection service. In some parts of the County collections were not

93 The Committee has investigated this point. It has been assured that in the extreme weather conditions the Waste Service had a system in place to ensure that refuse and recycling collections took place where possible but with safety of residents and collections crews taken fully into account.

94 The Waste Services Manager informed the Committee that:

"Every morning a risk assessment was made between the Council's waste services manager and Focsa's contract manager based on all the information available. Whether a decision for a full service, partial service, a catch-up service or no service at all was arrived at this information was passed to the Council's Communications Team. This was then used to update the Council's website, inform the Council's Info Team (who take the phone calls relating to queries about waste management) and the local media including radio.

At the same time, the household waste sites were contacted to see if the on site conditions and access to the sites were safe and a similar risk assessment was made, decision made and the information made public.

By taking this action and requesting residents to store their refuse and recycling we were pleased to see there were no injuries relating to the waste management although two vehicles did end up off the road. Recycling and refuse were picked up by crews working extra hours and weekends to catch up as quickly as possible. With this approach we were still able to maintain a high recycling rate and clear the refuse."

95 Some respondents to the review questioned why other services such as post and milk deliveries operated when the waste collection service did not. The Waste Services Manager has advised that refuse collection vehicles have a variable and unusually high centre of gravity so are different to most other vehicles on the road. Consideration had to be given to the dangers of having large vehicles sliding off the roads.

96 The Waste Services Manager also observed that the risks of trips and slips for the operatives carrying sacks or moving wheel bins also needed to be taken into account. He reported that there was no disagreement between himself as the Lead Officer and the Focsa Contract Manager. As a result there were no serious injuries to Focsa staff and the public and no serious damage to vehicles or property.

97 The Committee considers that it is clearly unfortunate and an inconvenience if the refuse can not be collected but the Service has clearly demonstrated the reasons for its actions and shown a focus on service delivery which has included efforts to catch up on collections as soon as possible.

98 A suggestion was made that local arrangements might be made within communities to move waste to a central location where collection by the Waste Service might then be possible. The Committee considers that keeping the Household waste sites operational would be its preferred solution.

ICT Equipment

99 One specific concern expressed to the Committee by Adult Social Care was the performance of smart phones issued to adult social care staff. It was reported that the battery life of these phones was insufficient making it necessary for staff to carry additional batteries. Phone directories and e-mails were also difficult to access at speed on the phones that had been issued.

100 The Committee in its scrutiny review of ICT services and in considering several updates, following that review, has always emphasised the importance of ICT equipment being procured centrally through ICT to ensure that the equipment purchased is both necessary and appropriate and to make the most of discounts available to a bulk purchaser. The Joint Director of ICT advised the Committee that the procurement policy could accommodate the requirements of adult social care staff that had been highlighted

Recommendations

(h) That the implementation of the policy prepared by the Joint Emergency Planning Unit to ensure business continuity planning is embedded should be monitored to ensure appropriate arrangements are put in place, and it should also be ensured that the work of the Severe Weather Group to updated emergency plans relating to weather is completed before Winter 2010.

(i) That the Winter Service Plan should provide that salt stocks at the start of the winter season should be no less than 6,500 tonnes.

(j) That the gritting of school bus routes and accesses to schools would repay investigation as part of the review of the Winter Service Plan given the community impact of school closures.

(k) That noting the extent of what footway treatment can be delivered is to be reviewed as part of the annual review of the Winter Service Plan, the Committee requests that this will include consideration of pavement clearing machinery in addition to gritting and the prioritisation of footways for gritting.

(l) That the proposed Winter Service Plan for 2010/11 should be the subject of Pre-decision scrutiny by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the report to the Committee setting out the draft plan, including information on how prioritisation of routes has been arrived at, options considered and the costs of those options, mindful of the Committee's view that there is scope to extend at least some priority routes to some schools and sheltered housing facilities and urban estate roads.

(m) That the initiative for Parish Councils to organise their own gritting operations on minor roads be supported and encouraged.

(n) That consideration be given to extending and strengthening the arrangements to use contractors and farmers to assist with snow clearance in isolated areas during severe winter weather conditions.

(o) That action be taken to ensure that the acknowledged safety benefits of improvements to the drainage of the highway and maintenance of effective land drainage are realised.

(p) That any bureaucratic barriers regarding the treatment of Council owned car parks and interchanges such as the County bus station should be removed, with consideration also being given to how the Council can assist in the gritting arrangements for the city bus station.

(q) That consideration be given to formally inviting Partners to make a financial contribution to gritting of hospital entrances and the frontages of key emergency service premises and that the gritting of pavements or other means of clearing snow and ice from pavements and possible redirection of funding for this purpose also merits further investigation and consideration.

(r) That given the considerable pressures that disruption placed on parents and employers there should be an even greater emphasis placed on schools to try to open, perhaps with clear reasons for closure having to be given, and that further consideration needs to be given to how the Council can assist in facilitating schools to be kept open and to encourage greater local resilience.

(s) That given the apparent remaining uncertainty over the potential for there to be criticism from Ofsted if schools open but there is limited attendance because of the weather, it is recommended that further guidance is issued clarifying this matter.

(t) That guidance be issued to schools on what practical steps they could take to stay open or for more help to be provided to them to enable them to do so including information on the most efficient way to keep playgrounds safe and usable.

(u) That consideration be given to how the decision to close schools can be co-ordinated with, or better informed by, the highway service.

(v) That consideration be given to methods of ensuring that household waste sites remain operational.

Commissioner of Services

101 In the context of adult social care the Committee was informed of many examples of service providers going beyond the call of duty to provide services, with staff walking long distances, and of providers offering additional capacity.

102 However, some providers had not made visits as planned and had not been prompt in informing the Council's Adult Social Care Provider Services of their inability to do so. This meant the Service had been unable to see if other providers had the capacity to make good this shortfall in care.

103 The Committee considers it particularly concerning that care for the vulnerable was jeopardised in this way. Contracts currently contain no

104 Linked to this point it was suggested that Integrated Commissioning and Provider Services should ensure that providers themselves have their own business continuity plans in place.

105 The Adult Social Care Provider Service also noted that situation reports from Integrated Commissioning to social work teams detailing contract compliance from care providers and available capacity would be helpful for future pressure times.

106 Although the provision of the highways service was dealt with in the previous section it is important to note that this service is delivered through the contract with Amey. The Committee is highly complimentary of the way the contract with Amey operated in the testing conditions that were experienced.

Recommendations

(w) That contracts with providers should be reviewed and if necessary revised to require providers to ensure they communicate any inability on their part to deliver the contracted service so that alternative arrangements can be made.

(x) That providers be required to confirm that they have business continuity plans in place to deal with winter weather and arrangements for reviewing and updating those plans regularly.

Employer

107 It is clear that across the Council and NHS Herefordshire staff showed considerable commitment during the winter problems and there were examples of redeployment arrangements being in place and cover working well.

108 The Children and Young People's Directorate, for example, commented on the successful cover arrangements put in place to deliver important transport co-ordination and safeguarding and vulnerable children services.

109 NHS Provider Services also commented on arrangements made to ensure patients were visited at home and community hospitals were adequately staffed during the adverse weather, with staff being shared with Hereford Hospital to ensure cover was in place.

110 However, the Committee was also informed that there were instances of staff being underutilised as they could not be transported to areas requiring assistance.

111 The Head of Communications commented in his submission on the pressures on his team and that, although the team always ensured that news updates were placed on the website, the provision of more resources would have

112 The ICT response noted that although web staff are/were available out-of-hours to enable updates 24 hours if necessary and appropriate this is only an informal goodwill service.

113 The Head of Communication has commented that the crucial time for providing information to residents and staff is from 6am to 9am and that can only be provided from council facilities (as broadband is not effective enough for web updates to be done outside of the council's network). To improve the provision of information would require customer service staff and the web team in the office during the early hours as well as the Communication Unit.

114 The JEPU response noted that, “without the willingness of volunteer staff from within the Council and PCT, many critical services within the County would have been disrupted. Yet, there is not a HR policy for those partner employees wishing to volunteer to respond during an emergency/incident. Confusion exists on issues such as budget reimbursement, time off in lieu and pay. “

115 NHSH Provider Services commented in its response on the need for the adverse weather policy and staff handbook to be updated to reflect the co-ordinated decisions that were made across Health and Social Care about what leave should be taken during adverse weather condition.

116 It also stated that the Provider Services staff redeployment plan worked well – however it was labour intensive requiring regular updating and NHS Herefordshire is looking forward to the implementation of the new redeployment software that has been developed. The Committee raises the question as to whether this software could be of benefit across Herefordshire Public Services

117 These responses taken as a whole suggest there is a need for clear guidance to be issued to both managers and employees about their responsibilities in bad weather and for a more flexible, robust approach to redeployment to be implemented.

118 There was also a clear consensus that action should be taken to provide more mobile working opportunities and/or more local access points for workers to work closer to home. This should be part of the overall approach to more flexible working.

119 In terms of specific redeployments the Committee notes that the current waste collection contract makes provision for resources to be re-deployed to support other council operations when waste collection cannot go ahead. The mechanisms by with this could be done effectively were not established in time for this last winter and as a consequence the potential of this arrangement was not realised. It has noted that the HNM is to establish clear arrangements to enable the effective deployment of these resources.

120 A suggestion was also made that other Council staff unable to reach work could undertake snow clearance. The Committee suggests that this possibility be considered as part of the overall consideration of redeployment.

121 The issue of teacher redeployment to the school nearest to their home was also raised by a number of respondents and has been dealt with earlier in this report.

Recommendations

(y) That clear guidance be issued to managers and employees about their responsibilities in bad weather and a more robust approach to redeployment be implemented supported by an appropriate policy document.

(z) That action should be taken to increase the provision of mobile working opportunities and/or more local access points for workers to work closer to home.

Partners

122 The Council has a key role to work with partners across the County in the planning for emergencies and when those plans are invoked.

123 The Council has recently developed an initiative in association with Herefordshire Association of Local Councils to develop Community Emergency Plans. The Community Emergency Plan is intended as a vehicle for preparing the community to initially respond and remain resilient should statutory Emergency Responders such as the Police and Fire & Rescue be unable to immediately attend. Town and Parish Council have been invited to nominate Emergency Co-ordinators as part of the process.

124 The Committee was informed that there had been a limited take up to date. It was hoped that as work with volunteers got underway others would then join in.

125 Members recognised that there have been a number of demands made of Town and Parish Councils recently. Given the importance attached to this initiative, Members were concerned that the Emergency Co-ordinator Scheme may not prove as robust as hoped. It is recommended that take up should be monitored and, if insufficient, alternative action considered.

126 It is also noted for example that the HNM has identified the emergency plans with Parish Councils as potentially a good channel for effective communication between the community and the service.

Cross – Boundary Highways Issue

127 The Committee has noted the HNM's comments about mid season difficulties experienced with the cross boundary gritting arrangements with Shropshire, and some differences in the frequency of treatment cross boundaries, in particular the boundary with Worcestershire.

128 These are clearly important issues. The HNM notes that self treatment of all gritting routes will lead to some roads that straddle the county boundary being only part treated or, treated to a variable standard along its length, or have gaps in treatment. All of these can present a hazard to the travelling public. Similarly a road may have two gritters follow each other along it, each treating a different section of road, this would be seen by any reasonable observer as a nonsense.

129 The Committee notes the HNM plan to re-establish sensible cross boundary arrangements and the intention to ensure that appropriate standards are being applied to Herefordshire's roads, when treated by neighbouring authorities.

Highways Agency

130 The Committee would wish to highlight the HNM's comments on the difference between the Council's gritting approach and that of the Highways Agency. Whilst Amey also treat the trunk roads in Herefordshire alongside the county roads, they do so as agents for the Highways Agency and in accordance with their regimes. The HA's treatment regime results in a typically higher than necessary frequency of treatment, which also takes place at a higher spread rate. In addition to this their regime is less responsive to changes in conditions locally with action being 'called' on a more regional basis. As a consequence the draw on the salt supplies held in the county (which are shared) is disproportionably higher for the Trunk Roads. If the HA were to allow their Agents to adopt a treatment regime that mirroring the Council's approach to its priority routes this could result in a service that is more responsive to local needs and that utilises less salt to achieve the same aim, thereby promoting resilience.

The volunteer 4X4 service

131 A number of services commented on the importance of the 4x4 response. NHS Herefordshire provider services stated: "The 4 x 4 response service was essential to maintaining adequate staffing levels in the community and In-patient facilities and without them it would have been a much more challenging environment for staff and patients in Herefordshire."

132 The Herefordshire 4x4 Response Group is a registered member of the National 4x4 Response Network. There are currently 26 volunteer groups around the UK that are involved in helping the country's emergency services and local community. The Herefordshire Volunteer 4x4 Group offer assistance to Emergency Services, Herefordshire Council and the residents of the County by providing all-terrain vehicles and advanced off road driving capabilities across uneven terrain, flooded roads and to other areas inaccessible to most vehicles. The Response Group voluntarily provided support 24 hours a day. Similarly, St John Ambulance provided a limited 4x4 capability when available, alongside Primecare (Out of Hours), whose vehicles and drivers were made available inside core working hours, and Patient First. The British Red Cross provided additional patient transport at weekends, allowing the HHT to discharge or transfer patients, therefore make hospital beds available.

133 Vehicle support was co-ordinated through the JEPU allowing these County Voluntary Emergency Committee (CVEC) organisations and Primecare to

provide transportation of essential staff for the County's Community Hospitals, HHT, District Nurses and Mental Health.

134 It is noted that JEPU considered that some journeys undertaken were not justified when taking in to account factors such as priority, location, distance, road conditions and access to alternative transport. Moreover, some staff took it for granted that this limited capability would be made available and did not actively pursue self help.

135 The Committee would wish to highlight JEPU's comments in its submission to the review on what improvements could be made, in particular noting that there is no dedicated 4x4 plan that allows future operations to be organised in line with the lessons identified and best practice. JEPU's view was that there was a need to improve the details within the Severe Weather Plans.

136 The JEPU also considered that Highways should include the 4x4 Volunteer Group on the distribution list for road conditions. This information would allow the response group to plan their routes. The Group also have real-time experience of roads which could be used in the updates.

137 It is also noted that the Police in their response stated that the Police did not have a sufficient number of 4x4 vehicles to respond but were able to hire enough 4x4 vehicles from private companies in the County to meet demand. A second issue then was ensuring there were were sufficient staff trained to drive them. Arrangements were made to provide training at Hereford.

Recommendations

(a1) That, given concern that the Emergency Co-ordinator Scheme may not prove as robust as hoped, take up should be monitored and, if insufficient, alternative action considered.

(b1) That formal negotiations take place with the Highways Agency with a view to bringing their treatment regime within the County into line with that of the Council.

(c1) That the Joint Emergency Planning Unit ensure that appropriate provision is made within Severe Weather Plans for 4x4 vehicle usage.

(d1) That West Mercia Police be asked to review the resilience of its arrangements to secure an adequate supply of 4x4 vehicles and the trained staff to drive them.