



**FINAL REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW  
PANEL ON WINTER MAINTENANCE**



**SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 1 SEPTEMBER 2010**

**DRAFT FINAL REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL ON  
WINTER MAINTENANCE**

**REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL**

**Introduction**

1. This report sets out the conclusions and recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Review Panel's detailed consideration of the County Council's Winter Maintenance Service.

**Scope of the Review**

2. The Scrutiny Commission, in light of public concerns appointed a Scrutiny Review Panel on 26 April 2010 to investigate how the County Council and other agencies had responded to the prolonged period of severe weather in the winter of 2009/10, with a view to examining how this could be improved and how the Council and other key partners could be better prepared for severe winter weather in future. The main objectives of the review were:
  - (a) To understand the impact of the severe winter weather during 2009/10 on the Winter Maintenance Service, how highways are kept safe during periods of severe winter weather and what action is taken to enable access for the public to their employment, essential services and local amenities, including the use of salt bins; and
  - (b) To consider the information available to members of the public and partner organisations during periods of severe winter weather.

**Membership of the Panel**

3. The following members were appointed to serve on the Panel:



Mrs R. Camamile



Mr S J Galton  
(Chairman)



Dr S Hill



Mr K W P Lynch



Mrs R Page



Mrs P Posnett

Mr R J Shepherd

**Conduct of the Review**

- 4. The Panel met on five occasions between 8 June 2010 and 18 August 2010. During the course of the review the Panel:
  - (i) Received detailed information on the history and current operation of the County Council’s Winter Maintenance Service and the legislative framework from which this is derived;
  - (ii) Met with representatives from district and borough councils together with representatives from the Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Local Councils to learn their views on the performance of the County Council’s Winter Maintenance Service during the winter of 2009/10 and areas where this could be improved;
  - (iii) Met with representatives from health bodies, the police, the NFU, the Local Resilience Forum and fire authority together with school governors and BBC Radio Leicester to learn their views on the performance of the County Council’s Winter Maintenance Service during the winter of 2009/10 and areas whether this might be improved.
- 5. The Panel is thankful to the following witnesses for providing the above listed evidence:

The district / borough councils

- Mike Brymer - Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council
- Matt Bills - Harborough District Council
- David Pendle - Melton Borough Council
- Nick Ainsworth-Smith - Oadby and Wigston Borough Council
- Keith Fairbrother - North-West Leicestershire District Council

Charnwood Borough Council who made written representations  
Blaby District Council who made written representations

Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Local Councils

Cllr. John Machin  
Cllr Mike Fryer

The National Farmers Union - Who provided written representations.

Health Bodies

Julian Auckland-Lewis - University Hospitals Leicester NHS Trust  
Peter Mason - East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust  
Lorraine Austen - NHS

The Police, Fire and Rescue Service and the Local Resilience Forum

Sgt. Darren Burton - Leicestershire Constabulary  
Perry Mason - Leicestershire Fire and Rescue  
Adam McKay - Local Resilience Forum

School Govenors

Jean Lewis - School Governor  
Sylvia Bosworth - School Governor

BBC Radio Leicester

Justin Bones - BBC Radio Leicester  
Stephen Butt - BBC Radio Leicester

6. The Panel was supported in its review by the following persons and is thankful to them for their contributions to the review:

Martin Broomhead	Group Manager, Environment and Transport Department
Mark Stevens	Assistant Director of Environment and Transport
Katie Green	Media Officer
Rachael Stone	Customer Service Manager
Joanne Twomey	Committee Officer
Sam Weston	Committee Officer

**Context of the Review**

7. In 2008/9 the UK experienced a prolonged spell of harsh cold weather with ice and snow conditions considered to be the worst since 1991. The following winter of 2009/10 proved to be even worse and was considered to be the most severe many areas of the country had seen in nearly 30 years. The levels of snow fall and ice were much higher than previously experienced and persisted across most of the country much longer than expected (from December 2009 to March 2010).

8. These two winters followed a relatively stable period of milder winters and so tested the resources of all local authorities to manage an increased period of winter maintenance service provision. Local authorities also needed to purchase additional supplies of salt at a time when the demand for salt outstripped supply and many local authorities were at risk of running out.
9. Such prolonged and persistent bad weather also impacted on the local economy and the social framework of the community by limiting safe access to places of employment, essential facilities and vital public services.
10. Although the winters experienced prior to 2008/9 had been moderate and the UK is not often susceptible to such extreme weather, there is concern that climate change could increase the possibility of such severe winter weather conditions being experienced more frequently in future.
11. An internal review of the County Council's Winter Maintenance Service had been carried out in summer 2009, but, due to the impact such bad weather had on County Council resources and on the public and local economy, in line with the County Council's commitment to continually improve the services it provides to the community, it was considered important that a broader review involving key partners be carried out to assess what further lessons could be learnt to improve its resilience to extreme weather, even if this proved relatively uncommon.
12. In the current economic climate there are already significant pressures on County Council budgets and resources and this inevitably impacts upon the capacity for the Winter Maintenance Service to be increased. With this in mind, the focus of the review was not to look at particular routes and whether or not these should be added and thus expand the County Council's precautionary salting network but rather to look at the County Council's policy criteria, general practices for dealing with winter weather and potential improvements that could be made through partnership working to make more efficient use of existing resources.
13. The difficulties experienced during the winter of 2009/10 were experienced country wide and as a result, the Local Government Association carried out a UK wide review which was published in July 2010 titled 'Weathering the Storm II'.<sup>1</sup> An independent review of Winter Resilience in England was also announced on 30 March 2010 by the then Secretary of State for Transport and its interim report titled 'The Resilience of England's Transport Systems in Winter' was also published in July 2010.<sup>2</sup> Both reports contain recommendations which the Panel considered as part of this review and which are reflected in its own recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/12588760>

<sup>2</sup> <http://transportwinterresilience.independent.gov.uk/>

## **Highway Authorities' Statutory Responsibilities**

14. The Highways Act 1980 provides that all local highway authorities have a duty to maintain those highways within their County which are maintainable at public expense and to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage on such roads is not endangered by snow or ice. They are also obliged to remove snow from the public highway if it is causing an obstruction.
15. A local highway authority (such as Leicestershire County Council) is not responsible for motorways and trunk roads; those are the responsibility of the Highways Agency.
16. The Panel noted that, as a result of case law, it is accepted by the Department for Transport that the above statutory obligations do not mean that a highway authority is expected to guarantee, at any given time, the highway will be free of ice or snow, even following treatment.
17. All highway authorities are required to develop their own policies and operational practices and to publish a winter maintenance plan. Again, case law has confirmed that, provided a highway authority has prepared a winter maintenance plan which outlines what they intend to do in times of bad weather and that this plan is followed appropriately, a highway authority will be regarded as complying with its statutory duties.

## **Findings of the Panel**

18. The Panel's report is broadly divided into the following five sections with its recommendations included therein:
  - Leicestershire County Council's Winter Maintenance Plan
  - Operational Management
  - The Supply of Salt
  - Partnership Working and Improved Communication with Key Stakeholders
  - Publicity and Communication with the Public.

## **Leicestershire County Council's Winter Maintenance Plan**

19. The County Council's Winter Maintenance Plan forms part of its overall Highway Maintenance Policy and Strategy.<sup>3</sup> It is in line with the Code of Practice for Highway Maintenance Management "Well Maintained Highways" published by the UK Roads Liaison Group,<sup>4</sup> and also reflects its statutory responsibilities as the local highway authority.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.leics.gov.uk/highway\\_maintenance\\_policy\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.leics.gov.uk/highway_maintenance_policy_strategy.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ukroadsliasongroup.org/pdfs/p03\\_well\\_maintained\\_highways.pdf](http://www.ukroadsliasongroup.org/pdfs/p03_well_maintained_highways.pdf)

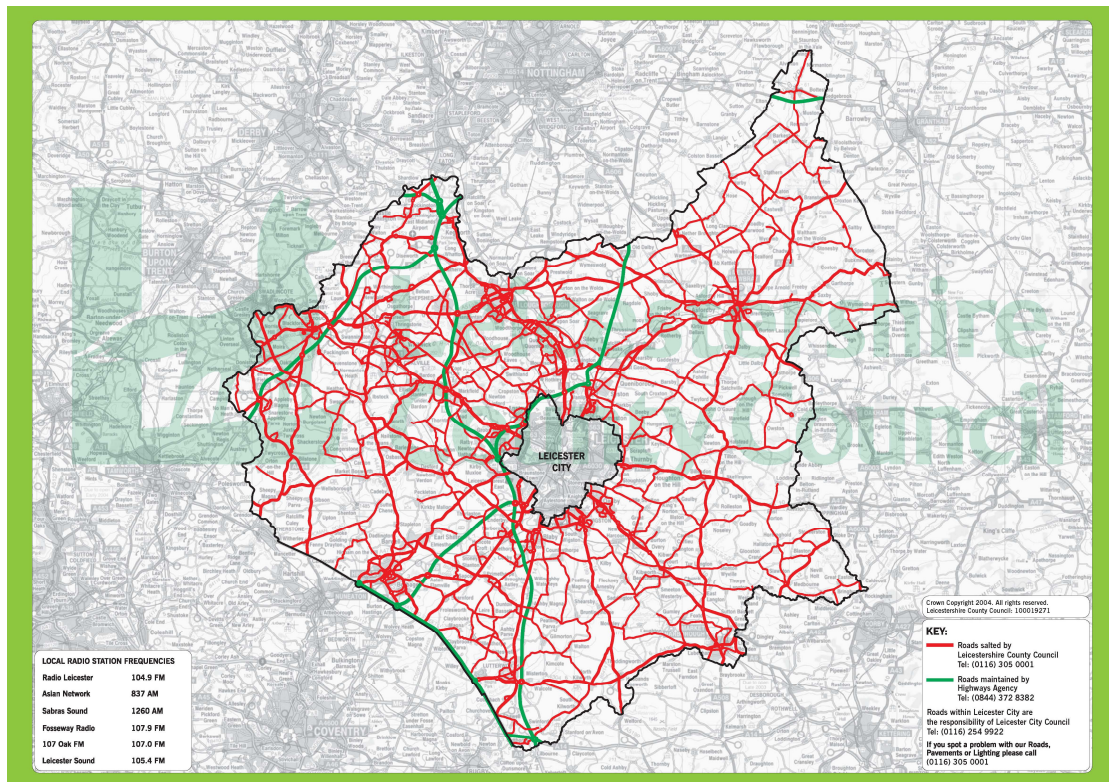
## Treatment of the Carriageway

20. Each winter when weather conditions require, the County Council operates a system of precautionary salting of certain roads throughout the County. The roads treated are identified following set criteria and these are reviewed annually taking into account any complaints or comments received in the previous winter season. How each road is classified and therefore treated is defined within the County Council's policy as follows:

<b><u>Priority</u></b>	<b><u>Classification</u></b>	<b><u>Treatment</u></b>
Priority 1	Main Distributor roads, commuter routes (rural roads carrying more than 2,000 vehicles per day) and major bus routes (in urban areas roads with 8 or more service buses per hour and in rural areas 2 or more service buses per hour).	Precautionary salting of these routes will be undertaken as a direct result of the weather information provided and as defined in the Winter Service Plan.
Priority 2	Secondary Distributor and Locally Important roads in the carriageway hierarchy and at least one route in to all villages as far as is reasonably practicable.	
Priority 3	Less important local, village and estate roads.	These routes will not normally receive any precautionary salting and will only be salted in periods of prolonged adverse weather (as defined in the Winter Service Operational Plan) and on the condition that priority 1 and 2 routes have been completed.
Priority 4	All other adopted metalled roads not covered by Priority 1-3 above. These are very minor, lightly trafficked, local, village and estate roads including cul-de-sacs.	

21. Those roads assessed as Priority 1 and 2 roads all form part of the County Council's precautionary salting network and they consist of all A roads, some B and C class roads, commuter and major bus routes and, as far as is reasonably practicable, one route into all villages. These routes are shown on the map below:





Detailed maps of particular areas have also been produced and these can be found by accessing the link below:

[http://www.leics.gov.uk/winter\\_salting\\_leaflet-2.pdf](http://www.leics.gov.uk/winter_salting_leaflet-2.pdf)

22. The extent of the total road network for which Leicestershire County Council is responsible is around 4,000km (2,500 miles). Approximately 45% of this (i.e. 1,800km / 1,100 miles) forms part of the precautionary salting network which is significantly more than many other local authorities across the country. Derbyshire County Council is the only authority which grits more of its roads (47%) and this is most likely to be due to the topography of that area. The table below outlines the extent of the road network salted by other authorities within the region:

Authority	% of Network Salted during 2009/10 winter period
Derbyshire	47
Leicestershire County Council	45
Nottinghamshire	39
Warwickshire	46
Worcestershire	43
Northamptonshire	43
Cambridgeshire	40
Cheshire East	40
Lincolnshire	35
Leicester City	33

23. Only during prolonged periods of sub-zero conditions will additional routes be salted (e.g. Priority 3 and 4 roads) but this is subject to the availability of resources and provided that such treatment does not adversely affect the treatment of the priority routes.

24. The winter service provided by Leicestershire County Council during the winter of 2008/9 was commended by the Council and recognised by the award of the “You’re a Star” Teamwork award in early 2009. Areas for improvement were, however, highlighted at that time and dealt with as part of the



David Parsons CBE, Leader, thanks the winter operatives

internal review carried out in summer 2009, which culminated in a revised Winter Maintenance Policy approved by the Cabinet in September 2009.<sup>5</sup>

25. As part of that review, Priority 1 and 2 precautionary salting routes were re-assessed, taking into account the very large number of requests received during that winter for extra salting. Minor adjustments were implemented which led to a slight increase in the precautionary salting network.
26. The result of this review and the forward planning carried out at that time meant that the County Council had already put robust plans in place in preparation for the 2009/10 winter period and the Panel is pleased to note that witnesses who attended the review commended the performance of the County Council during that winter as ‘excellent’.
27. Concerns were, however, raised about the gritting of town bus routes. Unfortunately, several of these had been disrupted because sections had not been included in the precautionary salting schedule. The impact of this was that many passengers, particularly the elderly, were deprived of a public transport service for several days. The Panel notes that bus routes change regularly and the precautionary network is adapted to reflect this where possible, although the routes are still assessed based on the criteria set out above and not all of them are therefore treated as a matter of course.
28. The Panel was keen to assess whether any improvements could be made specifically to help school transport providers and considered whether or not, for safety reasons, it would be practicable to require them to use those routes which formed part of the precautionary salting network. However, it was acknowledged that, in practice, this could prove to be counterproductive, particularly as many schools are not located on a priority road forming part of the precautionary network.

<sup>5</sup> <http://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=2687&Ver=4&J=4>

The County Council provides a copy of the precautionary salting network to all school transport providers prior to each winter season along with further general guidance on how and where to check on school closures and the preparation of their vehicles. The Panel is satisfied with the information circulated and accept that this allows the providers to use their own professional judgement and to adapt their route taking this and day to day weather conditions into account.

- (a) The Panel is pleased to note the level of service provided by the County Council in relation to the treatment of highways and that this compares favourably to the service provided by other local authorities.**
  
- (b) The Panel considers that, although the existing arrangements for prioritisation and treatment of routes for winter maintenance purposes should continue as at present, priority 3 routes in County Towns should be reviewed further by officers to ensure, so far as possible, that local bus service routes are adequately gritted.**

#### Treatment of Footways

- 29. The County Council's precautionary salting network does not extend to footways and these are only treated when ice or snow is lying on the footway and resources allow. When treatment is provided priority is given to main shopping areas, footways adjacent to heavily trafficked roads, outside hospitals, schools, health clinics, elderly persons' dwellings, homes for the blind and other similar locations where there is a heavy or above average use by pedestrians.
  
- 30. There has been public concern over the condition of footways in the recent severe winters and there is clearly a gap between public expectations and the County Council's resources in relation to this issue.
  
- 31. The Panel notes from the independent interim report, 'The Resilience of England's Transport Systems in Winter', that very few local authorities prioritise the treatment of, or the clearance of, footways and that priority is always given to keeping the designated road network open and safeguarding access, for example, to hospitals and other emergency services.
  
- 32. The Panel feels, however, that it is the County Council's responsibility to keep the public informed as to why it is not able to treat all roads and footways, and to encourage greater mobilisation of community resources and self help, particularly in keeping footways clear. The Panel deals with improving communication with the public on these issues in more detail below under 'Publicity and Communication with the Public'.

33. The Panel acknowledge that a significant barrier to self-help is, however, the fear of litigation should an injury or accident occur after an individual or organisation has cleared snow and ice from a public footpath. Concerns about the legal implications for those volunteering and assisting in winter maintenance work was a recurring theme raised by several witnesses throughout the review.
34. There is confusion amongst the public about the steps they, as individuals can take to help themselves and others in tackling snow and ice and the Panel is concerned that the lack of clear information and guidance on individual legal responsibility has restricted the work of volunteers, such as farmers and snow wardens, along with the public and other organisations, who understandably have been reluctant to clear footpaths and to carry out their own winter maintenance work for fear of litigation.
35. The Independent Review commissioned by the Department for Transport has, in its interim report concluded that, in England, “the bar to proving a claim for negligence is quite high, and it is unlikely (though not impossible) that an individual would be sued under such circumstances”. However, it has further concluded that “there is an opportunity for government to publish simple national guidelines for those who want to clear their frontages, which if observed would provide a defence in the event of litigation and that these should be made available by local authorities to householders.” It commends the action taken by some local authorities who were proactive in providing such guidance last winter and recommends that the Department for Transport develop and publish as a matter of urgency a simple code of good practice for members of the public and for business owners.
36. Arising from the Panel’s meeting with school governors specific concern was expressed about the lack of treatment of footways outside schools as this causes difficulties for the number of children and parents who walk to school, which increases in times of bad weather. The Panel considered how schools could be supported and encouraged to utilise their own caretakers to treat such areas along with their own play and parking areas. Prior to the winter of 2009/10 the Panel noted that the County Council had offered all schools the opportunity to purchase salt bins for a set fee which included four re-fills of salt/grit during the winter season. Unfortunately, this offer was only taken up by a small number of schools and witnesses who attended the review did not appear to be aware of this offer.

- (c) In light of the interim report published by the Department for Transport the Panel strongly recommends that, subject to legal guidance, advice is prepared by the Council to issue to private householders and commercial organisations, for example shop keepers, for the clearance of snow and ice from public footpaths.**
- (d) The Panel recommends that the Council’s offer to schools to provide grit bins and filling services for a set fee be reissued in**



**advance of the winter months to ensure that they are better equipped to deal with on-site snow clearance if they so wish.**

- (e) In addition, the Panel considers that those schools undertaking their own winter maintenance work on their own land may benefit from guidance from the County Council on the best methods for clearing snow and the efficient spreading of salt/grit.**

### Snow Clearance

37.



Snow clearance is carried out by the County Council to either prevent snow from accumulating or to clear accumulations when snowfall is heavy. Resources are again concentrated initially on strategic routes (priority 1 and 2 roads), with routes of lesser importance being cleared subsequently (priority 3 roads). Priority 4 roads and footpaths will be cleared when resources are available. The County Council has a target to open all major routes within 24 hours of the end of heavy snowfall.

38. The work carried out is supported by over 50 farmers who are provided with snow ploughs for their own four wheel drive tractors. These farmers are located around the County and plough snow from routes agreed on a day to day basis with the County Council. To support their role the County Council makes specific contact arrangements which are available 24/7.
39. Arrangements, including payment rates, with the farmers are renewed annually. The farmers themselves are, however, required to provide their own insurance specific to this activity.
40. The Panel notes the general willingness of the NFU to assist the County Council where possible with winter maintenance work. However, it also takes on board their concerns and notes the importance of ensuring that good communication links exist so that local farmers receive without delay proper authorisation from the County Council to plough snow when this is necessary. Local farmers who carry out snow clearance work without proper authorisation do so at their own risk and so inevitably, many are reluctant to commence work until clear instructions have been received.
41. The Panel considers that farmers are also in the advantageous position to provide the County Council with much needed information on local weather and traffic conditions. Retaining good communication links is also therefore important to ensure this additional assistance is fully utilised.

- (f) The Panel is impressed with the level of support provided by many local farmers and acknowledges the important role they play in assisting the County Council in providing a quality winter maintenance service particularly in rural areas. The Panel re-affirm the need for the County Council to retain good communication links with local farmers to ensure they are able to continue to provide this service effectively.**

### Salt Bins

42. Salt bins are provided by the County Council in village and urban areas provided that:
- (a) the route is not on a precautionary salting route;
  - (b) the location of the bin is first agreed with the County Council;
  - (c) the cost of the salt bin is met, in parish towns by the local parish council or in non-parished towns by the district council.

43. Once provided, it is the responsibility of the parish or district council to then meet any replacement costs in the event of vandalism, damage or general misuse.

44. Whilst the County Council will fill such salt bins once supplied, this will be at intervals that are deemed appropriate by the County Council and depending on resources.



45. From discussions with witnesses, the Panel is concerned to note the level of confusion amongst the public and some district councils and parish councils as to who is responsible for providing, installing and filling salt bins. Although the County Council has produced guidance on this which has been circulated, in particular to all highway forums, the information has still not reached all relevant partners.
46. The Panel also notes complaints raised by local residents, parish councils and snow wardens, that many salt bins are quickly emptied as some members of the public use the salt to clear their own drives rather than the public highway and footpaths as intended. The Panel supports requests received to allow for bins to be locked to ensure the salt is used more efficiently and in appropriate areas in future. However, the Panel recommends that the contact details of those authorised to open them are made available as this facility is provided for use by the general public on public roads and footpaths and the

Panel is keen to ensure that any arrangements to lock the bins do not unduly inhibit voluntary assistance which is important in rural areas.

47. Witnesses from the police and fire and rescue services confirmed that they had their own salt bins and salt stock. However, the Panel is concerned to learn that officers found it difficult to replenish their salt supplies via ESPO when this ran out. Blue light services are not given priority and salt is supplied on a first come first serve basis. The Panel makes a recommendation which deals with this issue below; recommendation (s) 'Partnership Working and Improved Communication with Key Stakeholders'.

- (g) Whilst the Panel is confident that the County Council's current policy for the supply and allocation of salt bins is clear, it recommends that arrangements be made to ensure this is better communicated to the public and district councils and parish councils.**
- (h) To respond to the concerns raised about members of the public using the salt in locally provided salt bins inappropriately, the Panel recommends that parish councils be advised that they can, if they wish, make arrangements to lock the bins provided that details of the person(s) authorised to open these, together with their contact details, are clearly displayed upon each salt bin.**

#### Parish Council Snow Wardens

48. The County Council's Winter Maintenance Policy enables it, in conjunction with local parish councils, to develop a network of snow wardens. The appointment of snow wardens is not based on the size and resources of the parish council or the area they represent but on the parish council's ability to show a need for such an appointment. Any request by a parish council will be considered by the County Council and, if this is agreed, such persons will be appointed at the cost of the County Council.
49. The functions of a snow warden during severe weather conditions are:
- (a) To provide information to the County Council on the local situation during the period of severe weather conditions;
  - (b) To consult with the County Council on local needs and determine jointly what local action to take, if necessary, to supplement the operations of the County Council;
  - (c) To organise that action utilising the local resources agreed with the County Council.
50. The appointment of snow wardens by Parish Councils has not been widely exercised which the Panel feels is unfortunate as they play a key role, similar to farmers, in providing additional winter maintenance

services and information on local weather conditions, especially in rural areas.

51. Witnesses during the review confirmed that each parish council operate differently and some are more active and have more resources than others. However, there seems to be a lack of knowledge about the County Council's Policy on this point and a misunderstanding that this is limited to larger parishes. The Panel feels therefore that this is an area where improvements could be made.

**(i) The Panel recommends the County Council promote and encourage greater use of volunteers via the Snow Warden scheme in order to ensure that localised areas of difficulty are dealt with more efficiently. The Panel also feels that better partnership working with parish councils generally could support localised winter maintenance services carried out by the County Council and further recommendations deal with this in more detail below.**

## **Operational Management**

### **Forecasting**

52. Effective forecasting facilities are vital in delivering a quality winter maintenance service. Once the network has been agreed by the County Council, it then determines whether or not it needs to carry out winter service operations based on predicted or actual adverse weather conditions. Contributing factors such as local topography, temperature, humidity, precipitation, wind speed and salinity all influence the actual conditions and likely duration of bad weather and therefore the treatment required.
53. The County Council operates weather stations throughout the County with ice-prediction detectors embedded in the highway at each station. It also receives a tailored rolling 30 day and seasonal forecast from the Met Office Public Weather Service. In addition, during the winter of 2009/10, the County Council benefited from a consultancy arrangement with a weather forecast provider that operated a system which added live Leicestershire weather station and thermal mapping data to its weather data to produce an ice prediction.
54. As was experienced throughout the UK, despite such resources, forecasting was problematic and information proved to be unreliable on several occasions, making it difficult to prepare in advance what treatment of the road network was required. The experience of staff, in particular the night controllers, employed by the County Council, along with local farmers and snow wardens was therefore heavily relied upon.
55. The Panel notes that the County Council's current weather forecasting provider has withdrawn its services mid contract. Officers, under



delegated powers, are therefore reviewing alternative providers and will be making recommendations shortly as to who they have identified as the preferred weather forecasting provider for the coming winter.

- (j) Despite forecasting limitations, the Panel supports officers' plans to find an alternative weather forecast provider as such services play a critical role in informing and guiding operational decisions. The Panel is impressed and commends the role officers and key partners play to fill the gaps of the forecasting information available.**

### The Gritter Fleet

56. Lesley Pendleton CC with winners of the 'Name the Gritter' competition



The County Council currently operates a gritter fleet of 23 vehicles along with 54 snow ploughs which are fitted to the fleet of salting and construction vehicles. This is, however, an aging fleet and the Panel is pleased to note that proposals are being prepared for its replacement over the next

5 years. Whilst the approximate cost of a gritter is £90,000, the Panel acknowledges that this is very much a case of invest now to save later, as maintaining and repairing the older vehicles is becoming more costly and ineffective.

- (k) The Panel supports officers' plans to replace the gritter fleet and consider it important to ensure that resources are made available for this over the next 5 years, so that the County Council can continue to provide gritting services to a high standard and cost effectively in future.**

### Salt Barns

57. The County Council's salt stock is located in five depots around the County - Billesdon, Melton, Misterton (on the M1), Mountsorrel and Nailstone. The Panel considered whether or not an increase in the number of salt barns in localised areas would, over the long term, create savings for the service by reducing travel time for gritters, and discussed with district council witnesses whether or not they operate facilities which could be utilised by the County Council from time to time. The Panel feels that there may be scope to use district council facilities if these are found to be appropriate and have capacity as part of the proposals for better joint working dealt with in more detail below

in paragraphs 62 to 67. However, the capital investment required to increase the number of salt barns is substantial and the Panel feels that the incidence of particularly severe winters is not yet sufficient to justify such investment, particularly at a time when resources are already stretched.

### **The Supply of Salt**

58. One of the key concerns arising from the winters of 2008/9 and 2009/10 was the limited availability of salt. Despite many local authorities significantly increasing the amount of salt held in stocks, the duration and severity of these winters exceeded reasonable stock levels in many areas with some local authorities running out. As a result, the government created ‘Salt Cell’ which operated an emergency system of monitoring and allocating dwindling salt supplies to local authorities. The then Secretary of State also issued in January 2009 “strong guidance” to all highway authorities to drastically reduce their salt utilisation by 25%, later increased to 50%, in order to conserve supplies.
59. The UK relies on three main salt suppliers, the two largest being Salt Union and Cleveland Potash, who supply approximately 85 – 90% of the UK market. Unfortunately, recent severe winters have shown that these suppliers are not sufficiently resilient to respond to the sudden increase in demand and have not so far been able to increase their mining capacity to meet requirements.
60. Despite the national shortage, the Panel is pleased to note that Leicestershire County Council had been vigilant and increased its salt stocks to ensure that all five salt-barns were fully stocked in preparation for the winter season i.e. by 1 October 2009. Such preparations resulted in them providing mutual aid to Derbyshire County Council and East Midlands airport. The County Council has long recognised the need to work in partnership and such mutual aid played an important part in ensuring no area ran out of salt. However, caution was necessary due to the uncertainty of whether or not further salt supplies would be received. The Panel also recognises that this impacted upon the County Council’s ability to extend its winter maintenance service during that time.
61. The County Council treats roads with a salt and ABP additive (dry salt spreading) which has reduced the amount of salt it uses by 40%, thus far exceeding the original target set by Government to reduce salt usage by 25%. Despite this, however, recent weather conditions have meant that the amount of salt used and the number of salt runs carried out has increased. The tables below show a comparison between last winter and the previous four winters experienced in Leicestershire.

#### **Salt usage (in tonnes)**

	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10
Total salt usage	12,500	7,520	7,900	16,425	16,600

### Number of salting runs

	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10
Full season total	46	34	42	70	72

62. The County Council's current budget is based on 55 salting runs, which is above the actual number carried out between 2005 and 2008 but below that carried out in 2008/9 and 2009/10. During one run of the precautionary salting network, nearly 200 tonnes of salt is deposited on the highway at a spread rate of about 12g/m<sup>2</sup>. To maintain the current level of service already provided (i.e. to salt 45% of the road network) it is estimated that approximately 15,000 tonnes of salt will be required for the coming winter, compared with 12,000 tonnes ordered the previous year. As the cost of salt has increased from £30 per tonne to £38 per tonne, this will mean an overall increase in costs of approximately £105,000.
63. The County Council has already submitted its order to restock its salt supplies ready for the start of the 2010 winter season. However, due to the shortage of salt, it is not guaranteed that all of this will be received. The ability to order additional supplies from Europe, as was done the previous year, also looks unlikely due to the severe weather they similarly experienced and their own increase in demand for salt.

**(I) The Panel supports the County Council's aim to continue to provide the current level of winter maintenance service (i.e. by gritting 45% of the road network) despite being faced with increasing costs and demand for salt, and commends the prudent action already taken to order this in time for delivery by the start of the coming winter season.**

### Partnership Working and Improved Communication with Key Stakeholders

64. A key objective of the review was to consider how working in partnership could improve the winter maintenance service provided. The Panel considers that improvements could be made in the way the Authority works with neighbouring authorities and other key stakeholders to co-ordinate information on the treatment and condition of road networks across the County. To assess this the Panel received evidence from several key partners, including district and parish councils, the police and fire and rescue services, the NHS and schools. The Panel is pleased that all expressed a willingness to co-operate for the future and, where possible, to carry out winter maintenance work.

## District and borough councils

65. All borough and district councils confirmed that those district employees who are not able to carry out their normal duties (e.g. street cleaning and refuse services) because of bad weather can be re-deployed and made available to carry out winter maintenance work, such as clearing access ways to GP surgeries, day centres, elderly people's homes and other key public service areas.
66. At present, however, many have limited resources at their disposal to provide such assistance. Most have only a limited salt stock which is used to clear car parks, shopping and pedestrianised areas. This is not sufficient, particularly in times of severe weather as experienced in 2009/10, to carry out additional spreading elsewhere. The Panel notes that some district councils have facilities to store salt which may have extra capacity, and use of which could therefore be shared, enabling the County Council to store some salt in more localised areas. In respect of gritting equipment, some district councils have this but many do not. The Panel therefore looked at the availability of smaller gritting equipment as it acknowledged that it would be uneconomical to provide salt if the proper equipment to spread this sparingly and efficiently is not also available.

67. As part of any future joint working initiative with district councils, the supply of additional salt would need to be addressed and balanced with the overall cost and availability of salt and the County Council's statutory obligations which would always need to take priority. The provision of equipment to spread this efficiently would also need to be investigated.



The Panel acknowledges, however, that these issues have significant resource implications for the County and district councils which, at a time of budget constraints, would not necessarily be possible for the coming winter but should be considered for future winters.



68. From discussions with witnesses, the Panel notes that many district councils do not have their own winter maintenance policy setting out each of their local priorities. These policies will be important to support any future discussions for joint working and to ensure co-ordination of policies and plans and consistency in the way that road networks are treated and services are delivered across the County. It will also be important to ensure that these reflect local priority needs.

69. A recurring issue regarding faltering communication links arose during the review and irrespective of any proposal for joint working the Panel is concerned to see this improved. Communication between County and district council officers appears to be on an ad-hoc basis, as established links have been lost due to staff changes, so much so that during the winter of 2009/10, some district officers were inappropriately being referred through customer services rather than being able to speak to a fellow officer direct.
70. Some district councils are also not aware of changes made in 2009 to the County Council's Winter Maintenance Policy, particularly in relation to salt bins and the snow warden scheme. Although reports are taken by the County Council to each area's Highway Forum, the Panel notes that these are not always regularly attended by district officers and in some cases, district officers identified as the representative on a particular Highways Forum had left the authority and replacements not been identified.

- (m) Given the district councils' willingness to assist in supporting the Winter Maintenance Service, the Panel recommends that the County Council enter into a service level agreement with them in order to formalise arrangements and responsibilities for future winters.**
- (n) For the long term the Panel feels that such joint working would be enhanced if the issues relating to the supply of salt and the provision of equipment are also addressed. In light of the support received for more joint working in this area, as part of future discussions with district councils, the Panel recommends that these issues are revisited for consideration for future winters.**
- (o) The Panel believes that representatives from the County Council, district councils and parish councils should be identified and their details exchanged in order to improve communication links and ensure better joint working in future.**
- (p) The Panel also feels that officers in the Environment and Transport Department should, as part of their discussions, encourage district colleagues to produce their own winter maintenance policies, setting out their own local guidelines and priorities which can then, where possible, feed into any joint working arrangements.**
- (q) Better use should be made of Highways Forums as a vehicle for briefing district council officers on winter maintenance issues. The Panel hopes that arrangements for district council representation at these meetings can be formalised and dedicated officer contacts identified to support this and to ensure better joint working in future.**

## Parish Councils

71. Witnesses from the Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Local Councils confirmed that many parish councils would be willing to assist the County Council during times of bad weather, particularly in providing information about local weather conditions and areas of historical difficulty.
72. The Panel acknowledges that Parish Councils and Parish meetings enjoy important links with the local community which could be better utilised to get more information out to the public and to improve the County Council's localised winter maintenance service. They also have good knowledge of particular problem areas such as water run-offs from local fields which create ice hazards on rural roads.
73. The Panel feels that improving communication links with parish councils, providing them with information on the County Council's policy in relation to the provision of salt bins and the snow warden scheme and in relation to the precautionary salting network prior to each winter season will maximise the support they are able to provide to the Winter Maintenance Service, particularly in rural areas. In order to make use of their local knowledge the Panel also feel that, when sending this information, the County Council should ask them to feed back any local problem areas not covered by the treatment proposals so that these can be considered and included, in times of severe weather, if resources allow.

**(r) The Panel recommends that specific guidance be circulated to parish councils mapping out the areas of responsibility for each authority and that their views be sought on specific local areas of historical difficulty during the winter months.**

## Police and fire and rescue services

74. The Panel is pleased to note that excellent communication links are already established between the County Council and the police and fire and rescue services through the Local Resilience Forum.
75. Witnesses from both organisations confirmed to the Panel that the County Council responds well to any requests to salt particular areas of concern and to requests to salt station forecourts to improve emergency access to and from those stations on a main gritting route.
76. Whilst the Panel notes that each station had its own salt bin and salt stock it is concerned about the difficulties blue light services experienced last winter in replenishing these.

- (s) The Panel recommends that the offer proposed for schools, to provide salt bins and filling services for a set fee, be extended to police and fire authorities to support and assist them in carrying out snow clearance on their own forecourts and parking areas, negating their need to order supplies themselves via ESPO.**

The NHS

77. The Panel received evidence concerning the initiative adopted by NHS County Durham (PCT) who had contributed £1m to be spent by Durham County Council over a three year period on its winter maintenance service. Primarily this is aimed at reducing slips and falls during inclement weather but can also be utilised to reduce the impact of isolation among the elderly and vulnerable sectors of the community in times of bad weather. This is a new initiative and it is too early to assess whether or not this has been an overall success.
78. Witnesses confirmed to the Panel that, although detailed statistics are not available, injuries resulting from adverse weather conditions increased significantly last winter. The cost and resource implications of these to health bodies in Leicestershire have not been assessed and this is a gap in information which, if made available, could be useful in determining future service provision. This information would also be useful in an assessment of whether or not the initiative in Durham could be usefully replicated in Leicestershire.
79. The Panel notes that proposals are being developed for the joint commissioning of a range of social care and health services with NHS Leicestershire County & Rutland (LCR) which involve the pooling of resources and the integration of resource and management structures. The overall aim of this project is to create a single functional entity, made up of staff from the County Council and NHS LCR. A Joint Commissioning Board has been established to oversee and monitor these joint arrangements and the proposal for joint services and pooled resources. The Panel feels that, once these arrangements had been fully established, the Joint Commissioning Board would be the appropriate body to consider whether or not the initiative established by Durham County Council, would be appropriate for Leicestershire.

- (t) The Panel feels that, once the new commissioning arrangements have been established, efforts should be made via the newly established Joint Health Commissioning Board to investigate the cost to the NHS Leicestershire County & Rutland (LCR) (or its successor) of injuries arising from the bad weather experienced during the winter months, with a view to establishing the feasibility of a financial contribution from the NHS LCR (or its successor) toward the Council's winter maintenance budget.**

## **Publications and communication to the Public**

80. The Panel considered the information available to members of the public and partner organisations and feels that many businesses, service providers, transport operators and individuals recognise the Council's need to prioritise treatment of roads during severe winter weather but would like the Council to engage more with them, particularly on where gritting will take place, to ensure that they know what to expect and can therefore make appropriate arrangements.
81. The Panel recognise the need to provide clear information to the public and local partners on the levels of service they can expect in the event of severe winter weather, both in advance of the winter and during periods of exceptionally cold weather and considers that this is an area where real improvement could be made.

## **BBC Radio Leicester**

82. BBC Radio Leicester plays a crucial role in keeping the public informed in times of bad weather. It provides information about road closures and, in particular, about school closures.
83. Last winter, many schools tried to put information about whether or not they were open on their individual websites. However, due to the number of parents simultaneously trying to access this, many systems crashed. BBC Radio Leicester was therefore considered the main point of contact to ensure that parents were provided with this information as soon as possible.
84. This information was broadcast live on the radio and also supported by BBC Radio Leicester's website as can be seen via the link below:  
  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/leicester/hi/people\\_and\\_places/nature/news/id\\_8412000/8412329.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/leicester/hi/people_and_places/nature/news/id_8412000/8412329.stm)
85. Witnesses from BBC Radio Leicester confirmed that the number of hits on it's website rose by 400% last winter. In addition, it had recorded receiving in excess of 400 telephone calls in one day, from parents and head teachers who were trying to give or obtain information about school closures.
86. The Panel is impressed by the level of service provided by BBC Radio Leicester to the community, particularly during such difficult times. It is acknowledged that this has become a well established link to the public who often consider it to be the first point of call for such information.
87. The Panel notes that details of the routes gritted by the County Council as and when necessary throughout the day and night are not provided to BBC Radio Leicester and consider this to be a key area for improvement. Whilst the Panel is pleased to note the good relationship between the Council and the station generally, it acknowledged that better contact with key officers in the winter



maintenance team, in particular the night controller, would assist in providing up to date information to the public early. Better communication of work done overnight will be useful for those travelling to work and taking their children to school early the next morning.

- (u) The Panel commends the work of BBC Radio Leicester during the winter period and acknowledges the important role it plays in providing important information to the public. The Panel considers that the County Council should ensure its links with the station are maintained and, as far as possible, provide it with support, such as officers attending for interview, when requested. Specifically the Panel recommends that an officer of the Environment and Transport Department gives to staff at BBC Radio Leicester the presentation which had been given by Martin Broomhead to the Panel during the review, in order to provide them with background information on the County Council's Winter Maintenance Policy and the work being done.**
- (v) The Panel also feels that the Council's Communications team should consider how it can better provide BBC Radio Leicester with up to date information on school and road closures, particularly before 8am, together with up-to-date information about any winter maintenance work carried out the previous night.**
- (w) To support the information the station can provide the Panel considers that the station should be provided with the contact details of the night controller to be contacted (out of hours) at short notice for up to date information.**

#### County Council publications and Customer service team

88. Currently, 5,000 winter maintenance leaflets are provided and distributed across the County to the public and other key agencies (e.g. the Fire Authority, libraries, schools and school bus providers etc.). These contain details of the roads which will be salted by Leicestershire County Council and the Highways Agency. The leaflet is also made available on the County Council's website on the link below although this does not include the county wide plan as shown in paragraph 19 above:

[http://www.leics.gov.uk/winter\\_salting\\_leaflet-2.pdf](http://www.leics.gov.uk/winter_salting_leaflet-2.pdf).

89.



Leicestershire Matters is produced by the County Council every two months and distributed to every household in the County. It is also available on the County Council website via the link below:

[http://www.leics.gov.uk/leicestershire\\_matters](http://www.leics.gov.uk/leicestershire_matters).

This is a useful way to provide information to the public and the Panel felt that this could be better utilised to specifically provide information about the County Council's Winter Maintenance Policy.

90. A recurrent issue raised throughout the Review was that the information and assistance provided by the County Council's customer service team could be improved. These are often the public's first point of contact with the County Council and it is vital that they always adopt a customer friendly approach and allow each caller the opportunity to voice their concerns, irrespective of the difficult circumstances in which they sometimes operate.
91. The Panel acknowledges that customer service operators have a difficult task, regularly having to deal with difficult customer issues and expected to be knowledgeable about all County Council services and departments. To assist them in their work and to improve the service they are able to provide to the public it is important that they are provided with up to date information sufficient to allow them to direct calls appropriately.

- (x) **That arrangements be made to include the 'Winter Salting Routes' leaflet in a future edition of Leicestershire Matters and the feasibility of having a 'pull-out' centre spread dedicated to gritting issues be investigated as a means of improving public awareness of the winter maintenance work undertaken by the Council.**
- (y) **That an officer of the Environment and Transport Department give to all County Council customer service operators the presentation which had been given by Martin Broomhead to the Panel during the review in order to provide them with background information on the County Council's Winter Maintenance Policy and the work being done;**
- (z) **That each customer service operator be provided with an easy to follow 'fact file' containing all key information about the County Council's Winter Maintenance Policy, its gritting routes etc. and officers' and other key stakeholders' contact details.**

**(aa) That greater use be made of the 'Leicestershire Villages' website in order to disseminate 'Snow Warden' policy and other winter maintenance issues to parish councils and the public.**

### **Resources**

92. Provision already exists to replace vehicles on a rolling programme. The additional cost of salt (i.e. the £105,000 referred to in paragraph 58 above) is not included in the original budget for 2009/10 and will need to be met from underspendings elsewhere within the Environment and Transport Department.

### **Recommendations**

93. The Scrutiny Commission is recommended to support the overall findings of the Panel and refer the conclusions and recommendations (a) - (aa) to the Cabinet for its consideration.

**Mr. S Galton CC  
Chairman of the  
Panel**

### **Environmental Implications**

94. Severe winter weather conditions may rise as a result of climate change and this will have significant impacts on economic, social and environmental assets. This report sets out the necessary steps to support the delivery of a quality winter maintenance service to reduce the risks and impact of such weather conditions in future.

### **Equal Opportunities Implications**

95. Improvements to the Winter Maintenance Service will benefit all residents within the County but in particular those more vulnerable and less mobile citizens living and working in Leicestershire by ensuring better access to essential services.

### **Circulation under the Local Issues Alerts Procedure**

96. None.

### **Background Papers**

'Winter Maintenance: Review of Policy' Cabinet Report - 8 September 2009