

DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
IMPROVEMENT AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

17 November 2010

**Report of the Chairman of the Improvement and Scrutiny Management
Committee**

**IMPROVEMENT AND SCRUTINY REVIEW OF ADVERSE WINTER
WEATHER**

1.0 Introduction

The winter of 2009/10 was one of the coldest on record. The majority of the Country including Derbyshire witnessed extremely low temperatures and at the same time prolonged spells of icy and snowy conditions. Scrutiny was asked to review the County Council's response to the adverse weather conditions and also the response of its partners.

2.0 Conduct of the review

The Improvement and Scrutiny Management Committee comprising of Councillors G Wharmby, Mrs J A Twigg, Mrs G Farrington, P Murray, A Western, B C Lucas and S Flitter agreed to undertake the review.

During the course of the review the Working Group met with:

- Ian Shuttleworth - Chief Emergency Planning Officer
- Mike Ashworth – Deputy Director, Environmental Services Department
- Neil Hickman – Assistant Director, Highways Area Management, Environmental Services Department
- Chris Hartley – Assistant Director (Customer Services), Chief Executive's Office
- Councillor Mike Longden – Cabinet Member for Education
- Teresa Potter – Senior Human Resources Consultant, Children and Younger Adults Department
- Toni Compai – Director of Human Resources
- Nikki Tucker - Director of Planning and Performance and Alfonzo Tramontano, Chief Nurse, Chesterfield Royal Hospital
- Tim Broadley - Associate Director of Service Delivery and Lynn Walshaw – Head of Urgent Care and In-Patient Services, Derbyshire County Primary Care Trust
- Maggie Bishop – Environmental Policy Officer, Chief Executive's Office

3.0 Background

The period of adverse weather in December 2009 and January 2010 was particularly severe. Temperatures were regularly below freezing, often between minus 7 and minus 10 degrees. The result was widespread disruption to services including roads, schools, hospitals and business with associated costs running in to billions of pounds. The prolonged nature of the weather also led to severe local and national shortages of salt for treating the highways and pavements. This winter also had “Black Wednesday”, 13 January which was the worst single day the Environmental Services Department has ever experienced in terms of keeping the roads gritted and the network open.

Obviously, Departments have been reviewing their responses and making recommendations for change at the same time as Scrutiny has been undertaking this review. Some changes were required to be approved in time for them to be implemented by the coming winter and a report was presented to Cabinet on 14 September to approve some measures. The Working Group was consulted on this report and its comments were incorporated. Some of the points raised in the Cabinet are considered in more detail in this report.

4.0 Issues and Recommendations

4.1 Winter Gritting of roads

The duty to grit roads rests with the County Council under the provisions of the Highways Act 1980 as amended by the Railways Act 2003. The legislation provides a duty and responsibility to remove snow and ice where it is reasonably practical to do so.

The Council as part of its gritting policy undertakes to treat all A roads, the majority of the secondary network B roads plus bus routes where there are 9 or more services a day. In total, the Council treats around 50% of the road network in the County. It is obviously impractical to expect the Council to grit all the roads in the County. This gritting policy is published as a defense against legal action being taken against the Council where roads have not been gritted.

In a normal winter the County Council would expect to use around 18,000 tonnes of salt. Last winter however, they used over 35,000 tonnes. Costs would usually be £3.3m but last winter they rose to £5.5m, a 66% increase. There would normally be around 80 “call-outs” per winter. This year however, the figure was 159.

The weather was so bad and prolonged that salt suppliers nationally could not match demand. At some points during the bad weather, salt was being imported from abroad. To co-ordinate and control salt supplies the

Government established a national Salt Cell. The Department for Transport recommended that Councils should reduce the precautionary gritting network by 50% or reduce the amount of grit put down by 50% to conserve grit supplies. The County Council decided to reduce the volume of salt put down but not the network covered.

Despite the Council stockpiling 10,500 tonnes of salt at the start of winter, supplies came dangerously close to running out at one point. The Council had to rely on “mutual aid” supplies from other areas. It is pleasing to report that despite salt supplies being critically low at some points the Council always managed to grit its precautionary network, although on occasions it was not able to treat the secondary highway network. Some councils ran out of salt completely and were unable to even treat their precautionary network.

Part of the problem was that southern counties had not stockpiled sufficient salt at the outset of winter and they needed additional supplies which reduced the amount available to counties who had stockpiled. Nationally Salt Cell appeared to have worked well although the County Council probably did not benefit from the system as much as some councils.

The Council has 47 high tech gritting vehicles each fitted with satellite navigation equipment which enables the County Council to be able to prove where the vehicles have been operating. The gritters are based in 5 depots at Stonegravels, Willington, Sandiacre, Chapel-en-le-Frith and Ryder Point. The Working Group notes that the Changing the way Derbyshire Works programme may impact on the number of depots operated by the County Council. Any issues arising from proposals put forward will be considered alongside the review of the rationalisation of gritting routes.

Obviously following such a severe winter, the Environmental Services Department has been examining the impact of the weather on its gritting services. The Department has concluded that particularly given the financial constraints that it cannot sustain potential costs of £5.5m in future years. The gritting network needs to be reviewed to make savings and efficiencies. The Working Group concurs with this view. It is noted that Derbyshire County Council grits a higher percentage of the road network than any other County and the Audit Commission has previously commented on the size of the gritting network. The Department proposes to review the current gritting network and also the frequency when the gritting takes place. The Working Group has offered to assist with this review.

The Department has also looked at the levels of stockpiled salt held by the Council. It is proposed to increase start of year stores by some 10,000 tonnes including the provision of a strategic store at the Ryder Point Depot at Wirksworth, the current main winter maintenance depot. Some of the costs associated with additional storage would be at least partially offset by being able to purchase salt at a lower price per tonne.

The Working Group has already supported this proposal to store more salt. There was a concern however, about the practicalities of storing all the additional salt supplies in the same depot and the potential costs of transporting it out to other depots when needed.

Recommendation 1

- (a) The review supports the proposal to increase the initial salt stocks by 10,000 tonnes at the Ryder Point Depot.
- (b) The Working Group participate in the review of the gritting network and the frequency of gritting if requested to do so by the Strategic Director for Environmental Services.

4.2 Gritting of pavements

Just like the gritting of roads, the condition of pavements was a major issue during the adverse weather. As with roads the responsibility for clearing snow and ice rests with the Council. The Council must take all practical and reasonable steps to clear snow and ice from pavements. It is impossible however, for the Council to treat every mile of pavement in the County.

The County Council has entered in to contracts with Derbyshire Dales District Council and High Peak Borough Council for them to provide pavement gritting services in their areas on our behalf. There are no similar agreements with the other district and borough councils in the County.

The ability of the County Council to cover the gritting of pavements is constrained by limits on working hours, driving hours and the size of the workforce. During periods of adverse weather, District Councils may well have staff who are unable to perform their normal duties. The Council is currently engaged in discussions with High Peak Borough Council with a view to utilising staff such as grounds maintenance employees to extend the clearing of snow from pavements further. If the agreement with High Peak is successfully concluded it is proposed to look to extend this arrangement to other councils to provide a consistent service across the County.

The Working Group supports in principle the idea of utilising the services of district councils to assist with managing adverse weather including the gritting of pathways. However, it does consider that any agreements need to be consistent across the County. Where district councils are unable or unwilling to enter in to agreements, the County Council will need to consider making provision in order to provide a consistent level of service.

Recommendation 2

- (a) The review supports the County Council entering in to agreements with the district councils to provide services to grit the pathways.

(b) It is recommended that the Council should aim for a consistency of service across all districts. Where districts are unable or unwilling to assist the County Council should seek to provide the service.

4.3 Grit Bins

The Council owns around 1300 grit bins across the County with Parish Councils and other organisations owning about another 540. Usually the Council spends around £5k on grit bin filling. This winter however, expenditure was £20k.

County Council grit bins are filled by the Rapid Response Team and they tend to be situated at locations where snow and ice are known to be a problem. Parish Council grit bins filled as and when orders are received. Requests from Parish Councils to fill grit bins are either received in writing or via Call Derbyshire. When salt supplies are under pressure the County Council concentrates on filling its own bins first and filling Parish Council bins as and when salt stocks allow and time permits. The Environmental Services Department is currently in the process of undertaking an audit of grit bins in order to ascertain precise numbers, their ownership and location. This should make it easier for Call-Derbyshire staff to deal with calls and also lead to a more efficient refilling service.

Grit bins were a big issue in the adverse weather and it is clear from the numbers of calls received by Call Derbyshire, that the County Council was often being blamed by the public for grits bins being empty – even if they were Parish Council owned.

The Working Group, like the Environmental Services Department itself, has concluded that there is a communications issue in respect of grit bins. The Department is proposing that all grit bins should be clearly marked as being County Council owned or Parish Council owned. It is also proposed that the bin should have contact details in order that the public can advise owners when their grit bins need filling.

The Working Group supports the idea of marking bins to denote their ownership. It does however, have reservations about marking bins with the contact details of Parish Councils. It is considered that there is a high turnover of both Parish Council Clerks and Members which will mean keeping the contact information on the bins up to date will be an issue in the long-term. Over time, the Working Group believes the contact information on the grit bins will become out of date. In the event of the contact number being unavailable, it was likely that the public would contact the County Council to report bins as empty. Whilst the review supports grit bins being marked to denote ownership, it recommends Call-Derbyshire should continue to be the contact point for requesting all grit bins to be filled.

Recommendation 3

Call-Derbyshire to continue to be the single point of contact for requests to fill all grit bins including those provided by Parish Councils.

4.4 Working with Parish Councils

County Council resources for dealing with prolonged periods of adverse weather are limited and the experience over the last winter provided a major challenge to keep services running and the road network open. The Environmental Services Department has been looking at ways in which capacity to manage such issues can be increased. This includes utilising Parish Councils as a means of providing local knowledge and information to the County Council in the same way the Emergency Planning Division utilises their support in dealing with flooding. The idea would see Parish Councils assisting in the identification of road closures, dangerous local conditions and also as a means co-ordinating local self-help through the nomination of “snow patrols”.

The Working Group accepts that Parish Councils have considerable degree of local useful knowledge both in terms of identifying potential problems areas and also by providing up to date information on local conditions during periods of adverse weather. There is a concern however, over the quality and consistency of the information that will be received. Parish Councils may for instance, identify a particular road as a dangerous owing to adverse weather in order to ensure that the County Council gives it attention when it may not in reality be any worse than a multitude of other roads across the County.

It is also considered that using snow patrols to report on local conditions in adverse weather may raise local expectations which the Council may not be able to meet. It was clear from the requests for assistance received during the recent adverse weather that many of the public expected a greater level of service than the County Council could provide in terms of the gritting of roads and pavements. The Working Group considers that clear guidance needs to be issued to those providing information to the Council to ensure that it is useful as a means of identify problems areas and prioritising resources accordingly.

The Working Group also has concerns over the maintenance of such an information network in the long-term. As already stated, Parish Councils have a relatively high turnover in terms of parish clerks and councillors so it may be difficult to keep the details of the snow patrols network up to date.

Recommendation 4

If the use of Parish Council “Snow Patrols” is pursued, it is recommended that clear guidance be issued to those responsible in order to ensure that the information provided across the County is as consistent as possible.

4.5 Working with the voluntary sector

It is clear from the Working Group's discussions with the Chief Emergency Planning Officer that the voluntary sector played a major role in assisting the Council during adverse weather.

Local voluntary organisations were invaluable in helping to identify and support vulnerable people in adverse weather. There are a multitude of such organisations in the County and it is impractical for the Council to work with them all. As well as utilising County Council and district council staff to co-ordinate assistance to the vulnerable, the Council also works with the local Councils for Voluntary Service and other voluntary groups. The County Council did not use St John Ambulance or Red Cross as they were assisting health services in coping with the adverse weather.

The Emergency Planning Department also utilised the Peak 4x4 Club to get food and supplies to vulnerable and isolated families and also for transporting workers such as health visitors to the homes of vulnerable clients. The assistance proved invaluable and the County Emergency Planning Officer is looking to set up an inventory of 4x4 vehicles which are available in adverse from the voluntary sector. At the same time work is being undertaken to log all such vehicles available from within the County Council.

Recommendation 5

The review supports the audit of all available 4x4 vehicles across the County in order to co-ordinate this support.

4.6 Impact on Schools

School closures whatever the reason behind them, cause problems and disruption. Children's education is disrupted and parents are forced to take leave or make special arrangements to look after their children and tensions can run high. Whilst the recent adverse weather did cause problems the numbers of closures was considered to be relatively low. There are however, no precise figures as to actual numbers of schools that were forced to close as a result of the adverse weather last winter.

The decision as to whether to close a school rests with the Headteacher. It is a difficult decision to make and one which ultimately will come down to ensuring the health and safety of both pupils and staff. Inevitably some parents will agree with the decision whilst others will not. No two schools are the same; each will have their own peculiar circumstances to overcome in adverse weather such as long drive ways which can present a danger in snowy and icy conditions.

Historically, teachers would have lived close to the school in which they taught. However, nowadays this is no longer the case and teachers can travel

many miles to work which in adverse weather, can present difficulties if the roads are impassable. There are also other factors to take in to account such as the need to advise school bus companies on closures in good time and it may also be the case that school buses are unable to operate owing to the conditions of the roads.

The County Council does provide practical advice to Schools on the closure of schools, safety for schools remaining open and a general annual reminder about preventative measures to mitigate potential damage to schools from adverse weather.

In terms of closures during adverse weather, the vast majority of scenarios will relate to safety concerns over the school grounds and/or the surrounding area. Responsibility for safety within the school grounds rests with the school. Some schools will have relatively small grounds which make safety issues more manageable whereas others will have larger grounds making safety a bigger issue. Many schools will use their Caretakers to ensure that school grounds, particularly the access points are adequately gritted. In schools with larger grounds and long driveways however, utilising the school caretaker may not be practicable.

Schools are responsible for providing their own supplies of grit. It is not considered practical for the County Council to supply all schools with grit given the difficulties it has experienced with supplies and also the capacity to ensure that the requests for grit are met on demand.

The Working Group considers that an “audit” of schools should be undertaken to identify those schools with particular issues during periods of adverse weather which cause the school to close. The outcome of the audit would enable advice and support to be targeted at those schools who regularly experience problems owing to the location of the school or its site layout. The Environmental Services Department proposes to work with schools where there are issues to identify local resources that can be used to assist with snow clearing for example.

Communication is a key factor in school closures. Schools have built up both informal and formal mechanisms through which they inform pupils and parents of school closures including email and text messaging. Local radio stations also play an important role. The County Councils website was not used to provide a list of closures during the recent adverse weather as there was no formal system in place for reporting the closures and also it was felt that there was already sufficient burden on schools to report closures through existing means without creating an additional link. There is no doubt however, that people were looking to the County Council for information on school closures.

It was noted that a system was in the process of being developed which would use the County Council’s website as the link for providing information on school closures. Software had been developed which would allow

headteachers to advise of a school closure through the Derbyshire Net for Learning which is the secure site for use by schools and governors. The information on the closure will be speedily uploaded on the main County Council website. The website would then be used as the definitive point of information and one which can be accessed by local radio stations to pass information on to their listeners.

Recommendation 6

- (a) The Working Group supports developments to provide definitive information on school closures during adverse weather through the County Council website.
- (b) An “audit” of schools most at risk of closure owing to adverse weather be undertaken and targeted advice and support be provided to these schools.

4.7 Impact on staffing

Just like any other employer, adverse weather can have a significant impact on County Council staffing and therefore potentially service delivery. There were days when staff were unable to get to work owing to the conditions or when they were forced to leave work early. Overall however, the opinion is that staff across the County responded magnificently to the weather conditions and made every effort to get in to work. Indeed there are examples of staff booking in to hotels to ensure that they could get to work. The review also spoke to the Derbyshire County Primary Care Trust and the Chesterfield Royal Hospital, both of whom had similar stories of staff dedication.

The County Council has adopted an Adverse Weather Policy which is designed to provide advice and guidance to managers and employees whilst also trying to ensure that the Council operates as nearer normal services as possible. The Policy, which was reviewed in 2009, acknowledges that there may be occasions when travelling to work may be difficult owing to adverse weather. The Policy makes it clear that in such circumstances the priority of all employees should be maintain Council services whilst taking in to account their own personal safety. In such circumstances, the Policy allows for flexible working arrangements by permitting staff with difficult journeys to leave work earlier and also allowing staff to work from different work bases they can access from home. It also provides for a manager in each establishment to be responsible for implementing the Policy. The Cabinet report which agreed the revised policy stated that it would be reviewed in view of the new flexi-time arrangements which should make it easier for staff to manage their time during adverse weather.

The decision as to whether to send staff home is a matter of judgement for managers based on individual employees circumstances and the weather conditions. Each establishment will have an identified officer responsible for taking such a decision. In smaller establishments this may have an impact on continuity of service.

At County Hall where around 2,500 employees work, the identified officer is the Chief Executive. The impact on the roads in the surrounding area of so many staff leaving work at the same time can be significant. There were examples of individual departments and sections sending their staff home during the bad weather, prior to any instruction being issued from the Chief Executive. On one occasion, staff from one department were sent home at the same time as the Director of Environmental Services issued a message to Chief Officers that staff should not be sent home as the roads around County Hall were very dangerous and already congested with staff still trying to get in to work. The weather report was that the snow would ease later in the day which would allow for time for the road network to be cleared. Not only could this cause further congestion on the roads but it also causes confusion and anxiety amongst other staff. The impact of a significant proportion of the 2,500 staff all leaving work at the same time could be considerable and could have made local problems even worse.

The Working Group recommends that in future the provision of the Adverse Weather Policy that the Chief Executive determines when it is necessary to send staff home or close County Hall should be adhered to in order that the circumstances are managed in a consistent manner across departments. The Adverse Weather Policy will also need revising in light of the new working arrangements.

During the 2009-10 adverse weather, only limited use of dnet was made as a means of communicating messages to staff on weather conditions and what action if any they needed to take in response. In future it is intended to post regular bulletins on weather conditions and the application of the adverse weather policy including sending staff home, road conditions and also the best time to make journeys. The review supports the more effective use of dnet as a means of communicating messages on adverse weather to staff.

It is noted that the Emergency Planning Officer is in the process of arranging meetings with all Departments to review their arrangements for the coming winter. In addition, they were preparing an operational document containing all severe weather procedures.

The County Council also has a Business Continuity Plan which details how the Council will respond to unforeseen events which may disrupt the provision of services. Part of this planning process involves making arrangements for ensuring that key employees get to work. During the adverse weather arrangements were put in place for the Peak 4x4 Club and the Countryside Service to get key staff groups such as Call-Centre staff and Home Helps to work.

Recommendation 7

In future, the Chief Executive in line with the provisions of the Council's Adverse Weather Policy, determines when it is necessary to send staff home from work in order that the circumstances are managed in a consistent manner across departments.

4.8 Communications

4.8.1 General

Long periods of adverse weather where services are disrupted regularly will inevitably give rise to frustrations on the part of the public. Local authorities as the providers of many of these services such as road and pavement gritting will bear the brunt of this frustration and the situation was not helped last winter by the prolonged national coverage which did at times presented a negative image of how councils' were responding to the situation. The County Council clearly has generally provided a good service over recent years and this has served to raise the expectations of the public.

It is important therefore, that the Council makes the best use of the resources at its disposal to communicate effectively and responsibly with its public regarding the issues it faces particularly during prolonged cold spells. From the Working Groups discussions with those involved in dealing with the adverse weather, there is a general view that such communication could have been handled better and that the issues faced by the Council could have been more positively and effectively delivered.

The sheer volume of calls received by Call Derbyshire (see below) by concerned residents would suggest that people were unaware of the current position or unable to access information to assist. Likewise, the fact that Oxfordshire provided less of a road gritting service than Derbyshire but received a more positive satisfaction rating could suggest that the message about the issues faced by the Council during this period was not delivered effectively.

4.8.2 Winter Service Plan

The Environmental Services Department produces a Winter Service Plan which sets out a range of information on winter gritting, working with partners, communication etc. The Working Group considered that this was useful document which would help explain many of the issues raised by Parish Councils for instance. It was recommended that the Plan be sent electronically to Parish Councils and local organisations as well as being available through the County Council website.

4.8.3 Call Derbyshire

Call Derbyshire were the Council's front-line staff in dealings with the majority of the public's questions and problems relating to the adverse weather. Normally the Centre would expect to receive around a thousand calls a day. During December and January the volume of calls was significantly higher, reaching a peak on 4 January when the Centre received 3,461 calls.

Procedures were put in place to deal with the increased demand including changing call-routing systems, staff working additional shifts and having relief staff on standby. Again it is pleasing to note that the staff response to the situation was magnificent with some even sleeping at the Call Centre. Communications and working relationships with partners worked well. Call Centre staff were able through the Emergency Planning Division, to readily call on the support of the Peak 4x4 Club and the Ranger Service.

Whilst the Call Centre did cope with the significant increase in call traffic, it is difficult to sustain over a long period and it is not the most cost effective means of providing information (See below). Increased call traffic also potentially places a greater pressure on Centre staff in dealing with urgent calls (say on safeguarding issues) which require a one to one conversation. There is a danger that such calls may be missed or not given sufficient attention in periods of a high volume of calls. Meetings have been held with the Emergency Planning Division to review the handling of calls in the coming winter.

4.8.4 Derbyshire County Council and Derbyshire Prepared Websites

The County Council website was a key source of information on the adverse weather situation. The weather soon became the "feature story" with other news stories and events being cleared from the site to make space for general weather information. Using information from the Met Office, the Police and the Authority's own Environmental Services Department, updates were provided relating to the snow and road and school closures. There were also links to pages giving information about gritting routes and other weather related issues.

As the website is developed it is intended that the range of information available on it will increase to include information such as gritting routes, including real time gritting information and grit bin locations. It is also intended to make easier for the public to report missing grit bins or when grit bins are empty as well as reporting other problems.

The website provides an opportunity for the Council to provide information to the public in a simple and cost effective way. The more information which is received through the website, the more this will alleviate the pressure on the Call Centre during such periods of adverse weather. In addition, it is more cost effective for the Council to provide information via the website than

through local people telephoning for information. The Channel Benchmarking Service¹ estimate that the difference in costs is as follows:

Phone	£3.21 per visit
Web	£0.39 per visit

(Further information on this is included in the Improvement and Scrutiny Review of the County Council's Website).

If the provision of information on events such as adverse weather is to be focused through the County Council website, it is important that the information is up to date and reliable. If in periods of bad weather, the website cannot be updated if staff are physically unable to get to work to do so, the information becomes effectively worthless. The review supports the recommendations of the Website review that the E-content Team should be provided with Virtual Private Network access and the necessary equipment to ensure the flow of information during a crisis such as severe adverse weather.

During the course of the review, the Derbyshire Resilience Forum website, Derbyshire Prepared, was launched. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 requires Category One responders (includes the County Council, district councils, the Police, the Fire and Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service) to work together to co-ordinate planning and responding to emergency situations including adverse weather conditions. Part of this duty involves ensuring that all the partners effectively communicate with the public.

The primary focus of the Derbyshire Prepared website is to provide information on how to prepare for and what to do in emergency situations as well as providing information before, during and after specific emergency situations. The information provided will go some way to answer some of the queries received by the Call Centre. The Working Group had concerns however, over the profile of the site which it was felt would be difficult to locate by a member of the public. Again, the Working Group concurs with the findings of the Scrutiny Website review, that a clear link to the Derbyshire Prepared site should be available from the derbyshire.gov website.

The Working Group also had concerns over the potential for confusion and duplication in the provision of information to the public during periods of adverse weather. It considered that there should be a clear distinction in the information provided on each site. The derbyshire.gov site should be the main source of up to date information for the public such as road closures, school closures etc with the Derbyshire Prepared website complimenting this by providing information on the wider partnership response to an emergency situation.

¹ Socitm Insight (December 2009)

4.8.5 Community Messaging Service

The County Council is looking to make use of the Community Messaging Service as a means of providing information to the public on emergency situations. The Messaging Service is already a well established means of communication used by Neighbourhood Watch. It allows key information to be delivered to individuals and groups enlisted on the scheme in a variety of different modes including phone calls, text message and email.

4.8.6 Twitter and Facebook

For the first time during the winter of 2009-10, the County Council made use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter as a means of enhancing the information provided through the website. The E-content Team were of the view that the use of social media had proved a useful means of communicating with the public and to provide a means of “putting the record straight” on some of the misconceptions that arose during the adverse weather.

4.8.7 Other Mobile devices

There was also an increase in the variety of mobile devices used to access information such as i-phones, Blackberry's and android phones. This is an area which will continue to develop and which will present the Council with new opportunities to disseminate information to the public on adverse weather. The Council should ensure in developing its website in future, that information is available in multiple formats in order to maximise access. The principles with this point relate to wider issues than just adverse and the recommendation mirrors that contained in the Scrutiny review of the Council's website.

Recommendation 8

- (a) The Council should make greater use of communications during adverse weather to positively promote the service it is providing but also importantly to inform the public of the issues and problems faced in delivering those services.
- (b) The Winter Service Plan should be used as a means of providing information on winter services to local organisations
- (c) The derbyshire.gov website should be main source of information on adverse weather.
- (d) The derbyshire.gov website should have a clear link to the Derbyshire Prepared website in order to provide the public with easily accessible of information on preparing for emergency situations.
- (e) The Council should explore further the use of the Community Messaging Service as a means of providing information to the public.
- (f) The Council should continue to develop the use of social media as a means of information provision to the public.

- (g) The Council should ensure that in future information from the website can be accessed in multiple formats.

4.9 Impact on Health Services

During the course of the review the Working Group met with representatives from NHS Derbyshire County and also the Chesterfield Royal Hospital Foundation Trust to discuss their experiences of the adverse weather. As with the County Council, both reported that their staff had responded magnificently to the adverse weather and had worked tirelessly to try to provide as near a normal service as possible.

The obvious pressure points were on accident and emergency services in order to cope with the significant increase in the number of trips and falls caused by the snow and ice. The situation at Chesterfield Royal was made worse as the Hospital was still experiencing the impact of the Swine Flu pandemic and also an outbreak of the norovirus, both of which placed a considerable strain on beds and resources in general. Special arrangements were put in place to cope with the impact of the adverse weather such as GPs working in the Accident and Emergency Department, GPs were asked to “hold on” to non-urgent admissions and general patients were placed on maternity wards.

The management of beds during this period became a major issue at Chesterfield Royal. The main issues concerned:

- Patients no longer requiring acute treatment refusing to transfer to community hospitals where beds were available.
- Patients/relatives in the process of choosing care homes
- Patients on waiting lists for care homes
- Patients awaiting Social Services interventions

In terms of numbers by way of an example, on 2 March there were 10 patients still occupying acute beds at the Royal who had been fit for discharge on 10 February. At one point there were over 50 patients in acute beds who did not need them. This situation was not necessarily any more significant than usual in terms of numbers. The problem was the increased pressure on beds at this time owing to the impact of the prolonged severe weather.

The Working Group has not looked in any detail at the causes of these bed blocking issues. The issues raised however, are obviously important particularly of the potential consequences of beds not being available to those patients in need of them but also the inefficiency and cost implications. It is recommended therefore, that the Adult Health and Care Improvement and Scrutiny Committee look in to this matter in more detail.

As detailed, NHS staff worked very hard to ensure that services ran normally and for the most part this was the case. Chesterfield Royal Hospital did report that during week commencing 4 January the road conditions around the Hospital were particularly bad which in part caused several surgical cancellations owing to both staff and patients not being able to get to the hospital. It was noted that following discussions with the Emergency Planning Department, the situation had been satisfactorily rectified. The use of satellite navigation technology allows the Council to identify which roads have been treated and when. The information provided shows that the roads around the hospital had been gritted. The Working Group notes that whilst the cancellation of operations is unfortunate, the weather conditions were so bad that some cancellations of operations were inevitable.

The Working Group did have concerns regarding one incident raised by Chesterfield Royal. The conditions on 13 January were particularly extreme and the Hospital Accident and Emergency Department was already under severe pressure from the number of patients presenting themselves following falls on the ice. At one point the East Midlands Ambulance declared a major incident as it struggled to cope with the problems caused by the ice. Chesterfield Royal was unaware of the reasons why the major incident had been called and for a time this caused considerable confusion during what was an already stressful time. The Royal could for instance, have put in place procedures to close the Accident and Emergency Department which would have caused even more issues. The issue was resolved following a phone call to the Emergency Planning Department.

The Working Group does not wish to exaggerate this incident and it notes that it was satisfactorily resolved fairly quickly. It is concerned however, that internal communications procedures in place in the event of a major incident do not appear to have worked as well as they should in this case.

Recommendation 9

- (a) The Adult Health and Care Improvement and Scrutiny Committee undertake a scrutiny on the bed blocking issues raised in the report.
- (b) the Emergency Planning Officer be requested to ensure that internal communication procedures in the event of an emergency are understood by all partners.

4.10 The Public

The public potentially represent a major support group for the County Council and is partners in dealing with adverse weather. Not only can the public provide information on local conditions, they can provide support to vulnerable people that agencies may be struggling to reach and they can also provide a means through roads and pavements can be cleared of snow and ice, particularly those away from the main gritting routes.

Unfortunately we now live in an increasingly litigious society. An “urban myth” has gained significant credence which leads people to believe they may be sued if someone falls where for instance they have cleared snow and ice from the pavement outside their homes. The reality is that whilst people can be sued for clearing snow and ice, this is only likely to happen where negligence can be proved or where, in doing so, the situation has actually been made worse. The same principles apply to the clearing of snow and ice by businesses.

The Working Group supports the view that the Council should do more to dispel the view that members of the public and businesses are automatically liable should they clear snow and ice from the highway or even their property. The review recommends that the County Council should work with partners to develop a joint approach to encouraging the public and local businesses to clear snow and ice. This should include the promotion of guidance on the legal position and the “do’s and don’ts of such activity.

In July 2010, the Government issued interim Guidance entitled “The Resilience of England’s Transport System in Winter”. The Guidance highlights the negative impact that the media has had on raising people’s fears of clearing snow and ice from their properties. It also has an example of a press release issued by Westminster City Council which highlights the difficulties faced by Councils in giving advice on the subject. The press release sets out a four point good practice guide on how to clear snow and ice but it also has information on the legal position which sets out when someone can be liable. The Chief Emergency Planning Officer has commented on the need for more robust and clear statements on snow and ice clearance. The final Guidance is due to be published in the near future.

Recommendation 10

The Council in conjunction with its partners should seek to promote a positive message on the clearing of ice and snow by businesses and the public and to reduce the fear of litigation.

4.11 Role of Elected Members

Local Resilience Forums are bodies established by the Civil Contingencies Act to co-ordinate emergency planning work across a range of partners. The Derbyshire LRF is chaired by the Assistant Chief Constable and membership is made up of various partners including local authorities, the Police, Fire Service, Ambulance Service and the health services. There are various sub-groups of the Forum. Meetings of the Forum are held in private as some of the matters they consider are of a very sensitive nature.

The Forum is the place where the overall response of the various partners to major events including the adverse weather would be considered. There is no

formal Member involvement in the process although where appropriate reports are prepared for Cabinet.

The Working Group have been provided with extracts of a sub-group meeting on 1 March and a main Forum meeting on 11 March where the adverse weather situation was discussed. The Forum had decided that it was unnecessary to undertake a formal de-brief on the impact of the adverse weather. Members of the Working Group were somewhat surprised at this given the adverse weather had been the worst for possibly 30 years and given the significant impact of the conditions.

The need for the Resilience Forum to operate in private in many of the matters it discusses is recognised and it does not wish to interfere in or duplicate this process in any way. It does consider however, that there needs to be greater and more formal involvement of councillors in the post major event evaluation if councillors are to fully undertake and understand their role as community leaders and representatives of the County Council. At present the Chief Emergency Planning Officer does provide local Members with an informal briefing on incidents occurring within their divisions.

Councillors can play a significant role before during and after an event such as a period of prolonged adverse weather. For instance, before an event of this nature the councillor can make himself/herself aware of the council's responsibilities, be aware of potential risks in their areas and have an awareness of policies and plans which will be brought in to action. Likewise, during the event the councillor role includes providing support to council staff, disseminating credible information to community groups and providing reassurance to the local community in general. After an event the councillors are again a key link with the local community and they can also ensure that lessons are learnt for future similar events.

In order to undertake this community role effectively councillors need relevant information and training. During the recent adverse weather, very little information on the impact of the weather and the Council's response was directly provided to the 55 front-line councillors outside of the Cabinet. It is difficult therefore, for councillors to fulfill a role in liaising with the local community and providing reassurance if they do not have relevant information provided to them by the Council. The Working Group consider that councillors have a key role in this respect and that this role will enhance the Council's response to major events. Councillors will be able to help provide reassurance to the local community as well as dispelling many of the misconceptions which will inevitably arise regarding the Council's response to such situations. During the adverse weather, the Chief Emergency Planning Officer did for the first time distribute an email to all Members to update them on the current situation.

Councillors have received only a general briefing on emergency planning issues and the Working Group has concerns that many Members, particularly

those elected for the first time in 2009, may not have sufficient knowledge of relevant contacts and also knowledge of appropriate policies and plans that may come in to effect in the event of an emergency situation.

It is noted that the County Council in 2008 adopted an Elected Members' Emergency Plan. The aim of the Plan is to provide their councillors with a clear overview of emergency planning issues, and responsibilities, details of relevant emergency plans along with details of the role councillors should play in responding to emergency situations, before, during and after the event. It is clear that there is a limited knowledge of the Plan on the part of Members. Indeed the Plan has not been issued to those councillors who joined the Council in 2009. The Working Group recommend that the Members Emergency Plan be revised and re-launched.

Recommendation 11

- (a) the Council to develop a communications policy for providing information to councillors during emergency situations including long periods of adverse weather.
- (b) the Council to provide more detailed training for its councillors on emergency situations.
- (c) the Members Emergency Plan be revised and re-launched.

4.12 Long-term trends and planning

The Working Group heard evidence that the long-term impact of climate change on winter weather in the UK may be that winters will be warmer and wetter than at present. Snowfall and cold weather will continue to occur but less frequently. The review has concentrated on the impact of and response to the prolonged cold weather which happened last winter. It has not considered the impact of other forms of adverse weather such prolonged rainfall which leads to flooding.

The potential trends from climate change provide a dilemma for the County Council and those planning winter services. Snow and ice may occur less frequently but the public will expect the Council to be fully prepared when it does occur. Being fully prepared may in the public's view mean stockpiling salts stocks which may be wasted if the winter turns out to be mild. Such a scenario may well present a "no win" situation for the Council.

If the trend is towards milder winters, it will make winter planning very complex because of uncertainties of day to day weather changes. It will be important that the Council and its partners engage in strategic planning and risk assessing their approaches to winter weather to ensure that they are responsive to changing weather and in the longer-term to a changed climate.

The 3CAP Initiative run by Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire County Councils carried out a study on the Impacts of Climate Change on

Highway Network Policies and Standards which looked at a range of potential impacts of all severe weather not just extreme cold, over the longer term. In respect of winter services however, the study has looked at a number of key areas of risk and produced responses relating to winter services as detailed in the table below:

Winter service	AR18. Carry out risk assessment surveys to establish which routes have the highest risk of ice formation	Immediate
	AR19. Re-assess and re-classify priority routes based on future climate change predictions	By 2020
	AR20. Review established resources for winter service provision and consider if changes need to be made	By 2020
	AR21. Provide a more flexible and responsive winter service	By 2020

Comprehensive Risk Assessments carried out on a range of County Council services to meet Level 2 of NI 188 (Planning to Adapt to Climate Change) considered a series of other risks arising from snow and ice and provided a “score” based on the likelihood of occurrence and severity of consequence across the 2020s, 2050s and 2080s where 1 indicates a low risk and 25 a very high risk. Some examples are set out below:

Service	Risk	Consequence	Risk/Opportunity “Score”		
			2020s	2050s	2080s
CAYA	School closures	DCC staff might need to take time off work to look after their children. Possible disruption to service.	8	0	0
Highways	Disruption on the roads caused by frost, snow and ice.	Increased demand for resources such as salt to grit the roads	16	12	6
Highways	Disruption on the roads caused by frost, snow and ice.	Increased demand for salt to grit the roads	16	12	6

Adult Care	Roads impassable particularly in hilly areas of the County.	Day care centres may need to be closed in hilly parts of the county.	20	0	0
------------	---	--	----	---	---

It should be noted that in all of the above examples, the risk is assessed as reducing over the years in line with the predictions that severe winters will occur less frequently.

Recommendation 12

The Council should continue to risk assess its services against the standards developed through the work of the 3CAP Project (for Highways) and through NI 188 and it should develop a detailed long-term action plan to ensure that services are able to respond to the impacts which climate change will have.

5.0 Conclusions

The adverse weather experienced for several weeks in December and January during the winter of 2009/10 was the worst for thirty years and undoubtedly presented the County Council and its partners with significant challenges in maintaining services during this period. The weather and the response to it by public services received unprecedented media coverage both at a national and local level.

The review concludes that the Environmental Services Department did a magnificent job in gritting the County's roads. Despite shortages of salt, the gritting teams managed to keep the majority of major roads open. Given the extreme conditions, it was inevitable that on occasions some roads would be closed or impassable and that minor roads, estate roads and pavements remained untreated.

The County Council has already identified a series of measures relating to the gritting of roads and pavements and grit bins. The Working Group for the most part supports these proposals. The review agrees with the view that gritting levels cannot be sustained at current levels given that the costs rose from the normal £3.3m to £5.5m last year. Scrutiny would be willing to participate in the review of the gritting network. The Working Group supports in principle proposals to work more closely with Parish Councils in minimising the impact of future adverse weather by the appointment of local "snow patrols" and also the identification of Parish Council owned grit bins. It does however, have some concerns about how these proposals will work in the longer-term.

Whilst there is no information available on the number of schools closures, there were obviously a significant number of schools closures during the

adverse weather. For the most part these were confined to certain days when the weather was particularly bad. Decisions to close schools are taken by the school not the Council although advice on closing schools is produced. The Working Group supports the measures proposed to be introduced for the notification of school closures via the County Council website. It also recommends an audit be undertaken to identify schools at particular and regular risk of closure in order that advice and support can be provided.

Communication was identified as a particular issue in the review. It is clear that public expectation on the gritting of roads and pavements was greater than the level of service the Council's was able to provide. The Working Group concludes that the County Council could have done more to communicate with the public on the adverse weather, in particular to explain the extreme difficulties that were being experienced such as the shortage of salt supplies.

During the prolonged adverse weather, the Council's Call Centre received an unprecedented numbers of calls for service. Whilst it is pleasing to report that the Call Centre did manage to cope with the increased demand, the Working Groups supports the idea of seeking to maximise the use of the website as the primary source of information on adverse weather for the public. This represents a more efficient use of resources. The Working Group would also like the County Council and its partners to help utilise the public and businesses more in responding to adverse weather by reassuring them over their liability if they undertake to clear snow and ice from the highway.

The Working Group was concerned over the role that Elected Members play in the event of adverse weather and other significant events which impact on the local area. It was considered that the Members Emergency Plan should be revised and re-launched.

The Working Group would like to place on record their thanks to all those involved in delivering services during this period. There were numerous examples of staff from the Council, schools, emergency services and the health services acting above and beyond their duties in order to maintain services. It is also clear that the County Council's Emergency Planning Department played a key role in co-ordinating services. From the evidence received partners worked well together including the voluntary sector. The County Council made good use of the local 4x4 club to reach vulnerable people and the health services used the Red Cross and St John Ambulance. Overall therefore, the Working Group concludes that the public services responded very well to the difficult situation caused by the adverse weather.

Councillor George Wharmby

Chairman of the Improvement and Scrutiny Management Committee

18/11/10