



Scrutiny Committee
28th November 2016

Winter Maintenance: Preparedness – 2016/2017 season.

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Commissioning Manager**

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1. Summary

- 1.1. This report summarises the Council's Winter Maintenance Service preparedness for the 2016 / 2017 winter maintenance season for Highways, and identifies future issues for discussion and consideration.
- 1.2. The winter maintenance service, is part of a wider package of works, discussed in this report that allows Shropshire Council to fulfil its statutory responsibilities as defined in Section 41 (1A) of the Highways Act 1980.
- 1.3. The councils Term Maintenance contractor, Ringway, provides the winter maintenance service, by provision of staff to operate and maintain the council owned gritting fleet (this arrangement is in place as a risk management approach) and using our salt, secured through a contract with Compass Minerals.
- 1.4. The winter maintenance service is considered to be effective, and is considered to reflect positively on the service and the councils overall reputation.
- 1.5. The supplementary service commissioned by Highways and provided by local contractors, using tractor-mounted gritters, is also considered to be effective in dealing with local issues during adverse conditions, this allows greater flexibility and responsiveness to local needs.
- 1.6. The service has further developed the use of technology and is constantly gathering more comprehensive route and salt use data, so that we can eliminate human interference and optimise salt usage whilst gritting routes. This will ensure that we deliver the service as efficiently as possible, whilst still exceeding our statutory responsibilities.

2. Recommendations:

- 2.1. That the committee note the contents of the report.

- 2.2. Scrutiny notes the defined gritting routes and policy for the 2016 / 2017 winter period season, as detailed within this report.
- 2.3. Scrutiny receive and comment on a revised winter maintenance policy in the summer of 2017 in preparation for the 2017 / 2018 winter season.

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 3.1 Provision of an effective winter maintenance service fulfils the councils Statutory responsibilities under the Highways Act, Section 41 (1A) of the Highways Act 1980. This reports updates on current established provision, and no changes to policy are made within this report.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 The current Winter Maintenance budget is £2,058,520.00, and in normal circumstances is sufficient to support the service. For comparison, the winter of 2015 / 2016 was exceptionally mild, and the service incurred an expenditure of £1,638,060 contextually: the previous four year average expenditure directly to Ringway has been £2,166,485, however it also has to be noted that two out of the four previous winters have been classed as "mild".
- 4.2 Discussions regarding the future annual revenue budget for winter maintenance are ongoing at the time of writing this report. Pressure on revenue budgets now requires a reduction to the budget to be incurred from April 2017, effectively reducing the threshold for drawing upon the severe weather reserve. Over time this could put pressure on the service, should several severe winters be incurred and therefore the reserve be depleted. However, the need to recognise the council's statutory responsibility is key, and that minimising areas of expenditure on none or less essential winter maintenance service(s) now requires a more robust response from local highways staff. Typically, requests for additional grit boxes, 'one off' gritting runs that fall outside of the defined network, treating footpaths and carparks, when the current policy identifies that this should occur after some prolonged winter period. Scrutiny should note that officers will be required to be more robust in the application of the winter maintenance policy when additional requests, or complaints are received, in the context of an anticipated reduction in the winter maintenance budget.

5. Background

- 5.1. The Service reviews and revises the operational delivery of services after every winter operation period, i.e. The effectiveness and financial elements of the whole service delivery supports the Council's aims, and fulfils the Council's statutory responsibilities. To that end a number of Winter Service Review meetings took place into the delivery of the service during the summer of 2016 The review meetings included Shropshire Council staff

from all levels, and Ringway staff, again from all levels. The sessions were facilitated by an independent advisor, Penmark, who Ringway engaged for the purpose.

- 5.2. This exercise looked at a number of operational issues such as: -
 - Effectiveness of operational procedures
 - Call to arrangements
 - Record keeping
 - Use of technology
- 5.3. The above operational issues were incorporated into the staff training and development for the forthcoming winter maintenance service.
- 5.4. As routine, once a review of the service has been jointly undertaken, Shropshire Council requests a letter of assurance on Winter Maintenance from Ringway (see Appendix 1). This letter provides an additional layer of confidence for the delivery of the service. It should also be noted that at weekly operational meetings (August to March period) Winter Maintenance is discussed, and any issues that occur are discussed, and revisions to process or procedures implemented, if required.

6. Performance

- 6.1. Ringway have been providing the Winter Maintenance service since 2012. They continue to use gritters, provided by Shropshire Council, for Primary and Secondary Routes. There are 25 gritters and 5 spares for use throughout Shropshire. The gritters remain positioned at our divisional depots. These vehicles salt our resilient network, which are A and B classified roads and certain important local distributor roads, which represents 28% of the Shropshire road network. They also salt a smaller secondary network when resources allow, during prolonged periods of snow and ice, including cycle tracks and carparks.
- 6.2. There are no plans to change the current defined network as our gritting fleet is operating to its full capacity. For this reason, Shropshire Council is unable to commit resources for requests to treat private roads/areas during winter conditions.
- 6.3. It should be noted that the percentage of the defined network gritted as part of the overall highways network (see Appendix 2) is at 28%; this is at the lower end of the spectrum when compared to comparative authorities, where percentage tends to be higher, for example:
 - North Yorkshire County Council is at 54%
 - Suffolk County Council is at 51%
 - Worcestershire County Council is at 30%
- 6.4. The defined routes, locations of grit boxes, highways depots and roads gritted by neighbouring authorities are valuable via the council's web site, on an interactive map. Simply type in your post code and it will highlight

available winter resources in your area, as detailed above
<https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/highways-and-traffic/winter-road-maintenance/winter-maintenance-resources/>

- 6.5. All of the primary gritting routes have had a trial run ahead of the season for the purpose of driver familiarisation, training and data capture.
- 6.6. The council has a modern fleet and has optimised routes. We are currently considering extending the leases on some of our oldest vehicles and that has the potential to save revenue spending. However, these vehicles, due to their age will incur additional heavy maintenance costs given a severe operating season. A decision will be made regarding whether to extend leases or make replacements circa March 2017.
- 6.7. The entire winter maintenance fleet and council owned contractor equipment has been inspected and overhauled and tested and is fully operational.
- 6.8. The new on-board technology has had some further updates and we continue to monitor the performance of the gritting process and routes more accurately to deliver consistency and accuracy and provide robust evidence of actions taken as and when necessary.
- 6.9. When Gritters are deployed, updates via the Council Twitter feed can be subscribed to and are automatically sent out [@ShropCouncil](#) by the attached feed. Hence live updates and information are valuable via Twitter for users. Known as Twitter Gritter.
- 6.10. There has been no additional equipment purchased for the 2016/17 winter maintenance season as we had had a mild winter maintenance season during 2015/16. Dependent upon the severity of the winter this year there are some assets that may need replacement ahead of the 2017/18 season. As always the machinery and gritter replacements are constantly reviewed to deliver optimum capability in a severe season.
- 6.11. In future performance reviews it is felt likely that salt storage will be the focus of attention, to identify whether further savings could be made. The new technology is already assisting the accurate usage of materials and indicating savings potential.
- 6.12. The operational review group discussed how winter operations involving local communities had fared over the winter period. Again the overwhelming impression was that the tractor-mounted gritters that supplement the winter service (27 in total), which are operated by local farmers/contractors, proved their worth. They were found to be very cost effective in providing an increase in capability in areas where there were access problems, they used road salt very efficiently (reducing the need for excessive numbers of salt bins) and were operated by personnel who have extensive local knowledge of the roads requiring treatment, and the needs

of their communities. As you would expect a commission process is in place with payments agreed and training in procedures and operation provided over the summer period to ensure the effectiveness of this service as a supplement to the wider service delivered directly by the council.

7. Operational Issues

- 7.1. It was again felt that the main issues that continually arise during the winter are related to unrealistic expectations generated by the general public, organisations etc. as indicated in this report, pressure on the revenue budget will require a more robust and stricter implementation of the policy, as initial reductions in the winter maintenance budget are anticipated.
- 7.2. Generally, people are taken by surprise when adverse weather arrives, and they initially experience difficulties on the minor/residential roads, which they have to traverse prior to accessing the treated network. Of course, the available resources are prioritised allowing the treatment of the defined network (A, B and other high risk routes) prior to treating the secondary routes (in sustained adverse weather). In marginal conditions road surface temperatures will rise during the daytime, meaning that our efforts will be confined to the defined network.
- 7.3. The operational review endorsed the idea of individual shop owners and residents taking responsible action to clear snow on footways outside their properties in accordance with government advice. This advice is now also posted on the Shropshire Council web site, - winter maintenance section.
- 7.4. Another issue that came into the discussions was the large number of grit bins located at various locations across the county. Local communities often request additional bins each year and where possible and subject to completion of a risk assessment, such requests are met. However, the sheer level of resource needed to keep grit bins filled can be excessive from the point of view of cost, manpower and available road salt. As in previous reviews it was strongly felt that carrying out local gritting by the use of salt bins was very inefficient in terms of salt usage, often the grit is used for private drives rather than the highway, and there are numerous reports of systematic theft. For this reason, consideration to reduce reliance on salt bins and salt piles. Those that are not being used, or on routes/locations covered by our tractor mounted gritters will be considered for removal as part of the process of the revised Winter Service policy to be presented to Scrutiny in the summer of 2017.

8. Actions

- 8.1. The salt supply contract was due for renewal this year and was tendered out over the summer. Two tenderers returned their prices and supply resilience details. These were evaluated and the contract awarded to Compass Minerals for 3 years with a possible 3-year extension, awarded annually provided there is acceptable performance.

- 8.2. We currently hold 22,000 tonnes of salt when our barns are full. That equated to over 20 days' supply for the gritters in constant use if we were to have continuous snow.
- 8.3. We have cancelled the agreement to house a strategic stock pile at Much Wenlock. This storage facility was an expensive overhead, and use of salt from there meant either double handling of it, or gritters or the loading shovel had to travel there, which is not where the optimised routes start from. We have been able to do this as Compass Minerals have given an undertaking to keep us stocked up as necessary throughout the season. This will be fine as long as there is no intervention from Central Government dictating that salt goes to maintaining the motorway and trunk road network.
- 8.4. We have eight weather stations located to provide coverage across the defined network. Information from these is used by the Met Office to enable them to provide accurate forecasts for Shropshire. Of these, four have been updated to the latest specification over the summer months and will provide improved accuracy in detecting precipitation and determining its type. Infra-red cameras have also been installed at these sites and this will allow accurate remote monitoring of weather conditions at these sites and will enable officers to make better informed decisions regarding treatment. We also have access to data from weather stations owned and operated by some neighbouring authorities and Highways England, so that officers are fully aware of weather conditions in the adjacent areas.

9. Policy.

- 9.1. Once this winter period has passed, the Council's overall policy on winter maintenance will be reviewed and updated (last reviewed 2013), it is therefore suggested that a revised Winter Maintenance Policy is brought to Scrutiny for comment in the summer of 2017. This will refresh the policy and allow any changes to be considered by Scrutiny prior to the 2017 / 2018 winter period, and will also include the conclusion of any budgetary decisions.

10. Conclusion

- 10.1. The operational review felt that considering the current Winter Service Policy the service would be well prepared for the coming winter.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

**Scrutiny reports of September 2012, October 2015
Existing Winter Maintenance Policy.**

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Councillor Simon Jones, Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport

Local Members – All local members affected.

All local members affected

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ringway assurance letter.

Appendix 2 - Defined gritting routes

[https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/.../winter...maintenance/winter-road- maintenance-useful-links/](https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/.../winter...maintenance/winter-road-maintenance-useful-links/)