

## **Gritting update- Scrutiny panel Tuesday 26 January 2010**

### **Key Messages – We were well prepared for winter - Review to be undertaken during summer 2010 – Future Enhancement to the Severe Weather Fund Considered**

We will be undertaking a strategic review of our Winter Maintenance service during the summer months. This review will look at any lessons learnt over this winter season and particularly during the recent unusually long cold snap.

We carried out a review following last year's winter and as a result increased our salt stockpile by 20%. Over the summer 2009 we acquired some 16,000 tonnes of salt. As a result we had nearly double the Government's recommendations of salt stocks stored. Following last winter (2008/2009), central Government recommended that every council should have six days resilience during the core winter period; however in December 2009 we actually had at least 12 days.

This planning has meant we have so far kept ahead of the national shortage. Last year, and so far this year, we did not run out of salt as many authorities did. The councils who have run out have been given priority and received fresh supplies of salt.

As with last winter, the situation where-by we had to scale back our gritting operations is not a result of a lack of funding, or lack of salt on our part but a national shortage of salt from the suppliers. Apart from increasing our stocks substantially, which we did, we have no control over this situation.

We hope this year's review will help us to continue to plan ahead for any future shortages.

### **Current situation**

We would like to reassure people that we have supplies of salt despite the national shortage.

We currently have 1620 tonnes of salt. (Information as of 10am Friday 22 January 2010)

In mid December before a national shortage was fully predicted, we started looking to alternative suppliers to our contracted supplier Salt Union. This has meant we have received an additional 500 tonnes of marine salt from Peacocks and have another 500 tonnes arriving next week.

We have received a further 400 tonnes of salt from Salt Union this week. As well as this we have also ordered an additional supply of marine salt from Peacock's which should be delivered in mid February.

Shropshire Council is still able to fulfil its commitment to keep all A and B roads and agreed high risk routes open, as agreed in the council's Winter Maintenance Policy Statement. This policy aims to keep Shropshire moving and ensure that major routes are kept open.

On the 6 January 2010 central Government set up Salt Cell. It is now advising on national priorities for salt deliveries to help ensure stocks of salt are prioritised where most needed. We are unable to confirm when further supplies are to be delivered, as this is a central Government decision.

Central Government has instructed us to reduce our gritting by a further 25% as part of a national effort to conserve salt. In order to meet this instruction the council is reducing the spread rate and is introducing 25% grit into their salt mix. This grit will help improve grip on the roads during the expected icy conditions as well as conserving salt stocks.

### **Future enhancements.**

As part of the review we are looking into The Severe Weather Fund, which has been recently mentioned in the media.

It is very important to clarify that the Severe Weather Fund had never been cut, but it has been used up. It did enable savings in the mild winters to be carried forward to assist in covering the cost of winters similar to that we are currently experiencing.

Currently any over expenditure above the winter maintenance budget of £1.6 million is taken out of the following year's highway maintenance budget (about a £1 million last year and probably significantly more this year). The last time a winter was mild enough for money to be carried forward into the Severe Weather Fund was in 2002/3 in the sum of £200,000.

Following this winter the Director of Resources, Laura Rowley is currently looking into the possibility of a one off payment into the reserve. This could be up to £1 million.

### **School bus routes**

School bus routes include the majority of roads in the county. They often change without notice if for example a family was to move house.

Councils that carry out higher levels of salting are generally urban authorities with high traffic densities. If Shropshire was to decide to increase the length of road salted to include all school bus routes then significant additional investment would be required for additional gritters, salt storage facilities, an increase in the workforce or number of contractors employed etc.

Shropshire Council is not obliged to grit all roads used by school buses, however wherever resources allow, it will try and grit as many important routes as it can.

Through our Winter Maintenance Policy we are committed to grit our defined network, which includes all A and B roads and other agreed high risk routes. This policy aims to keep Shropshire moving and ensure that major routes are kept open.

Normally, when resources allow, the council will carry out an additional gritting service on important minor roads, once the defined network is gritted. However, during the current shortage, additional gritting is only being carried out in emergencies.

The council also works with school bus service providers to try and make the journey to school easier during the winter season. The service providers know which roads are gritted, and can alter their journeys accordingly.

Through the review we will be looking to work with bus operators to ensure that more school children are able to get to school, and are not left in the middle of their journey. We will be looking to a more co-ordinated approach between bus service operators.

## **Social Services**

The review will also look for a more joined up approach with the social services teams. This will ensure that isolated and vulnerable residents throughout the county continue to receive support, in cases where their rural roads may not have been gritted in the past.

## **Grit bins**

The council has provided about 800 grit bins throughout the county. In a normal winter these have been used by local residents to salt adjacent footways and roads and they have been refilled on a regular basis.

This year the use of the bins has been unprecedented, as soon as they are refilled they are being emptied.

We have received reports of drivers turning up with bags and taking salt out of the bins for use on private roads. Consequently there have been occasions when drivers go to the bin to obtain salt to use on the road there is none left.

Refilling these bins unfortunately can take some time as we have so many bins to look after, and we have to prioritise areas in most need across the county.

We would like to remind people that this grit should only be used on public roads and footpaths, and not on private driveways or properties.

Through the review we will be looking to extend this self help (grit bin) facility.

### **Pilot for gritting on minor roads by our contracted farmers**

We have carried out a trial this winter and provided six farmer contractors with tractor mounted gritters that we have had made especially for us. They are employed in periods of prolonged severe snow and ice and have proved to be a success, so we have placed an order for 14 more.

We intend to have up to four or five contractors in the more hilly rural areas of each division equipped with the gritters and a supply of salt. This will enable them to treat problem areas quicker than the council can with our current gritter fleet during prolonged severe conditions. A further advantage is that the tractor gritters are far more manoeuvrable than our own vehicles enabling them to treat narrow roads, cul-de-sacs etc.