

**Agenda Item No:**

**Report to:** Special Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**Date of Meeting:** 9 February 2010

**Report Title:** **Response to Severe Weather**

**Report By:** Richard Homewood  
Corporate Director Environmental Services

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### **Purpose of Report**

To provide an overview of the local authority response to the recent severe weather and invite discussions on future arrangements for such events.

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### **Recommendation(s)**

- 1. That the report be noted.**
- 2. That Members are invited to discuss the response and contribute ideas and suggestions on how we should prepare for such events in future.**

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### **Reasons for Recommendations**

To ensure the Council is able to respond appropriately to severe weather incidents.

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## Introduction

1. Since mid-December we've seen some of the severest winter weather in the UK for decades. Cold air arrived from the east and north, with temperatures falling as low as -22 °C. This combined with weather fronts coming in off the North Sea to cause a series of snowfall events, as well as prolonged icy conditions through until the middle of January.
2. North-easterly winds brought several centimetres of snow between 17 and 20 December. This resulted in severe travel disruption, particularly in south-east England with long delays on some trunk roads, disruption to flights from all of the regions airports and to Channel Tunnel rail services, due to adverse conditions in northern France. In the run up to Christmas further snow and freezing temperatures continued to cause difficult conditions with icy surfaces.
3. From Christmas to the New Year the northern half of the UK bore the brunt of the cold weather, with further snow and some very sharp frosts, whilst the south east benefited from a milder period. The severe weather returned to the south east between the 7 and 9 January where it caused further severe disruption to daily life and continued until a slow thaw set in from Sunday 10 January. A final but short burst of snow fell on the morning of Wednesday 13 January and caught everybody by surprise, including the Met Office who had only forecast rain or sleet. This caused further travel disruption for a few hours in the morning, after which the thaw continued.
4. There is no doubt that the magnitude and duration of this period of severe weather stretched local authorities and emergency services to the limit and clearly demonstrated the limitations of local authorities' ability to respond and maintain the transport infrastructure and continue to provide local services. What is clear however is that Hastings and East Sussex were not unique in this and throughout most of the country councils were unable to respond effectively and as time went on salt shortages resulted in Government intervention in its distribution and use.
5. Whilst the weather was exceptional there are lessons to be learned at all levels from Central Government to the local level. County and District Councils for their part will need to examine how prepared they were, how they actually responded to the situation and how they can be better prepared in future.

## The local experience

6. The main snowfall occurred between 17 and 20 December and between 6 and 10 January. Temperatures fell dramatically over that December weekend causing extreme difficulties for motorists and pedestrians. Snowfall was heavier and more prolonged during the January episode and was particularly heavy on Saturday 9 January when it closed all but the primary routes in Hastings.

7. In accordance with the Winter Service Plan (see Appendix B) gritters were deployed on a total of 66 occasions over this four week period, applying over several hundred tonnes of salt over standard and snow routes and in addition using ploughs over the weekend of 9 and 10 of January. Stocks were being rapidly depleted and application rates and new supplies were restricted through the Government's 'Salt Cell' plan. Treatments did not therefore extend beyond these priority routes and footways, pedestrianised areas and minor roads were not treated in accordance with the Winter Service Plan.
8. The Borough Council does not retain any stocks of salt or grit of its own and has not done so for several years. It is not routinely equipped to deal with the effects of snow and ice and certainly not such severe weather episodes as this. Goodwill arrangements with ESCC and its contractor had however enabled us to respond to less severe weather episodes in the past.
9. The severity of the weather on this occasion and the predicted duration of it required those salt stocks that were available to be conserved for priority routes, and no salt was able to be released for the treatment of footways, pedestrianised areas and minor roads in accordance with the scheme of prioritisation.
10. Attempts to obtain alternative supplies of salt or grit following the Christmas break proved difficult as demand across the UK and Europe outstripped supply and the Government intervened invoking its 'Salt Cell' plan to control distribution. After experimenting with the use of 'sharp sand' for footway treatment with the agreement of ESCC a quantity of grit was finally obtained from Eire. This arrived on 11 January and was applied throughout the Town Centre and secondary shopping areas, by redeploying our street cleansing contractor staff. Its effect was, however, limited due to the lack of salt content.
11. Refuse and recycling collections were severely disrupted by the snow. Collections for properties on main roads were continued as far as possible but side and estate roads were in general inaccessible. Collection schedules were rearranged to reach as many areas as possible but had to be suspended on four occasions. Following the gradual thaw the contractor worked over the weekend of 9 and 10 January to try to catch up. Collections reverted to the routine collection timetable with effect from 18 January but side waste is still being taken until 8 February to ensure all outstanding waste and recycling is collected.
12. Through Local Resilience Forum contingency arrangements, Borough Council staff assisted the Primary Care Trust and the Conquest Hospital using our 4x4 vehicles to distribute prescriptions and transport patients and staff to and from the Hospital.
13. Information on the Council's website on refuse and recycling was regularly updated and frequent press releases issued to local radio to try to keep the public informed. Regular updates were also provided to Elected Members and staff.
14. There is no doubt that the intensity and duration of the severe weather and the lack of availability of salt for the treatment of footways, pedestrianised areas, side and estate roads caused extensive disruption of daily life and severely restricted the ability of people to move around. It is important to emphasise however that even if stocks of salt had been available, the resources to distribute them by redeploying our existing contractors would still be limited. Its distribution would therefore still

have to be prioritised and in such persistent conditions it is still likely that significant residential areas would be left untreated.

15. If the Borough Council wished to adopt a more proactive approach to such severe weather conditions, a number of options exist subject to the agreement of ESCC which is the highway authority (legal responsibilities are set out in Appendix A). These range from arranging a stock of salt and developing contingency plans with our contractor for its application in appropriate conditions; provision of additional grit bins; or distribution of bags of grit to predetermined strategic locations when necessary to enable self help.
16. This was the first real test of the Council's business continuity plans. Apart from the disruption to refuse and recycling services we were able to keep most other services operating as normal. This was achieved through a contribution of local staff getting to work and home working by those living further away. Lessons have been learned and we will use these to examine how we might respond more effectively during such severe weather.

### **Policy and financial implications**

17. The cost of obtaining and applying the sand and grit detailed in paragraph 10 above was approximately £6,000, which has been met from within the existing Waste Management budgets.
18. Were the Borough Council minded to put in place future contingency arrangements to treat footways, pedestrian areas and minor roads then:-
  - a. The express permission of the County Council as the Highway Authority would have to be obtained;
  - b. A fully costed contingency plan would need to be developed and approved; and
  - c. Budget provision will need to be identified to fund this plan.

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### **Wards Affected**

Ashdown, Baird, Braybrooke, Castle, Central St. Leonards, Conquest, Gensing, Hollington, Maze Hill, Old Hastings, Ore, Silverhill, St. Helens, Tressell, West St. Leonards, Wishing Tree

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### **Area(s) Affected**

Central Hastings, East Hastings, North St. Leonards, South St. Leonards

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## Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	Yes
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	Yes
Environmental Issues	Yes
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	Yes

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## Background Information

Appendix A - Legal Responsibilities  
Appendix B - ESCC Winter Service Plan

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## Officer to Contact

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## Appendix A

### Legal Responsibilities

The statutory duty for keeping roads and footpaths clear lies with the highway authority (East Sussex County Council) under Section 41(1A) Highways Act 1980. This is not however an absolute duty and is qualified as follows:-“to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice.”

East Sussex County Council (ESCC) have devised a policy to reflect what they consider to be reasonably practicable, and this is published on their website at <http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/roads/maintenance/saltingandgritting/default.htm>

The Borough Council has no statutory duty in this respect but in its role as the agent of the County Council under the Highways Management Agreement it is responsible for implementing County Council highways policies within the Borough. In respect of the Winter Service Plan this role involves determining when to deploy gritters, to which routes and how much salt to apply. These decisions are made in consultation with the duty manager at ESCC and must be in accordance with the policy.

In the absence of a statutory duty in this respect, the Borough Council may wish to take some action to keep footpaths and pedestrianised areas etc. not adequately covered by the ESCC policy free of snow and ice. If the Borough Council wished to exercise its well-being powers for this purpose, then it would have to be with the agreement of the ESCC since they have responsibility for highways.

## Appendix B

### ESCC Winter Service Plan

The full East Sussex County Council Winter Service Plan 2009/10 is available at <http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/roads/maintenance/saltingandgritting/default.htm>

The Plan sets out the planned response to winter weather conditions to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice.

In the event of snow being forecast, the ESCC Winter Service Plan prioritises available resources to treat main (standard) routes through the Borough and then other 'snow routes' which include scheduled bus routes and feeder roads to hospitals. The Plan goes on to state that:

"No footways, pedestrian precincts or cycleways shall be specifically included for precautionary salting on a forecast of snow, due to the impracticality and financial implications of so doing. However, there may be a certain amount of salt overspill onto footways and cycleways whilst precautionary salting adjacent roads."

Following snow fall resources are again targeted toward standard and snow routes. Once these are clear other roads are prioritised following scouting and assessment with priority given to roads serving hospitals, and emergency services, stations and public transport interchanges, steep hills and then shopping areas, schools etc. Again the plan goes on to state that:

"Hand salting of footways shall only be instigated where resources become available, and then only after consultation between the Duty Manager and duty Officers. Footways will be treated on a priority basis in accordance with the footway hierarchy:

Main Shopping Areas

Busy Urban Areas

Other Urban and Busy Rural

Little Used Rural"

The plan also makes provision for salt bins throughout the County at problematical locations as a means of self help for motorists and pedestrians to enable the salting of small areas of carriageway or footway not covered by the routes described above. There are 106 ESCC salt bins in Hastings. Since 1997 no additional bins are provided by ESCC but they will allow the provision of additional bins by Parish and District Councils, Residents Associations etc.