

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**PLANNING and TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY BOARD**

**22 February 2011**

**Report of the Director of Planning, Transport and Leisure**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Information**

**1 WINTER RESPONSE IN CAR PARKS**

**Summary**

**The report assesses the current arrangements in place to respond to severe winter weather in the Borough's car parks and how well these operated over the snow crisis period during December.**

**1.1 Introduction**

- 1.1.1 The severe winter weather of January 2009 provided a reminder of what conditions can be like in the south east. This came after many years of fairly benign winters with only brief spells of snow. For many years, we were able to benefit from the operational capacity we had as part of the Kent Highways Partnership and this assisted in providing some additional resilience for our own Borough Council assets and services. When that came to an end in 2005, the long series of mild winters made it difficult to justify the cost of gearing up to provide guaranteed resilience in our car parks to combat bouts of severe winter weather.
- 1.1.2 Such resilience is achievable if enough money is invested in plant, equipment, training and storage, especially of salt stocks. Generally speaking, the more the expenditure, the greater the degree of resilience. However, there is a practical limitation because whatever we do is constrained by access to our offices and car parks using the highway network which depends on the actions of the local highway authority.
- 1.1.3 The fundamental point about gearing up for a winter response is that the plant, equipment, materials and associated storage areas all come at a cost, and it is a cost that is potentially abortive if a winter turns out to be a mild one. Nevertheless, the experience with the winter of 2009/10 was sufficiently serious to persuade the Borough Council that a step change in operational capacity was essential.
- 1.1.4 The aim was not absolute guaranteed operational resilience, but a measured and appropriate enhancement of what was achievable through the addition of a 4x4

vehicle and gritter trailer, an almost doubling of the number of salt bins in our car parks and the storage of some salt stocks at Kings Hill and in Tonbridge.

## **1.2 Response during December 2010**

1.2.1 Winter is not yet over and there remains the risk of severe weather through the end of February and March. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to have an interim review of how the new arrangements worked during December and to identify any lessons we need to learn or adjustments we should make.

1.2.2 Winter response across the Council works on several parallel and related strands;

- At a corporate level, activity is focused on ensuring the offices are open for business, even if this is achieved through a skeletal staffing arrangement. This was achieved throughout December, helped in part by the new 4x4 vehicle.
- Health and Housing Services focuses on maintaining the refuse collection service as consistently as possible in a snow crisis and it succeeded to a significant degree in minimising the disruption during December.
- When conditions are as severe as they were in December, litter picking and bulky waste collections are inevitably disrupted or rendered impossible. When this happens, the gangs are 'loaned' to Kent Highway Services to assist with clearing footways and accesses to critical local destinations such as doctors' surgeries and schools. Deployment and supervision come under the direct control of KHS inspectors who work through the schedule of locations set out in the Plan reported to the last meeting of the Board. This represents the Borough Council's contribution towards restoring normal conditions by helping the highway authority clear critical public locations sooner than would otherwise be the case.
- For Planning, Transport & Leisure Services, the focus is on keeping a range of Borough Council areas open and safe for use. These include car parks in town and village centres, leisure sites such as Larkfield Leisure Centre and Tonbridge Swimming Pool and also around the offices at Kings Hill and Tonbridge Castle to enable customer access to be safely maintained.

1.2.3 This report deals with this final strand although there are inevitably some points to raise about the KHS response and how its work on the highway fared. A general overall assessment of the Borough Council response in keeping our own assets accessible and safe for the local community was that it worked well, subject to some acceptance that it was an exceptionally difficult task to treat all the places that we wanted and needed to during the height of the crisis period. Without wishing to put different locations in competition with each other, it is inevitable that some places will be considered for priority before others when deploying our limited resources to try and achieve the best overall result across the Borough.

- 1.2.4 All of the additional salt bins for the car parks were installed in the summer and early autumn and filled in preparation for the coming winter, some 100m tons in total. The 4x4 vehicle and gritter were delivered in late October and a programme was started to ensure a properly trained core of staff was available before the start of the winter. In any normal year there would have been no problem with running this through November and December in preparation for severe weather in January or February. As it was, there were two severe bouts of weather during December before everyone was fully trained. Even so, despite this deterioration in the conditions earlier than expected, sufficient training had been carried out to allow a good response through the critical period.
- 1.2.5 Gritting on its own is ineffective in dealing with heavy snow fall. It is, however, very effective as a follow-up treatment if the snow can be cleared first. During the second bout of snow just before Christmas, we adopted an operational practice of using our grounds maintenance contractor, Kent Landscape Services, to clear snow as early as possible in the morning in the car parks using its face-shovel equipped tractors. Then we followed this by using the 4x4 and trailer to grit the car parks or in some cases by the parking attendants hand gritting. All in all, this worked well, especially the role played by Kent Landscaping Services, and will be the foundation of an operational plan we hope to produce to bring more structure to the response.

### **1.3 Next Steps**

- 1.3.1 Naturally, responding to the severe weather has identified 'lessons to be learnt' and further work on refining our processes and procedures. For instance, our planning anticipated that we would be able to carry out a refilling of the salt bins in the car parks using Ringways. As it happened this proved to be impossible because the County Council restricted access to salt stocks once the winter crisis was underway. This also severely disrupted our planning for refilling the gritter which was based around being able to do so at the KHS depots. However, we were able to revert to our 'fall-back' plan of hand loading from our own stock of bagged salt.
- 1.3.2 We are, therefore, currently considering how best to ensure we are able in future years to carry out at least one refilling operation on our own salt bins acting independently from the County Council. The only readily apparent way to do so appears to be to buy the salt in bulk in the summer when the price is at its lowest and store it on our own property. We have two containers already located in a spare corner of Sovereign Way North car park and the 80 or so tons required to refill the salt bins could be stored alongside these in a small compound. We will also be ensuring that we have a stock of bagged salt stored at the Kings Hill offices.
- 1.3.3 The storage of the gritter, the palettes of bagged salt and the small conveyor belt needed to safely load the gritter are presenting continuing challenges. These are extra items of equipment and materials that are surplus to normal requirements for

much of the year and they compete for limited storage space with other items. A further consideration is that the salt itself has a 'shelf-life' and cannot be used in the gritter once it starts to solidify. We will look to resolve these matters for the operational response in future years.

- 1.3.4 The treatment in some car parks, it has to be acknowledged, was disappointing. The new vehicle and gritter combination proved impossible to use in some car parks, especially Borough Green, because of the exceptional conditions and topography of the car park and it means that treatment in this and other similar locations has to be labour intensive. Consequently, dealing with them is dependent on and influenced by our limited physical capacity but we are currently devising ways of improving the response at these locations. In general terms, we need to refine factors associated with improved resilience, more training for staff, firmer contact arrangements and we will be addressing all these factors and incorporating them into the operational plan referred to earlier.

## **1.4 Matters Related to the KHS Response**

- 1.4.1 There have been a number of requests from Members for additional salt bins at critical locations and these have come mainly from Tonbridge. There are a number of salt bins located throughout the town and many of these date back to the days when the Borough Council managed the local highway network on behalf of the County Council. However, the locations where these are situated are likely to be ones where conditions were most acute during the long spell of reasonably mild winters. During last winter and this, conditions have been much more severe and this has potentially reinforced the need for salt bins at a number of other locations that were not problematic in the past.
- 1.4.2 The highway liaison officer at KHS has been alerted to the potential sites already indicated by Members and these should be subject to assessment using the procedure outlined in the report to the last meeting. If Members have additional sites, I would invite them to alert the Chief Engineer so that he can coordinate the request for assessment to KHS.

## **1.5 Legal Implications**

- 1.5.1 There are no direct legal implications of the report but there are potential liability issues picked up within the section below on Risk Assessment.

## **1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

- 1.6.1 Provision for the winter maintenance response is contained within existing revenue budgets.

## **1.7 Risk Assessment**

- 1.7.1 Snow clearance and gritting in the car parks is an important activity to ensure the safety of people using the car parks and to mitigate the Council's risk of liability during severe winter weather conditions.

## **1.8 Policy Considerations**

### 1.8.1 Asset Management

Background papers:

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Nil

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