
Meeting: Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny committee
Date: 7 September, 2010
Subject: Winter Maintenance within Central Bedfordshire
Report of: Cllr David McVicar, Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities and Healthier Lifestyles
Summary: This report examines the problems experienced last winter during the worst snow for over thirty years and proposes changes to the Winter Service Operational Plan.

Advising Officer: Gary Alderson, Director of Sustainable Communities
Contact Officer: Basil Jackson, Assistant Director Highways & Transport
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Executive
Key Decision Yes
**Reason for urgency/
exemption from call-
in
(if appropriate)** N/A

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

Council priorities affected by this paper are:

- Creating safer communities;
- Supporting and caring for an aging population; and
- Managing growth effectively.

Financial:

There is no additional cost to the Authority from the proposal to amend its Priority 1A network and the salt bin policy as proposed is self funding.

Legal:

Highway Authorities are under a statutory duty to maintain highways. This general duty is set out in Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980, amended by the Railways and Transport Act 2003, which states: "*In particular, a Highway Authority is under a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practical, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow and ice*".

Risk Management:

It should be noted that in the event of very severe weather conditions it may not be possible to treat the full Priority 1 network. Communication media has been developed to advise the travelling public and other public bodies (such as schools) about road conditions and specific actions being taken by the Authority with respect to salting.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

n/a

Equalities/Human Rights:

n/a

Community Safety:

The proposals improve access issues for public bodies such as emergency services and schools that need to be considered within our winter maintenance prioritisation process during exceptional winter conditions.

Sustainability:

There could be issues around managing salt stocks so that there are sufficient reserves to keep the road network free of snow and ice during exceptional weather conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Executive:

- (a) To amend the Priority 1A network that is only used in exceptional circumstances, so that a gritted route is provided to the majority of the upper and middle schools in Central Bedfordshire. This amended network to be included within the Winter Service Operational Plan 2009/10 (a copy of this is appended to this report);**
- (b) That the salt bin policy be adopted in line with the outcome of the consultation; and**
- (c) That the Central Bedfordshire Council continue to search for suitable Council owned land for additional salt storage.**

Introduction

1. Last winter, between December 2009 and February 2010, Central Bedfordshire, along with most of the rest of the country, experienced the worst snowfall for over thirty years. The impact of the 2008/09 winter had resulted in Executive agreeing the formal adoption of a Priority 1A network (a reduced gritting network covering approximately 19% of our roads) to be salted only in times of exceptional circumstances such as national salt shortages.

2. In 2009/10 there was a similar national shortage of salt which meant that highway authorities did not receive their salt replenishment orders. The shortage became so severe that the Government set up their national Salt Cell (similar to 2008/09) and allocated the national salt stocks to highway authorities on a needs basis. Along with many other highway authorities, Central Bedfordshire Council was again forced to restrict its snow clearing and salting operations to its Priority 1A network in order to keep traffic moving on the strategic road network. This report looks at the issues that arose in 2009/10 and seeks to introduce improved ways of working to reduce the impact in future years if similar events are experienced.

Options examined since last winter

3. Our winter maintenance activities in Central Bedfordshire are based on best practice in the industry. However, reflecting on our experience last winter, officers believe that it is possible to make some improvements to our operations that will help local communities. As a result of the issues experienced last winter a Portfolio Holder working group was established that examined the following issues:
 - Whether land could be found for additional salt storage;
 - Whether covered storage could be used so that we are able to use less salt;
 - Whether salt could be imported in case our usual supplier runs short;
 - A review of the policy for the provision of salt bins; and
 - Whether the Priority 1A network could be adjusted so that there is a gritted route to all upper and middle schools.
4. Both Bedford and Dunstable depots are restricted by their urban locations. They are already congested and operating at capacity for the highway operations that are carried out. Pre-season salt stocks and in-season stocking arrangements were reviewed before the 2008/09 winter and minimum stock levels were increased by 33% giving sufficient salt for over 20 continuous Priority 1 saltings. There is no opportunity to expand either depot to create additional salt storage. As a result, officers have been looking to see if there is any Central Bedfordshire land available to store additional salt or if there are any opportunities to share salt storage with the Highways Agency; all with no success to date.

5. At both Bedford and Dunstable Depots salt is stored outside and is uncovered. Due to the limited space available it is not possible to cover the salt within the depots. Covering salt keeps it drier and allows the rate of spread to be reduced. The Highways Service has looked at options for covering any additional salt stocks to reduce usage. Two options have been identified: the provision of an additional salt barn and storing salt in an "Ag-Bag" which is a strong plastic bag more usually used to store agricultural products. The provision of a salt barn would cost in the region of £200k while storing salt in an Ag-Bag would cost in the region of £4 - £5 per tonne. The option of a salt barn cannot be progressed unless a site can be identified and funding found. The cheaper option of storing salt in an Ag-Bag has also had to be discounted at this stage as it has not been possible to identify any suitable land for storage.
6. The Highways Service has identified four alternative salt suppliers from whom the Council could purchase additional salt. As with the option of a salt barn and Ag-Bags this option cannot be pursued unless additional land can be identified where the salt can be stored.
7. Following numerous requests from communities after the 2009/10 winter to have more salt bins, a new draft policy has been developed and consultation is currently being undertaken with town and parish councils. The draft policy allows communities to fund additional salt bins and salt at their own expense with the community taking responsibility for managing salt usage. The consultation is still ongoing at the time of writing this report, so its outcomes will be reported verbally at Executive.
8. The existing Priority 1A network agreed by the Executive does not include a gritted route to all upper and middle schools. A revised Priority 1A network has been developed for 2010/11 by adding in a gritted route to all upper and middle schools. Any amendments to the network will be included in the Winter Service Operational Plan 2009/10 (see appended document); the amended version will become the plan for 2010/11.
9. Central Bedfordshire Council is developing a website where our educational establishments can access road weather and condition information, together with the winter maintenance actions that Bedfordshire Highways is undertaking. This will enable these establishments to make more informed decisions as to whether or not to close schools and colleges.
10. At its meeting held on 17 August 2010, the Executive considered the inclusion of additional salt storage capacity within the redeveloped household waste recycling centres as part of the BEaR project.

Summary

11. Although additional land has not been found, officers consider that:
- the minor adjustments made to the Priority 1A salting network will facilitate improved access to upper and middle schools;
 - Website improvements will enable upper and middle schools to make better informed decisions as to whether or not to remain open during severe winter weather; and
 - that the new salt bin policy will enable local communities to assist the travelling public during periods of ice and snow on those roads and footways that would not be salted under the present salting regime undertaken by The Highways Service.

Background Papers (open to public inspection):

Winter Service Operational Plan 2009/10

Location of papers: Website and also Priory House, Chicksands