

## **Scrutiny Review of the Severe Winter Weather Experienced in Hampshire in 2009/10 Oral Evidence Day 17 June: Meeting Notes**

### **Attendance:**

Cllr Keith Chapman (Chairman)  
Cllr Keith Evans (Vice Chairman)  
Cllr Adrian Collett  
Cllr Bruce Tennent  
Cllr Sharyn Wheale

Cllr Pat West gave apologies

### **Human Resources: Gavin Wright, Director of Human Resources**

The role of Human Resources (HR) during the adverse weather was threefold:

- Managing the immediate impact on staff to ensure that people were able to get to and from work safely
- Maintaining frontline services
- Establishing a 'volunteer bureau' to support front line services and vulnerable members of the community

Overall these objectives were met. Key messages were passed quickly to staff, and close working with key departments such as Adult Services ensured that frontline services were maintained throughout the period of adverse weather. Two particular challenges did emerge. Firstly how to monitor the number of staff who were unable to get into work. This was relatively straight forward for front line services, but others were more difficult. The second was to ensure that guidance to managers about staff was applied appropriately and that whilst corporate advice was provided, local discretion was also required depending on the circumstances.

The vast majority of staff made extraordinary efforts to get into work – the main causes of absences were due to road conditions or because schools were closed. Consideration was given to providing facilities at work for child care, but health and safety considerations meant this was not possible. Further work is currently in hand to explore if this might be possible in conjunction with partners should an event of this nature happen again.

One issue that did emerge was the extent to which staff could access alternative County Council facilities that were not their normal place of work. This was difficult for some, for example where small outlying offices were not as well prepared to accommodate extra staff. One of the priority areas for action is to ensure that in such circumstances communications are improved to enable this option to be more effectively exploited in future.

Passport was a real benefit for office based staff unable to get into work as it enabled them to work from home. In some cases, support staff who could work from home were actively encouraged not to attempt to come in, to reduce the pressure on transport systems. It was acknowledged this message could be reinforced in future. Working from home was more difficult for staff providing direct care, but to the credit of staff services to the vulnerable were maintained throughout the period of bad weather.

Staff with 4x4 vehicles were used to provide assistance where possible, as staff registering with the volunteer bureau were asked if they had a 4x4. Consideration was now being

given to maintaining a register of staff who would be able to assist in this way should the adverse weather reoccur. Training would be essential and arrangements would need to be made to ensure staff driving on County business in such circumstances would be covered by the County Council's insurance.

The potential for a county wide approach to the co-ordination of 4x4 volunteers was worth considering.

The Volunteer Bureau worked well. Corporate services staff were invited to contribute to the maintenance of frontline services by providing support to vulnerable people living close to them. Over 300 staff offered their services. Adult Services set up a help line for people who were experiencing difficulties as a consequence of the bad weather, which was advertised in local media. Staff were deployed from home in response. Details of the volunteers available by post code were also shared with the Districts. Hampshire County Council had received national recognition for this scheme.

HR also worked closely with Children's Services, who were giving advice and guidance to schools. Head teachers were aware of the importance of schools being open to enable parents to get to work, particularly once the priority routes were reopened.

Consideration was given to using texts to communicate with staff but this was dependent on staff being willing to give their numbers and the system being kept up to date. This did merit further exploration, although it does need to be noted that mobile phone coverage is poor in some areas.

The three priority areas for action being taken forward by HR following the adverse weather were:

- Improving guidance to managers to ensure staff are safe
- Getting messages and key communications to staff
- Access to alternative facilities when it was not possible for staff to get to their normal place of work

### **Children's Services: Felicity Roe, Assistant Director of Children's Services**

Children's Services did its own 'wash-up' in March to identify the key issues related to the adverse weather. Overall the feedback was positive. Services were maintained and vulnerable children and families were supported. Schools were able to cope and messages went out effectively to parents. Departments and services supported each other and there was a sense of 'pulling together'. The main lessons to emerge were based around the duration and severity of the weather.

The value of schools having an agreed policy for such conditions had been highlighted and Children's Services were intending to remind schools in September of the value of having a 'snow plan', including responsibilities for clearing school grounds. A model policy was in the process of being up-dated. Although Children's Services were able to strongly recommend this approach it should be remembered that schools are self governing.

Schools wishing to purchase grit bins and arrange for replenishment could do so cost effectively via the County Council.

The responsibilities and liabilities of schools in periods of extreme weather should be included in business continuity plans, which should cover short and long term disruption. Liability advice had been provided by Hampshire County Council Legal Department.

Some schools had lists of people with 4x4 vehicles and were able to call on this resource for assistance.

Texting was an effective way of contacting parents and a means of communicating with a large number of people in Hampshire in extreme circumstances.

Where teachers were unable to get to their own schools it was not possible for them to simply go to another that was accessible. Schools employ their own staff and there were legal implications if a teacher was not directly employed by the school.

There was scope for classes to be brought together in the same school if not all teachers were unable to get to work. The point at which the ratio of teachers to pupils would be unmanageable should be covered in the schools business continuity plan.

Schools were very aware of the consequences for parents as well as children if they closed: this was not a decision that they made lightly and safety issues were the main consideration. It is also important for schools to be able to take account of external factors such as weather, traffic and the state of roads. They require accurate information to inform their decision. It was noted that two schools on the same site might make different decisions about closing, as teachers for each school may have to travel from different locations. School closure decisions are taken by the head teacher, to ensure the decision takes into account circumstances specific to that school.

There was a need for transparency and clear communications about what is being given priority in terms of gritting and snow clearance in these circumstances.

Social workers went to extremes to visit vulnerable clients and prioritised to ensure that the most vulnerable were contacted. Where areas were not accessible the police would be asked to assist. Consideration is being given to using school support staff living in the area (who are CRB checked) to make contact with clients.

Children's Services were aware of Gold Command and its role.

### **Hantsdirect: Michelle Smith, Head of Resources and Steve Hawker Operational Manager**

Hantsdirect is the first point of email or telephone contact for all County Council departments. It has 12 public numbers and 2 professional numbers. An out of hours service operates for social care calls.

There was a massive increase in calls to Hantsdirect during the adverse weather. In the three days leading to Christmas December 2008 there were 522 calls regarding roads and transport, and in the same period in December 2009 there were 3983 calls in this category. Similarly in the first week of January 2009 there were 1871 roads and transport calls, compared to 3443 in the first week of January 2010. Another area where figures can be compared is highway fault reporting, figures for this were 2252 in October 2009, 3139 in November 2009, 5241 in December 2009 and 6012 in January 2010.

Staff coped well with the weather and made significant efforts to get to work; one individual walked 7 miles to work and back. Staff worked very flexibly but with staffing levels down between 20% and 70% Hantsdirect was not able to provide its normal level of service. Priority was given to calls relating to Adult Services, Children's Services, Registration Services and Highways. The technology available also enabled call messages to be tailored around different service areas, so where a call was waiting to be answered relevant information was provided to inform customers of the current position and of any alternative ways of accessing information e.g. through Hantsweb, the County Council's website.

Communications with Departments were sufficient to enable priority calls to be dealt with. However, improved links across all departments would help should such an event happen again, to ensure information regarding service availability in the 'back office' functions is communicated to hantsdirect.

Hantsdirect restricted opening hours due to the reduced number of staff available. When calls were not being taken, answer phone messages directed the public to alternative sources of information such as the internet, or alternative sources of help if serious e.g. police. The centre did open on the Sunday which is not the normal practice

Hantsdirect staff cannot currently work from home, however consideration is being given to whether hpsn2 (the upgrade to the Hampshire public service I.T. network) could enable hantsdirect staff to access the appropriate software from home in future. Staff with children who would otherwise not have been able to come into work due to the closure of schools were able to bring them into work and leave them in a safe, supervised environment. CCRA supported the centre by providing a driver and 4x4 vehicle to assist with getting staff to and from work.

There were no complaints about the service during this period. Overall the public were understanding and the telephone messaging service was a helpful mechanism for telling people what was happening.

Hantsdirect was the front end of the 'Volunteer Bureau' line receiving calls and passing messages on to Adult Services.

Hantsdirect could put callers through to Districts where this was appropriate and there is scope for more cross Authority working to improve this aspect of the service.

A big issue for staff was getting on and off the site safely if they were able to get to work. The access road and car park were particular problems in this respect and staff did help to try and clear the snow but there was a problem with ice.

### **Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service: Andy Bowers, Area Manager**

HFR has severe weather and business continuity plans for events such as this. These plans enabled HFR to move quickly to set up a major incident room to respond to the situation. Staff were also very enthusiastic in the support they provided.

Overall the service responded well to requests for help during this period and appliances were able to get to all incidents that they were called to. The service was seeking to learn from this experience and one emerging issue was co-ordination of assistance across Hampshire. HFR was able to lend its 4x4 capacity to partner agencies, and it was important that this assistance was given in order of priority. A 'Memorandum of

Understanding' across partner agencies setting out what help each was able to offer, and agreed priorities, needed to be formulated now so that all could be prepared should adverse weather problems recur next winter.

It was noted that the fire service itself had been less active during this period, partly because people were staying at home and traffic was much slower. Although there were a greater number of minor traffic accidents there were less major road traffic accidents. Calls on ambulance co-responders (retained fire service personnel trained by the ambulance trust as a first response to an emergency) did however increase significantly during this period. In order to expedite responses arrangements were made to put co-responders in 4x4 vehicles. 4x4s were also offered to the ambulance service.

HFR also provided 4x4 vehicles and trained drivers to the police to help with reaching stranded motorists. The police adverse weather office interacts with the fire service and it was considered they worked well together.

Staff were able to get to work during this period and the option exists for them to work at any fire station if they are unable to get to their normal place of work. Most support staff also have access to Passport and therefore can work from home. Retained fire service personnel tend to be more local and therefore less affected than some other colleagues.

Priority 1 gritting routes do not cover access to all fire stations, however they do cover strategically positioned fire stations – these are prioritised due to their position in relation to key transport links and the facilities available at those sites. Of 52 fire stations 20 have access to 4x4 vehicles, and these are located strategically e.g. in rural areas like the new forest.

It was confirmed that HFRS are aware of the County Council's priority gritting routes, and plan accordingly. Gritting routes were not considered to cause particular problems, as the Fire service were able to attend all call outs they received.

In response to a question relating to snow chains it was confirmed that consideration was being given to the most effective and appropriate product. It was recognised that some metal chains could damage road surfaces but alternatives were available.

### **Environment Department: Chris Lait, Highways and Transport Area Director**

The Environment Department was continuing its internal review of the impact of the adverse weather on its services. Recommendations for action would go to the Executive Member for Environment at the end of June and an update to Cabinet in July.

It is likely that this work will highlight the option of adjusting priority 1 and 2 routes to include emergency services and transport hubs as well as some other key public transport facilities, such as main bus stations. Routes are being reviewed to pick up on any anomalies that should be covered but currently aren't. Schools with 500 or more pupils are currently included on the priority 1 network and it is anticipated that combined school sites, or school sites in close proximity that exceed this figure will be included in this network in the future. Car parking in private premises (e.g. rail stations) are not the responsibility of the County Council. Access routes to some County Council services (e.g. Hantsdirect) are cleared but car parks are the responsibility of facilities management.

In addition to this, consideration was being given to additional investment of £250,000 to purchase equipment to clear school and community routes- this would concentrate on highway access to schools, health centres and other key community facilities (e.g. cemeteries). This resource could be used flexibly and could run separately to the priority 1 and 2 networks (so clearance of these routes would no longer be dependent on priority 1 and 2 routes being cleared first). This capacity could also be used to contribute to clearing priority 1 and 2 networks when community routes are less likely to be needed (e.g. during school holidays).

Salt stocks are being increased to 18,000 tonnes and a planning decision was awaited on a new salt barn. Should planning permission be refused or delayed a contingency had been identified. Storage had also been temporarily increased in existing barns. The trigger for restocking salt had been increased from 75% to 85% and the County Council would be at 100% at the start of the winter. Salt does deteriorate in storage and needs to be turned regularly. Additional salt suppliers have been identified and alternative products to salt are being evaluated.

The supply chain behind the provision of salt was being analysed and a workshop was being held with the County Council's highways contractor to consider and address these issues.

In response to an invitation from the County Council, sites for grit bins had been suggested by Parish Councils and it was anticipated that 1000 of these will be in place by December. This is the first phase of up to 4000 bins. The management/restocking of grit bins was currently being discussed with District Councils, as is the scope for improved partnership working to support the sharing of labour and snow ploughing.

The LGA has written to the new Government to ask them to address the issue of liability should people clear their own frontages and footpaths.

The County Council Highways branch does not provide for grit bins that are on school premises unless contracted to do so but would restock bins on the access routes to schools. There is some confusion about who is responsible for school premises

The role played by farmers in clearing snow was important and there could be benefit in holding a briefing session for them in the autumn and the County Council taking a lead in co-ordination of their contribution. In some weather simply clearing snow was not sufficient as it lead to icier conditions- in these circumstances was there scope for the farmers to grit as well?

In relation to the concern raised by the Highways Agency, it was indicated that access roads to motorways were gritted by the County Council, but due to the particular conditions on that occasion the grit was less effective. Congestion then impeded gritters attempting to reach the area to re-grit. The Highways Agency grits motorways and slip roads, the County Council is responsible for the roads leading to the slip roads. It was acknowledged there was scope for closer working with the Highways Agency e.g. taking a common sense approach to gritting of roads gritters travel along before reaching their designated routes.

Pavements are not a priority for gritting by the County Council unless they are in heavily used community areas, but in the longer term it may be possible to work with partners e.g. district councils, to enable footpaths to be treated sooner.

It was noted that the County agreed this winter to a reduced network, covering 12% of the network, for use when salt supplies are running low. Concern was raised that this reduced network did not include any roads to some communities e.g. Yateley.

The percentage of roads in Hampshire covered by the priority 1 network is 26%; the adjustments currently being considered may add a further 1-2% to this figure. It was acknowledged this would impact on the number of days our salt supplies would cover, however it was suggested with the increased salt stocks this would still be around 15 days supply.

In relation to clearing the car park at Hantsdirect, it was indicated this was the responsibility of facilities management. It was suggested that if Hampshire highways were to clear all the County Council's car parks this would be resource intensive, and would divert resources from the priority road clearance.

**NHS Hampshire: Richard Samuel Director of Performance and Standards.  
Fleet Medical Centre: James Perrin, Practice Manager**

The lessons for all to learn from the severe winter weather were acknowledged. Two key areas were highlighted from a health perspective

- Agencies did not come together effectively as a cohesive co-ordinating group
- The impact of the weather was short-lived for a number of agencies, but for health significant and severe disruption was experienced for 10+ days as a majority of care takes place in community settings.

Hospitals remained broadly accessible but a large number of frail and vulnerable patients in the community has access challenges up to 10 days after the main snowfall. Co-ordination between agencies reduced once the worst of the weather was over. The NHS incurred extra costs after the snow abated through employing agency workers to catch up on the backlog of appointments.

Anecdotally a large increase in falls were reported. It may be possible to assess the number of injuries due to falls and compare them to the figures for the same period the previous year.

It was noted that individual GP practices (outside of NHS owned health centres) were accountable for the maintenance and clearance of their own premises. The Medical Centre reported paying a private contractor to have their car park cleared, and reported the price of salt went up considerably during the severe weather compared to its usual cost.

The Medical Centre reported that, even when acting as a hub for their area when other practices were unable to open, patients were unable to gain access by road. Attempts to contact the County Council to address this were not successful. This example was a microcosm of the frustration of the NHS across the county as staff were unable to access key sites- this included rest homes and nursing homes.

The most vulnerable were identified as the frail elderly, and those with long term conditions requiring ongoing intensive support from multi-disciplinary health and social care teams to maintain their health and independence.

The Medical Centre estimated that the costs of dealing with local patients that hit a crisis during this period was in excess of £25,000.

There was a considerable number of 'slips and trips' to be dealt with. GPs were able to get to some emergencies by 4x4 vehicles owned by staff. Adult Services had been very helpful in providing 4x4 vehicles to the NHS

A strong strategic lead e.g. gold command, was needed to co-ordinate access to priority clients across different agencies. The NHS was not initially included in the adverse weather office . Need for clarity regarding when Gold Command is triggered, when the seriousness of the situation escalates gradually.

Key lessons were:

- How to make better use of 4x4s as a resource
- Prioritise the vulnerable and share intelligence
- Improve cross agency working

### **Hampshire Economic Partnership: Paul Kinvig, Chief Executive.**

Most businesses were of the view that the response of the County Council was very good particularly as the adverse weather came in so fast. The early warning system via the web was appreciated.

The overall costs to business of the bad weather is not known but the immediate impact on many businesses was a 15-17% drop in sales. Although levels did return to normal after the weather improved most have never recovered this shortfall. Another issue was that areas outside the county that were unable to respond as well in terms of opening key routes had an impact on supplies being able to get to businesses. Businesses have been as badly affected by the restrictions imposed by the 'ash cloud'. (where their business relies on supply/export of goods)

The Federation of Small Businesses reported that some local businesses actually saw an upturn in trade as people shopped locally – although there were issues about getting supplies.

Most urban business were accessible- but many staff were unable to get out of their homes/local areas or had to look after children. Many did not have access to 4x4s but the green transport scheme set up in many business parks could have potential for supporting staff getting to and from work.

The option of home working was only applicable to some sectors although the adverse weather was forcing many to consider this possibility. It was noted that access to broadband internet was important to support flexible working.

The potential liability for clearing areas did make some reluctant as there is a general fear that an individual could be held culpable.

One area for improving responsiveness might be to bring media and other key communicators together to agree a single point of contact to aid the rapid distribution of information.