

Scrutiny Review of the Severe Winter Weather Experienced in Hampshire in 2009/10 Oral Evidence Day 21 June: Meeting Notes

Attendance:

Cllr Keith Evans (Vice Chairman – Chaired morning session)

Cllr Keith Chapman (Chairman - gave apologies for morning session, attended and Chaired afternoon)

Cllr Adrian Collett

Cllr Bruce Tennent

Cllr Sharyn Wheale

Cllr Pat West gave apologies

Mamie Branthwaite, Head of Quality and Audit, Adult Services, Hampshire County Council

Emphasised that Adult Services staff were committed to reaching vulnerable service users throughout the period of winter weather. Examples were given of staff walking to service user homes when car travel was not possible and staying overnight at residential homes. In some cases 4x4 vehicles were used to help staff get to work.

When day centres were closed this was communicated well in advance, and staff were re-deployed to support other services. The community response team reported no critical incidents and contact was made with all service users daily. Reaching those who were alone or in isolated areas was prioritised. Business continuity plans for residential homes worked well.

The emergency response 'volunteer bureau' set up through liaison between Human Resources, Emergency Planning and Adults Services, worked well. Over 150 members of staff offered their services, and were used to help over 90 people (correction to figure given in written evidence).

Some service users reported their scheduled online grocery shopping deliveries being cancelled, and therefore needed assistance in accessing essentials such as milk and bread.

An example was given where highways were asked to clear the access road to a caravan site where many of the residents were elderly people.

The Hampshire Integrated Community Equipment Store carried on delivering equipment where possible, with the help of 4x4 vehicles.

A decision was taken to close the day centres operated by Adult Services for a week (but this was reviewed daily). The safety of services users was a deciding factor, as Adult Services did not wish for individuals to risk travelling to and from the centres. HCC day centre staff were redeployed or worked flexibly in the time the day centres were closed. Witness was unsure whether or not contractors were redeployed or involved in relief efforts – to check. The day centre was seen as being of lower priority in comparison to critical care.

Question was asked as to whether Councillors received regular communication from the Adult Services teams on their progress throughout the winter weather – witness to investigate.

Considered HantsDirect worked well as a means of handling queries regarding Adults Services. Calls were taken initially through Hantsdirect then passed to Adults Services staff to handle.

The NHS indicated to Adult Services and vice versa if they encountered issues reaching critical care patients, in order that others could reach them. Communication with the NHS was at an informal level. There could have been better liaison between Adults Services and the NHS, for example in relation to use of 4x4s to reach priority clients.

Adult services utilised 4x4 vehicles when normal car travel was not an option, with staff and other agencies volunteering their vehicles.

Staff contacted all service users known to be vulnerable or have critical care needs. Service users were contacted by telephone, although there is evidence that a proportion accessed the Hampshire County Council website for updates. Family members or named contacts were communicated with if services users could not be visited, in order to ensure someone could reach them.

Visits to service users were prioritised during the winter weather period, with those with the most critical needs all receiving regular visits. There were no critical incidences over the two periods of winter weather.

The Adult Services business continuity plan was invoked in the winter weather period, which ensured that all residential homes has at least one week's supply of food and essentials. The business continuity plan is being reviewed in light of the winter weather, in order to ensure that plans are in place to deal with heavy snowfall and the associated issues it brings.

Adult Services commended the partnership working with the Emergency Planning Unit and Human Resources during the time of the winter weather in relation to the 'volunteer bureau'.

Work is now ongoing with parish councils to build community resilience into business continuity plans, so that named community leaders are aware of vulnerable people in their locality and are able to reach them if Adult Services are not. Parish Councils would be able to have named contacts in Adult Services if this was required.

Caroline Winchurch, Hart Voluntary Action and Wendy Brown, Women's Royal Voluntary Service

Hart Voluntary Action is mostly a support for other voluntary groups, but does provide some services. HVA responded to this review by canvassing its members with the review questions. Of the responses received, it can be assumed that most voluntary services in the District closed over the winter weather period, with only those that could easily be reached on foot remaining open. All clubs run by HVA were cancelled, including the local day centre – this was for safety reasons, as travelling to these locations could have been dangerous.

HVA received calls from members of the public over the winter weather period wishing to volunteer their services. HVA suggested organisations like theirs could co-ordinate public volunteering in future situations, if this was supported by links with other agencies.

All of those using HVA services were contacted to inform them of closures, and the HVA office was manned throughout the period.

The meals on wheels service continued with the assistance of 4x4s – drivers were stopped to ask if they would be able to assist in delivering meals with the help of meals on wheels assistants. The police and Hampshire County Council Countryside team also lent their assistance and 4x4s to the service. One issue which arose within the meals on wheels service was that in some cases the meals are sourced from schools, which was no longer possible when schools were closed. Voluntary services like meals on wheels would benefit from 4x4 capacity being co-ordinated better in future.

Requests were received by HVA to clear drives or pathways, but volunteers and HVA were unsure on where they stood in relation to liability. Also reported were difficulties in procuring salt.

HVA were not aware that they could request new grit bins through their local Parish Council. It was suggested that the voluntary sector could play a proactive role in highlighting areas where such bins could be located.

When visiting older people's homes volunteers use a system similar to the trigger tool, where other needs are highlighted through being the 'eyes' and 'ears' of other services. Volunteers are especially trained to keep an eye out for alcohol prevalence, as this can be an indication of fuel poverty.

HVA didn't feel there was a knock-on effect of closing services, as service users who attend clubs and support groups tend to have NHS or Adult Social Care support workers.

The Yelabus doesn't tend to keep records of individuals as it is more of a bus for hire by various groups, but some drivers do get to know individuals.

Public bus services were running a reduced service, but there wasn't any communication between HVA and these, so were unaware of which routes were still in service. Some buses were snowed in at the depots. One bus company had only a phone number for enquiries at the time of the winter weather, and therefore had a constantly busy line when HVA tried to make contact. This bus company now has a website for service updates. There was also an issue of bus stops not being cleared and it being difficult for less able people to reach these and access buses from them. It was suggested that it would help if District Council websites carried service updates for public transport such as buses.

It was noted that warnings may need to be given to bus users regarding the state of pavements, as while buses may be able to run on cleared roads, the pavements users need to walk on once off the bus may not be cleared.

HVA would be please in future to be involved in any co-ordination of voluntary response to winter weather.

Ian Houl, County Emergency Planning Officer, Hampshire County Council

The various roles of the Emergency Planning Unit were outlined:

- (i) Pre-emergency, to ensure plans are in place for the County Council and District Councils (10 out of 11) to respond effectively to any emergency that may occur, and to learn and embed lessons learnt from previous emergencies in policy and procedure.
- (ii) During an emergency, to co-ordinate the County Council's response to any situation arising, based on procedures and business continuity plans, in order that business continues as much as is practicable.
- (iii) To work with external partners, including non-statutory organisations, in order that, post-emergency, normal service can be restored.

The HCC business continuity plan is not aimed towards any single emergency – it is designed to be effective no matter what the issue, and informs as to how services would be continued should anything happen.

Ten of the eleven District Councils in Hampshire use the County Emergency Planning Unit to fulfil their emergency planning needs, with Eastleigh Borough Council wishing to employ its own unit.

The previous government published a consultation on the use of community resilience plans within local communities, enabling local people to assist themselves in the face of an emergency. This consultation ends on 1 July 2010, and new guidance should be issued after that. It is likely local authorities will be asked in future to support communities in developing community resilience plans. The issue this brings about is 'what constitutes a community?', the consultation suggests this could be a parish area, or a neighbourhood watch area, or a block of flats. The document suggests that a community should be 'self-defining'. There is some concern that self defining groups may not cover all areas of the community that would benefit from such a plan.

The police play an important role in Gold Command at Netley, with the police chairing the emergency group during the December incident. In January, the incident persisted and lead passed to the chief executive of HCC, as per the protocol. The witness was surprised to hear the NHS evidence that not all partner agencies were aware of gold command or the role they played in the response to the winter weather. It was suggested this could have potentially been due to the differences in strategic and operational communication within the NHS.

There are no 4 wheel drive ambulances in Hampshire, so borrowed 4x4 vehicles had to be used to reach some patients. The Fire Service has 21 4x4 vehicles, HCC's Countryside Service also 5 or 6, and the Emergency Planning Unit has 1. HCC can also call on a voluntary group of 4x4 drivers 'Hampshire & Berkshire 4x4 response', whose drivers have special training. The NHS was the biggest recipient of aid from multi-agency partners including lending of 4x4's.

The use of 4x4 vehicles is now being reviewed. The number of 4x4's in the public sector were being reduced due to sustainability concerns, but it is likely this trend will now reverse as a result of the severe winter weather.

The biggest problem encountered by the Emergency Planning Unit was the supply of salt. It was felt that the national Salt Cell worked ineffectively, Hampshire only received 10% of

the total levels of salt allocated to us by the Salt Cell. The Salt Cell can only influence salt suppliers, it does not have the power to require them to distribute salt in accordance with their assessment. Shorter journeys are more profitable for salt suppliers so this tended to be their preference.

At one point, the County had less than one days salt remaining in its storage facilities, but thankfully did not run out, like some border authorities. When the government at the time asked for local authorities to reduce their salting routes by 26%, Hampshire had already reduced by 74%. The salting routes were reviewed by Highways & Transportation every day. Mutual assistance was supplied to other Local Authorities, such as Portsmouth, Brighton & Hove and Berkshire. Each request was considered carefully and some were rejected.

An example was given that a shipment of salt was sold by auction while it was on route, and due to demand the price paid was 8 times the normal price for salt. (Hampshire was not the winning bidder as we were not prepared to pay that much)

It is felt that the current minimum levels of salt and grit set by the government are not appropriate for a County the size of Hampshire, with the mix of rural and urban salting routes. Therefore a review is ongoing to look at increasing the amount of stock held, the placement of salt barns and the coverage of priority one routes. HCC have also been working with Amey, our Highways contractor, in order that road that cross local authority boundaries are kept clear, in agreement with other local authorities.

With hindsight it is felt that the response to the winter weather emergencies in Hampshire was 'spot on', and worked well to keep our services going. In the first period of snow in December nobody spent a night alone in their car, and in the January snow everybody who did was able to be reached by either a volunteer or partner agency. Nobody died as a direct cause of the winter weather emergency.

In relation to the situation in Basingstoke, it was reported that heavy snow had been predicted, and pre-emptive gritting had taken place, however rain in the morning washed the grit away. When it turned to snow, it settled very quickly so there was little time to get out and re-grit (particularly as the snow fell in the afternoon, and gritting is usually undertaken over night). It was discussed that it may have been of some benefit if people had not rushed to drive out of Basingstoke at the first sign of snow, leaving time for gritting lorries to get through first.

The emergency planning unit will also in future be working closely with premises management, so that salt can be allocated to help keep walkways and car parks clear to provide access to the County Council's office sites. In future not all satellite offices will be kept open – larger offices with clear desk policies will be prioritised, and staff informed which offices will be available.

Agreed that in future it will be communicated that the leaving of premises by staff should be staggered to reduce congestion.

Karen Brimacombe, Corporate Director, Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council

Basingstoke suffered more in the initial bout of winter weather in December, as the snow was unexpected, and the weather forecast was not received until the snow was already falling. This emergency was more difficult to respond to than other situations, as the

situation developed over time and was not triggered as an emergency. The Council did not set up an emergency control centre in the December bout of weather, but learnt from this and did in January.

Basingstoke & Deane District Council are undertaking their own review of the reaction to the winter weather. The review has just begun, but evidence shows already that the winter weather pulled communities together – this is something the District wishes to build on. This could involve working with parish councils in rural areas, areas that don't have parishes are more challenging but they are exploring other community groups to work with.

From complaints and comments received by the District Council it is clear that roads, pavements and grit bins were of most concern to residents, but these are issues that are outside of the District's control. There is a misconception amongst the public that grit bins are placed for their own convenience – some of it was used for private driveways and pavements, which left too little for roads.

It was agreed that the rush of traffic to leave Basingstoke in the December snow may have been the contributing factor to the traffic jams and subsequent trapping of cars in the snow. The emptying of the Festival Place shopping centre added to this. This issue was better managed in the January snow, with communications sent to local businesses and Council employees to stagger the times at which they left for home. Working with local businesses is something Basingstoke District Council wishes to further in future, and build into resilience plans.

Not many services were closed, as many that Basingstoke DC provides are contracted out. Sport & Leisure facilities were closed on the initial day of disruption, but opened on shorter hours each day after. Contractors redeployed employees to other areas of business if necessary. Staff providing in-house services were either able to work from home or work flexibly elsewhere.

The Council contact hotline received 2,000 extra calls. This was handled within existing resources, however calls were not answered as quickly as usual (a warning was provided to callers that there may be a delay in answering their call). A few complaints were received, for example in January in reference to shorter opening hours of the contact hotline (the hotline was closed early in order that staff could make their way home in the light).

When waste collection resumed, the perishable rubbish collection was prioritised over recycling, and was collected, although not on the usual day. Recycling returned to usual after the snow had cleared, but in some instances took up to 4 weeks to return to normal service. There weren't any issues with burial build-ups, but the route in and out of the cemetery had to be cleared.

Kestral radio was used by the District Council to communicate messages regarding service delivery to local people - this worked well and is something the Council hopes to expand on in future. The Council website was also used as a contact point for residents wishing to see information on services and the response to the weather. The Council also put out daily press releases, gave newspaper interviews and communicated information to Members regularly. It has since been agreed that in future all press releases will include 'key messages' that the Council wish to communicate to residents.

The District Council did not request to use any 4x4s, as it was felt that they would be best used by the County and other partners.

District Council staff worked day and night to assist with snow clearance, for example manually clearing car parks and footpaths, occasionally with use of snow plough attachments for tractors. They prioritised supporting public transport and cleared routes from the train station through the town centre.

District Council communicated with Hampshire Highways on a daily basis, providing alerts re key areas that needed clearing, it was then decided if it was best for the County or the District to undertake clearance.

In future, the priority the District would want to improve on is co-ordination of community resilience – they would like to see more local resilience plans in place, which may require officer support from the County Council. It was suggested that community spirit was raised during this winter, and we should capitalise on this before it ebbs.

William White, Regional Director, National Farmers Union South East
John Archer, Environment & Land Use Adviser, National Farmer's Union South East

The evidence submitted by the farmer's union south east was drawn up from responses they received by local farmers and partners. The NFU feel it is a piece of constructive criticism, and that there is room for improvement in how farmers can assist in winter weather emergencies. However they did note that Hampshire responded well in general.

The NFU acknowledged that they had received feedback suggesting that clearing snow without gritting afterwards can in some cases make the situation worse. They indicated that farmers would be willing to grit as well as snow plough, and that equipment was available to do so. However, farmers use red diesel in their tractors, and can only use this on the public highway when ploughing snow. The regulations specifically state that this exemption can only be applied to gritting vehicles whose 'sole purpose' is gritting, not those to which a gritting attachment has been added. (a copy of the regulations in question was supplied to the panel)

There is an opportunity for further aid from farmers in future but first there needs to be clearer documentation and agreements in place.

In the most recent bout of winter weather some farmers had resources but not the information to deploy them appropriately and efficiently – there wasn't always an available contact point at the County Council for information on which routes needed to be salted, and farmers did not wish to risk duplicating runs already completed. For example, 1 farmer had 6 snow ploughs, but was only allocated 2 clearance routes.

Farmers often also have access to 4x4 vehicles, and yet no requests were made for use of this capacity. Farmers are very keen to show their goodwill in making their equipment available if needed. Farmers are also able to assist in pulling out HGV lorries or cars that get stuck, but there are issues of liability.

The rates paid to farmers for their assistance is also an important area for review, according to the NFU. All future contractual agreements need to take into account rates normally paid to other contractors. Rates do vary region by region, and currently rates paid are historical agreements that have risen incrementally in line with RPI. Setting an hourly rate can be very complicated, as there is a difference in machinery used, roads cleared and the type of farming undertaken. Currently contracts outline a pre-designated route which farmers will clear at a set regularity (normally based on snow height), but further

runs can be taken if directed. There needs to be better communication between the County Council and farmers on extra runs.

Training and equipment is also an issue, with there having previously been no requirement for dummy runs or upgrading equipment. In some cases ploughing had not been required for many years, and some equipment was 20 years old. Getting parts for the old equipment could be difficult, and there was sometimes an issue of the fit with modern replacement parts.

Farmers are also able to clear snow in urban areas. It was noted that some farmers used trailers to remove snow that had been cleared so it did not pile up e.g. on pavements. This is not currently a requirement.

The farmers tend to hold discussions directly with the County Council, but have communicated with District Councils when they have been asked to clear specific areas. Private businesses also use farmers for private land clearing, e.g. a supermarket car park. Private clearance is often more lucrative for farmers than public road clearance.

The suggestion was made that there could be farmer co-ordinators within areas, who know the local area and the resources available within that area, who could then cascade requests appropriately.

The main issue that the NFU wished to draw attention to was the need for better communication between HCC and farmers, and perhaps the giving of greater responsibilities to farmers for clearing roads. It was appreciated that the County has strategic priorities to focus on, but it was suggested they could empower people more to help themselves locally.

Cllr Ken Thornber, Leader of Hampshire County Council

(in a change to the published schedule, the Leader of the County Council came before the panel to give his views)

The press were helpful in communicating messages from the County Council, and updates from the Director of Environment to Members were useful.

The situation in Basingstoke may have benefited from a phased evacuation.

On road parking in some areas caused problems.

Acknowledged the need to review our priority gritting routes, and to consider treating some areas that are currently priority 2 as priority 1. Noted that the original specification of roads in the priority network was a long time ago and could do with being reviewed to ensure it is up to date.

We need to be pro-active when severe weather is predicted, and it is preferable to risk over reaction than under reaction.

Regarding insurance and liability issues, noted that we self insure and have an insurance reserve based on calculated risks. We need to assess the risks in relation to winter issues, would seek to support a 'common sense' approach.

Suggests consideration be given to the potential to issue bags of salt to shops and businesses, via district council colleagues e.g. waste collection trucks, with a view to this salt being used to clear pathways outside their premises.

Reported consideration is being given to sourcing salt from outside the country that could come in via the ports.

Need to assure people that we are doing all we can to prepare, but explain that the level of equipment we have needs to be reasonable for average conditions, or will lay dormant for most of the time. Though acknowledges winters may be getting worse due to climate change.

Leader wished to register his thanks to staff for their efforts on behalf of the County Council. Welcomes this review and invites the panel to 'tell it as it is'.

Chairman, South Warnborough Parish Council

The Parish Council did not believe the response to the winter weather in their area was as good as it could be. The B3349 was not cleared when needed, despite it being on a priority one route, and people became stuck on the hillier parts of the route. The steep gradients around the village caused bottlenecks for traffic, causing traffic and individuals became stuck. Gritting and salting did not aid the clearing of snow, as the snow was by then too heavy.

Once the priority routes were cleared, it then became an issue of individuals not being able to reach the main roads, as residential roads were not cleared. A mini digger on site for a house build was used to clear some areas. Abandoned cars were also an issue, making it difficult for others to get past.

Contact was made with farmers – the capability was there but it was not exercised due to contract issues. There could be a role for Parish Councils in co-ordinating this in future.

The Parish Council are in support of community resilience plans, but not in isolation, and would still like support from the County Council.

There are three grit bins in the village, but no answer from contact points on when they could be replenished. There have been issues with them being used for private use rather than public use. There could be clear notices added to grit bins to remind the public of its use.

An example was given where the road through a parade of shops was cleared, but the snow was pushed onto the parking spaces, so people stopping to go to the shops blocked the road. In future it would be helpful for car parking to be cleared so that residents can reach shops for essentials, and also access to train and bus stations for travel purposes. Cars were often parked throughout the weather in inappropriate places, but there is a possibility these had been abandoned.

Agreed a local emergency plan could cover priority areas for clearance e.g. hills, traffic bottle necks etc, and list key contacts and processes e.g. for replenishing grit bins.

It would help if there was some indication of when smaller roads would be cleared/safe, so elderly residents know when it is safe to go out.

T J Nicolson, Chairman, Hampshire & Berkshire 4x4 Response

Hampshire and Berkshire 4x4 responders is one of 28 similar volunteer groups that operate as a national network across the UK. It is a registered charity and the Hampshire/Berkshire group is the third largest currently with 110 members. However, at the outset of the adverse weather it had 28 members.

During the week of adverse weather in January the responders worked closely with Wokingham Borough Council, travelling over 6000 miles to help transport essential staff, keep traffic moving and unblock bottlenecks. They were also able to transport care workers needing to visit the vulnerable as well as helping 'meals on wheels' to continue to operate. When members of the public offered to help, Wokingham BC were able to direct them to 4x4 response who were able to train them during the event so they could provide assistance as soon as possible.

Wokingham BC had since accessed the training provided by the network in relation to driving a 4x4 vehicle in poor weather (a one day course) and risk assessment. There is no charge for training and the 4x4 group is supported by a significant amount of local good will to make this provision possible. The group does not undertake road clearance but will help transport people and assist/recover stranded vehicles. They are also able to help provide this support in flooding situations.

There is a 'good Samaritan clause' in most vehicle insurance policies that enables drivers to help out in an emergency – this includes towing another vehicle out of difficulty. To be covered by this clause drivers must not be paid for their help- nor should they actively seek out people in difficulty.

Drivers that are trained by the 4x4 responders are covered under an insurance scheme operated by the national network. They charge 50p per mile- 40 pence of which is retained by the driver, the rest going to the network to cover costs. The service is provided on a 24/7 basis with SMS technology used to advise responders of support required and enable the deployment of the nearest driver.

The 4x4 vehicles used are not specially adapted and most 4x4's can be deployed in all but exceptional weather conditions, although it is essential that the drivers are properly trained. The roads in Wokingham were very bad with significant ice and snow and very little grit- all 4x4 used were able to cope.

The 4x4 group did not respond to requests from the public and was not a 'taxi' service. It could however help with getting essential personnel to and from work as well as securing access to areas such as nursing/residential homes or transporting a patient to hospital.

The witness also worked on a farm, and made comments in relation to farmers capacity to assist during snow. It was suggested that some of the ploughs provided to farmers by the County Council are very old- 15+ years. These have a rubber edge that can degrade very quickly and may cause more of a problem in icy conditions as well as damaging the road surface. The new ploughs that are available do not have the rubber edging and cause less damage to roads, but the blades do need replacing on a regular basis.

There were bad traffic problems in Basingstoke and Deane, some of which could have been avoided if priority had been given to keeping three key roundabouts clear and assistance to manage traffic movement at these roundabouts.

The 4x4 response group is able to move HGVs (including jack knifed vehicles) of up to 70 tonnes and has access to a tank recovery unit. This facility was used to help recover vehicles stuck on the A3.

4x4 response have agreements in place with particular agencies, which cover what they will be called on for.

No special adaptations are required by the 4x4 vehicles used. Road tyres are normally sufficient but most of the 4x4 vehicles in the group have all terrain tyres.

Drivers are not CRB checked but if a vulnerable person needs to be moved then they can be accompanied by a member of staff from the service concerned.

The 4x4 response group was not widely known prior to the adverse weather but has been getting a profile and new members since that event. Hampshire County Council did not call on their services although aid was provided to the police, ambulance service and some hospitals. They can use a red light to ensure people give way if there is a paramedic on board.

4x4 response encourage their members to offer help to their neighbours e.g. getting shopping.

Their coordinator operates as a bronze level of command and is able to link to silver and gold command. They already link with other voluntary sector organisations in Berkshire, could do so more in Hampshire.