

Review of the Severe Winter Weather Experienced in Hampshire in 2009/10: A view from voluntary and community organisations in Hart

Introduction

Hart Voluntary Action (HVA) was asked by Hampshire County Council to seek responses from local voluntary and community organisations serving residents in Hart about how they delivered their services during the two episodes of severe winter weather in December 2009 and January 2010.

HVA sent out a questionnaire to the most relevant of its member organisations (ie those working with people, especially vulnerable groups) and places of worship – just over 100 groups.

The following groups have submitted responses to this questionnaire:

Accessible Boating – which operates 2 canal boats adapted for people with mobility problems and wheel-chair users on the Basingstoke Canal.

Brendoncare Club Hampshire – on behalf of the 4 social clubs for the elderly, which meet at the Red Cross Centre in Fleet on 4 separate days in the week.

Cornerstone Counselling – one-to-one counselling service based at St Peter's Church in Yateley.

Court Moor Centre Community Playgroup – a pre-school based at Court Moor School in Fleet.

Fleet Pond Society – which manages volunteer parties to work at the Fleet Pond nature reserve.

North East Hants Portage Service – which operates a home visiting service for families with a child or children under the age of 5 with special needs.

Open Sight (Hart) – which runs a monthly social/support club for people with visual impairment in Fleet.

Yelabus Association – which runs a community transport service for residents in Yateley, especially community groups who work with older people and people with disabilities.

Hart Voluntary Action is also submitting its responses on the impact the winter weather had on the delivery of its services.

Responses to Key Questions

1. What impact did the recent weather have on the services provided by voluntary sector organisations operating in Hart?

- Brendoncare Club Hampshire cancelled all 4 of their club meetings in Fleet.
- Open Sight cancelled their monthly meeting.
- Court Moor Centre Community Playgroup was closed for 3 days.
- Hart Voluntary Action had to cancel their mental health support groups across Hart because group facilitators and service users were facing travel problems. The volunteer gardening project was also affected.
- Cornerstone Counselling had to cancel appointments because clients found it difficult to access the venue.
- NE Hants Portage Service had to cancel some of their home visits either because the family were in an area that was difficult to reach or the home visitor was stranded at home and unable to drive.
- Fleet Pond Society's volunteers had problems accessing their workshop by car as the access road was not cleared, so new tasks were set; not an unusual occurrence as much of the volunteering work is weather dependent.
- Similarly, the weather only had limited impact on Accessible Boating, as they do not run boat trips at this time of year, so there was only disruption to time spent on boat maintenance, which amounted to several weeks.
- The biggest impact was on Yelabus, who were unable to collect their clients for about two weeks due to roads and paths being dangerous to drive and walk on.

2. What information was provided to the public about how to access your service during the winter weather and in what format?

- NE Hants Portage Service were able to man their office throughout the time as the administrator could walk there, so acted as the main point of contact for the rest of the team, and the families they work with. Contacts were made by telephone. If a journey was thought to be too risky, a phone call was made to the family and a new appointment arranged. At no time were families out of contact.
- Brendoncare Club Hampshire contacted their clients by phone, as did Hart Voluntary Action and Cornerstone Counselling.
- Yelabus did not state how they contacted their clients, only that the operations manager took responsibility for this.
- Fleet Pond Society were able to e-mail all their volunteers about changes to arrangements, and latest updates on hazardous nature of roads and working conditions.
- Court Moor Centre Community Playgroup placed a message on their answerphone and updated information on their web-site, which received a large number of hits from parents looking for updates.

3. Looking at the period 1 December 2009 – 31 January 2010, what aspects of service delivery worked well for voluntary sector organisations operating in Hart?

This question was not well understood by the respondents, so there are no responses to this question.

4. Have you made any changes (or do you intend to make any changes) to the way you plan for severe weather as result of this experience, if so how?

Most organisations have not made any changes to the way they deliver the services. Only Court Moor Centre Community Playgroup responded that they now have a severe weather policy for closure, paying fees and staff salaries in place.

5. Reflecting back on the period in question what would be your 3 priorities for action, and how could these be implemented?

Not all organisations responded, and some took this to mean what the local authorities' priorities should be:

Cornerstone Counselling

1. Clearing domestic roads – snow ploughs.
2. Heating rooms in use – good maintenance.
3. Advising clients of inaccessibility if appropriate – mobile phones available.

Fleet Pond Society

1. Grit for road surfaces accessible to those whose roads are not treated by the authority. Bins at strategic locations that could be opened when bad weather occurs.
2. Ease of contact to vulnerable people in their own homes to allow them to seek help when needed. Emergency phone lines and/or numbers to call.
3. Security of energy supply. Co-ordination with suppliers.

NE Hants Portage

1. Quicker responses to impending snow falls – gritting.
2. More gritting on steep slopes in side roads.
3. A new policy on clearing snow from school sites (some community organisations like NE Hants Portage are based on school sites).

Open Sight Club

1. Clearing pavements.

Yelabus Association

Our service relies on collecting vulnerable people from their homes. Whilst the main roads are usually cleared by gritting, the side roads are not. Given the economics of

dealing with this and the low frequency of severe winter weather historically in the UK, this just seems something we have to live with now and then.

For those member organisations relying on our transport for essential shopping, we did provide alternative shopping arrangements to deliver essential supplies by car and foot.

6. Did you receive any complaints, comments or feedback as a result of the severe weather from the public using the services?

NE Hants Portage – no complaints, but a few unexpected smiles when we managed to access a home despite the severe weather – everyone was very good humoured about it.

Fleet Pond Society received complaints about slippery footpaths and ice compacted on boardwalks.

Additional comments from Hart Voluntary Action

Volunteering response

Hart Voluntary Action took quite a number of queries from the public, especially those with 4X4 vehicles offering help as volunteers to run errands for people who were housebound. In some cases we were able to refer them to voluntary groups such as the WRVS meals on wheels service, who were looking for replacement volunteer drivers, or asked them to contact their respective parish council to offer support. It would have been useful if we could have had a more proactive role as a clearing house for these members of the public matching them to nearby volunteering opportunities.

This could be part of a bigger co-ordinated response led [probably] by Hart District Council. This should be led from the top; HCC need to open a crisis centre with something similar at District and Borough level. Within each crisis centre all key agencies are represented and essentially the centre acts as a focal point for the community to seek information; help etc with the relevant representatives in the crisis centre co-ordinating the response, and signposting. This is where HVA would have a role to act as the focal point for the voluntary sector in the local crisis centre.

Public Transport/bus stops/public transport information

On at least one day during the January winter weather, one of the local bus companies was unable to run their, albeit restricted, bus service, because their buses were snowed in on the farm where they are parked (the farmer helped dig out the buses with a snow plough, but this took one day)! Should it not be a priority to ensure that access to bus depots are cleared, gritted etc?

Similarly, there was no gritting carried out at bus stops or the lay-bys next to bus stops – should this also not be a priority, particularly as public transport in Hart is used for the most part by the elderly?

Information about delays or cancellations of services should have been available in various formats either through the district council or county council web-sites, as it was not always possible to get through to the local bus company by telephone for information.

Based on the experiences of the two cold weather snaps, and the roads that are automatically prioritized for gritting, would it not be possible to create and publicise in advance alternative bus routes that would be in operation during extreme weather conditions, based on a reduced number of bus stops operating on the main roads only?