

Winter Resilience Scrutiny Review: Written Evidence Summary (Departments, Partner Agencies and Hart Specific)

Summary:

Evidence provided confirmed the services provided by the County Council and other key stakeholders were able to respond effectively to the severe winter weather, and key services were maintained. This is backed up by compliments received from the public, expressing their gratitude for the efforts of staff to maintain services and help the vulnerable. District and Parish Councils acknowledged the speedy response of County Council officers. Many stakeholders reported keeping customer contact centres fully operational to ensure queries from the public were handled, and Scottish and Southern Energy had mechanisms in place to deal with the increased call volumes received.

Examples of Good Practice

A number of stakeholders referred to staff 'going the extra mile', and in the case of County Council employees referred to the fact that staff were able to work from home thanks to 'passport' technology which enables access to the IT network. Other stakeholders reported that staff were able to be redeployed to work bases that were closer to home, and where services were cancelled (e.g. waste collection) staff were moved to other tasks e.g. gritting pavements.

Adult Services provided an example of setting up a helpline for people to contact, with staff making follow up calls to ensure the people concerned had received the help they needed. Scottish and Southern Energy also described that they hold a list of vulnerable customers, and called these customers to provide reassurance and check they were not experiencing difficulties.

Other examples of good practice included:

- Scottish and Southern Energy drafted in extra staff from Scotland when snow was forecast, to provide extra capacity for line repairs and to cover phone calls
- Planned health appointments were brought forward when snow forecast
- A District Council gritted the paths near their offices, sheltered housing and shopping centres
- Overnight accommodation for key hospital staff was identified in advance
- A school had their own 'Snow Plan' including local taxi firms with 4x4s, snow plough and grit suppliers, and CRB checked volunteers to call on for help with supervision
- A school also used staff living in different areas as 'local weather scouts', to establish conditions across an area to inform closure decisions.

4x4 vehicles

Various stakeholders referred to the use of 4x4 vehicles. A District Council reported it had 3 4x4s in its fleet, and allocated them to key service areas e.g. sheltered housing support, to ensure people in need could be reached if necessary. The Fire & Rescue Service reported that they had provided 4x4s from their fleet to partners during the severe weather, including Hampshire Constabulary, the County Council, Scottish and Southern Energy and the South Central Ambulance Service. However the Fire Service indicated there was room for improvement in how 4x4s are used, as

their view was that the 4x4s given to the Ambulance Service were 'not always used as effectively as possible'.

4x4s were also used in some cases to discharge patients from hospital, and by a GP practice to pick up staff and collect essential supplies. The health service indicated consideration is being given to sourcing additional 4x4s for future use. An example was also provided of partners providing 4x4s to a voluntary organisation which provides 'meals on wheels', which enabled them to keep their service running (apart from where meals were picked up from school canteens if schools were closed).

Hart Voluntary Action reported that they had been contacted by members of the public who owned 4x4s wishing to offer help. In some cases they were able to put them in touch with suitable opportunities, and suggested they could develop this role in future. Evidence from County Council departments also suggested that the County Council could maintain a list of 4x4 owners and co-ordinate how they were allocated, with an agreed method of priority.

While a good level of service was maintained, stakeholders provided various ideas for further improving Hampshire's resilience to severe winter weather in future.

Access

Various stakeholders suggested the way gritting routes are prioritised should be reviewed to include access to schools and Health Centres/Hospitals. It was indicated a list of health sites has been passed to the County Council for consideration. Adults Services also referred to the need to ensure that residential care homes are accessible.

Some suggested access to train stations and bus depots (and bus routes) should also be considered, to maintain access to public transport. It was also suggested that it would be beneficial for information about bus services to be available on council websites, and that bus companies consider using alternative routes based on the priority gritted roads. Mention was also made, particularly by Parish Councils, of the need to clear, as far as possible, the minor roads linking to the main roads.

Resources

Several stakeholders suggested that farmers be used to spread grit as well as to plough snow, to assist with clearance of minor roads. It was also commented that grit bins could be provided in key locations e.g. schools, to assist self help clearance. One stakeholder highlighted the need for grit bin re-supply arrangements to be clear.

Co-ordination

Feedback from stakeholders indicated that there was generally good partnership working in co-ordinating the response to the severe winter weather, although there were opportunities for improving this further. A District Council suggested co-ordination could be improved in relation to local gritting being delegated to districts, as an example was given where the district gritted pedestrian areas in a town centre, and then the County Council gritted the subways leading to the town centre the following day. The Highways Agency also indicated co-ordination of gritting was important, and gave examples where the motorway was gritted (their responsibility),

but roads linking to the motorway were not (County Council responsibility), leading to congestion.

The Association of Local Councils made the point that it was important to have good cross border liaison with neighbouring authorities, to ensure gritting routes and other action reflected local geography not just administrative boundaries. Scottish and Southern Energy made clear they are keen to co-ordinate with local authorities in the area they cover to ensure 'a consistency of approach and optimum use of resources'. The Fire and Rescue Service noted that while sharing resources with partners worked well, it would be preferable to have a 'memorandum of understanding', to establish agreed protocols for use of resources in future.

Car parks and footpaths

An issue raised by several stakeholders was the clearance of snow and ice from car parks. This was of particular concern at health centres which endeavoured to remain open but were concerned that their car parks were dangerous, and had to pay contractors to clear them. A comment was also made regarding the importance of clearing train station car parks to facilitate use of public transport. Comments received indicated some confusion about where the responsibility for clearing these car parks rests.

Another frequent concern was icy pavements, meaning for example that elderly people often did not risk leaving the house. The issue of lack of clarity regarding potential liability if the public cleared pavements themselves was another issue raised.

Parishes

Parish Councils expressed interest in being provided with further information in relation to severe weather situations, for example the updates provided by the Director of Environment to County Councillors. It was also suggested that parishes are well placed to establish local emergency plans. An example was given of a parish developing a 'good neighbour' scheme linked to the existing neighbourhood watch, to keep an eye on vulnerable members of the community during such situations.

Schools

Head teachers expressed an interest in understanding the priority gritting network, to inform their closure decisions. One school reported some of its grit had been stolen, highlighting the need for grit bins to be secure. Providing information on websites regarding school closures was identified as working well in the main, although it was noted that on some occasions Hampshire County Council hosted websites crashed under heavy demand.

Health

The health service reported that some non urgent face to face appointments were cancelled, and telephone support was provided instead. In some cases hospital appointments were cancelled, particularly if travel to the hospital was considered dangerous. The health service indicated they will be seeking additional grit stocks in future, to assist with clearance of their sites and car parks.

Districts

A District Council reported that districts are obliged to provide a place for the homeless to sleep after 3 consecutive days of below freezing conditions, although this did not cause problems in the event. It was indicated that burials were postponed. The most significant impact was on household waste collections, as these were cancelled after a worker was injured following a slip on an icy pavement.

The district had its own small stock of salt, however more was requested from the County during the severe weather. Districts reported using re-deployed waste workers to grit pavements and shopping centres, however it was acknowledged that it would be beneficial to establish district level gritting priorities in future. The district also mentioned that snow plough blades were due to be purchased, to increase their capacity to clear snow.

Salt Supplies

The Highways Agency indicated an intention to use all their capacity when re-stocking with salt this summer, and would be considering out of UK salt supply sources.

Devon County Council reported that its salt procurement arrangements involve a framework agreement, which approves 3 suppliers, with prices re-competed annually. It was observed this system 'has proven helpful in certain seasons of high levels of urgent demand'. This was a joint tender with neighbouring authorities. Devon County Council receives salt in bulk at local ports, which minimises transportation costs. In addition, the contract with the supplier specifies the quality of salt required. The salt is tested by their Scientific Service, and if salt delivered is lower quality, claim rebates on the costs paid to the supplier.

Key Issues Emerging:

- Possibility of using farmers to grit as well as plough, to assist with clearing non-priority routes
- Access to 4x4 vehicles, including volunteer members of the public
- Clarity over liability when volunteers or the public clear footways
- Clarity of responsibility for and priority of gritting car parks
- Consideration of access to Health Service premises, Schools, Train Stations, Bus depots and up to date bus routes to be included in gritting routes
- Empowering local level authorities (districts or parishes) to do more, for example via snow ploughs, grit bins or redeploying staff to spread salt
- Keeping parish councils informed and utilising their local knowledge
- Co-ordination between different agencies being further defined in advance
- Disruption to household waste collection
- Resilience of IT systems to support websites during periods of heavy demand
- Salt procurement practices - to consider potential benefits of joint procurement and use of a framework contract, including quality specifications and delivery to ports