

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT

The Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee met on 15 September 2010.

Attendances: Councillor Stogdon (Chairman)
Councillors Belsey, Daniel, Dowling, Fawthrop, Healy and Rodohan

Also present: Councillor Lock, Lead Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment

1. Scrutiny Review of Winter Services in East Sussex

1.1 The Committee has completed its Scrutiny Review of Winter Services in East Sussex. A copy of the Committee's full report has previously been circulated to all Members and is available on request from Andy Cottell (Tel: 01273 481955).

1.2 At its meeting on 10 March 2010, the Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee examined the experiences and lessons learnt from the County Council's Transport and Environment Department's winter service response to the particularly severe winter weather in 2009/10. The Transport and Environment Department highlighted the endeavours and commitment of staff who had sought to maintain services throughout the severe weather period despite the huge difficulties faced. Members wished to record their thanks and appreciation to all concerned. The effort was also clearly welcomed by the many people who provided evidence to the Scrutiny Committee who clearly appreciated the scale of the winter service challenges in the context of limited County Council resources.

1.3 The Committee compiled evidence detailing the severe weather experiences and responses of a variety of individuals, agencies and partner organisations. Witnesses from the County Council included several County Council Members and staff from Transport and Environment and Legal Services, the Risk and Insurance Manager and Head of Communications. In addition, the Scrutiny Committee took account of the results of a Council Residents' Panel consultation on winter service and readiness for severe weather.

1.4 The Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee of 15 September **recommends** to the County Council that –

(1) The East Sussex County Council winter service policy needs to be expressed in a clear and easily understandable way. Central to this policy is the description of how different categories of routes will be treated under different weather conditions (and clarity about the set of routes which won't be treated within the County Council's policy). To assist this process, more intuitive definitions could usefully be adopted to make the picture clearer; for example, 'top priority routes' instead of 'standard routes' and 'secondary routes' instead of 'snow routes' for example.

(2) (a) Adjustments to current operations be made to extend winter treatments to areas which are crucial for the operation of essential public services such as emergency services accesses and access routes to the County's hospitals and bus stations/garages.

(b) Transport and Environment officers contact the bus companies serving East Sussex to elicit the impact of the winter maintenance policy during 2009/10, and to ensure that all current bus routes are classified appropriately within the policy.

(c) The outcomes of the Equalities Impact Assessment on the winter maintenance policy be reported to Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee in due course so that the Committee can consider whether further amendment to the policy is required to comply with appropriate equalities legislation.

(3) That Transport and Environment proactively engage with partner local authorities and other key agencies to improve future coordination and proactively encourage them to develop their own severe weather contingency plans and to offer to store and provide salt to them cost effectively.

(4) The expectation that householders and businesses in East Sussex will clear snow and ice from public areas near their properties during periods of severe winter weather should be actively promoted during the autumn in preparation for next winter; the promotion should include appropriate guidance on how to carry out snow clearance responsibly and encouragement to assist neighbours who are unable to clear snow themselves.

(5) The Transport and Environment Department:

(a) Proactively approaches all parish, town, district and borough councils to offer the sale of salt and grit bins cost effectively under the current policy and extend the offer on similar terms to include residents associations or groups of residents and businesses.

(b) When issuing publicity around grit bins and hippo bags, ensures that it emphasises that the salt provided is provided for public areas and not for private use, and provides suitable 'how to use' guidance.

(c) Determines and publicises the location points for hippo bags.

(6) Transport and Environment should engage with East Sussex farmers either by advertising widely for new participants in the 'farmers' snow plough scheme' across the whole of East Sussex, or by targeting farmers in particular geographical areas where there would be demonstrably the most benefit; the purpose would be to explain what the County Council could offer farmers and vice versa.

(7) (a) The information and advice that the Council can offer any farmer, individual or business with machinery capable of clearing roads of snow, but without a contracting arrangement with the Council, needs to be that the Council cannot endorse such action and a) they should assess whether they are capable of undertaking the task competently; b) that they are fully insured with a minimum of £10m public liability

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insurance cover and c) that they are made aware that they may be liable for injuries or for the repair of any damage they cause.

(b) Steps be taken to ensure that the publicity promoting community self help for winter preparedness under recommendation 4 or for promoting other forms of volunteering work on the highway (apart from winter emergencies) is not undermined by this stance.

(8) The communication of advance or planning information by the County Council be improved by:

(a) ensuring the Council's winter service policy is described in a much more user-friendly way, paying careful attention to the use of terms that may be misleading such as 'standard route' and 'snow route';

(b) publishing some key 'facts and figures' about winter service such as: the cost; the amount of salt spread, the number of miles of road covered, the number of gritting lorries; the location and usage of grit bins and hippo bags;

(c) providing greater clarity, with clearer online maps, about exactly which roads are treated under the policy; importantly including a description of which types of road are excluded or receive a lesser priority treatment;

(d) a leaflet and poster campaign on winter weather preparedness targeted at those without computer access; and

(e) using the County Council's Your County magazine and local media to provide positive encouragement and appropriate advice about community self help options and other cold weather precautionary advice as highlighted in the recommendations of the Residents' Panel survey report.

(9) (a) The needs of County Council Members in carrying out their roles be taken into account when communications systems are being improved by the lessons from the 2009/10 severe winter weather; and

(b) The roles of Members (including the specific role of the Lead Member for Transport and Environment) be communicated to contact centre staff so that they are better enabled to provide the public with a more helpful and realistic picture of what is involved in changing Council policy.

[See also report of the Cabinet from meeting being held on 12 October 2010 which will be circulated separately]

RICHARD STOGDON
Chairman

15 September 2010

