

Division(s):

**ITEM**

## **CABINET – 19 JANUARY 2010 - ADDENDA**

### **COUNTING THE COST OF THE RECENT SEVERE WEATHER INCIDENT**

#### **Report by the Leader of the Council**

#### **Introduction**

1. This report demonstrates how the recent severe weather has impacted on the county council and explains how we have responded at this difficult time.

#### **The situation as it developed – Initial snowfall**

2. While there were difficult weather conditions in parts of the county in December, it was January when it began to have a serious impact across Oxfordshire.
3. The Cabinet met informally on 5 January to receive updates from senior officers and, at our request, emergency planning procedures (Gold and Silver Command) came into effect. Overnight, heavy snow fell. The County Council Management Team (CCMT) was meeting twice daily, receiving updates from Gold (the strategic coordination group) throughout the day. The Chief Fire Officer, Deputy Chief Fire Officer and the Emergency Planning team took the lead in coordinating our response, with CCMT and Cabinet members ensuring that critical services kept running and that important messages were communicated to our staff and the public.

#### **Activities day-by-day**

##### Salting and snow plough activity

4. We have been clear about the national shortage of salt which has been well covered in the press. This meant that we were salting 1,200 miles of road until 5 January; 800 miles of road until 13 January, when the Government demanded a 25% reduction in salt usage and then 600 miles of road from then on after the Government ordered a 50% cut in total. From late December until 7 January, the county council was not supplied with the salt for which we were contracted. We have been in constant contact with the Local Government Association about the impact of supply problems on the county.
5. Despite not having as much salt as we would have liked, the county council has completed more than 25,000 miles of salting and even more miles of snow ploughing since the snow began - involving drivers working through the night on long shifts in often very difficult weather conditions. Unfortunately, we could not salt every road in the county ó this is simply not feasible. However, I can assure members of the public that our highways and Environment & Economy officers have worked incredibly hard to keep open the major routes.

### School coordination

6. From 6 January we have been coordinating the message about school closures, both through our website and in partnership with the local media. Our website also received a tremendous amount of traffic during the first day of the snow in particular, at one point the website was coping with almost fifty times the normal level of hits. Fortunately, our systems were able to cope with the demand and we continued regular reporting of the situation on the ground. *The Oxford Mail*, *BBC Radio Oxford* and other radio stations such as *Heart FM*, *Jack FM* and *Banbury Sound* all played a crucial role in keeping the public informed of the situation.
7. Of course, it is for the Headteacher of each school to determine whether that school should close due to the weather conditions but we took a clear decision to support all of our Headteachers in making that decision, based on their knowledge of the local area.
8. By 11 January, most schools were open again as we were able to clear access roads, with all secondary schools open to begin the scheduled AS Level examinations.

### Managing other services

9. Our new emergency reporting system was a vital tool in monitoring the condition of services, developed for any future flu pandemic, showing at a glance where we needed to reinforce or redeploy our teams. Internal processes like this can speed up decision making and have a major impact on the capacity of front-line services.
10. Non-critical services kept running as they could, with staff who were unable to make it into the office working from home, taking leave or going out into the community to help out. There are some truly inspiring stories of our staff going the extra mile (one officer walked for 10 miles to make a call) to keep services running. By 7 January, most of our libraries were open once more.

### Use of 4X4s to keep critical services running

11. Of course the county council delivers many critical services where getting out to a resident can be a matter of life and death. As an indicator of the scale of our services, we have over 600 social care clients visited by our own Social & Community Services staff alone. This meant over four hundred staff members needed to get out around the county for visits. On top of this, our external providers had over 1,500 clients to visit.
12. To keep these services running, we redeployed 4X4s from all across the council - from the Fire Service to the Countryside Service. Social workers and Home Care Assistants did as much as they could themselves but, where the conditions proved too much, we were able to organise for 4X4 transport to ensure that residents received their critical care.
13. Thanks must also go to the military and other local organisations who kindly offered 4X4s and other logistical support in the very worst of the emergency.

### Farmer cooperation and community self-help

14. Finally, Oxfordshire received heartening levels of support from farmers and other members of the communities. Especially in the more rural parts of the county, these individuals who took it on themselves to help with the vital task of clearing snow helped keep residents connected with their local community and facilities.
15. Of course, there are many untold stories of the people of Oxfordshire helping each other of their own accord, perhaps going down to the local shops for an elderly neighbour or clearing the pavements outside their house. The voluntary sector also had a significant part to play in mobilising and coordinating volunteers across the county.
16. Of course public services will always be there for local residents but the good will of the community is vital in looking after the more vulnerable members of society. To those many Oxfordshire people who did their bit, we thank you ó you are the backbone of Oxfordshire.

### **The aftermath**

17. Although the worst of the current cold spell may be over, we continue to remain on alert in case there are further snow events in the near future. Of course, we are paying particular attention to the possibility of localised flooding as the snow melts and we will do all that we can, in partnership with district councils and other responsible organisations, to mitigate the impact of the cold weather.
18. Internally, we are proud of how our services performed in the worst of the weather but lessons can always be learned from major events such as this. These will be reported to senior officers and to the Cabinet in due course.

### **Financial and Staff Implications**

19. This adverse weather will have significant financial consequences. We have calculated that the overall cost of the cold weather *in terms of salting???* (*SES*) by the end of January will be around £1.5 million. This is £630,000 more than the authority sets aside for winter snow clearance and gritting for the November to January period.
20. Like all councils, Oxfordshire County Council is required to keep financial reserves and contingency funds to help pay for unusual weather events such as the July 2007 flooding. This means that any overspend on the cost of the operation to tackle the snow will be limited to the 2009/10 budget and will have no impact on any other budgets (and therefore services) within the council.
21. As mentioned, the weather has had a major impact on our road maintenance programme. The council will pay for pothole costs from the budgets it sets aside for highway maintenance work with any extra cost likely to be paid for by a supplementary estimate. Initial estimates suggest this could be at least £1 million.
22. A separate report by the Assistant Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer will discuss the implications in more detail.

