

# Executive

## Cherwell District Council's Response to Heavy Snow

7 March 2011

### Report of Head of Environmental Services

#### PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider the Council's response to the heavy snow in December 2010 and improvements to that response in similar circumstances in the future.

This report is public
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#### Recommendations

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The Executive is recommended:

- (1) To note the problems and issues which arose from the heavy snow fall prior to Christmas;
- (2) To approve the proposed actions to improve the Council's response to future severe winter weather events; and
- (3) To note that any proposed equipment purchased will be acquired within existing budgets during 2011/12

#### Executive Summary

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##### Introduction

- 1.1 A heavy snow fall occurred on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> December. Some 8" of snow fell on the Saturday and although subsequently little additional snow fell, the temperature remained around or below zero for several days following this event. This snowfall had an impact on several of the services but the major areas of impact were on the waste collection service and car park income.
- 1.2 The snow fall in December was the largest snowfall in Oxfordshire for many years. However, this in addition to a significant snowfall in January 2010, meant it was opportune to review the impact of these events on services and look at how the Council could improve its response.
- 1.3 A review has been undertaken with wide scale representation across the Council. This concluded that the main affects of the snow on the Council's operations were
  - Waste Collection was severely affected with only around 30% of

collections completed in the week before Christmas. The catch up of these lost collections proved difficult because of when the Christmas period fell in the week.

- Public car parks were severely affected.
- Speed of snow clearance in the town centres was less than some members of the public and some traders expected.
- Increased numbers of public enquiries were made about services and our response to snow.
- Markets were affected.
- The public were not clear which Council had responsibilities for different services.
- Press interest in our service position was high.
- Other agencies sometimes gave inaccurate information leading to further public enquiries.
- Access to both Council depots was initially difficult and most of the first day was lost from having to clear both depots and the access to those depots.
- Many staff were not able to get into work.
- Those staff who did get to work struggled to park safely at Bodicote House because of the state of the car park.

1.4 Although a number of areas of possible improvement have been identified some changes made since the last snow event in January 2010 did appear to work well. These areas included

- IT systems - Home working through the Homeworker system worked significantly better than the previous Netilla system. The Netilla system had a restriction on licences which limited access to systems. Feedback on the use of Homeworker has been good.
- Information on the website was generally correct and regularly updated. Although the website listed the collections for the next day some residents felt there was insufficient information relating to when in the future their area would receive catch up collections. However the twitter page worked well & had a reasonable number of followers.
- Communication with Oxfordshire Highways generally worked well and Oxfordshire Highways made 10-15 tonnes of rock salt available for the Council to carry out gritting in the town centres on the behalf of Oxfordshire Highways.
- 8 tonnes of rock salt bought by the Council for the two depots and other areas was utilised on car parking areas as well as the two depots
- A snow plough attachment bought for use on a Land Rover worked

well for clearing an initial route through the Thorpe Lane Depot although the plough proved too small for very large areas with deep snow such as Bodicote House and other car parks.

### **Proposals**

- 1.5 An action plan has been prepared. This includes some small investment in equipment which will make services more robust in the event of heavy snowfall.
- 1.6 Clearance of large amounts of snow is too slow using manual equipment alone. Mechanical plant is required and this will be provided through a contract on a daily rate. Ownership of such equipment has been investigated but the costs of ownership are prohibitive

### **Conclusion**

- 1.7 The heavy snowfall in December 2010 was the greatest for many years and caused disruption to services, more so due to the effect of Christmas. A number of possible improvements which would make services more resilient in the event of heavy snowfall have been investigated. Many of these are low cost or no cost improvements and involve procedural changes, better co-ordination or provision of better information.
- 1.8 A proposed priority of response and committing resources has been established. It is based on returning public services to normal operation as swiftly as practicable. By implementing the action plan services will be more resilient for any future heavy snowfall events.

## **Background Information**

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- 2.1 On Saturday 18 December 2010, snow starting fall over Oxfordshire. Snowfall continued all day. By the evening some 8 inches of snow had fallen. Temperature levels were already very low and over the next few days hardly ventured above zero and were frequently several degrees below freezing.

### **Waste Collection Service**

- 2.2 The Waste Collection service was severely affected by the weather. On Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> December road conditions were initially too hazardous to send out the collection crews. In addition all outlets for receiving waste were closed. For the morning, crews at both depots were used on snow clearance in Banbury, Bicester and to clear more snow at the two depots. By early afternoon Waste Collection vehicles attempted to carry out collections in Grimsbury. This was the only area attempted since the area is flat where around 1,500 collections were carried out. No collections were possible in Bicester so only 1,500 collections out of the usual 22,000 district wide were made. On Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> collections took place from both depots with around 6,000 of the planned collections taking place. As conditions gradually improved during the week around 20,000 collections took place on the Thursday and Friday, although these were limited to flat areas in Banbury, and accessible parts of Bicester and Kidlington. Very few village collections were carried out in the week before Christmas.
- 2.3 Neighbouring authorities faired no better or in some cases much worse than Cherwell. In Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire no catch up collections at all were attempted. In South Northamptonshire all collections were suspended in the week prior to Christmas.
- 2.4 Around 2.5 – 3 days worth of collections were lost due to the weather in the week before Christmas. The usual method of catch up involves working Saturdays and Mondays. However with Christmas Day and New Years Day falling on Saturdays and the Mondays were both Bank Holidays, all outlets for waste and recycling were closed. Even if collections were possible on these different days, most households would not have their bins out.
- 2.5 In snow and ice conditions the collection crews have to work at a reduced pace. This large reduction in pace can make it difficult for collection crews to complete their usual rounds. Hence the collection crews were unable to carry out additional collections beyond their usual rounds in a bid to catch up.
- 2.6 In the past, garden waste collections have been stopped in periods of bad weather so that crews can be diverted on to catching up blue and green bin collections. However, now the brown bins contain food waste as well as garden waste, this option has largely been removed.
- 2.7 In snow and icy conditions, it is not only the state of the roads which are of concern. Collection staff pulling wheeled bins in deep snow or across ice becomes hazardous. Although staff are issued with good footwear, the possibility of whether better footwear exists for such extreme conditions needs to be investigated.
- 2.8 Catching up collections is difficult as additional vehicles are no good without

the crews to operate them. By stopping activities such as bin deliveries, street cleansing, bulky waste collections, vehicle maintenance and using those staff, sufficient manpower exists for around 3 additional crews. These crews do help clear backlogs but three additional crews working four days will catch up no more than 1 complete day's worth of collections.

- 2.9 Although additional vehicles can be hired in, competent staff is the limitation. It is important that trained and competent staff are utilised in such conditions Sourcing agency staff at short notice and then having to train them for working in very difficult conditions is not a realistic option. Therefore, three additional crews is the limit of additional resources for catching up.
- 2.10 The failure to catch up all collections due to the combination of snow, bank holidays and the availability of open outlets meant that some properties had to go four weeks between collections. In the north of the district this was green bins, in the south of the district it was brown bins. Clearly this is not satisfactory and measures need to be implemented to reduce the risk of such an event reoccurring.
- 2.11 To minimise disruption, the first aim must be to try to limit the number of lost collections. For collections not to be lost road access needs to be better. This better access can only be achieved by gritting in more residential areas and initial discussions with Oxfordshire Highways have been arranged.
- 2.12 In addition, councils which have more experience of regular significant snow falls will be contacted to try and learn from their experience.
- 2.13 Finally the prioritisation of resources for use on the three respective bins needs to be further considered now food waste is present in the brown bins.
- 2.14 In most circumstances, the four day week working allows a good possibility for catch up although in the week before Christmas this didn't prove possible. Additional crews do help catch up collections. However, it requires at least three additional crews working for four days to catch up just one days worth of lost collections.

### **Urban Centres**

- 2.15 Oxfordshire County Council Highways are responsible for keeping highways clear of snow and ice. However, Oxfordshire Highways initially concentrate their resources on the main highway routes. Consequently the urban centres receive little attention.
- 2.16 Since the Street Cleansing have ceased their operations after heavy snowfall, Street Cleansing resources have been offered to Oxfordshire Highways for clearing snow and ice in the town centres under the guidance of Oxfordshire Highways. Areas for clearance are agreed with Oxfordshire Highways before commencing work.
- 2.17 Oxfordshire Highways make rock salt available for this activity. Unfortunately the amount of snow which fell meant that Street Cleansing teams didn't move on to clearing snow and ice until Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> December. In addition progress was slow since the clearance solely relied on manual tools and staff numbers.
- 2.18 The speed of gritting could be increased if a gritting unit towed by a vehicle such as a Land Rover was acquired. Such a unit could be used not only in

the urban centres but also on car parks and at the two depots.

### **Car Parks**

- 2.19 The policy for public car parks is not to carry out gritting. This policy has been derived on the basis that previously most snow and ice events are very short lived with snow and ice quickly thawing. The policy is reviewed annually, the last being after the snow event in February 2010. This led to a variation in the policy to activate snow removal/gritting if forecasts identified heavy and long lying snow as a high risk. This assumed that there was capacity to undertake the work which proved not to be the case in the December 2010 snow event
- 2.20 In December, the car parks were out of action for many days resulting in significant income loss. This position can be improved with mechanical snow clearance.
- 2.21 Street Cleansing staff carried out some clearance in the area for the market and around The Mill in Banbury. Clearance was slow due to the sole reliance on manual equipment. The Grounds Maintenance contractor also diverted resources to assist with snow clearance

### **Depots**

- 2.22 On Monday 20 December Street Cleansing staff initially had trouble gaining entry to Thorpe Lane depot since padlocks were frozen due to the extremely low temperatures (below -10 C) A snow plough which was fitted to the Land Rover at Thorpe Lane depot quickly cleared a route through the depot. Manual gritting of the route and clearance of the staff car park took place although progress was slow due to the amount of snow which had fallen and the equipment available. Consequently, it took most of Monday to clear out routes through the sites and free many of the Street Cleansing vehicles. In addition, as Thorpe Lane Depot is under refurbishment storage is temporarily limited. This limitation meant that some equipment was stored in Highfield and had to be collected. These delays meant that vehicles could not be despatched to collect rock salt from the Oxfordshire Highways Deddington depot until late afternoon. The delays in collecting rock salt meant little resource was despatched to Banbury Town Centre to assist Oxfordshire Highways until Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> December
- 2.23 At Highfield Depot, no snow plough exists and clearance was manual using snow shovels and rock salt. Clearance of the depot and the entrance to the depot took all day. Consequently no crews were able to be despatched to help Oxfordshire Highways clear snow in Bicester town centre until Tuesday 21 December.
- 2.24 To utilise Street Cleansing staff on town clearance activities requires the depots to be cleared. Hence the quicker the depots can be cleared the quicker Street Cleansing resources can be deployed supporting Oxfordshire Highways in the urban centres. Manual snow shovels, manual gritting proved to be insufficient for dealing with large volumes of snow and progress could be accelerated by more appropriate equipment. The snow plough on the Land Rover was effective. However, snow clearance equipment is also required for Highfield Depot and, in addition, the gritting process at both depots could be considerably speeded up by the purchase of towed equipment.
- 2.25 An additional snow plough for the other 4X4 vehicle which is usually based at

Highfield costs less than £2,000. Gritting equipment which can be towed by a Land Rover costs in the region of £5,000 - £12,000 depending upon requirements. Such equipment would make gritting quicker and reduce the time taken to move Street Cleansing resources away from depot clearance. It also appears quite possible that such equipment could be purchased as part of the approved Environmental Services Vehicle capital programme 2011/12 and probably within the current allocated budget.

### **Customer Service & the website**

- 2.26 The Customer Service Centre received a significant increase in calls in the week prior to Christmas. A high proportion of these calls were from customers enquiring about Waste Collection
- 2.27 Good quality information on the website is important so that customers do not need to ring. Generally the information provided on the website was good. However, improvements to access, presentation and responsibilities on updating have been identified.
- 2.28 The Communications team will take responsibility for updating the website in severe weather conditions. Waste Collection will produce an update by 8am each day with the plans for collections and this will be updated again later in the day

### **Bodicote House**

- 2.29 Bodicote House car park was covered in eight inches of snow, therefore when staff started to arrive they could not gain access. This caused traffic to overflow into White Post Road. The Land Rover from the depot was sent to clear snow along with some Street Cleansing crews. However progress was slow and the snow plough was damaged on the speed humps within the car parks. The size of the car park combined with the depth of snow was too great for the equipment being used. However, eventually staff were able to access some of the car park.
- 2.30 Whilst many staff walked to Bodicote House in severe weather, there are still some who are able to drive. It is important for those who do drive and who operate essential front line public services such as the Customer Services Centre that they have easy access to and safe parking at Bodicote House.

### **Proposed Priority of Response**

- 2.28 Based on the experiences and lessons learnt from the recent heavy snowfall, the following locations should be cleared of snow in order of priority:
- CDC depots – unless the depots are cleared resources cannot get out to support the public.
  - Banbury Bus Station – Bus routes are a high priority for gritting with Oxfordshire Highways. Hence it is important that the bus station can be accessed.
  - Urban Centres particularly the pedestrianised areas and on Market days.
  - Car Parks - This requires individual car park priorities to be identified

since some car parks are more important to be reopened than others.

- Pathways around public buildings
- Bodicote House – Clearance of the car park especially the public parking area

### **Resources Available to Allocate to the Priority Locations**

- 2.29 The Council has limited specialist snow clearance equipment. Manpower can be supplemented from the Council's Street Cleansing and Vehicle Maintenance staff plus Continental Landscapes. However in deep snow manual equipment is insufficient to clear the snow quickly.

The option for snow clearance is to either purchase relevant equipment or contract in or a contribution of both. The cost of buying and owning a JCB or loading shovels is c£40,000 per vehicle, therefore a combination of contracting these vehicles with drivers on a day rate and minor equipment purchases is recommended.

Minor items to purchase include;

Snow plough unit for a 4X4 vehicle – estimated cost up to £2,000 and Gritting equipment and bins for use at the depots, urban centres for Oxfordshire Highways, car parks and Bodicote House – up to £12,000

### **Understand what should trigger an event**

- 2.30 Such snow events on some occasions can be predicted and where this is possible, a pro active response should be adopted to include;
- Secure and circulate copy of OCC severe weather plan and consider how the CDC Snow Plan would integrate.
  - Review of severe weather warning information received how we get it, who gets it and how we might organise communication of this in the Snow Plan.
  - Secure from OCC their priority gritting route; review and seek to suggest any priority areas across the District that we would ask OCC to include.
  - Provide copy and agree arrangements with Continental Landscapes.

### **Communications**

- 2.31 Informing members of the public in times of disruption about what services they can expect and when is clearly important. The following improvements are proposed to achieve this;
- Have specific arrangements in place for updating the website and ensure updates are communicated daily to the Communications Team.
  - Consider the information the Council wishes to get across and the positive messages that need to be part of the communications approach.
  - Investigate automated response protocols to emails.



- Consider the trigger for the Snow Plan (to be aligned with the OCC Plan), and how corporately this is enacted

### **Other issues**

2.32 These include;

- Check insurance position and liability especially where we are taking money for car parks.
- Look at councils where snow events are more frequent for best practice
- Establish a sub set of priority car parks.

### **Key Issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options**

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3.1 Considering the proposed action plan for adapting services to severe snow events

The following options have been identified. The approach in the recommendations is believed to be the best way forward

**Option One** To approve the proposed action plan as outlined in paragraph 2.29 to 2.30

**Option Two** To reject the proposed action plan

**Option Three** To ask officers to modify the proposed action plan

### **Consultations**

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Dialogue has commenced with OCC about those proposals in this report relevant to them.

### **Implications**

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**Financial:** There are some revenue and capital implications arising from the proposed actions. The amounts are relatively small and it is expected that these can be contained within approved budgets in 2011/12. In addition, the relatively small sums involved are far less than the loss of car parking income which can be substantial.

Comments checked by Denise Taylor, Service Accountant, Tel 01295 221982

**Legal:** There are no legal implications with this report

Comments checked by Liz Howlett, Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer. Tel 01295 221686

**Risk Management:** The likelihood of very heavy snowfall in Oxfordshire has been low but the consequence of such an event can be significant. With a changing climate it is difficult to forecast whether such events are likely to be more or less likely. However, it is prudent to make small investments to reduce the consequences of such an event.

Comments checked by Rosemary Watts, Insurance & Risk Management officer 01295 221566

#### **Wards Affected**

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All

#### **Corporate Plan Themes**

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Accessible and Value for Money Council

#### **Executive Portfolio**

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**Councillor Reynolds**  
Portfolio Holder for Environment, Recreation and Health

#### **Document Information**

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<b>Appendix No</b>	<b>Title</b>
None	
<b>Background Papers</b>	
None	
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