

# ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITY SAFETY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## Agenda Item 46

Brighton & Hove City Council

**Subject:** Scrutiny Panel on Winter Service Plan: Proposed Remit

**Date of Meeting:** 8 February 2010

**Report of:** Director of Strategy and Governance

**Contact Officer:** Name: **Brian Foley Standards and Complaints Manager** Tel: **29- 3109**

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**Wards Affected:** All

### FOR GENERAL RELEASE/ EXEMPTIONS

#### 1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

1.1 At the request of the Committee Chairman and Councillor Bill Randall in his letter to the Chief Executive, and following a number of complaints, comments and suggestions received from members of the public, a Scrutiny Panel is proposed (see previous item on this agenda). The Panel will investigate the delivery of the Council's Winter Service Plan and make recommendations on how it may be improved.

1.2 At **Appendix 1** the Standards and Complaints Manager gives details of the complaints and comments received between 16 December and 15 January about the Council's response to severe weather conditions.

The initial Standard Response (sent to complainants in December) and the revised Standard Response (January) appear as **Appendices A and B**.

1.3 This report sets out a suggested remit for the Scrutiny Panel at paragraphs 3.4 – 3.10 for agreement at this meeting.

## **2. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 2.1 That the Committee:
- (1) Note the information in this report
  - (2) Agree the remit of the Winter Service Scrutiny Panel
  - (3) Agree to the composition and named membership of the Scrutiny Panel.

## **3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 3.1 Details of the extreme weather events before and after Christmas and the Council's response in December 2009 and its enhanced service in January 2010 are detailed in the previous agenda item.
- 3.2 The formal complaints, comments and suggestions received from 16 December to 15 January are detailed in **Appendix 1** to this report.
- 3.3 Councillor Bill Randall wrote to the Chief Executive on 21 December 2009:

'There is huge discontent in my ward and others about the City Council's response to the extreme weather. I've been handling calls from older people and others who are under climatic house arrest. Although the situation is getting better now and street ate being dealt with, my group feels we will need a proper scrutiny of the council's response to the freezing weather once the snow has gone.

This is a formal request for a scrutiny by the Environment and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee as soon as possible after the New Year.'

Councillor Randall.

### **Membership and Aim of Scrutiny Panel**

- 3.4 It is proposed that the Winter Service Plan Scrutiny Panel comprises four members, one from each political group, with the ECSOSC Chairman serving as Panel Chair.
- 3.5 This meeting is asked to appoint three other named Members to the Panel to enable the scrutiny to progress without undue delay.
- 3.6 The Panel will make recommendations on modifications and improvements to the Council's Winter Service Plan and the Council's response to severe winter weather in future.

## **Work Plan for the Scrutiny panel**

- 3.7 The Panel will hold one public meeting in March and invite the Cabinet Member for Environment and officers to describe the Winter Service Plan and the actions taken in response to the severe weather.
- 3.8 The Panel will consider complaints and positive suggestions received. This being an issue of national concern, the Winter Service Plans and responses by other comparator authorities will be researched. The remit of the panel will be to consider:
- The Councils' Winter Service Plan
  - The predicted regularity of severe winter weather
  - The Council's response to the initial snowfall
  - Changes to the Council's response at the time of the second snowfall
  - Suggestions for alterations to service provision
  - Comparative information available from other local authorities
  - Financial implications of any service modifications
- 3.9 Witnesses will be invited to provide information to the Panel including:
- Members of council staff involved in the gritting programme
  - Members of the public with suggestions for service improvements
  - Council Members
  - Health organisations
  - Police
  - Unions
  - Others with particular expertise or knowledge
- 3.10 Draft findings and recommendations of the scrutiny review will be reported back to the April ECSOSC meeting.

## **4. CONSULTATION**

- 4.1 There has been no specific consultation however the information above has been gained from members of the public.

## **5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:**

### Financial Implications:

- 5.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report. In considering the Council's response to the severe weather event members need to take account of the financial implications of service changes. These are highlighted within the relevant reports.

#### Legal Implications:

- 5.2 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. In considering the Council's response to the severe weather event members need to take account of the legal implications of service changes. These are highlighted within the relevant reports.

#### Equalities Implications:

- 5.3 Whilst having no direct equality implications the issues raised in the report do highlight that some residents suffer disproportionately when severe weather conditions occur.

#### Sustainability Implications:

- 5.4 The report illustrates the impact that the severe weather had on residents of the City. If severe weather events are to become more frequent the council will need to evaluate how it seeks to prepare and respond to them. The Scrutiny Panel on Climate Change Adaptation is looking at some elements of this.

#### Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.5 There are no direct crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

#### Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.6 There are a number of risk implications associated with the severe weather. This report focuses on the number and type of complaint received by the council. The major risk associated with complaints of this volume relates to the Council's reputation and relationship with the City's residents.

#### Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 5.7 The Council has received substantial criticism for its response to the snow. This needs to be considered at a corporate level as all Council services are affected.

### **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

#### Appendices:

1. Report of Standards and Complaints manager

#### Documents In Members' Rooms:

None

#### Background Documents:

1. Brighton & Hove City Council's Winter Service Plan 2009 – 2010

**Background Information from Standards and Complaints Manager Summarising:**

- The number of initial contacts
- The number of secondary follow contacts
- Positive suggestions made by the public
- The key themes and issues being raised by members of the public
- The feelings expressed by the public

**Number of comments received 16 December 2009 and 15 January 2010**

1. The contact centre dealt with 3200 calls related to the severe weather conditions.
2. The council received in the region of seven hundred emailed comments from members of the public via its main email sites. In the main those emails were critical of the council's performance. However, later emails tended to be requests to have specific streets cleared of ice and snow and were less critical of the council's response overall. There was some recognition of the good work that was carried out by council staff.
3. Staff from the Winter Maintenance Team replied to the comments received in December with a standard template letter amended for specific issues raised. (Appendix 1)
4. With further snow falling in January staff from the Standards and Complaints Team assisted in providing responses using a revised standard response which referred the public to the information that was being constantly updated on our website. (Appendix 2)
5. Approximately 10% of people contacted the council for a second time stating they were dissatisfied with the response they had received. Where appropriate that group of people have been told they may make their representation to ECSOSC.
6. It was agreed with directors that none of the emails received would be dealt with through the corporate complaints procedure. However it was considered helpful to provide ECSOSC with an outline of the comments received.

**Summary of the issues of complaint**

7. The experience of Highways staff and Standards and Complaints was similar in that the December complaints contained a great deal of anger, were quite vitriolic and some could even be described as venomous. The overall impression gained was that people who contacted the council may have been looking for an opportunity to vent their annoyance with the council.
8. With regard to the initial complaints received the public reaction seemed disproportionate. There appeared to be little room for tolerance or understanding of the extent of the problem. It may be worth asking what it was that actually sparked such an intense reaction from some people.
9. January complaints differed from the initial complaints. It appears that people contacting us understood this was a national issue. They were probably seeing pictures from across the country and could see that it

wasn't just their council that had been 'caught out' or 'ill-prepared' (as suggested in the first round).

10. It is possible that our own communications with the public were improving and there was more information on the website. For example we were explaining how staff had been diverted from their current duties to assist. The press briefing at the end of December was very helpful. It was noticeable that comments focussed more on the needs of individuals, things like: why have you not gritted my road, I live at the top of a hill; I haven't been able to get to the shops.

### **Positive Suggestions made by members of the public**

11. Members of the public have made suggestions about how they think the service provided during severe weather may be improved. Some of these are summarised below:

#### Regarding prioritisation

- Keep schools open as a priority.
- Make it a priority case to grit outside the local shops or put grit bins there Many elderly people go to those shops, we live on the hills, but you concentrate on the centre of town, you should consider access down hills to local shops more during bad weather, for that's where people live, not in Churchill Square.
- Ensure bus routes are running.

#### Help from volunteers

- Find out / contact who can volunteer to help.
- Have a supply of hand tools that volunteers can use.
- Advise citizens to clean the path in front of their houses to facilitate the work of the cleaners (as it happens in other countries more organized in the event of snow like Germany). This council is very well organized and constantly open to new ideas so it would be brilliant to have a solution also to this problem.
- It is dangerous when residents are clearing snow from their property only to pile it on the pavements and roads. Please could people be advised to keep cleared snow on their front gardens

#### Communication

- Understand that not everyone has a computer and cannot get information from the web.
- Make sure people answering phones speak clearly.
- Give an indication when certain areas will receive some form of gritting to the roads/pavements.

#### Use of resources

- Prepare the street cleaners to use their resources (vans, trolleys) to clean the streets from snow or distribute salt on the ice to melt it, in the event of an emergency.
- The placement of the salt bins at the tops of roads would at least allow us to help ourselves.
- Consider placing grit bins on the roads that are not gritted. Much better would be for the council to realise that residential areas need to be gritted to allow us all to access services and it is short-sighted to force disabled people in desperation onto snowbound and icy roads and pavements, risking falls and fractures

### **Themes and Issues raised by the public**

12. The following is a summary of the themes and issues raised that were causing particular concern as perceived by members of the public:

- Lack of preparation given that snow had been forecast.
- BHCC were too slow in reacting to the problems.
- Disagreement with prioritisation of streets being cleared of snow.
- Other cities / regions / countries deal with emergencies much better.
- Snowploughs or gritters were not being used.
- Failure to prioritise bus routes and keep them open.
- Effect on businesses.
- People were unable to get to their local shops, gritting outside local shops was not prioritised. People do not live in Churchill Square.
- No help offered in the side streets.
- On steep hills people felt really cut off.
- Large numbers of requests to grit specific streets.
- Refuse and recycling is not being collected.

### **The level of feeling generated**

13. The following gives an indication of the feeling generated. The initial correspondence was really quite vitriolic. A great deal of anger was being expressed.

- Badly let down
- Video showing the gritting teams was insulting propaganda
- You really do not have a clue
- *There are 4 schools on the road and while a fantastic job has been done on gritting the pavements (thank you) the road is still very snowy and icy.*
- I'm a disabled bloke. I can't get out to supermarkets. Because you have decided NOT to make my pavements safe.
- I am disgusted with the councils lack of interest in ..... and the surrounding roads.
- Its disgusting you need to grit ..... there has been cars and vans stuck having to dig there ways out its utter chaos.
- Come on like... stop embarrassing yourselves.

- Why aren't you using tractors and hired plant to clear the roads. It looks like you just don't care.
- It's been almost a week and it's not acceptable. Considering how high the council tax is in this country it's amazing how little you get. ... This is ridiculous. I've never seen anything like this. You need to work way harder and no excuses are acceptable.
- *I do appreciate how hard your staff have been working to keep roads and pavements clear in this awful weather.* However, you do seem to have largely forgotten that Patcham exists.
- What it is to be old forgotten and ignored.
- *Many thanks for your hard work.*



**1. Initial Standard Response (December)**

Dear .....

Thank you for your message regarding the winter gritting operations of Brighton and Hove City Council.

I can confirm that we do not routinely treat side roads or lower used footways within the City this being due to the need to ensure main routes are kept passable and the resources available to the council as a whole.

We have a fleet of 6 lorries that are used for the gritting operations and they were fully committed to the main / bus routes throughout the City over the last few days and nights and could not be spared for side roads. Currently the drivers (there are 2 full sets of drivers) are being rested as we have further cold weather forecasts and therefore we can not afford to use all their driving hours up and then be unable to grit the main roads over night again.

Footways require a huge resource to clear them and we always endeavour to work in a priority basis when snow clearance is required. This being main shopping areas, hospitals etc. first. This process will take us several days to complete depending on the prevailing weather conditions and the current weather patterns have caused us to have to go back to areas already cleared and work on them again.

This means side roads and the majority of the cities footways will not be treated but there are a large number of side streets within Brighton and Hove in a similar position and we as an Authority have to prioritise our resources to the most used roads in these circumstances.

We also place grit bins on certain side roads that can be utilised by residents to help grit their own roads but these are generally only placed on junctions which have some incline etc. as these areas are of the highest risk. The grit bin request form can be found on the Brighton and Hove web site if you feel your road needs this addition. Any requests received will be considered and a needs list will be created from these requests.

We have issued instructions for all grit bins currently in use within Brighton and Hove to be checked and refilled as necessary also.

I am sorry I cannot give you a more positive response but do assure you we endeavour to utilise the resources available to us in the most effective manner and to help the most residents possible.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the Winter Maintenance Team

## 2. Revised Standard Response (January)

Dear,

We understand the frustrations of residents who have been faced with treacherous conditions during this particularly severe freeze. Because of the impact the snow and ice is having and the exceptionally high volume of correspondence we are receiving it is not possible to respond to individual requests and comments, but I hope the following information is helpful. I suggest you also look at our website, which contains forecasts, travel information and details of areas that are being gritted. <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=b1157184#Subtitle1>.

We are working with the bus company to keep the bus routes open where possible, with the bus company updating their website every 15 minutes on <http://buses.co.uk/news/weather.aspx>. Some bus routes, which have been gritted, can not be used by the buses because at extremely low ground temperatures even gritted surfaces remain icy and treacherous unless the grit is ground in by traffic.

Unfortunately we only have a finite supply of materials and staff to carry out the work so it is simply not possible to keep all 3,000 of the city's roads free from ice and snow in the hours immediately following a severe freeze. During the heavy snow our fleet of six lorries that are used for the gritting operations are fully committed to the main routes and main bus routes throughout the city. As you may be aware, prolonged ice and snow conditions require repeated treatments to keep these routes open and therefore in accordance with our Winter Service Plan, we direct our available resources to these and are not able to extend this to side streets.

Pavement clearance is very labour intensive and takes a long time to cover relatively small distances. Therefore the pavements in the most heavily used areas and those near shops and hospitals are treated first to keep them as safe and clear as possible. We are using 4x4 vehicles to take Refuse, Parks and Street Cleansing staff out to grit piles dropped around the city so they can treat pavements in more locations.

Grit bins were refilled as quickly as possible, both on request from members of the public and with staff checking those on our list. As with pavements, it can take some time get round to all 350 bins in the city but it was and continues to be a priority for our teams. A grit bin request form can be found on the Brighton and Hove City Council web site if you feel your road needs this addition. For a grit bin refill or request for a new grit bin please use the generic inbox [gritbinrequest@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:gritbinrequest@brighton-hove.gov.uk)

or use our online form at <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1148945>. We will however need to carry out a site visit to assess if it is possible to provide a new grit bin.

We endeavour to use the resources available to us in the most effective manner and to help the most residents possible. We will continue to review and learn from these events and are introducing extra measures, including diverting staff from other services to help with hand-gritting and increasing the number of grit-bins in the city.

Yours sincerely

