

REPORT TO INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES COMMITTEE – 20 JUNE 2019

ROADS WINTER MAINTENANCE REVIEW PROGRESS REPORT

1 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

1.1 Endorse improvements introduced for the 2018/19 winter season;

1.2 Acknowledge the ongoing medium term improvements; and

1.3 Consider Winter and Other Emergencies base funding levels in relation to current levels of service.

2 Background / Discussion

- 2.1 Following the storm events during the 2017/18 winter season the Roads Service carried out a review of winter services. The findings of the review and the proposed developments to winter services were reported to Infrastructure Services Committee on 10 May 2018. The report detailed the proposed future action in both the short and medium term. These actions accompanied with a summary of progress made to date is attached to this report (Appendix 1).
- 2.2 The current review follows on from the winter review which introduced changes to service provision which sought to reduce winter spend by £1 million from 2015/16 onwards. The 2018/19 winter has been relatively mild, as can be seen from the winter related statistics accompanying this report.
- 2.3 The number of personnel hours worked and quantity of salt used can reasonably be used as indicators of the relative severity of winter, and both of these were significantly lower than the previous year.
- 2.4 Although there were several warnings of severe weather during the season, fortunately there was nothing of the severity experienced during the December 2017 storm event nor the “beast from the east” the following February/March.
- 2.5 Following the December 2017 storm event the Service recognised that there were difficulties encountered by the public seeking to make requests for new grit bins and grit bin refills. In response, a number of improvements have been made. Requests may still be made by telephone, however the website online request process has been greatly improved.
- 2.6 Residents are now able to see all grit bin locations on a map, select the appropriate bin and request a re-fill. In addition to the website this function is also available via the MyAberdeenshire smartphone app.
- 2.7 The request is then processed via the Road Maintenance Management System (CONFIRM) allowing the Service to quantify and manage requests.

- 2.8 However, with approximately 1800 grit bins throughout the Aberdeenshire area there will continue to be refilling challenges during extreme weather events when resources are stretched. New criteria for the provision of new grit bins were also introduced and will be reviewed in due course.
- 2.9 Staying with the “self-help” theme, another initiative progressed during the 2018/19 season was the Snow Warden Scheme. The scheme was initially launched during the winter season 2016/17, however uptake was extremely low.
- 2.10 The Service has continued to be proactive, engaging with communities to promote the scheme. The scheme has also been promoted via the council website and social media. This has seen the number of active groups grow, resulting in 26 groups now being enrolled (a total of 74 individuals).
- 2.11 The result is encouraging and has been positively received by groups such as the Scottish Community Alliance as well as generating interest from other Scottish Local Authorities. The Service is continuing to engage with communities to explore further “self-help” initiatives.
- 2.12 Another area identified for improvement was communication. The Service has set up an internal Winter Service Communications Team, thereby designating individuals with clear responsibilities regarding communications during the winter period. This will continue to be developed and the Service will continue to explore further improvements and be more proactive regarding our use of the internet and social media. As part of this wider communication strategy a regular Briefing Note for Members was introduced. As well as circulation to Members this Note was circulated, via Area Managers, to other interested groups, such as Community Council. Informal feedback to date indicates that this document has been well received.
- 2.13 The farming community also play an important role and the Service continues to have a good relationship with approximately 120 farmers and contractors that provide a snow clearing service on our minor road network.
- 2.14 A telematics system has been fitted to the Aberdeenshire Council fleet of vehicles and the Service has been working with our fleet colleagues and the telematics provider to develop winter service applications. This will be an ongoing piece of work.
- 2.15 The data feed from telematics has already been used by ICT to develop a system to display the progress of our gritters in real time via the MyAberdeenshire smartphone app. It is also hoped to provide a similar display on the council website.
- 2.16 For technical reasons this has been limited to our planned treatments of the Primary Route Network, however it is intended to widen this to show all winter gritting/ploughing activity in future.
- 2.17 The Service has also been looking at how improved and clearer planning of snow clearing can be introduced. Currently the Operational Plan is focused on preventative treatments of the Primary Route Network in order to prevent the formation of ice. Typically, the Duty Officer makes a daily assessment of forecasted weather conditions and decides actions for the forthcoming evening/morning. Making better use of the Met Office National Weather

Warning System, the Service has introduced a “weather status” condition looking further ahead in order to facilitate advanced planning.

- 2.18 Early indications are positive, however there is still more work to be done identifying appropriate response actions.
- 2.19 There has also been work carried out to increase resilience in relation to available labour resource. To improve this the Service has extended the involvement of employees from non “roads” parts of the Service, engaging with colleagues in Waste and Landscape Services. This has included the identification and training of additional gritter/plough drivers.
- 2.20 However, this has been challenging and further work is required to ensure we can adequately staff rotas that involve an “out of hours” commitment.
- 2.21 In summary, progress in delivering the identified actions from the 2017/18 review has been relatively good. However, the Service recognises that more work still needs to be done to continually improve and meet future challenges.
- 2.22 The delivered improvements are by and large cost neutral or low-cost in relation to the overall winter budget, and the Service remains fully aware of the need to balance the appropriate service levels with the available funding.
- 2.23 Any proposals for changes to policy would follow the Council’s Policy Review Framework and details would be presented to Committee.
- 2.24 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

3 Scheme of Governance

- 3.1 The Committee is able to consider and take a decision on this item in terms of Section F.1.1 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as the relates to policy issues and resource matters of the Roads, Landscape and Waste Management Service.

4 Implications and Risk

- 4.1 An equality impact assessment is not required because the proposals do not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.
- 4.2 The funding of the winter service is an area of concern. The current budget allocation for Winter and Other Emergencies for 2019/20 is £4,529,000. By way of providing context: the 2018/19 winter was a relatively benign winter, however costs were in the region of £4.7 million. It follows that an “average” winter would cause a significant financial challenge. The Winter Statistics table in Appendix 2 shows information relating to the winter season for the previous 10 years. The number of precautionary treatments on the Primary Network, salt tonnage used, number of hours of labour and final costs are good indicators of the relative severity of the winter weather encountered during the season. It can be seen that the past winter season (2018/19) is at the less challenging end of the spectrum.

- 4.3 When price increases due to inflation are applied to the previous winter costs, it can be seen that should we experience an identical winter to last year, the cost would rise to £4.95 million in 2019/20. The price adjusted figures for the previous ten years are shown in Appendix 3.
- 4.4 The average expenditure on Winter Maintenance across the previous 10 years is £6,682,100; and the average since the changes introduced in 2015/16 is £5,350,251 (albeit 3 out of 4 of those years were “light” winters).
- 4.5 Winter funding has increased by just over 3% over the past 4 year period, whereas real cost increases have outstripped that. In essence, the winter budget has reduced in real terms. Based on historic data, current funding levels are some way short of adequately funding a relatively mild winter.
- 4.6 A substantial proportion of the Service’s costs are “fixed” e.g. depot costs, ensuring fleet and plant availability, ensuring labour availability, weather station provision and forecasting services. In excess of £1,500,000 is spent on winter readiness before any treatment costs are incurred. This means that around £3,000,000 remains from current budget provision for direct treatment costs (essentially labour, salt and additional plant and fuel costs).
- 4.7 The Service’s current estimate for 2019/20 winter outturn cost based on average winter conditions and current price rates is £6,050,000. As previously stated, the current budget provision is £4,529,000. The Winter and other Emergencies Fund Reserve was reset to £1,500,000 by Council on 14 February 2019, resulting in total available funding for 2019/20 being in the region of £6,029,000. Without the decision to allocate monies to the Winter and Other Emergencies the annual available budget would be significantly less than that required to deliver the agreed Service Level.
- 4.8 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level: ACORP001 Budget Pressures - the proposals will consider how to deliver an effective winter service within the available budget. ACORP006 Reputation Management – the proposals will detail how communication channels including social media will be used to manage the provision of information to the public. ACORP010 Environmental Challenges – the proposals will detail how the Service responds to extreme weather events.

Stephen Archer
Director of Infrastructure Services

Report prepared by Bill Lennox, Quality & Resources Manager
Date 4 June 2019

APPENDIX 1

Short and medium Term Objectives (Extracted from Report to ISC: 10 May 2018)

2.14 Proposed Future Actions – Short Term

2.14.1 The Roads Winter Service remains one of the most important aspects of service delivery. There have been numerous changes to this function in recent years. While the Service reviews performance and readiness annually, the events this winter indicate that a further in-depth review is warranted.

2.14.2 This initial short-term review has identified some areas for initial focus:

Snow Clearing

2.14.3 Improved and clearer planning of snow clearing as opposed to frost/ ice prevention. The focus of the Operational Plan currently is on preventative treatments of the Primary Route Network. More detailed planning and recording of actions following snow events are required.

Action

Snow Clearing: Improved and clearer planning.

Develop clear process for start times/ actions when snow forecast. Including triggers within the forecasts that prompt this action.

Communication

2.14.4 Develop a more robust communications strategy to provide the public with regular information prior to and during extreme weather events. Clearly designate staff with specific communication duties during these events. Improve web site and social media content. Improve information provided to Elected Members. Develop improved complaint handling processes with a more consistent standard of response.

Action

Communications Team established July 2018.

Regular Briefing Notes sent to elected members during 2018/19 season:

Three Briefing Notes issued over the season and a final BN planned for April.

Self Help

2.14.5 Promotion of the Snow Warden scheme, including improved engagement with Community Councils. Explore other opportunities to work with communities to facilitate self-help initiatives. Review the provision and management of grit bins.

Action

The Snow Warden Scheme

The Snow Warden Scheme has been reviewed and updated. Scheme promoted by engagement with the Area Managers to raise awareness with Community Councils and the Community Planning Officers raised awareness at CC Forum Meetings.

Details of the scheme are on the Aberdeenshire Council website, also promoted the scheme via social media (facebook and twitter).

The service will be reviewing the progress with the scheme and addressing any feedback prior to next winter.

Grit Bins

Complaints regarding difficulties in making requests for new bins/re-fills have been addressed. Improvements implemented to request process via phone, updated website with maps and Phone App. Also improved recording/management via Confirm.

Arrangements are in hand for additional 3 larger capacity grit bins (Westhill, Crow's Nest and MacDuff HWRCs).

New Grit Bin criteria introduced for 2018/19 season (to be reviewed). Review at end of season required with some amendments possible for 2019/20 season.

Aberdeenshire Working Group established to explore terms of engagement regarding volunteer groups. Also included in medium term action 11 - Partnering/supporting communities to maximise self-help.

Weather Forecast Information

2.14.6 Improve the use of longer term weather forecast information to prompt readiness action based on 5 - 10 day forecasts.

Action

Weather Forecasting & Response

Weather Status introduced (green/yellow S1 & S2, amber, red). So far there has been little feedback on further development of planned responses.

Route Planning and Recording

2.14.7 Define a Secondary Route Network in greater detail and plan and record treatment decisions and actions.

Criteria to be established for P3's based on Hierarchy 4a + bus routes.

Area teams working on identifying "routes" and sending information to Q&R to allow plans to be prepared.

Resources

2.14.8 Develop proposals to improve the availability of labour resources, particularly outwith normal working hours. Investigate utilising an increased pool of available labour ensuring they have the appropriate skills/competencies.

Group established to look at out of hours provision.

Increased numbers on Gritter driver rota (4 man rota).

2.15 Proposed Future Actions – Medium Term

2.15.1 The short-term proposals focus on ensuring that the Winter Operational Plan can fulfil the current stated policy. However, there is also further work required to consider whether the current policy statement and expectations are appropriate, proportionate and deliverable. This broader question will require a more in-depth review. A number of issues have been highlighted for this second stage, albeit it is far from exhaustive and to some extent will be developed further during the short-term review.

Further areas for review include:

1) Road network winter hierarchy – updating the assessment procedure to follow a more risk-based approach and introducing more tiers of road classification for winter

treatment. It should be noted that risk consideration should not be limited to injury risk. Other risks (such as economy, reputation) should be included.

2) Service standards - considering whether the planned winter treatment regime could be more targeted, again on a risk-based approach.

3) The impact of critical infrastructure, transport and large businesses on winter service plans and service standards.

Review of critical infrastructure currently being undertaken.

4) Performance measuring, with a focus on outcomes.

5) Staff rota patterns and hours of availability.

Group established to look at out of hours provision.

6) Treatment decision making and de-icing materials and spread rates.

7) Expanded use of vehicle telematics and tracking.

Gritmax fitted to gritting fleet. Currently used for live phone app. RW adding routes to telematics, we then need to set up reports and decide how we can use the available information.

8) Provide more real-time information to the public.

Telematics/Gritmax fitted to gritting fleet and currently used for live phone app.

Further development required. Also planned for similar information to be available on website.

Discussions have been held with Vaisala/Metdesk to get suitable information onto Council website.

9) Plant/vehicle suitability.

Work carried out to ensure gritters have adequate load capacity for treatment routes (20g/sq.m)

10) Coordination of Roads, footway, car parks, schools, other Council properties for winter services.

Options report for gritting at academies prepared and submitted for approval.

11) Partnering/supporting communities to maximise self-help.

Aberdeenshire Working Group established to explore terms of engagement regarding volunteer groups.

Appendix 3

The table below shows the previous 10 years winter season costs with price increases applied to show 2019/20 rates. The average figure for the previous 10 years is £6,682,100. The average figure since 2015/16 is £5,350,261.

<i>Year</i>	<i>2019/20 Prices</i>
2018-19	£4,953,444
2017-18	£7,777,233
2016-17	£4,002,806
2015-16	£4,667,562
2014-15	£5,529,451
2013-14	£5,224,414
2012-13	£9,610,732
2011-12	£5,666,355
2010-11	£9,922,924
2009-10	£9,466,079

