

T1.3/pf/0042

January 2010

Dear

Salting and Gritting of Hampshire's roads as at 14 January 2010

I have received a number of questions and queries about the County Council's salting and gritting campaign and I believe the best way of answering these is this general letter.

The County Council went into the winter with enough salt for 12 days continual treating of the network, double the Government's recommended six days of stock which was a recommendation made after last February's severe weather. At the start of the winter we had a total of 12,000 tonnes of salt in our stores.. The salt supply should have been replenished as it was used up, under the terms of a contract with the Salt Union in Cheshire, but due to the huge and unprecedented national demand the supply position has become very difficult, and now the Government has stepped in to decide who will receive supplies based on their assessment of priorities.

We have, up to this date, spent well in excess of £1 million on clearing Hampshire's main roads and we have used 14,000 tonnes of salt, mainly on the Priority 1 routes in Hampshire, which are the A roads plus important B roads and approaches to hospitals, schools and areas of key importance to our communities.

Each of the main roads in Hampshire has now received 53 salt runs and our Priority 2 roads received 12 salt runs before we were forced to cut back to conserve salt supplies. Our salting and gritting gangs are working around the clock in two shifts of 12 hours and we have drafted in contractors, farmers and indeed District and Borough Council staff to help in our efforts. The whole of the entity that is Hampshire has been co-ordinated within what is known as 'Gold Command' in which all the emergency services participate. We planned the location of rest centres that have opened across Hampshire to help motorists trapped after particularly bad snowfall and the whole effort was co-ordinated by the County Council once the Police decided the worst of our emergency had passed.

We have had to eke out our salt supplies and indeed the Government is today, asking us to reduce salting of our roads by up to 50%. We are considering what the implications of this are, but of course as temperatures vary we have in any event, been reducing or increasing the deposit of salt that our salt lorries are able to spread.

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In all of this, in order to keep these main routes open, we had to take the very difficult decision that some country roads and some areas of Hampshire would not be salted although we are now across the whole of the county using our lorries to spread sand and grit. While this will not reduce the ice, it will nevertheless deposit a material which will allow greater grip on these roads which we are unable to treat with salt.

The Government has assumed control over supplies of salt and you will gather from that how dire the situation is, to prompt Government to take this action.

As we struggle to keep our roads open, particularly the main routes so that food and fuel can reach Hampshire and be distributed, we are nevertheless looking at how we can try to avoid the worst of severe weather implications.

We shall totally disregard the Government's six-day stock of salt advice and having doubled it, we may well look to have 3 times more than the six days which Government recommended for next winter. We are looking at the possibility of additional smaller gritting equipment which could access the narrower roads and town centres which, of course, the large heavier vehicles which grit our main roads are unable to access. We are also looking at the probability of leasing more four-wheel drive vehicles since these were invaluable, particularly around the A3M and in other areas of the County in getting access to stranded people and to isolated communities.

I have also asked Officers to present a report to Cabinet by the end of January on an idea which I put forward at the Cabinet briefing, which is that we should treble the number of salt bins in Hampshire from the present 2000 to 6000 and we should ask local communities through responsible agencies such as parish councils, Neighbourhood Watch, perhaps even Residents' Associations to indicate to us where the bins should be located. We would then top-up these bins as and when required, and we would look to local communities, particularly those hardest hit through the lack of salting, to indicate both the location of these bins and to also accept responsibility to mobilise their local communities so that pavements, shop frontages and minor roads with lower traffic densities might be salted. The capital cost of these bins would be £800,000 and I believe that, in addition to some parish councils purchasing these bins from us, we can find an amount of money of up to £800,000 from our Reserves which we have built up specifically to tackle emergencies of this nature.

We will also, in the future, be looking for strategic partnerships with our neighbours such as Dorset, and with hospitals for holding and managing stocks of salt locally for snow clearance purposes. In amalgamating all of our stocks the salt position should become very much healthier.

In considering these policies and the report that will be brought to Cabinet at the end of January, it would be helpful if Parish Councils would indicate the number and location of the bins and whether they are able to make a contribution either in full or on some shared basis.

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I would emphasise that the idea of more bins is a proposal but we need to work through all of the implications including the knotty problem of whether well-meaning citizens, and particularly shop owners, helping us to clear the roads and pavements of Hampshire would render themselves liable to claims for compensation in the event that pedestrians continued to slip and injure themselves. Attempts have been made in Parliament by the MP for the Isle of Wight, Andrew Turner, to get Parliament to consider what I understand is a ruling by Lord Justice Denning which has led to the belief that however well-intentioned, the shop owner for example, might be in clearing their shop frontages, if people fell, they were then liable. Only Parliament could overturn such a judgement.

I have set out in detail in this letter, what we have been doing and what we think we can do as a consequence of the very severe weather we have experienced in the last two years. We were advised that last February's severe weather was a one-in-twenty year occurrence. Now we are being told that this year is a one-in-thirty year occurrence but I think most of us would feel we now have to plan for a greater incidence of such poor weather conditions.

I hope this letter goes some way towards informing you, allaying your fears and telling you what we are planning to do if it is legally possible, and if finances are sufficient. I am asking our Policy and Resources Select Committee to review how we have handled this emergency and to report back to Cabinet. I will ensure that all your comments are included in their consideration of these matters.

In conclusion I should say that we are all, at the County Council, immensely grateful for the community spirit that there is in Hampshire and the unstinting effort on behalf of all of our employees, all emergency services, District and Borough Council employees and our many volunteers. We are both grateful for and proud of the efforts of everyone involved.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ken Thornber', written in a cursive style.

Ken Thornber
Leader