

MINUTES of the meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Friday 21 May 2010 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor PJ Edwards (Chairman)
Councillor WLS Bowen (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: AE Gray, KG Grumbley, TM James, RI Matthews, PM Morgan, AT Oliver and PJ Watts

In attendance: Councillors JP French (Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources, JG Jarvis (Cabinet Member-- Environment and Strategic Housing), PD Price (Cabinet Member - ICT, Education and Achievement and DB Wilcox (Cabinet Member- Highways and Transportation).

24. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors PA Andrews and ME Cooper.

25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

26. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 15 March 2010 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

27. SUGGESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ON ISSUES FOR FUTURE SCRUTINY

There were none.

28. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE WINTER WEATHER AND THE RESPONSE TO IT

The Committee met to gather evidence as part of its review of the impact of the winter weather in 2009/10 and the response by the Council, Partners and others to the problems it posed.

The Committee had sought and received written evidence from a range of sources. The meeting focused on how the winter weather had affected a number of selected service areas, to help identify further matters that should form the basis of a report to Cabinet to help inform future winter planning.

The following officers attended the meeting to assist the Committee:

Children and Young People's Directorate (CYPD)

C Baird – Assistant Director, Planning, Performance and Development (ADPPD)

Adult Social Care

S Keetley – Head of Service – Adult Social Care

G Taylor – Assistant Director – Provider Services

Highways

C Hall – Highway Network Manager (HNM)

R Ball - Assistant Director

S Burgess – Transportation Manager

Representatives from Amey: J Maddy, C Howell, R Kinsella, M Thomas.

Information, Communication and Technology Services (ICT)

Z Pandor – Joint Director of ICT,
E Pawley, Knowledge and Web Services Manager.

Communications

R Blower - Head of Communications

Emergency Planning

Dr A Ali – Director of Public Health
P Nicholas– Assistant Director
E Hermon – Emergency Planning Manager

Resources

D Powell – Director of Resources

The Chairman remarked on the substantial impact the weather had had on the community, with both rural and urban areas experiencing considerable disruption, making this a county-wide issue worthy of the Committee's consideration.

He explained how he proposed to conduct the meeting and thanked both those who had already made written submissions and those who had made themselves available at the meeting to assist the Committee with its enquiries.

He complimented officers on the considerable efforts that had been made in response to the winter problems, observing that the Committee was seeking to identify the scope for improvement where that was possible.

It had been decided to try to make efficient use of officer time by, as far as was practicable, focusing on services provided by the Children and Young People's Directorate and Adult Social Care as discrete issues, with some specific separate consideration also of highway issues. However, it was considered that a number of other issues including ICT, communication and emergency planning together with highways services overlapped to such an extent that they could not be segregated.

Considerations Relating Primarily to the Children and Young People's Directorate

The following principal points were made:

Communicating school closures

Members suggested that it was vital to simplify communication to parents and staff.

The Assistant Director, Planning, Performance and Development (ADPPD) acknowledged that there were improvements that could be made to ensure that information was communicated via a variety of means to inform the public and staff of weather conditions and school closures.

The ICT service agreed that there were clearly improvements that could be made to communication and timeliness of that communication.

The proposed development of an automated web based system to provide information on school opening and closures, as described in the written submission by CYDP, would both improve timeliness and reduce the scope for confusion inherent in the current system which involved various parties relaying information from one to the other.

There was also the opportunity to explore a variety of other methods of communication including use of social media, subscription services and a corporate SMS system, already trialled by the waste management service.

It was noted that 60 responses to the online Socitm Insight Website take up service in January had related to the winter weather. Most had related to waste, others to schools and highways.

There was clearly scope to improve updating of information on service web pages. Services needed to work with ICT on this issue. Members suggested a winter weather front page with links to services from that page would make information more accessible to the public.

The Highways Network Manager (HNM) commented on the importance of: pre-planning and preparedness, explaining what is intended to happen, to help inform people's decision making; being realistic in the light of conditions that are then actually experienced; and explaining the overall circumstances and how it was planned to work through them. Whilst attention had been paid to these issues, he thought communication could be enhanced.

Where the decision to close a school should be taken – centrally or by individual schools

It was noted that schools in one part of the County often faced very different conditions to those in another part. A blanket decision taken centrally to close schools would not generally be helpful. The Directorate had provided information about weather conditions, transport routes and school transport to schools to assist them in their decision making, the decision on closure usually being taken by the governing body in consultation with the Headteacher. Apart from one day, a significant number of schools had been open.

It was evident that school closures had a wide community impact. Many people relied on schools being open. Members considered that the onus should therefore be on schools to try to open, perhaps with clear reasons for closure having to be given, and that consideration needed to be given to what the Council could do to facilitate schools being kept open and to encourage local resilience.

In relation to the payment of salaries to teachers who did not attend work the ADPPD said they were paid, provided reasonable steps had been taken to attempt to get to work.

Travel to School/Gritting of access routes to schools

Some schools were situated relatively short distances off main roads. It was suggested that more schools might have been able to remain open if access routes to those schools had been gritted.

The HNM acknowledged the submissions made on this point and that this would be considered. Normally secondary routes would have been gritted and this would have addressed this issue. However, the national shortage of salt had meant that through Silver Group, set up to co-ordinate the response, the focus had had to be on maintaining the priority routes.

Members suggested there was scope to review priority routes.

Clearance of School sites and playgrounds

The ADPPD commented that the clearance of school sites was delegated under a schools grounds maintenance contract. Some schools with large sites had additional contractual arrangements. Property Services wrote to schools every October asking how much grit they required. Deliveries were made in December.

A number of schools had run out of grit. It was noted that supplies could be obtained from Amey, subject to availability. However, there had been a national shortage.

The ADPPD commented that there were no provisions in the schools grounds maintenance contract covering such exceptional circumstances but Property Services had tried to make more grit available where possible.

Members suggested that there was potential for guidance to be issued to schools or for more help to be provided.

The ADPPD noted that safe access to schools for both pupils and teachers was fundamental.

The potential for teachers not able to work at their employing school to work at another school

The ADPPD reported that teachers were governed by the terms and conditions of the Burgundy Book. Although it could be argued it was out of date, this did still contain a provision that teachers should seek to work in the school nearest to them if unable to work at their normal school. This was a general principle but not one that was promoted. It was not custom and practice for teachers to seek to work at alternative schools. The provision did not take account of the different types of school now in existence, with the local authority not necessarily the direct employer and different conditions of employment applying. A number of teachers also had their own children to care for in severe weather conditions making them unable to attend work.

School Attendance Records

There was a suggestion that if schools opened but there was limited attendance because of the weather this would affect the attendance statistics and invite criticism from OFSTED. In contrast it was believed that a total closure did not affect the statistics. This seemingly created a perverse incentive for schools to close.

The ADPPD categorically refuted this as a myth, reporting that the Directorate had issued guidance to schools from the then Department of Children Schools and Families informing them of the provisions for recording absence in such circumstances.

Impact on children's education

The ADPPD reported that a number of schools had arranged homework clubs over the Easter holidays and this had helped to make up for the loss of school days.

School Transport

The ADPPD said that efforts had been made to draw together the available information on accessibility including gritting plans and early morning reports of ice. Safety of children was a paramount consideration. A number of routes involved small lanes. He noted that if school buses did not run the contracts with the Council did mean that the Council was charged a much smaller amount. This created an incentive for the bus companies to provide a service, but it was essential that the companies operated safely.

Staff had made themselves available from early in the morning and at the weekend and had tried to provide as much relevant information as they could to Headteachers about conditions.

School Opening Times

It was reported that some schools had opened later in the day, conditions having eased somewhat by that time. However, communication of revised times could be problematic and it could be difficult for parents to respond to changes.

Similarly, some schools had not been able to open if they could not provide lunch. Again there was a communication issue in alerting parents to provide a packed lunch.

It was acknowledged that the timeliness of school closures was also an issue, with closures resulting in an increase in traffic volumes and impeding treatment of the roads.

The operation of the surge information line and its intended replacement by a new system operated through customer services was noted. It was considered that the link between children's services and emergency planning, who managed the line, had worked well.

Considerations Relating Primarily To Adult Social Care

The Head of Social Care outlined the respective roles of commissioners of care and Council and Primary Care Trust providers.

The business continuity plan provided that in the case of severe weather non-urgent services were stopped and priority given to delivering urgent services and in particular maintaining services to the most vulnerable.

Co-location of a lot of staff in the service had helped. Liaison with emergency planning and the police had been good.

There had been many examples of service providers going beyond the call of duty to provide services, with staff walking long distances, and of providers offering additional capacity.

However, some providers had not made visits as planned and had not been prompt in informing the Service. This meant the Service had been unable to see if other providers had the capacity to make good this shortfall in care.

The hindrance providers had faced as a result of pavements not being cleared was noted.

The importance of the role of the 4x4 volunteer service was emphasised.

Social workers had made use of formal and informal networks to try to ensure care reached service users. Where day centres had closed staff at those centres had been redeployed.

She considered the Service had by and large served the County well.

She noted that the first two days of any spell of bad weather were not so significant but when the bad weather extended beyond that point it became more problematic. Vulnerable people may often face financial constraints and might face a shortage of supplies after that point.

The role of the community itself had been important and the Communications Unit had been involved in raising awareness of the need to support the vulnerable.

The lack of gritting on the route to headquarters at Belmont Abbey was not considered important, compared to the need to enable social workers to travel.

Where specific places of high risk had been identified and a request made to Silver Group, gritting resources had been provided.

It was noted that computer systems permitted information held by adult social care to be overlaid onto maps to identify areas of need.

It was suggested that the development of the emergency co-ordinator scheme in parishes would improve community resilience.

It was noted that information from GPs and District Nurses was fed into the system.

It was acknowledged that there was no formal network designed to draw on Local Members, but information was supplied both by them and by Parish Councils.

Concerns over the performance of smart phones issued to adult social care staff were noted. The Joint Head of ICT's advice that the procurement policy could accommodate the requirements of adult social care staff and that he would review the issue in conjunction with the Head of Adult Social Care was noted.

The Assistant Director of Provider Services agreed that some people had not been able to attend appointments at GP surgeries. Urgent cases would have been dealt with. He was not aware of there having been any substantial pressures on GP and out of hours services and no complaints had been received.

The Director of Public Health acknowledged that it had been a difficult time for the primary care service and the acute service and there would be specific instances where the service had not been optimal. Meetings had already taken place regionally on the scope for improvement.

Considerations Relating Principally to Highways Services

The HNM stated that the Highways Authority had discharged its statutory duties during the winter weather. The Authority was required to take such steps as were “reasonably practical” in carrying out the duty to ensure safe passage along a highway was not endangered by snow or ice.

He noted that a parliamentary review of the transport industry’s response to winter weather was underway and this should identify areas of good practice from which lessons could be learned.

Gritting

The HNM confirmed that there was liaison with Parish Councils throughout the year and their views on gritting routes were taken into account in the annual review of the Winter Service Plan (WSP). The prioritisation of routes was set having regard to the duty, so far as was reasonably practicable, to ensure that safe passage along a highway was not endangered by snow and ice.

The prioritisation of routes was discussed, noting for example that whilst the A465 had been relatively clear, the South Wye area, containing some one third of the City population had virtually been cut off, with pavements impassable and buses not operating on routes off the main roads.

The HNM commented that the national salt supply problem had meant that the treatment of secondary routes and some footways provided for in the WSP had not been possible. The Government had required authorities to conserve salt supplies with reduction in usage of 25% of normal levels, subsequently reduced further to 50% of normal levels. Inspections had been carried out to avoid unnecessary gritting and conserve supplies. There had been selective treatment and spread rates had been varied.

There had been plans in place to restrict gritting further if necessary but it had proved possible to resist this step.

Commenting on the scope to extend gritting routes, for example to some school accesses, the HNM said that routes would be reviewed as part of the annual review of the WSP. However, whilst it might be possible to accommodate some additional routes, beyond a certain point there would be significant step changes in the cost of service delivery. An additional gritter, for example, would cost £85,000,

Self-help

In terms of community resilience and the scope for Parish Councils to carry out more works there was a question as to how far it was practicable to extend schemes such as the lengthsman scheme, which did not currently include gritting, and how much resource was available to support such an extension.

Provision of grit bins was one way of enabling communities to help themselves mitigate the conditions. In the severe weather it had been difficult to obtain salt and restock without compromising resilience. Attention was drawn to the need to secure bins against vandalism.

Schools and businesses could purchase salt from Amey provided there was sufficient stock.

Preventative action

The HNM acknowledged work to improve drainage of highways, to prevent water running onto roads creating a hazard, could be improved. There were regular highway inspections and some key sites that would receive particular attention.

It was confirmed that there were inspections to ensure footways too were kept clear of overhanging trees and hedges.

Resources

It was noted that Amey was included within Silver Group and Amey's resources, including 4x4 vehicles, would have been made available if required, although the vehicles were being used by Amey to deliver its services. Amey had had 8 4x4 vehicles available – these were normally shared between highways and grounds maintenance duties.

It was noted that, with finite resources, allocating additional monies to winter maintenance would be at the expense of other services. The Director of Resources commented that provision for winter maintenance was made in the base budget (£2m in 2009/10) based on an analysis of expenditure over a five year period. A winter maintenance reserve of £0.5m was also included in the budget given the unpredictable nature of the weather.

Salt Supply

The resilience of the national salt supply was discussed, noting that the Highways Service had explored a number of options to secure supply. It was reported that the provision of some regional resilience was under consideration.

The Committee noted that there might appear to be a temptation to reduce salt storage to save money. However, mindful of the pressures on supply, there was unanimity that the stock level should be maintained at no less than 6,500 tonnes at the start of each winter season.

A Member commented that by comparison with some previous winters the disruption had in fact lasted a relatively short time. There had been more severe and longer lasting winters. The HNM acknowledged this and that establishment of resilience at regional level might prove to be the solution. However, had the winter been more prolonged the Authority had had plans in place to secure additional supply.

The national salt supply was one parameter. Finance was another. The HNM considered that the Authority's policy had proved to be a prudent one allowing the WSP to be delivered. This compared favourably with a number of authorities.

Communication

Communication of the Council's plans was essential.

The importance of communicating what the Council could realistically achieve, trying to ensure the Community was listening and understood this and encouraging a self-help attitude in the Community was emphasised. It was suggested that the production of a handy guide to be kept in cars and Hertfordshire County Council's ready for anything campaign were ideas worth exploring further.

Members commented on the need to ensure that material on website was up to date and that out of date material was removed. It was noted that some information on the Council website regarding gritting routes had been out of date and that people had been unaware of some of the changes to routes that had been made.

It was also important to draw on local knowledge. An example was given of a dangerous junction left ungritted, that had previously been included on the gritting route.

The HNM commented that the main gritting routes had been updated as part of the WSP process. Some work with Amey on the website was planned. Any errors would be addressed.

Arrangements with Farmers and Contractors

The arrangements with farmers and other contractors for undertaking snow clearance work were noted.

The Emergency Planning Manager commented that the story that farmers could not engage in clearance work with Red Diesel in their tanks had been refuted by the Revenue and Customs Service.

Members congratulated the Highways Network Manager and Amey for their response to the winter weather.

Consideration of Issues Relating Primarily to ICT, Communication and Emergency Planning

The large amount of information to be gathered, the cumbersome nature of some broadcasts of school closures and the co-ordination of them was noted. It was suggested that the development of the proposed web based system for notifying school closures would help.

Concern was expressed about the robustness of the proposed development of the community based Emergency Co-ordinator scheme with Town and Parish Councils. It was noted that there had been a limited take up to date. It was hoped that as work with those who had volunteered got underway others would join in.

It was stated that the role of Emergency Planning was that of co-ordinator. Individual services had to be responsible for the management and delivery of their services.

It was noted that the facility for officers to work at home was increasing. The development of the virtual learning environment and video conferencing provided opportunities for delivering education in times of disruption to transport.

Whilst there was information on the website about school closures and waste collection arrangements there was a lack of information on the website about disruption to other services, including services for older people such as meals on wheels and day care centres.

The need for information about school closures to be available very early in the morning to be of any value to parents was reinforced and, linked to this, the importance of putting information on the web a day beforehand about what the Authority's plans were for the next day.

The Committee was advised that arrangements were in place to avoid duplication of services.

The Chairman thanked those who had attended the meeting for their contribution.

RESOLVED:

- That**
- (a) the findings arising from the meeting be used to inform the Committee's report and recommendations to Cabinet; and**
 - (b) the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Councillor PJ Watts, be authorised to work as a Review Group to seek such clarification and further information as they considered necessary to enable the review report to be finalised.**

The meeting ended at 12.50 pm

CHAIRMAN