

Flintshire County Council 01/03/16
Agenda Item 6: Questions from Members

Question submitted by Councillor Tony Sharps

Could the Deputy Leader give a detailed explanation to council following his investigation as to why treatment works were not carried out on the evening of Sunday, 10th January, 2016 - the morning of Monday, 11th January, 2016.

According to local press reports, over 60 vehicles were involved in accidents including a coach of Flintshire students taking them to college. Weather forecasters informed all North Wales that poor weather was on the way with wind, rain and frost.

For reasons only known to management, the gritters of Flintshire County Council failed to turn out. I should like to point out there was no shortage of grit or salt.

STREETSCENE AND TRANSPORTATION
RESPONSE TO QUESTION RAISED BY COUNCILLOR TONY SHARPS
REGARDING WINTER MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS ON
MONDAY 11th JANUARY 2016

Background

The County Council, as Highways Authority, has a statutory responsibility to provide a Winter Maintenance service to ensure that, where reasonably practicable, the road network is kept clear of snow and ice.

The Winter Maintenance service is provided on behalf of Flintshire County Council by staff from within the Streetscene and Transportation Portfolio and has two main components.

1. The Decision Making Process.

The decision on when and where to treat the highway network is undertaken by a small group of trained staff within the Streetscene service, who follow the Member approved Winter Maintenance policy to make a decision on the appropriate treatment ahead of predicted frost or snow conditions. The policy is reviewed and approved by the Council's Cabinet every two years, with the last review being undertaken in September 2015.

The staff members make the decision based on the weather forecast provided by a national forecasting provider (Meteogroup Ltd). Meteogroup provide weather forecasting services for most of the Welsh Authorities (21 out of 22) and a high number of local authorities in England. Local weather stations (which include road sensors), provide additional local information on road conditions, which the forecast supplier uses to predict the local weather conditions

2. The Front-line Operational Response

The direct service provision is provided by operational staff from within the Streetscene and Transportation service. This service is provided through a core fleet of 14 gritters, operating from a single depot in Alltami and driven by a team of 36 drivers, who operate on a weekly standby rota between September and April each year.

Budgets

As part of the September 2015 Winter Maintenance policy review, some changes were made to the precautionary routes to ensure consistency on some unclassified routes. The new policy made no changes to the response times, scope or the mechanism for delivering the service on the classified highway network.

Whilst there is a dedicated budget for Winter Maintenance within the overall Streetscene and Transportation budget, the actual spend on Winter Maintenance is dictated by the weather conditions each year. Any overspend is funded corporately and a reserve account of £250K is maintained to deal with extreme winter conditions. The reserve is added to (if a mild winter results in an underspend on budget) and utilised during years when conditions demand additional action.

Any decision on Winter Maintenance treatment is therefore based on the need of the network, taking into account the expected weather conditions - There are no restrictive financial controls when making daily decisions on proposed actions.

Events on January 10/11 January

On the morning of 11th January, there were a number of Road Traffic Collisions in Flintshire County Council, some of which were allegedly caused by untreated roads.

In total there were 17 collisions recorded within the County

- 2 were classified as serious (although one was not related to road conditions)
- 2 were classified as minor
- The remainder were classed as 'damage only' incidents.

An immediate internal service investigation took place and at the request of the Chief Officer, an independent Internal Audit was undertaken, reviewing both the processes followed and subsequent actions taken, on the evening of Sunday 10th and morning of Monday 11th January 2016.

Conclusions

The Council's Winter Maintenance Procedures are robust and had been followed in this case and the Council staff member tasked with making the decision was adequately trained and experienced to do so.

Changes to the predicted weather conditions, experienced on that morning were not passed onto the Council by the contracted forecast provider, in order that pre-cautionary gritting action could be undertaken.

Following the incident, the Chief Officer and Senior Managers from the service met with Meteo Group to seek assurances that the contracted conditions to notify the Council of any change to the weather forecast provided - would be met fully in future. These assurances were received verbally at the meeting and subsequently confirmed to the Council by Meteo Group and their adherence to these conditions will be monitored throughout the remaining winter period.

Managers and staff from the service undertake the role diligently and clearly understand the implications if their decisions are not appropriate to the forecast received. There is a process in place to review each daily action and members of the Senior Management Team are always available for discussion if there is any doubt on the correct action to be taken.