Institute of Highway Engineers
Submission to Winter Resilience Review 2010

Introduction

IHE as a professional institute represents around 3000 engineers many of whom are key deliverers of highway maintenance and network management.
We supported the formation of the Salt Cell in early 2010 as there were clear difficulties in securing replenishment supplies for which many had contracted for with UK suppliers. It is observed, without any hard evidence, that some authorities had not done enough to provide for a harsh winter.
There is also a view that salt alone is needed to remove snow hence more than necessary was applied when adequate removal would have been preferable.
From the 'other' side, for many drivers this was their first experience of a long term snow event and they were inadequately trained to cope with some conditions.

1. UKRLG Review and its recommendations

1.1 The report did address many of the key issues relating to the winter of 2008/9 but most authorities had insufficient time to complete some of the recommendations. Resilience was the correct emphasis but many could not persuade elected members and County Treasurers to invest in the facilities for storage and environmental mitigation in time for the start of winter. The effects of 2009/10 may have changed this view in those authorities. More could be done to establish very locally placed salt stocks and to use local farmers etc to provide local resilience at the earliest opportunity. The review correctly emphasised the need for adequate salt storage to meet a basic resilience requirement of 6 days on a core network but this proved to be inadequate. The period over Christmas and New Year (2009/10) showed that deeper resilience standards are required.

1.2 Most authorities did examine their Winter Service operations in the light of the review and improved the approach to resilience to include a strategic network. However, some found that, in the depth of winter, it was difficult to explain and rationalise that network when forced to retreat to it by the need to conserve salt stocks.

1.3 The guidance should be expanded in the light of the experience from the last two winters, particularly in the area of self help (including the legal aspects) and engaging voluntary and community resources. Other responsible authorities should be advised to prepare such as Head teachers for schools, District Councils for car parks and NHS for safe access and use of car parks as generally the network to the entrance would be a priority for an authority. This should also extend to other transport operators (haulage and public transport).

2. The approach to winter resilience – highways

2.1 Generally authorities felt that they were able to perform well but were forced to compromise on normal standards due to the salt supply problems. The issues were clearly understood but still caused a deal of frustration. Too often members in authorities who were able to provide mutual aid observed that it was the same authorities in the region that appeared to be requesting assistance for the second winter running.

2.2 Salt Cell performed well in demanding circumstances and provided intelligent advice to suppliers taking into account weather forecasts on a regional basis. There were frustrations about salt usage as it became obvious that some authorities were not actively conserving salt and some were not supplying data.

2.5 We advocate improved advice and more encouragement to prepare adequately for future winter events although there is a concern that reducing public finances will inhibit the ability to fully and properly prepare.
Salt supply is a concern, particularly in the context of re-supply, given that for two successive winters the supply chain has been unable to perform to contractual requirements. Whilst there should continue to be a presumption for mutual aid, advice should be provided to authorities on how they might manage access to aid through providing reassurance that all possible measures have been taken to reduce usage and conserve stocks.

2.6 Government should examine the place of incentives to suppliers to increase their resilience and performance and whether there is a place for centrally managed regional stockpiles.

3. Weather forecasting and communications

3.1 Short term forecasting is generally accepted as good but needs to continue to improve with more localised data. The propensity for forecasters to include factors of safety needs to be examined as it can lead to unnecessary use of salt in marginal situations which then impacts upon general salt use. Medium and long term forecasting needs to be improved to assist with decisions on when to move to resilience networks. Borderline forecasts caused a real problem during the winter, which resulted in supplies being diminished unnecessarily prior to the real event.

3.2 Higher confidence in medium to long term forecasts would assist in planning for the length of serious events and with attitudes towards the provision of mutual aid or an encouragement to move to conservation strategies including the use of resilience networks.

6. The consequences and economic impacts of severe winter weather

6.1 There is little doubt that short term events have little effect on local economies but more remote small and medium enterprises experience problems where events are prolonged. In rural authorities the farming sector will lose milk and other supply chain commodities if access into the minor road network is not usable. Emergency services can be assisted through the Gold/Silver command structure and generally cope well. Public transport services appeared able to function on the longer routes due to the usage of the higher categories of road but were not able to provide the very local services so important to local communities. Many services terminated or collected from access points close to the main road network to avoid the risks of operating on unsalted local roads.

6.2 Some aspects of salting of footways may have led to an increase in falls and broken limbs increasing pressure on the NHS. The economic impact of this might usefully be discussed to understand the most appropriate response. There appear to have been more insurance claims. Greater self help and encouragement to clear footways outside of properties would help but the legal position in terms of liability needs clarification or atleast reassurance should be provided to the public. Central government should assist and should encourage more self help,

7. Communications and public expectations

7.1 The public have a propensity to be selective about responding to advice which is not helped by the need to provide advice before the weather has turned. There has to be improved communication and regular updates before, during and after winter to help, not only the public, but all those using the network for economic reasons to ensure informed decision taking. Authorities recognise the need to employ social media for this purpose and that there will have to be different ways of providing regular and timely information.
The Institute's policy statement of 2004 still seems relevant!
http://theihe.org/knowledge-network/uploads/WinterMaintenanceSept2004_9__1.pdf

7.2 Good advice and examples of good practice from those authorities expert at employing new technologies would be helpful.

8. Long term weather trends

8.1 Authorities would benefit from improved intelligence about the likelihood and frequency of future severe weather events. Future financial pressures will influence the risk assessment approach to investment. Society needs to engage in dialogue to establish the levels of tolerance to repeat events which will very much depend upon frequency. The UK continues to be a road based economy and the performance of local authorities will come under greater scrutiny should there be an increase in the regularity of winter events such as we experienced in the last two years.

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