

## **BRIEFING NOTE- Motion to full Council- Grit Bins**

As the highways authority Lancashire County Council are responsible for winter maintenance of adopted highways and pavements across the entire county. Therefore, the majority of information provided within this note has been taken from either briefings issued by the County Council or directly from County Council officers.

### **BACKGROUND**

Lancashire like the rest of the region recently faced some of the most sustained periods of very bad winter weather for around 30 years.

The weather made a huge demand on salt supplies, despite the plans made by the County Council last year to prepare for the then likely winter weather. To make sure the county kept moving operations were prioritised. This meant that all A and B roads plus a proportion of other important "main" roads were salted. As was the case with other local authorities the County Council were not able to treat side roads, pavements or fill grit bins. This is a situation which is kept under regular review.

The County Council did review their general policy after last year's winter and concluded that broadly it was robust and generally effective. This policy has worked in the sense that at no time has the County Council failed to keep key routes open.

Lancashire has one of the largest gritting operations in the UK which comprises 150 trained drivers, 48 frontline gritters, 16 reserve vehicles which are called into use in extreme conditions. The network currently treated as a priority amounts to 2,350 km.

The total length of roads in Lancashire is 7,000km and, in addition, there are over 13 million square metres of pavements and footways. Despite the resources available, it is simply not possible to treat all roads and footways in the kind of extreme weather we recently experienced. The kind of infrastructure that would be needed to treat everywhere would mean Lancashire required at least three times the amount of vehicles, staff and buildings as well as a corresponding increase in the amount of salt. This would mean a significant increase in budget and council tax at a time when local people are already facing difficult financial times. It is also the case that the investment would be unused most normal years.

The County Council treats 35% of roads as a top priority. Not only is this a higher proportion than other councils in the UK, the county has more roads than most other councils.

Through the County Council website and other media residents were urged to think about whether they should travel and to offer help to any vulnerable neighbours, friends and family.

### **GRIT BINS**

Essentially the motion is to request that the county council replenishes grit bins throughout the winter period.

#### **How comprehensive is the grit bin network currently?**

Lancaster district currently has about 240 grit bins and a small number of salt heaps in rural areas.

#### **Under 'normal' circumstances what is the specification for filling grit bins?**

Under normal circumstances salt bins would be refilled with dry salt after the first reports of empty bins started being received – this would be done by a general run round of all bins when there was spare labour or by individual filling of reported bins if the labour was scarce.

### **Why weren't empty bins filled during the recent period of snow and ice?**

The salt stock is managed to ensure that the priority routes are kept open. This means that there is no salt available to fill salt bins –all the salt currently in the depots could be used many times over just filling each grit bin once, leaving nothing for the priority routes.

### **What are the financial and operational implications of this proposal ?**

Each additional 100 bins would have the following impacts:

Purchase + placement £350 x 100= £35,000

Initial filling and refilling £75-150/bin depending on location = £7,500-15,000

Total estimated additional cost to place 100 bins = £42,500-50,000 + £7500-15000 for refilling + costs for bin maintenance.

In practice, filling and maintaining a large number of grit bins would divert highway staff and financial resources away from other, possibly more important, duties. The recent prolonged event has shown that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice lower priorities in order to meet the higher priorities, and this will always be the case. A similar request has been received from most districts in Lancashire, and it is unlikely that additional resources will be available from County budgets in future years to meet the cost of these requests. On balance, the proposal may only become practical if district councils support the initiative with financial and staff resources.

From experience, a large proportion of the salt in bins is likely to be used on private areas and not for the benefit of highway users. For example, if additional salt is required for the treatment of footways and minor roads, a more effective answer would be to hold stockpiles of salt specifically for footways to be applied by hand by provided through diverting City Council staff from their normal work. If the City Council was willing to treat this as mutual aid under the public realm agreement, the salt would be more likely to be applied where it was required and at the correct time. However, if salt is in short supply, priority routes would always take precedence.

### **COMMENTS FROM HEAD OF CITY COUNCIL (DIRECT) SERVICES**

During the recent period of bad weather as part of our ongoing formal highways maintenance contractual arrangements several CC(D)S staff were deployed to drive gritting vehicles for the County Council. Remaining highways maintenance staff were directed by the County Council to undertake various winter maintenance works, as per our contractual agreement. For the first time in nearly 30 years two days of waste collection were lost to the weather. On both these occasions many staff decided to take annual leave. On the first occasion remaining staff were diverted on an ad hoc basis to clear snow in Lancaster, Morecambe and Carnforth town centres. On the second occasion the few remaining staff cleared the depot to help ensure operational vehicles were able to access the highway. The cleansing operation continued throughout and reverted to a much more labour intensive manual operation which focussed on emptying litter bins, litter picking and cleansing town centres. Many grounds maintenance staff had already taken annual leave the remainder were mainly deployed on winter maintenance of Council open space and contractual works.

Were the City Council to consider the suggestion by the County Council of introducing a formalised policy of diverting staff from their normal work to hand grit footways etc much consideration would have to be given as to whether and how this would actually work in

practice. Eg which footways would be priority? What equipment would be required? What would be the operational implications of diversion? How serious would the weather conditions be if staff were diverted? Would the grit actually be available or would it end up having to be diverted.

The fundamental question which needs considering both nationally and locally is what frequency of severe winter weather is it reasonable to plan for and how flexible should plans be to escalate. It is understood that County are proposing to set up a task group to debrief on what happened this time, what lessons can be learned and presumably as a result what changes to make to existing plans and operations.

For the City Council the issue is how far would we want to contribute to the County agenda and to what extent should the City Council make provision on its own land eg cemeteries, parks, car parks.

**HEAD OF CITY COUNCIL (DIRECT) SERVICES**  
**19/01/2010**

**SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

The Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments to add.

**MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.