

Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee

4 July 2011

Winter preparations and lessons from severe weather

Dealing with resilience arrangements following lessons learnt from snow events and preparations being made for future events.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this briefing is to:

- 1.1 Inform the Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee of progress to increase resilience to snow and severe weather events within the county council; and
- 1.2 Outline action taken to improve plans and processes to improve the local response to severe weather incidents.

2. Background

- 2.1 In the last 18 months, Oxfordshire has experience several periods of heavy and prolonged snowfall where an emergency response was required to support critical services, partner agencies and the community.
- 2.2 In response to the snow event in January 2010, a Severe Weather Plan was produced by the Emergency Planning Unit (EPU) in consultation with the District and City Councils to provide a more coordinated response to weather events. This plan was published in November 2010 and was used by partners during a further snow event in December 2010.
- 2.3 In response to Met Office issued weather warnings on 17th December 2010, the activation procedures in the Severe Weather Plan were followed which included a teleconference with internal and external response personnel to prepare services for the weather conditions and consultation with the Duty Director to activate the online Major Incident Reporting System (MIRS) for Monday 20th Dec in anticipation of significant disruption.
- 2.4 In contrast to the snow event in January 2010, schools were closed for the Christmas period eliminating the requirement for the Council to publish school closures. However, the proximity to the Christmas holidays – and in particular the fact snow fell on the last shopping Saturday before Christmas meant that many people continued to travel and were involved in extended traffic delays despite advice from emergency services to stay at home. The time of year also meant that some agencies experienced a lower than usual availability of volunteer staff due to holiday commitments.

3. Lessons identified and subsequent activity

- 3.1 **Review of Severe Weather Plan:** The existence of the Severe Weather Plan and its use by responding agencies within Oxfordshire reinforced the view that such a plan was both required and useful in coordinating the activation activities of local

agencies. It is usual practice to review learning and amend plans following use and this process is underway within the EPU and with partner agencies to incorporate learning. This review will also take account of changes to Met Office weather warning procedures and legislative and policy changes which affect the response such as changing approaches within the county to flood response following the Flood and Water Management Act as the plan covers flooding, snow, gales, heat wave and drought.

- 3.2 **Availability of 4x4 vehicles and volunteers:** The availability and coordination of 4x4 capabilities within the county was highlighted by all responders in the snow event of January 2010 where the Fire Service provided support to both OCC and NHS services. Progress was made by December to review fleet and lease cars to increase access to 4x4 vehicles within many teams. However, due to some shortfalls in provision and planning arrangements, initially the Fire & Rescue Service and later, the Integrated Transport Unit were required to manage an emergency 4x4 cell to support the delivery of some critical services, particularly to rural areas. The Environment & Economy Directorate, supported by the EPU will work to construct a 4x4 plan which can be placed on standby in response to weather warnings and to gain an understanding of potential demand for such a service following changes to Home Support services within OCC. Work is also underway via the Business Continuity Stakeholder Group (BCSG) to promote team-based reviews of transportation requirements and whether measures such as “snow-socks” are appropriate resilience measures for some teams.
- 3.3 **Review of holiday cover arrangements:** The timing of the snow in December 2010, being close the Christmas holidays, meant that some holiday rotas had already started and many people who would normally be free to volunteer for emergency response were reluctant to interfere with Christmas arrangements. However, when the extent of the situation was understood, staff did come forward and the response was managed. The BCSG has raised this issue with all directorates to ensure that holiday and standby rotas are robust and that resilient standby arrangements are activated in response to weather warnings.
- 3.4 **Explore out of hours telephone answering for emergency situations:** An area of learning for services throughout the weekend in December, was the pressure placed upon out-of-hours call handling arrangements already in place. A number of comments through the debrief process related to arrangements to provide a high volume call handling capacity to respond to resident’s calls. Discussions are underway between the BCSG and the customer service centre to explore opportunities to offer this facility and via the BCSG, directorates have been asked to review the existing arrangements for out of hours call handling to ensure they have capacity to manage increased demand during an emergency.
- 3.5 **Facilitate multi-agency planning for emergency disruption on the A34:** Travel disruption on the road network is an expected result of high levels of snow and freezing temperatures and responding agencies such as the Highways Agency and Police provide public advice on appropriate action for drivers. Feedback from the two snow events in 2010 indicate that the OCC management of its highways improved, particularly with the provision of information on gritting routes via the website. However, the biggest disruption occurred on the A34 north, which is part of the Highway Agency network. The EPU has agreement from partners to engage in a project to produce a plan for disruption the A34 with contributions from OCC Highways and Network Management, Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue, Thames Valley Police and Road Policing, Highway Agency, West Berkshire Council, Hampshire

County Council and BBC Oxford. Good progress is being made to plan for a multi-agency response and to potentially establish a "Traffic Cell" to support the tactical response to an incident on the A34 with stronger public information systems to inform road users on appropriate action to take.

- 3.6 **Continued community resilience activity:** During 2010, the emergency planning unit with support from the EA, Environment & Economy, Social & Community Services and the District and City Councils, organised 4 events for Parish & Town councils to promote community resilience and the development of community emergency plans. With the support of parish councils to distribute the "Are you ready?" booklet to households, promotion of the OCC community emergency plan template and the highways website and a focus on helping the vulnerable in communities, there was positive feedback from communities through the second snow period on resilience of communities and access to useful information. A second round of similar events is planned for September-October 2011 to re-engage with Parish and Town Councils, to deliver further advice on personal and community resilience, give advice on action to be taken in response to severe weather including flooding and snow and to continue to support communities to develop their own emergency plans.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 Lessons have been identified for an increased level of resilience and sharpening of business continuity arrangements to improve Oxfordshire County Council's response to severe weather events. The BCSG is managing the internal OCC reviews to increase our resilience to severe weather events and the associated weather warnings.
- 4.2 Multi-agency partners are supporting the efforts to review existing plans and to produce new plans where a requirement has been identified, and in particular, efforts are being made to ensure that plans and processes are flexible to facilitate a response to a range of events and circumstances.
- 4.3 Engagement with communities is resulting in the development of community emergency plans which complement the response plans held by statutory responders and this work stream will continue to be a priority within the emergency planning unit throughout 2011.

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June 2010