

# Report on the Panel's Scrutiny of the Authority's Gritting Operations

## Terms of Reference

To review the Council's operational policies for the treatment of roads throughout the Borough during periods of severe winter weather, and, if appropriate, make recommendations on such policies, and to assess the performance of the Environmental Services Department in implementing those policies.

## Method of Review

The Scrutiny Panel interviewed Mr D Smalley, Engineering Operations Manager, Mr D Holt, Senior Maintenance Officer, Mr C Fielding, General Manager, District Assemblies and his staff and Mr D Charlesworth, Quality Control Officer. The Panel also sought and received information from the Police on behalf of the emergency services.

The Panel invited, through the District Assemblies, members of the public to give their comments and observations of the Council's winter gritting service.

## Information Received

### a) General Gritting Operations

Mr D Smalley, Engineering Operations Manager, addressed the Panel and gave an overview of the winter gritting service and submitted the following documents:-

1. Winter Maintenance Policy and Plan.
2. Winter Maintenance Operational Instructions.
3. Winter Maintenance Operational Manual (Ice Patrol).

The Council's Winter Service Policy was aimed at permitting the safe movement of vehicular traffic on the more important parts of the highway network whilst minimising delays and accidents directly attributable to adverse weather conditions.

Gritting Priority was given to three types of road/route.

**Priority A** - Trunk and principal roads, important classified roads and bus routes.

**Priority B** - All other classified roads, important unclassified roads and bus routes.

**Priority C** - Important footway routes (e.g. shopping precincts etc.) remote from Mechanical treatment routes. In addition and in prolonged periods of lying snow and/or ice, estate and minor access roads in hilly or exposed locations will only be treated accordingly.

Treatment of all Priority C locations would only be considered when conditions dictated and when all other priorities had been fully and adequately treated.

Each lower priority would not be commenced until the higher priority had been completed.

The policy stated that the period between a decision being made to begin gritting and vehicles leaving the depot (response time) is expected to be one hour or less.

The period between vehicles leaving the depot and completion of priority routes during gritting (treatment time) was expected to be two hours or less.

Dependent upon the time that treatment was determined to commence, the aim during overnight working was to complete routes A and B by 7.30 am.

Salt Grit bins were provided and the schedule of bins has been circulated to Members of the Panel. These were in areas not normally subject to mechanical treatment, at hilly locations and potentially dangerous road junctions.

Two winter maintenance periods were defined for operational purposes :-

1. High Period - December, January and February when severe weather conditions
2. Low Period - November and March when severe weather conditions may occur.

During both periods vehicles, equipment and personnel were available on standby when the need was determined by the Client operational manager, to await call out for gritting duties when required.

The Council was a recipient of the Met Office "Open Road" forecasting service which presents realistic forecasts between October and April.

The decision to commence gritting operations was determined by :-

1. In the low periods - client's Ice Patrol Officers, employed on a rota but only when the daily "Open Road" forecast predicts conditions which may require treatment of highways.
2. In the high period - client's Ice Patrol Officers employed on a rota basis between 7.00 pm and 8.00 pm each night, and by standby arrangements during the daytime at weekends.

The requirements and criteria for treatment were contained in the Winter Maintenance Plan and the Winter Maintenance Operational Manual which were issued annually to all personnel involved in the implementation and control of gritting operations.

The Winter Maintenance Plan set out in detail the respective responsibilities of the clients and contractors.

Plans of the priority routes were available for operatives and managers.

In very severe weather conditions, especially when there was snow or ice present, consideration would be given, in priority order, to the treatment of pedestrian routes - footways and pavements in the following order :-

- Town centre streets/main pedestrian routes
- Shopping frontages
- Busy pedestrian routes
- Hospitals and doctors surgery frontages/routes
- School frontages/routes
- Community centre frontages/routes
- Steep sections of footway/footpaths
- Predominately elderly residents areas
- Other residential areas
- Industrial estates.

The Panel was informed that there were a minimum of gritting units available although they were rarely all deployed at the same time. A realistic number of units were deployed to deal with the situation.

Also available, were four midi and mini gritters for those locations where large vehicles could not operate, however, these were coming to the end of their useful working life. It was noted that there were seventeen trained HGV gritter drivers who were available on a continual rota.

The Council operated in accordance with national Code of Practice for winter maintenance which is produced by the Government and local authority organisations. This was also used in court cases when gritting was involved in litigation.

Each route had been optimised to achieve the maximum amount of driven mileage, this involved the gritting vehicles travelling in a loop or a figure of eight configuration. These routes had been examined by consultants three years ago and virtually the exact areas recommended.

Details were given of the gritting material used by Tameside vehicles.

Precautionary gritting was undertaken at 15gms per sq. Metre.

Snow gritting was undertaken at 40/50gms per sq. metre.

The rock salt used for gritting was a very corrosive material and great care was required to ensure a limited but effective spread.

Rock salt was currently stored at Cavendish Street, Ashton-under-Lyne, although it was anticipated that this would relocate to the depot in Stalybridge. An agreement with Salt Union ensured a minimum of 9-10,000 cubic metres of salt was available.

## **b) Local Gritting Provision**

The diverse geography of Tameside meant that winter weather conditions varied considerably between the lower lying areas adjacent to the Manchester boundary and the eastern areas which were higher and in parts more isolated.

They were currently 320 grit bins throughout Tameside for use either by local residents or manual gritting teams. It currently cost £67,000 to maintain and supply the grit bins. The bins were subject to vandalism and required annual maintenance.

Local residents were able to purchase small amounts of salt from the depot for use in estates. It was noted that many estate access roads were difficult to use in icy conditions. This would become an increasingly difficult problem as new housing developments were built in higher areas.

The number of grit bins had been reduced. Each bin cost approximately £70 each to purchase and £15 to fill with grit.

The Panel interviewed Mr C Fielding, General Manager, District Assemblies and Mr D Charlesworth, Mrs L Farrington, Quality Control Officers about local schedules for gritting by Street Force and cleansing operatives.

It was confirmed that local gritting around District Assembly areas was undertaken outside and around elderly persons homes.

It was suggested that District Assemblies could be more proactive and responsive to local need by providing additional grit bins where Members, using their local knowledge, felt they would be most beneficial. Local residents could put the grit to the best use or it could be spread by local operatives.

Local supplies of grit could also be provided and stored at District Assembly depots, providing the necessary equipment was available for loading.

Gritting local areas was done by hand by operatives trained by the Engineers. They operated with smaller flat back vehicles.

It was suggested that all future housing developments should be conditional on the provision of grit bins, especially on estate access roads, for use by local residents.

#### Public Consultation

Each District Assembly meeting during November 1999 had invited members of the public to give their view on the Council's winter gritting service. Only one response had been received which was from the Fold Avenue Tenants and Residents Association, Droylsden. This had requested ice and snow clearing especially near mobility stops and routes for elderly and disabled people to get to shops, doctors' surgeries and other essential facilities.

There was also newspaper coverage of the scrutiny investigation, but no other responses were received from the public.

#### Consultation with Emergency Services

It was the view of Greater Manchester Police that Tameside's current gritting policy was effective. The police in liaison with the Authority's emergency control facility get gritters operating if any unforeseen problems occur. The police confirmed that assistance had been readily provided.

There were, however, some minor estate roads that were never treated, even in protracted spells of severe weather. This could lead to some difficulties when answering emergencies, although officers were aware those roads and took the necessary precautions.

Although it was acknowledged that winters were more mild of late, it was felt that there had been a significant improvement over the last three years.

## Conclusions

Having considered all the information presented to it, the Panel concluded that Council provided a good winter gritting service, especially to main roads and bus routes which were its priority.

The availability of gritter drivers and vehicles appeared to be satisfactory and the response from the police was complementary.

The Public had been invited to comment upon the service, but only one response had been received.

Information relating to local gritting pointed to the possibility of enhanced local provision through district assemblies. This would utilise the Street Force/Cleansing Operation which could not otherwise be working. To further improve this operation, there seemed where this was possible, benefit from the provision of local grit supplies in district assembly areas. This would require means of storage and loading to enable an efficient operation.

The Panel also noted that other authorities and agencies also required supplies of grit and it was suggested that some joint use arrangements with, for example, the Highways Agency depot at Bredbury, Stockport, should be investigated.

Concern was also expressed about estate roads. It was recognised that it would not be practical for the Council to winter grit all estate access roads. It was felt, however, that it should, as far as

possible, be a condition that all new estates should have secure provision for grit bins to be located at the most vulnerable places on the highway.

## Recommendations:

1. That the Engineering Operations Manager and the Winter Gritting Operational staff, be commended for the generally high standard of winter gritting on the main priority routes in Tameside.
2. That consideration be given to the joint use of facilities with other authorities agencies, where this opportunity exists.
3. That in future all new housing estates have provision for grit bins with bins provided by developers or estate roads at places of maximum need.
4. That grit for the bins referred to in (c) above be supplied by the Council from its own stocks for use by local residents.
5. That the position and number of grit bins be reviewed in consultation with local Councillors.
6. That consideration be given through District Assemblies to a more flexible proactive local response to winter gritting using Street Force and Cleansing Service operatives. This would enable a response more related to the individual circumstances and weather conditions of each District Assembly area.