

The Highland Council
Community Services Committee
20 August 2015

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| Agenda Item | 16 |
| Report No | COM 44/15 |

Review of the Winter Service

Report by Director of Community Services

Summary

This report presents the results of the benchmarking exercise to establish how Highland Council's winter service compares with other rural authorities within Scotland.

1. Background

- 1.1 Benchmarking our winter service with other rural authorities in Scotland ensures that we have the necessary information to change our practices or improve them where required.
- 1.2 A questionnaire was sent out to 6 Councils within the family group of "rural" authorities. These included Argyll & Bute, Perth & Kinross, Moray, Aberdeenshire, Angus and Dumfries & Galloway Councils.

2. Outcome of Benchmarking Exercise

The benchmarking exercise revealed a number of variations in the service level being provided by each Council.

2.1 Operating Hours

- 2.1.1 Highland's winter operations commence at 6am (7am on a Sunday). Normal operations continue up to 9pm on the primary route network as and when weather conditions dictate. We do not operate a 24 hour service.
- 2.1.2 The table below details the service period being operated by each of the Councils questioned.

Table 1 – Comparison of operating hours.

| Council | Start | End | Comments |
|----------------|--------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Highland | 6am | 9pm | 7am start on a Sunday |
| Aberdeenshire | 5:30am | 10pm | |
| Angus | 5am | 11pm | |

| | | | |
|-----------------------|--|----------|--|
| Argyll & Bute | 4am | Midnight | Selected primary routes start at 4am and continue till midnight, remainder of primary routes operate 6am to 10pm |
| Dumfries and Galloway | 24hr service provided on primary routes. | | |
| Moray | 6am | 9.30pm | |
| Perth & Kinross | 5am | 9pm | 24hr service provided on 2 strategic routes plus early morning bus routes within Perth city centre otherwise 5am to 9pm. |

2.2 Road Hierarchy descriptions

- 2.2.1 The survey results indicate that all the Councils use generic terms when describing what type of roads they include within their primary route network. Phrases such as “busiest and most critical routes” or “main routes” were common in the descriptions used. This is similar to that used by Highland.
- 2.2.2 Aberdeenshire Council include traffic flow thresholds to assist with prioritisation of roads.
- 2.2.3 Dumfries & Galloway incorporate a scoring matrix which includes factors such as traffic flow, school and service bus routes, lifeline roads, industry and commerce access roads.

2.3 School Bus Routes

- 2.3.1 Highland Council makes specific reference within its winter policy to “school bus routes” (SBR). To meet the requirements of a SBR the “bus” should :
- be a Council contracted service, and
 - have a carrying capacity of 10 seats or greater (9 passenger seats plus the driver).
- 2.3.2 Although 10 seats are specified there is no requirement set as to the number of seats that need to be occupied.
- 2.3.3 Aberdeen, Angus, Moray and Perth & Kinross Councils make no mention of school bus routes within their policy documents preferring instead to take the approach of prioritising their roads on what is best for the overall network.
- 2.3.4 Argyll & Bute Council include SBR’s within their policy however they stipulate that the vehicle being used must have 12 or more of its seats occupied for the route to qualify. This means that only the largest of the mini-bus type of vehicle will meet their criteria.

2.3.5 Dumfries & Galloway include SBR's within their overall scoring matrix. Depending on other local factors the scoring outcome will determine the priority of the road with some SBR's attaining primary status, some secondary and the remainder being treated when resources permit.

2.4 Winter Vehicle Resource (Fleet)

2.4.1 During the winter of 2014/15 Highland Council operated 111 front line gritters with 3 strategic spares. This equates to having 1 gritter for every 60km of road network. Using this comparison method of vehicle resource versus road network length we can compare the resource levels of each Council. The results, as shown in the table below, indicate Highland to be well resourced in this regard (3rd best).

2.4.2

| Council | Ratio of number of gritters to network road length | Spare Vehicles |
|-----------------------|--|----------------|
| Highland | 1 to 60km | 3 |
| Aberdeen shire | 1 to 99km | 3 |
| Angus | 1 to 95km | None |
| Argyll & Bute | 1 to 69 km | 2 |
| Dumfries and Galloway | 1 to 90km | 2 |
| Moray | 1 to 43km | 1 |
| Perth & Kinross | 1 to 59km | None |

2.5 Footway Treatment and resource level

2.5.1 Highland Council during winter 2014/15 operated 48 mini tractors tasked with treating a primary footway network of approx 120km. This equates to having 1 footway tractor for every 2½ km of primary footway. Using this comparison method of vehicle resource versus primary footway length we can compare the resource levels of each Council as shown in the table below.

2.5.2

| Council | Ratio of footway tractors to primary footway length |
|-----------------------|---|
| Highland | 1 to 2½km |
| Aberdeen shire | 1 to 2km |
| Angus | 1 to 15km |
| Argyll & Bute | 1 to 8 km |
| Dumfries and Galloway | 1 to 1½km |
| Moray | 1 to 4km |
| Perth & Kinross | n/a |

2.5.3 All Councils questioned made reference to the delay in treatment of footways as a result of having to move equipment between rural locations.

2.6 Time taken to treat Road Networks

2.6.1 Under light snow or frost and ice conditions Highland will on most occasions

be able to treat the primary network, during week days, by 8:30am, the secondary network by 9am and the remainder of the network by noon that same day.

2.6.2 The responses obtained indicate there is a significant difference between what Highland can deliver and that achieved by the other Councils.

- Aberdeenshire stated “we aim to treat our whole network but completion unlikely till day 2”
- Argyll and Bute Council stated “it’s highly unlikely that all roads would be treated at least once until day 3 or 4 of an event.”
- Dumfries & Galloway Council stated “the majority of the road network would not be treated until day 3”.
- Perth & Kinross Council stated they would normally only treat their Category 1 & 2 roads during light snow/frost condition ie not their entire network

2.6.3 It is clear that the other Councils take a different approach to treatment of their road network. It would suggest that they are prioritising resources on their main routes and only extending treatment to the remainder of their networks when the weather event is anticipated to extend beyond day 1 of an event and only then when conditions have abated sufficiently to permit resources to move off the highest priority routes.

2.7 Assistance from Farmers for Snow clearance

2.7.1 Highland were the only Council not to have some sort of arrangement in place to call upon farmers to assist with the clearing of snow from roads in the most remote parts of the network.

2.7.2 Aberdeenshire have 123 farmers “signed up” and this has been achieved through a direct approach where the farmer is offered a fixed hourly rate. Aberdeenshire provide snow plough blades for fitting to the farmer’s own tractor. Treatment normally involves the ploughing of roads where deep snow conditions exist.

2.7.3 Perth & Kinross have over 70 “self help” farmers who are provided with a plough blade for their tractor and treat a section of road for free, many of whom are also available on a paid basis as requested.

2.7.4 Highland Council let a tender for the provision of winter services in 2014, seeking private contractors and other operators to price for the provision of various winter services. The response was very poor with only one contractor offering a snow clearing or gritting service on our roads.

3. Summary

- 3.1 The benchmarking exercise has shown that the overall service provided by Highland is better or equal to that provided by the other Councils questioned.
- 3.2 The start time of our operations (6am) is later than the majority of Council's questioned.
- 3.3 Four of the six Councils make no specific mention of school bus routes within their winter policy. Argyll & Bute Council use a criterion which stipulates there must be a minimum of 12 seats occupied in the vehicle before the road is classified as a school bus route.
- 3.4 Highland's resource levels for front line gritters and footway tractors are comparable or better than that provided by the other Councils.
- 3.5 There is a fundamental difference in the approach taken by other Councils to the treatment of the priority road network. Highland will generally set out to treat its entire network within the first day of a weather event. The other Councils do not normally achieve this standard, instead concentrating resources on their high priority network.
- 3.6 Highland lags behind when it comes to engaging local farmers to assist with snow clearing on the rural road network

4. Implications

- 4.1 This report has no impact on equality or Gaelic considerations nor is there any resource, legal or risk implications.

Recommendations

Members are asked to consider and comment on the findings of the benchmarking exercise.

Designation: Director of Community Services

Date: 5th August 2015

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Background Papers: