



membership resources

State of the Market Survey 2012

Winter Maintenance



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The state of the market survey was conducted by **Phil Brennan**, APSE Principal Advisor for Highways, Street Lighting and Winter Maintenance

For any enquires in relation to the survey, Phil may be contacted on:

Tel: 0161 772 1810

Email: pbrennan@apse.org.uk

Association for Public Service Excellence
2nd floor Washbrook House
Lancastrian Office Centre
Talbot Road, Old Trafford
Manchester M32 0FP
telephone: 0161 772 1810
fax: 0161 772 1811
email: enquiries@apse.org.uk
web: www.apse.org.uk

LOCAL SERVICES
LOCAL SOLUTIONS



Winter Maintenance

State of the Market 2012

Introduction

APSE conducted an on-line survey during early Summer 2012. A series of questions were asked covering a range of issues of interest to those officers and councillors responsible for highways issues in general and winter maintenance specifically. 20 responses were received from local authorities throughout the UK. This report identifies the key findings of the survey.

This is the fourth year APSE has undertaken a state of the market survey for highways, street lighting and winter maintenance so a comparison over time is available and this comparison will be highlighted where appropriate. It must be noted that the councils and individuals responding may not be the same from year to year. In previous years there has been a combined survey for highways, street lighting and winter maintenance whereas this year they were sent out separately and so will be reported separately.

44 responses were received to the highways survey and a further 45 to the street lighting survey making a total of 109 responses to all 3 surveys.

The surveys are an attempt to understand perceptions of the market amongst people directly involved in delivering services rather than a survey of the same individuals from year to year.

Context

The recent 3 severe winters which resulted in bad weather across the whole UK certainly prompted a significant response from local authorities, central government and suppliers. There were problems with salt supplies and deliveries, communications between customers and suppliers and significant traffic problems with knock on impacts for local people right through to the national economy. The Quarmby review and local government reviews of winter maintenance service policies were undertaken and lessons learnt. Extra funding has been allocated to the service area with investment in new vehicles, training, extra salt supplies and increased storage facilities.

The weather over the most recent winter (2011-2012) was not as bad as the previous three and it will be interesting to see how councils respond in terms of allocating resources. The service remains a reactive one and so having up to date plans in place which can be activated promptly and are effective remains fundamental to deliver a good service.

Note

The tables below show figures for 3 or 4 years but the questions were asked of the winter maintenance service only in this year's survey whereas in previous years questions had been asked of the highways, street lighting and winter maintenance services combined. Therefore the tabular data is not a true comparison. It does however provide contextual information for the winter maintenance service.

Results from the survey

1) How do you expect the budget for the winter maintenance service to change over the next 12 months? How do you expect the budget for the winter maintenance service to change when allocated in 2013-14?

Answer Options	2012 Number (%)	2011 Number (%)	2010 Number (%)	2009 Number (%)
Increase	4 (20%)	10 (24.4%)	10 (13.9%)	5 (7.6%)
Stay the same	14 (70%)	23 (56.1%)	58 (80.6%)	55 (83.3%)
Decrease	2 (10%)	8 (19.5%)	4 (5.6%)	6 (9.1%)
Total	20	41	72	66

20 Councils responded to the first question and of these 14 responded that their budgets remained the same. 4 councils have seen increased budgets – 1 of these increased with inflation, another to match the increase in the cost of salt purchased and another was given a 2% increase. 2 further councils saw a reduction in their budget. The majority of responses have pointed to budgets remaining relatively static over recent years and this is the case for the forthcoming year.

2) What has been the impact on your budget?

Answer Options	2012 Number(%)	2011 Number(%)	2010 Number(%)	% change 2010-12
Have had to overspend on our budget	11 (68.9%)	22 (61.1%)	27 (69.2%)	-0.3%
Have had to work within existing budgets and limit the service provided	3 (18.8%)	5 (13.9%)	1 (2.6%)	+16.2%
Have been given additional resources to cope with demand	2 (12.5%)	18 (50%)	10 (25.6%)	-13.1%
Have overspent budget but must recover these costs within current financial year	0 (0%)	4 (11.1%)	7 (17.9%)	-17.9%
Have overspent budget but must recover these costs within next two to three years	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (7.7%)	-7.7%

Nearly 70% of those responding had to overspend on their planned budget to deliver the winter maintenance service last winter. Financial planning will remain a vital area of planning over the foreseeable future but the fact that future weather patterns remain unknown will continue to make budgeting for this service a difficult exercise. To date councils have continued to treat roads and footways in the most severe weather and even though acute traffic problems has resulted in some cases, no local authority has taken the step of closing a road because it feels it is too dangerous.

3) How are your services currently delivered?

Answer Options	2012 Number (%)	2011 Number (%)	2010 Number (%)	2009 Number (%)
In-house - combined service	10 (50%)	34 (82.9%)	35 (72.9%)	26 (61.9%)
In-house - client/contractor split	4 (20%)	3 (7.3%)	8 (16.7%)	11 (26.2%)
Externally provided	5 (25%)	3 (7.3%)	4 (8.3%)	4 (9.5%)
Arms length organisation	0	1 (2.4%)	0	0
Joint venture company	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.1%)	1 (2.4%)
Total	20	41	48	42

The majority of responses were received from councils where the service is delivered in house with most of these being combined services. Overall this sample shows a minor change towards delivery by external providers/JVCs.

4) Do you expect the service to remain in-house over the next 12 months?

All of those whose services are provided internally expect the current arrangement to remain the same in the foreseeable future.

5) Do you have a dedicated training budget for winter maintenance? If so, what has happened to it over the past 12 months?

16 of the 20 councils have no dedicated training budget for winter maintenance and the remaining 4 who do have one have seen it stay the same over the past year. Severe winters over 3 of the last 4 years have focussed attention on training such as fitting ploughs, calibration and specialist driving. However it appears that most councils have training budgets administered at departmental or corporate level rather than being allocated for winter maintenance specifically.

6) Do you currently sell your services to organisations external to the council?

Answer Options	2012 Number(%)	2011 Number(%)	2010 Number(%)	2009 Number(%)	% change 2009-2012
No and not considering it for the near future	10 (50%)	18 (52.9%)	33 (71.7%)	26 (65%)	-2.9%
No but considering it as an option in the near future	4 (20%)	8 (23.5%)	1 (2.2%)	2 (5%)	-3.5%
No but likely to start doing it in the near future	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	0	1 (2.5%)	+5%
Yes and expecting to continue	5 (25%)	8 (23.5%)	11 (23.9%)	9 (22.5%)	+2.5.0%
Yes but not expecting it to continue long term	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.2%)	2 (5%)	0%
Total	20	34	46	40	

The answers from responses to this question show that proportions remain similar to last year. About half of services do not trade externally and are not considering it as an option. They presumably have taken a decision to concentrate on their own local service users and ensure the service provided is top quality. About a quarter are considering it as an option which is line with current thinking on generating income from all sources where capacity allows it. In general there has been little change between categories which reflects the air of austerity within local authorities and the unwillingness by some to try new approaches.

7) Where do you see growth areas over the next 12 months?

Clearly there will be differing opinions in relation to this question all dependent upon local priorities and whilst a number of responses noted that there are opportunities for growth, others suggested there would be none. Areas of growth that were noted include the following

- Publicity about the extent of what can be done and their personal responsibilities.
- Equipment renewal
- Further engagement with parishes/districts; better use of communication, i.e. twitter
- Shared information
- Joint working / joint storage
- Vehicle tracking
- Footway treatments
- Providing the same level of service without an increase in budget

8) Where do you see areas where work may decrease over the next 12 months?

Again there was a mixture of responses to this question with some people claiming there would be no reduction in work whilst others thought all areas of work would experience cuts. Once again the items noted will reflect local circumstances. Some specific responses included

- Budget pressure may see a reduction in pre salt routes
- Generally decreases in the service with decreasing budget
- Gritting of unclassified roads (i.e. potentially concentrating on other key route corridors)

9) Have the orders you placed for salt to cover winter maintenance over 2009/10 been met by your suppliers?

Answer Options	2012 Number(%)	2011 Number(%)	2010 Number(%)	2009 Number(%)	% Change 2009-12
Orders met in full	18 (90%)	11 (30.6%)	8 (19%)	15 (40.5%)	-9.9%
Order partially met with our full knowledge of shortfall	0	12 (33.3%)	7 (16.7%)	17 (45.9%)	-12.6%
Order partially met without our full knowledge of shortfall	1(5%)	2 (5.6%)	6 (14.3%)	1 (2.7%)	+2.9%
Significantly less delivered than ordered with our full knowledge of shortfall	1 (5%)	5 (13.9%)	13 (31%)	3 (8.1%)	+5.8%
Significantly less delivered than ordered without our full knowledge of shortfall	0	6 (16.7%)	8 (19%)	1 (2.7%)	+14%
Total	20	36	42	37	

The proportion of councils who had their orders for salt met in full increased significantly last year probably down to the reduced demand. This reduced demand will have been as a result of better stock levels and storage arrangements by councils and as a result of improved weather compared with the previous 3 years. Equally suppliers have improved their delivery arrangements. There is no doubt that the severe weather had the effect of prompting both salt suppliers and their customers to communicate better with each other and this appears to have borne fruit last winter.

10) How do you purchase salt supplies (jointly with other authorities, via Highways Agency, independently, via consortium such as YPO or other)?

6 councils that responded purchase salt independently whilst another 4 purchase it jointly or through consortia which include AGMA, YPO, ESPO and Scottish Excel. One council relies on its contractor to purchase it whilst another purchases through a 20 year PFI. There remains a split between those who purchase salt independently and those who do so jointly or through a consortium. Clearly if the council is happy with their current supplier, price and delivery arrangements they would not feel the need to change. However it is the case that better prices can be obtained by changing the form of purchase as well as changing suppliers.

Throughout the four years of this survey the proportions have remained similar with a relatively large number of authorities continuing to purchase salt independently despite a lot promotion around joint purchasing. It seems sensible to avoid relying on a single method of purchase and more councils appear to be purchasing from more than one source.

11) Which company supplies your salt?

Of the 20 responses, 11 were supplied by Salt Union, 5 by Cleveland Potash, 1 by Irish Salt Sales and 1 by both Salt Union and Irish Salt Sales.

12) Do you have any suggestions for how councils or suppliers can act to avoid salt shortages in times of very bad weather in future?

The most common response was the obvious one which is that councils should simply store more salt prior to winter. After a gradual reduction in the amount of salt stored over a number of years, the recent sever winters have led to an increase in stockpiles. There will be pressure to reduce the amount spent on winter maintenance services both as a result of pressures to save money and if the weather remains reasonable. Other responses included letting tenders for salt to multiple suppliers, making more use of suppliers from other countries and imported supplies as well as not relying on just in time stock management, although again this will depend upon local circumstances and weather conditions.

Another response noted that salt be mixed with grit whilst investing in equipment to reduce the total amount of salt used, so enabling better resilience.

13) With regard to your road network, which of the following are salted?

Out of 20 responses, 14 said they salted all primary routes and some extra other routes. 3 councils said they salted all primary routes, 1 responded that they salt some primary routes by region based on geographical domains whilst another said they salt some primary routes and some other routes. Experience from the last few winters points to reductions in the amount of salt used per run and the number of runs, rather than reductions in the number of routes treated.

14) Do you salt footways?

Of 20 respondents, only 1 said they did not salt footways. A further 4 said they salt footways as a precautionary measure following forecast whilst the majority, 15 councils, said they salt footways after ice has formed.

Salting of footways has received a higher profile over the past few years due to guidance issued from government about risks to those clearing snow in front of their homes or premises against claims, what was previously seen as concentration on roads rather than footways, a move by a number of local authorities to establish snow wardens on a volunteer basis to help clear snow and a specific recommendation in the Quarmby Review addressing footway salting.

15) If you do salt footways, approximately what percentage of the footway network do you salt? Which areas do you salt?

7 councils provided an estimate to this question ranging from 10 % down to less than 1%.

When asked which facilities are salted , shopping centres were salted by 15 out of 20, town/city centres by 14, town halls/council officers/leisure centres by 7, Police stations, medical centres and hospitals by 5 and other streets by 5. Some councils treat park and ride sites, school routes, elderly persons housing complexes some walk to work routes and high risk district centres.

16) The severe weather has made some councils rethink their approach to salting footways. Has your council allocated extra resources to increase salting on footways? Have the extra resources enabled you to salt all the footways that you think should be salted?

Answer Options	2012 Number (%)
Our council has allocated extra resources to footway salting	7 (36.8%)
Our council has not allocated extra resources to footway salting	12 (63.1%)
Extra resources have enabled salting between 0%-25% of footways that should be salted	3
Extra resources have enabled salting between 25%-50% of footways that should be salted	0
Extra resources have enabled salting between 50%-75% of footways that should be salted	0
Extra resources have enabled salting between 75%-99% of footways that should be salted	1
Extra resources have enabled salting of all footways that should be salted	3
Total	19

7 out of 19 responses indicated that their local authorities had allocated extra resources to footway salting last winter but that only 3 of these had adequate resources to salt all the footways they feel should have been salted. Clearly this is a move in the right direction with resources directed to what is considered a local priority.

Some other developments include the purchase of quad bikes and towed footway gritters, Multihog vehicles as well as snow blowers to deal with snow and ice on footways.

17) Do you have a snow warden scheme in place?

Of the 19 responses, 4 have snow warden or similar schemes in place. Another 6 councils are planning to introduce them in the near future whilst 9 have no plans to establish this kind of scheme.

Snow warden schemes have received both positive and negative comments with some claiming they are simply a PR exercise with little value. Others work with parish and district councils and other voluntary organisations by providing grants or de-icing agents free of charge to encourage them to contribute to de-icing and clearance..

18) What changes did you make to service arrangements as a result of poor weather over the last 4 years?

There have been a range of actions taken over the last 4 years including those noted below.

Actions taken over last 4 years	
Greater use of vehicle/plant hire rather than purchase	Established salt conservation measures and thresholds
More external contractors available via contract to assist during snow events	In recent contract, we specified that contractor should provide gritting vehicles (previously we owned them and contractor operated them)
Converted to 100% pre-wet treatment for 12/13 & purchased 100% GK5 ceramic plough blades	Established salt saving routes to be used if there is another salt shortage or emergency
Worked with parish councils to enlist their help/ establish procedures for severe weather	Integrated county and city routes to increase efficiency
Purchased new footway gritters	Bought new quad bikes to grit pavement areas
Devised resilience network	Reviewed winter policy with elected members
Bought snow blowers to clear footways	Better utilisation of standby workforce
Increase in salt stocks – up to 60% increase	Reviewed and reduced essential routes
Increased salt orders	Introduction of snow warden volunteers
Reducing dead lengths of treatment routes	Parish Council bought a hand wheeled spreader
Reduced spread rate, early reduction of salt usage	Increased covered storage facilities and capacity, new salt barns
Organised strategic approach across all services	Backup use of industrial salt and sand mixture
Increased proportion of network treated	Increased use of sub-contractors to clear snow
Established strategic and resilience salt networks for use in emergencies.	Additional prioritisation of carriageways & footways
Documented and approved contingency arrangements	Closer liaison with contractor, street cleansing, across London and neighbouring boroughs.
Increased service levels, working more with the voluntary sector	Changed type of vehicles used in fleet reverting back to a number of fixed body gritters
Pooled staff arrangements, grounds maintenance and others support the operation	Contract register in place to ensure availability of external contractors when needed
Clearer process for starting salt conservation put in place	Arrangements in place to support waste collection
Implementation of reduced routes when salt supplies low.	Improved access to information on web site, tweet winter decisions
Review of service, consultation with councillors	More flexible workforce for potholes, aftermath

The variety of actions noted above reflects local circumstances as well as previous actions taken and differing priorities. Those experiencing regular severe weather may need to change less whilst those who experience heavy snowfall infrequently may have more to learn and therefore to change.

Most changes made will have a budget impact and although most expect budgets to stay the same (as noted in question 1) extra spending will have to be carefully considered at a time of limited budgets. Changes such as purchasing new equipment, erecting salt barns and increasing salt stores will have significant cost whilst other approaches such as collaboration with parish councils and establishing snow warden schemes cost very little.

19) Has the severe weather over the past 3 years led to any of the following (you may answer more than one?)

Answer Options	2012 Number(%)	2011 Number(%)	2010 Number(%)	% change 2010-12
Increase in legal claims for slips, trips and falls	11 (55%)	23 (67.6%)	35 (92.1%)	-37.1%
Review of gritting / salt routes	13 (65%)	28 (82.4%)	29 (76.3%)	-11.3%
Review of clearing /gritting pavements outside schools/key public buildings/residential homes	14 (70%)	30 (88.2%)	27 (71.1%)	-1.1%
Review of clearing / gritting pavements outside of shops and in town centres	13 (65%)	26 (76.5%)	28 (73.7%)	-8.7%
Encouragement of others to clear snow e.g. local people, parish councils, farmers	18 (90%)	27 (79.4%)	n/a	+10.6%

There has been a reduction in those local authorities seeing an increase in legal claims for slips, trips and falls between 2010 and 2012. This will have been because of better treatments reducing the likelihood of such events and more robust defence against claims by many local authorities. Review of routes and clearing outside of public and commercial premises now appears to be an annual occurrence in many councils whilst collaborative working with other bodies is also extensive.

Conclusions

The survey covers a range of questions and provides a lot of information. Some issues emerge clearly such as the wide variety of changes made to winter maintenance services over recent years. There is no doubt that innovation is alive whether that involves the use of new technology, snow warden schemes or external trading and there are many examples within this survey to justify such a statement. The budgetary situation will remain challenging for this service, as it will for all in the public services, and the added complication of unknown weather conditions only adds to difficulty of planning for and providing the service.

The Association for Public Service Excellence

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular advisory groups, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The advisory groups are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national advisory groups include:

- Building cleaning
- Local authority, police and fire authority partnerships
- Housing management, construction and building maintenance
- Parks, horticultural and ground maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, highways and street lighting
- Service improvement and performance management
- Service delivery models
- Sports and Leisure management
- Vehicle maintenance and transport operations
- Waste management, refuse collection and street cleansing
- Workforce strategy and employee relations