Draft outline of LGA report on implications of severe adverse winter weather conditions in the UK

1. Introduction

As a result of the UK's generally temperate climate we do not have in place preparations for extreme winter weather in a way that other countries where cold winters are norm do. (Include overseas case study). Climate change means that we are likely to experience adverse weather conditions with less predictability, and more frequency and severity in the future. We need to make sure that we are better prepared for such events to ensure that transport networks are more resilient to extreme weather.

The severe weather experienced across the UK in early February, following a prolonged spell of cold weather in January, exposed weaknesses with existing policies on supply and stocks of salt to enable Highways Authorities to carry out their winter road maintenance duties. During this period, demand for salt outstripped the amount that could be supplied by UK salt suppliers which left many areas at high risk of running out of salt. Government was required to intervene in arrangements between Local Authorities and salt suppliers to prioritise distribution in order to keep local road networks functioning. This is highlights the need for local authorities to have appropriate plans in place to ensure that such intervention is not necessary should similar circumstances happen in the future.

2. The impact of severe winter weather 2008/09

- Discussion of the impact of the cold weather on disruption to:
  a) public transport (both bus and rail networks) – how and why this varied geographically across the country
  b) the road network and particularly local authorities' ability to carry out their winter road maintenance duties due to a lack of salt for gritting purposes.
- Impact on the economy and services (and potential for more serious problems in future).

3. Why did the shortage of salt arise?

- Councils' policies on salt procurement and storage and how these have changed in recent years.
- Resilience of the salt supply chain, contractual arrangements between salt suppliers and councils and why these failed to ensure adequate supply for extreme weather.
- Discussion of the way the salt industry operates in the UK, how it compares to other countries and whether the current situation where the country is almost completely reliant on two main suppliers operating deliveries on a "just in time" basis is appropriate.

4. Central contingency arrangements in response to the salt shortage

- Why the salt cell was needed.
- How it operated and the LGA's role in representing councils in the prioritisation process.

5. How councils responded to the salt shortage

- Mutual aid arrangements,
- policies to conserve salt stocks (reduced network coverage, etc),
- communicating with local communities,
- securing alternative supplies of salt / alternative materials.
- Including case study examples of good practice

6. Implications and issues for councils and their communities

- Threats to services from reduced networks
- Implications for councils of high levels of salt use, including:
  - damage to the road network caused by severe weather and salt use
  - environmental damage caused by extensive use of salt (damaging habitats, water courses, etc).
- Exploration of more environmentally friendly alternatives to salt for winter weather treatment (case study from Canada?)
- Need for behaviour change – individuals being more prepared

7. Recommendations for preparing for severe weather events in the future

- Councils will be reviewing their salt storage and procurement policies in the light of the recent severe weather events. In doing so they should:

  a) Ensure they have access to adequate levels of salt supplies (either through holding stock piles of salt or through contingency arrangements for alternative supplies should normal arrangements fail) to keep local networks open in the event of severe weather.
  b) Acquire knowledge of international producers and put in place contingency contracts with alternative suppliers so that if UK supply becomes an issue, councils can act quickly in terms of securing supplies from overseas.
  c) Identify trigger points which would allow alternative supplies to be secured in time in the event of disruption to normal supplies.
  d) Explore the potential for more environmentally friendly alternatives to salt
  e) Work in partnership with other councils within their region or sub-region to ensure the viability of local road networks in circumstances of severe winter weather without intervention from central government.

- Coordination at regional or sub-regional level will allow councils to make efficiencies in managing salt and stocks and smooth distribution and supply problems in the event of future periods of severe weather. Possible roles for such partnership arrangements could include:

  a) Coordinating relationships and contracts with suppliers

b) Hold regional pools of surplus salt in the lead up to winter and agree a process for distributing stocks over and above individual requirements of Local Authorities,
c) Agree a local prioritisation process to facilitate supplies and mutual aid arrangements that can be initiated when demand out-strips supply within a region.
d) Agree how negotiations with other regions would operate if a national shortage of salt occurred in the future.
e) Make contingency arrangements on a regional basis in anticipation of future supply issues.

- Ensure dissemination of good practice in the light of dealing with severe weather, for example, by reviewing the Code of Practice for Highway Maintenance "Well Maintained Roads".