

The Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Great Minster House
Horseferry Road
London SW1P

24 November 2010

Dear Philip

SEVERE WEATHER

I know I ought to be cheered to read in this morning's newspapers that you take the view that councils and the Highways Agency have enough road salt to get through any episodes of severe weather this winter. But I am concerned that you may in fact be taking far too sanguine a view. In this context, I am disappointed that you have not replied to my letter of 3 November in which I set out some of the challenges we will need to face together.

It is true that local authorities have made an unprecedented effort to prepare for this winter. The level of stocks they now hold is the highest it has been for years, at about a third up on the stock with which we began last year and higher still compared to the year before that. Nearly half of the stock of gritting vehicles has been renewed. New measures have been taken, in parallel with your helpful willingness to clarify that there is no legal risk to people who clear their own pavements, to enlist the goodwill of local residents and companies in preparing to keep roads and pavements clear of snow.

Nevertheless, your department, like councils, has known all year that the domestic suppliers of salt would be incapable of meeting the needs of the country. As I understand it, some two-thirds of councils have still not received all the salt they wish to order, despite looking increasingly to overseas supply. David Quarmby's report into The Resilience of England's Transport Systems in Winter made it clear that "the salt supply chain as currently configured is fundamentally vulnerable and lacks resilience".

This is where your department has a national role to play that goes above and beyond anything that councils can do. As your officials are aware, the LGA view is that action needs to be taken with the current near-monopoly to increase capacity; it is a disappointment that this long-running issue has not yet been addressed. We have, however, very much welcomed your willingness to implement the Quarmby recommendation – which echoed the recommendation of the LGA's earlier report on the events of last year – to establish a national strategic reserve of 250,000 tonnes this year. While we understand, however, the considerations that have led you to price that reserve in a way that deters local authorities from trying to access it when they do not need to, it will nevertheless be regrettable should

this lead to charges that the Department is setting out to make a surplus from the problems of local motorists.

I am, finally, very pleased that your department has this year prepared early and well for the administrative machinery that may be needed to coordinate action over the winter. We welcome the planning for a possible Salt Cell that has taken place, and the plans for new arrangements to collect information quickly and effectively without the need for the old regional office machinery. But the mechanics are not all: I cannot stress too strongly the importance of encouraging cooperation, trust and solidarity between places and organisations in order to make this arrangement work. I do hope we can look forward to a continuing excellent collaboration between ourselves as the winter closes in.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Box', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Peter Box
Chair LG Group Economy and Transport Programme Board



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Councillor Peter Box
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25 November 2010

Dear Mr. Box,

Thank you for your letter of 3 November to Philip Hammond. I have been asked to reply as Minister with policy responsibility for local roads in England.

Like the Local Government Group, the Government considers it important that all parties involved in keeping our transport systems open in severe weather continue with their winter preparedness, and stay vigilant throughout the forthcoming winter.

On 12 November the Secretary of State for Transport, with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government wrote to the leaders of all English Local Authorities advising on the measures the Government has taken to implement the recommendations made by David Quarmby in his independent review which examined the resilience of the nation's transport systems in winter. The letter also drew attention to the recommendations in the review panel's report which were addressed to local authorities.

Arrangements have been made by the Highways Agency for the import of 250k tonnes of salt as a national strategic supply of last resort. The supplies have started to arrive and it is expected that the full amount will be in place in December.

You enquired about the arrangements for distributing this road salt and the co-ordination of the nation's supplies in the event of a severe winter. David Kidson from your organisation, as well as representatives from other interested parties, recently attended a Winter Resilience Exercise hosted by this Department. This covered a number of issues including co-ordination. Departmental officials will continue to liaise closely with the LGA as we go forward.

I hope this response clarifies the position.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Norman Baker', with a stylized, cursive script.

NORMAN BAKER