



Department for
Transport

From the Secretary of State

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Dear Mr Box

Thank you for your letter of 24 November. I have also seen the reply to your letter dated 3 November that Norman Baker sent to you.

I note the points you raise in your letter and see that Norman has addressed many of these. As Norman's letter explained, the action that we have taken has ensured that we are in a more resilient position compared to last year.

As you will have seen, in light of the early and severe onset of winter, I asked David Quarmby CBE, in December 2010 to follow up his earlier review of winter resilience published in July and October 2010 with an urgent audit of how well highway authorities and transport operators in England have coped with the cold weather between 24 November and 9 December 2010.

The audit, which was published on 21st December 2010, found that local highway authorities generally coped well with the extreme and early winter conditions, but used a significant amount of their salt stocks in doing so. David Quarmby was particularly concerned about the wide range of spread rates of salt between different local authorities. I therefore asked the UK Roads Liaison Group and the National Winter Service Research Group to prepare additional guidance on spread rates based on all evidence available, so that all highway authorities can adopt the practice of the best. This was made available before Christmas.

Your letter highlights concerns about the salt supply chain and the apparent inability of UK producers to meet all orders from local authorities this winter. It is for each individual local highway authority to set its own winter service plan and to prioritise the resources to deliver it, including ensuring that it places orders for salt supplies in good time before the onset of the winter period with suppliers who are able to deliver to the customers' requirements.

Some authorities have arranged imported supplies because of concerns about delivery reliability from domestic sources. I support the recommendations from David Quarmby on pre-season stockholdings by highways authorities and the importance of following best practice on usage. Any issues between the salt suppliers and local authorities regarding salt deliveries are entirely a contractual matter for them and not for my Department to intervene.

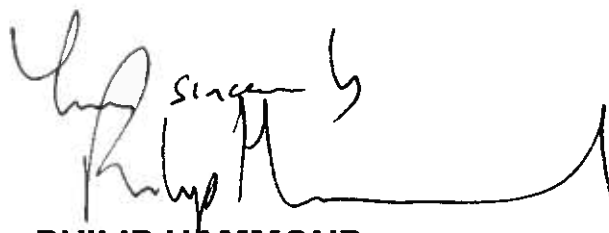
That said and as you recognise, the Department took early action on those recommendations from David Quarmby that fall under my responsibility. This included sourcing a volume of imported salt to establish and manage an initial national strategic stockpiles of 250,000 tonnes, reflecting the exceptional re-stocking challenges for local highway authorities for this coming winter, as well as producing and publishing no-nonsense guidance for members of the public on clearing snow and ice from footways outside their property without having to worry about health and safety or other public liability issues.

As a result of the early onset and severity of the weather experienced already this winter season, I requested the Highways Agency in early December to facilitate the import of a further volume of salt of around 250,000 tonnes.

We have, since late December, invited authorities on 6 separate occasions to purchase salt from the national strategic reserve in order to bolster their salt supplies to a minimum level. In line with the recommendations of David Quarmby, the pricing of this imported salt reflects full cost recovery – we are not making a profit from the problems faced by local authorities as you suggest. We have already allocated 88,000 tonnes of strategic salt to local authorities.

The range of actions taken by my Department has meant that, despite the much earlier onset of severe weather this winter, overall salt stocks in Great Britain were over 800,000 tonnes last week, compared to around 274,800 tonnes at a similar time last year. However, we are not complacent and we continue to monitor salt stock levels across the country, working closely with local authorities and other key groups, including the Local Government Association.

I hope this is helpful.


PHILIP HAMMOND