

# CITIZEN LED INSPECTION

FEEDBACK REPORT FOR WEST LoTHIAN COUNCIL

## WINTER MAINTENANCE

**AUGUST 2011**

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## 1. Summary

1.1. This feedback report has been produced following an inspection of **WINTER MAINTENANCE** in West Lothian Council against the Citizen Led Inspection framework and using the framework rating system.

1.2. The inspection process took place over 6 days in **June 2011** and was planned and completed by Citizen Inspectors, who are residents and volunteers from the West Lothian community.

1.3. Winter Maintenance has demonstrated good practice/performance in the following areas:

- **Committed, hard working, adaptable and knowledgeable staff**
- **Suitable equipment to carry out processes**
- **Awareness that they need to build on previous experience to develop plans for future winters**

1.4. Winter Maintenance requires improvement in the following areas:

- **Communication with customers**
- **Duty Officers to ensure consistency**
- **Premises that are fit for purpose**
- **Succession planning**
- **Performance Indicators**

1.5. The Citizen Inspection team have rated the service as follows:

<i>CRITERION</i>	<i>RATING (✓)</i>				
	<u>E</u> (Excellent)	<u>G</u> (Good)	<u>A</u> (Adequate)	<u>W</u> (Weak)	<u>U</u> (Unsatisfactory)
1 LEADERSHIP		✓			
2 SERVICE PLANNING		✓			
3 PEOPLE RESOURCES		✓			
4 PARTNERS & OTHER RESOURCES		✓			
5 SERVICE PROCESSES		✓			
6 CUSTOMER RESULTS			✓		
7 KEY RESULTS			✓		

## 2. Introduction to the Inspection Feedback Report

- 2.1. This feedback report has been produced following an inspection of **WINTER MAINTENANCE** in West Lothian Council against the Citizen Led Inspection framework and using the framework rating system.
- 2.2. The inspection process took place over 6 days in **June 2011** and included the following steps:
  - Evidence review and site visit planning
  - Onsite observation and interviewing
  - Telephone surveys with a small sample of customers
  - Consensus on strengths, areas for improvement and scores by the citizen inspection team
- 2.3. The inspection process was planned and completed by Citizen Inspectors, who are residents and volunteers from the West Lothian community. The team comprised:
  - Mr Renner D Mbireaye
  - Mr Peter West
  - Miss Carole Mulholland
- 2.4. During the inspection process every effort has been made by the team to ensure that conclusions and feedback are based on fact and are the result of consensus.
- 2.5. The team have interviewed **25 Roads Services staff and their key partners** individually or in groups and visited **3** locations, including; Guildiehaugh depot, the Customer Service Centre and the Civic Centre.

### 3. Key Strengths

3.1. Winter Maintenance has demonstrated good practice/performance in the following areas:

- **Committed, hard working, adaptable and knowledgeable staff**
- **Suitable equipment to carry out processes**
- **Awareness that they need to build on previous experience to develop plans for future winters**

### 4. Key Areas for Improvement

4.1. Winter Maintenance requires improvement in the following areas:

- **Communication with customers** should be improved to ensure customers have access to useful and timely information through a range of access points, including publications, the contact centre, local offices, the council's website, local media and new media such as Facebook and Twitter. This is to include the provision of information such as gritting routes, prioritisation of routes, the statutory standard of service that is to be provided and clear information on what is *not* statutorily required.
- **Duty Officers to ensure consistency** in the management decisions that are made relating to service provision and service standards.
- **Premises that are fit for purpose** as the current depot does not have adequate storage for the high levels of salt required for severe winters and there are issues relating to congestion at the depot at busy periods.
- **Succession planning** is to be undertaken to ensure continuity of service delivery at times of pressure and future staff movement.
- **Performance Indicators** are to be established that will provide meaningful information on performance in terms of; quality, timeliness, efficiency and customer satisfaction with the service.

## 5. Ratings

5.1. The Citizen Inspection team have rated the service as follows:

<i>CRITERION</i>	<i>RATING (✓)</i>				
	<u>E</u> (Excellent)	<u>G</u> (Good)	<u>A</u> (Adequate)	<u>W</u> (Weak)	<u>U</u> (Unsatisfactory)
1 LEADERSHIP		✓			
2 SERVICE PLANNING		✓			
3 PEOPLE RESOURCES		✓			
4 PARTNERS & OTHER RESOURCES		✓			
5 SERVICE PROCESSES		✓			
6 CUSTOMER RESULTS			✓		
7 KEY RESULTS			✓		

## 6. Overview of the Service

### 1 Leadership

#### Leaders:

- *Identify a clear direction for the service*
- *Set long-term outcomes*
- *Are open, honest and accountable*
- *Put in place scrutiny to challenge performance*

- 6.1. The managers were able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the objectives of the service and the legal obligations they are accountable for. Annually a Winter Service Operational Plan is produced which is presented to the Environment Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel in August for approval. Local Area Committees are consulted on the plans.
- 6.2. There is a very clear structure within the service and all managers are clear on their role. It appears that the decision making process relies heavily on the Road Services Manager, Andy Johnston. It was stated that this was not being done in isolation and others were consulted but the communication of decisions was the responsibility of the Road Services Manager. Staff feedback was positive but there was the feeling that there was a lack of consistency among duty officers which was due to differing levels of experience. There was also a recognition that succession planning is required to ensure continuity of service delivery at times of pressure and future staff movement.
- 6.3. All interviewed considered that performance was challenged, although the Road Services Manager felt that this was finance focused and did not take into account service standards. However, all staff were able to state clearly that they were challenged to demonstrate that they were complying with the policy.

**Rating: GOOD**

## 2 Service Planning

*The service:*

- *Develop clear strategies*
- *Has effective annual planning that outlines the key activities*
- *Uses reliable tools and methods to engage and consult with customers*
- *Sets and meets targets for performance in all the key areas of activity*

- 6.4. West Lothian Council (WLC) has clear policies and plans to provide a Winter Service on adopted roads and footpaths throughout West Lothian. WLC produces a Winter Services Operational Plan covering all areas of the service. This plan is reviewed and updated annually<sup>1</sup>.
- 6.5. Operational Services staff at all levels meet, prior to the onset of winter, to ensure that staff are fully aware of the Operational Plan. Managers also meet with Partners to involve them in the planning process and share information, e.g. with Call Centre staff.
- 6.6. WLC engages and consults with customers in the planning and review of Winter Service policies and plans by a variety of methods including:
- Questions relating to winter service in the Customer Survey given to the Citizen's Panel
  - By accessing Local Area Committees, Community Councils and the Citizen's Panel
  - By analysing customer complaints and enquiries
- 6.7. WLC annually publishes information about Winter Services in West Lothian by:
- Producing a handout
  - Including a section within the November issue of "Bulletin", which is delivered to all West Lothian households
  - Placing information notices in the local press
  - Publishing its policy and plan on the WLC website
- 6.8. WLC plans to continue to use social media facilities such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as the Council's website and radio announcements, to update customers about ongoing situations, e.g. during periods of heavy snowfall.
- 6.9. WLC should consider how to disseminate information more effectively and proactively. It should be noted that:
- Evidence from customer interviews suggests that the 'Bulletin' is not widely read or retained. (One respondent in the customer survey reported that they had not received a copy.)

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<sup>1</sup> Only the 2008-09 Winter Service Operational Plan was made available to the Citizen Led Inspection team.

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- Not all customers have computer access, particularly older, potentially more vulnerable, customers. Not all customers who do have IT access make use of Facebook or other social media.
- During the winter period information about the Winter Service should be more prominent on the Council's website homepage and updates in particular should be more apparent.
- More detail about aspects of the Winter Services Operational Plan should be made available, e.g. 1 - publishing maps to show which are primary routes and secondary routes and e.g. 2 – giving indicators of timescales involved in different situations.

6.10. Analysis of complaints suggests that many complainants were unaware of the priorities inherent within the Operational Plan.

6.11. WLC sets targets for performance within its Winter Services Operational Plan, e.g. for pre-gritting primary routes, and these appear to be met in 'normal' winter circumstances. The targets become more challenging to meet in exceptional circumstances such as those encountered from late November 2010 into January 2011.

6.12. WLC needs to ensure that all targets are practical and meaningful rather than simply finance based which is not a true benchmark of service delivery.

6.13. Whilst Senior Managers were fully aware of service standards and targets, not all staff were aware of these targets.

**Rating: GOOD**

### **3 People Resources**

*The service:*

- *Identifies the right people resources it needs to achieve outcomes*
- *Sets out desired qualities and acceptable behaviours for staff*
- *Reviews and improves individual people's performance*
- *Communicates effectively with people*
- *Involves people in reviewing and improving the service*

6.14. West Lothian Council (WLC) is aware that sourcing the right kind of people is an important factor if they are to deliver an effective Winter Service. WLC has management and staff development training programmes in place prior to mild and severe winter conditions. This actually helps staff to be more responsive towards customers.

6.15. All staff involved with Winter Maintenance contributes and get involved in reviewing and improving the Winter Service.

6.16. Interviews with Winter Maintenance front line staff/ road operatives showed the following advantages and disadvantages.

6.17. Advantages are that staff:

- Understand the needs of customers
- Listen to customers
- Are friendly
- Have a positive attitude to work

6.18. Disadvantages are that staff:

- Received abuse from customers
- As a result customer relationships are sometimes strained

6.19. WLC has a deployment plan in place which allows them to act quickly in both normal and severe winter conditions. For example – for severe conditions for period 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 staff from other areas were deployed to help with winter maintenance duties and staff volunteered to help in other areas such as in customer services switchboard duties. Road engineers were deployed as ward officers to manage and quality assure the work of contractors. This practice is normal and acceptable as long as such staff are properly trained to achieve consistency and effective delivery of Winter Services.

6.20. The overall scenario is that lessons learnt from one severe winter become a benchmark for the following year, hence improvements were easily implemented in some parts of the Winter Service.

6.21. WLC should continue to use their Winter Service strategy to:

- Source out the right staff it needs to meet the desired outcomes
- Maintain good quality standards and behavioural attitude of staff
- Review and develop staff performance
- Hold multi-lateral communication with staff, managers and elected members
- Use staff ideas as part service improvement

6.22. During our fact-finding exercise it became clear to us that line managers are aware of the policy and procedures and the service standards required. The road operatives seem less aware of the overall policy and service standards but were very clear on how to follow instructions given by managers. As the service standards are not specific enough there is an issue with consistency of interpretation by managers communicating requirements to staff for delivery. In some cases non-uniformity of instruction caused confusion for road operatives.

6.23. WLC should continue to:

- Encourage staff development training to boost staff performance
- Implement recommendations related to health & safety policy into staff development training
- Implement recommendations related to equality and diversity policy into staff development training

**Rating: GOOD**

#### **4 Partners & Other Resources**

*The service:*

- *Manages partnerships to add value for the customer*
- *Manages finances to deliver quality services sustainably*
- *Uses information and knowledge to support and enhance service delivery*
- *Uses assets (land, buildings, vehicles and equipment) to optimum effect*

6.24. West Lothian Council (WLC) has identified key partners and together they form a working relationship to provide an efficient Winter Service to customers. WLC is also aware that good partnerships encourage better management of resources. The associated benefits achieved play a key role in the performance of Winter Service.

6.25. Some Partners are:

- Road Services
- Elected Members
- Housing
- Education
- Social Policy
- Police
- Voluntary Sector
- NHS
- Fire Service
- Other Councils

6.26. WLC shall continue to adhere to the Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) which set out targeted, prioritised outcomes for each local government area. The Scottish Government and the statutory Community Planning Partners (CPP) developed the SOAs.

6.27. WLC has an effective communication system with other partners and this was apparent during the last 2 severe winter periods. Examples of this include:

- Collaboration in gritting roads which cross boundaries

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- Sharing resources, such as vehicles, equipment and grit supplies.
- Treatment of routes in and around emergency centres such as ambulance depots and hospitals
- Maintaining routes to schools and clearing school car parks
- The Police were able to move abandoned vehicles on the roadside to allow gritting and lying of salt on the roads and footways.
- Staff Resources
- Targeting, prioritising and delivering of SOAs outcomes
- Allocation of financial resources
- Sharing information on performance and bench marking

6.28. Partners, when developing their winter policies, need to ensure that these take account of the overall winter maintenance policy.

6.29. WLC and its Partners have a binding policy, with the help of the Scottish Government, to enable them to take tough decisions to keep the roads open. It is imperative that West Lothian's public services work together to achieve common goals to improve the quality of life of the people in West Lothian.

6.30. WLC and partners should ensure they pay close attention to some areas of mutual concern.

6.31. The main aim is for local partners working together to respond to severe winter conditions and effective service delivery for customers.

**Rating: GOOD**

### **5 Service Processes**

*The service:*

- *Designs processes to meet the needs of customers*
- *Ensures processes are efficient and effective*
- *Delivers services to customers in the way they want*
- *Reviews the efficiency and effectiveness of processes*
- *Uses customer feedback as part of the review process*

6.32. Winter Service comprises the following types of treatment:

- Precautionary salt treatment
- Treatment of ice
- Treatment of snow
- Treatment of hard packed ice and snow

6.33. The types of treatment are generally carried out in accordance with technical memoranda and codes of practice issued by the Scottish Government.

- 6.34. The period normally covered extends from the beginning of November to the end of March but can be extended if weather conditions necessitate this.
- 6.35. Control of operations is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- 6.36. Decisions about treatment required are based on weather forecasts, data from road monitoring equipment, observations by staff and are dependent on staff knowledge and experience.
- 6.37. The 950km of roads and 1000km of footpaths in West Lothian cannot be treated simultaneously so a prioritisation of routes has been carried out, dividing them into primary routes and secondary routes.
- 6.38. In 'average' conditions the processes are effective, for example in ensuring that primary routes can be pre-treated in less than 4 hours after a forecast is received, and before the onset of the morning peak traffic flow period. Staff at all levels contribute to providing an effective and efficient service. Secondary routes are effectively treated once primary routes are clear. Correct spread rates are used and the option exists for small scale localised variation of rate. Weather forecast data and other monitoring data, provided by the Met Office using the *Viasala Ice View* system and by monitoring stations, is considered to be good. It was noted that the *Viasala* contract is coming to an end and will be reviewed soon.
- 6.39. 'Exceptional' circumstances include **(a)** occasional events such as:
- Freezing following periods of rainfall, when the timing of the freezing coincides with peak traffic flow
  - Rainfall turning to snowfall, again coinciding with peak traffic flow
  - Heavy snowfall, combined with high winds causing localised drifting
- 6.40. Also, **(b)** prolonged events such as those encountered in the winters of 2009-10 and 2010-11, producing conditions of continuous heavy snowfall over an extended period, coupled with an extended period of very low temperatures, often extending below -11°C, rendering salt ineffective.
- 6.41. In circumstances such as this, despite the efforts of staff, processes are less effective in a number of ways including:
- Gritting lorries stuck in static or slow moving traffic cannot apply their load
  - Salt cannot be applied to roads in heavy rainfall, or, if it is, is washed off
  - Continuous snowfall means primary routes have to be repeatedly covered in attempts to open them and keep them clear

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- Cars normally parked on secondary routes or in residential streets are parked (or abandoned) on primary routes preventing gritting lorries from passing
  - Salt stocks become depleted
- 6.42. WLC should consider how to better inform the public about what to expect from the council and what is expected of them in exceptional circumstances. (It may be that a National campaign, led by the Scottish Government, would be more appropriate.)
- 6.43. WLC has taken steps to increase its salt stock in anticipation of conditions similar to the last two winters. There is concern that a significant portion of this is currently stored in the open. This can lead to loss (estimated at 5%), but can also lead to increased moisture content of the salt making handling and spreading more difficult. Effective covering of the salt stock pile not currently housed in the salt dome should be carried out as a matter of some urgency.
- 6.44. WLC has also taken steps to ensure continuity of supply of salt.
- 6.45. Preparations for gritting operations are centred on Guildiehaugh depot. At very busy times, the 'wrong way' one way system causes congestion issues and may compromise Health and Safety. Amending this is currently under consideration.
- 6.46. Staff at all levels consider they are well equipped to carry out the tasks required by the Operational Plan. There was some concern that vehicles and plant are stored outside which might affect their long term efficiency and also affects their readiness for use in some weather situations.
- 6.47. The exceptional winter conditions of 2009-10 caught everybody unawares and there was some initial confusion in the provision of winter service. Lessons were learned from this and the process was more orderly when similar (or worse) conditions arrived in 2010-11. Staff depend on the policy and operational plan to carry out their tasks effectively and this includes acting on clear decisions made at senior levels. Operatives indicated complete confidence in their current (and previous) manager but indicated that there was some inconsistency in the decisions taken by different Duty Officers.
- 6.48. All decisions and actions taken, and the forecast data used to arrive at decisions, are logged. Consideration is being given to installing tracking devices in all vehicles not just gritting lorries so that 'active' information about road treatment is available.
- 6.49. WLC supplies close to 2000 grit bins, using an allocation and priority system. These grit supplies can provide essential assistance in areas of local difficulty where treatment would not normally be immediately available. There is evidence that their use is inefficient and often ineffective due to a number of factors including:

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- There is a high cost in time and materials involved in filling these prior to the onset of winter
  - Grit from them is used incorrectly, e.g. not used to pre-treat an incline
  - In severe weather the bins are all emptied simultaneously and quickly, but cannot be refilled quickly
  - There is evidence that the contents are taken for uses other than what they were provided for
- 6.50. WLC made grit available for residents who could come and collect it e.g. from Guildiehaugh. Whilst this proved useful for some residents able to access it, there is also some suggestion that the facility was misused by some individuals who collected grit with the intention of selling it on to the public.
- 6.51. WLC also made use of contractors to assist in snow clearance and gritting operations. Most of these performed well but some were described as 'not being up to scratch.' Contractors need to be fully aware of what is expected of them in advance of an event and their input needs to be coordinated and fully monitored, for example by Ward Officers in their areas.
- 6.52. As the severe conditions in 2010-11 persisted, WLC used grit (rather than salt) to provide traction on hard packed ice on footpaths. Whilst this had some effectiveness, successive snowfalls reduced this. There was also considerable cost in removing it after the winter and the delay in removing it caused complaints from the public who considered that it made otherwise clear footpaths slippery.
- 6.53. WLC responds to requests and complaints from customers relating to Winter Service. Staff on the 'front line' (e.g. spreading grit), often receive direct complaints (and at times abuse) from customers. Other comments and complaints are received from a variety of sources including via the Council's call centre, directly from the public at Guildiehaugh, or via elected members. These are responded to and acted on where appropriate or possible, and within the policy. Annually they form part of the information shared at debrief, and help inform the development of future policy and operational plans.
- 6.54. Many of the complaints examined suggested a lack of awareness of the Council's Winter Service policy and standards. There would also be a significant reduction in complaints if customers had more information about ongoing situations. Generally customers questioned felt that the Winter Service operation was 'good' in respect of its treatment of primary routes, but 'weak' in its treatment of footpaths or roads in residential areas. In that respect, the policy and service processes do not necessarily deliver the service to the customer in the way they 'want.'

**Rating: GOOD**

## **6 Customer Results**

*The service:*

- *Are measuring the right thing(s) in relation to customer results and what is important to the customer*
- *Can show positive and sustained good performance over a period of 3 or more years*
- *Have set and met challenging targets*
- *Compare their own performance against performance leaders in other councils or organisations*
- *Can explain any dips in their performance or positive changes*

6.55. A customer survey was undertaken in May with 2 questions specifically addressing treatment of roads, housing estates, footpaths and rural roads during frost and ice and severe snow. This is an annual survey and in 2011 over 720 people responded. The people surveyed were all members of the Citizen’s Panel. There is also a Quality of Life survey undertaken every 3 years which asks similar questions.

6.56. The feedback from customers was positive in respect of main roads but the majority of feedback rated the approach to housing estates, footpaths and rural roads as “poor” or “very poor”. This was further confirmed by a short telephone survey undertaken as part of this Citizen Led Inspection process.

6.57. West Lothian Council (WLC) has collected performance data relating to customer satisfaction over a long period. However, the way customer satisfaction is measured was changed in 2008/09 and the key Performance Indicator “percentage of customers who rated the winter maintenance service as good or excellent” dropped from 80.1% in 2007/08 to 50.84% in 2008/09. Prior to 2008/09 the performance indicator included people who considered the service as “satisfactory” (instead of only those that rate the service as “good” or “excellent”). Given this change and the weather in 2009/10 it was to be expected that public perception would be less positive as a result.

6.58. Through the Confirm system customer enquiries are monitored and there was a specific report produced detailing the comments received during the winter period. This demonstrates what is important to the customers and measures should reflect these. There was also a report produced showing the complaints by staff member/business area. The majority of complaints received were categorised as relating to standard of service.

6.59. The indicators that are in the public domain relate to the overall condition of the road network and not specifically to the winter maintenance. Information relating to achievement of this appears to be reactionary when the events occurred and using electronic methods (Facebook and the website). Those that are in the public domain are benchmarked against other councils.

6.60. WLC should consider developing and publishing indicators specifically relating to customer satisfaction with the Winter Maintenance service as this would add to public understanding of the service and what they can expect during the winter period.

**Rating: ADEQUATE**

### **7 Key Performance Results**

*The service:*

- Are measuring the right thing(s) in relation to the key activities and the long-term outcomes*
- Can show positive and sustained good performance over a period of 3 or more years*
- Have set and met challenging targets*
- Compare their own performance against performance leaders in other councils or organisations*
- Can explain any dips in their performance or positive changes*

6.61. There are only 2 relevant Performance Indicators for Winter Maintenance and these are not in the public domain. The measures refer to satisfaction with the service and precautionary salting. Those measures that are in the public domain relate to the condition/maintenance of the road network and are specific to the Winter Maintenance activities.

6.62. The Performance Indicator “% of occasions precautionary salting routes are completed before the formation of ice” is 100% during the critical period and there is recognition that this may not be an appropriate measure as it is always zero during quarters 1 and 2 of the year.

6.63. The service can clearly demonstrate performance over the past 3 years and were able to clearly articulate why there were dips in the performance over the last 2 winters. They were also able to evidence positive changes made as a result of the first bad winter (2009/10).

6.64. Specific measures about Winter Maintenance are not benchmarked against other council areas although the Scottish Government did ask all councils to supply information to them during the winter period.

**Rating: ADEQUATE**

## 7. Review Date

- 7.1. The Citizen Inspection team will return to the service in April 2012 to review the progress in the areas identified for improvement.