

**WINTER 2009-10: Life in Brighton & Hove during the recent severe winter weather****Some comments and suggestions from Brighton & Hove Older People's Council****1 GENERAL COMMENTS**

- 1.1 **Overall the response by the Council** to some quite extreme weather conditions was reasonable, given that the snow and ice persisted for a long time. The response could have been better, but the severity of the conditions probably surprised everyone. The impression of the way the Council responded is that there were some mistakes and some poor judgement, coupled with what seemed like hasty improvisation with limited resources
- 1.2 **The normal pattern of English winters** is such that only occasionally do we experience severe weather, and it is entirely reasonable that the Council should anticipate that normal preparations would generally be adequate. Naturally enough, with the experience of what actually happened this winter, and with the benefit of hindsight, we can all now look back and think that things could (and probably should) have been done differently
- 1.3 As it turned out the sequence of **heavy snowfalls, and sustained periods of freezing temperatures** made for the very difficult conditions which everyone had to cope with, especially considering the geography of the area with many steep gradients. As a result there have been many accidents (e.g. older people slipping on ice, with frequent fractures, bumps and bruises) which could probably have been avoided, and a lot of people's lives were colder, more lonely and isolated than they need have been
- 1.4 **We submit some specific comments under two broad headings** relating to **Central** and **Local** actions: they apply to all people in the City, but especially to older people, who frequently have health and mobility problems which mean that bad weather can bring severe and occasionally life threatening difficulties for them

**2 PREPARATIONS****2.1 CENTRAL ACTIONS**

**We should all be better prepared next time** (and it will happen again sometime). The City Council should prepare a better response, and everyone should be recognise that better responses will cost more money

**The City must prepare to keep major services running by providing a coherent and properly coordinated strategy.** Roads need to be clear, so that transport and business activities can function as well as possible, and pavements must be safe to walk on. Major routes in and around the City need to be kept open for the **supply of essential services** (delivery of food and other supplies to key locations), and for the emergency services. This winter road salting and gritting did ensure that most major roads were by and large passable with great care, so some bus services in central areas were available for much of the time. **Unfortunately side roads were generally untreated, and pavements by bus stops were not always cleared,** so bus users encountered treacherous surfaces when they tried get to those buses that were running, and also when they attempted to enter or leave a bus

If bad weather persists for any length of time and it becomes difficult for many people to get out, **there is a danger that older people, the disabled and some families will run short of essential food and heating supplies.** Much of this problem could be minimised by people maintaining a **modest store of non-perishable supplies** (tinned and frozen food, dried milk powder, candles, matches, emergency heating, etc), but a key action for **the Council and neighbourhood groups would be to alert everyone in autumn to the need to stock up with some basic emergency supplies,** perhaps via leaflets or bulletins in City News and Neighbourhood newsletters, etc

## 2.2 LOCAL NEEDS AND ACTIONS

**Key Local Routes to be kept clear:** In severe conditions, many people are advised to stay at home, but **some journeys soon become essential: for basic food supplies and for medicines.** To this end we would expect that efforts should be concentrated on ensuring that at least **key routes are kept open** to enable easier access to local shops or the pharmacy, etc. Similarly, if public transport is restricted to a few routes, the **clearance of footpaths should be prioritised** to ensure access to and from the points that can be served by that transport

**Safe Pavements:** A simple way to enable people to get around in snow and icy conditions, and to reduce accidents, is to encourage the practice that many older people grew up with, namely that **you clear snow from the pavement outside your house.** This is common practice in countries where heavy snow is the winter norm. It should be equally the case in this country. Can the City Council pass a bye law requiring this of its citizens? And it should be perfectly possible for

communities to **encourage a neighbourly interest in helping those who live nearby** and who may be unable to clear snow from their house fronts because of age, infirmity or illness

**Essential supplies when needed:** Maintain local supplies of emergency materials (grit bins, shovels etc). Further to the idea of stocking emergency supplies of foodstuffs etc, **there is always a need to be able to contact vulnerable people**, and part of this difficulty is knowing who may be in need of help. An **early neighbourhood audit/leafleting exercise** to identify such people would enable community and voluntary groups to compile a list and would save time and effort in a period of severe weather

### **2.3 INFORMATION:**

Radio, TV, Internet, the City Council website, Community Websites, Commercial websites (e.g. the local bus and train services): these all proved **useful and important sources of advice and information** during the bad weather

More could perhaps be done on a regular basis by providing **in advance** information and advice about preparing for difficult conditions: everything from having adequate supplies of basic foodstuffs, looking out for vulnerable neighbours, advising about sensible driving habits in difficult conditions, emergency help contact details (not just the official emergency services but local shop and pharmacy opening hours, local charities and community organisations, local help-lines and phone numbers, etc)

As a development of this idea, it is equally important for the Council to consider setting up a **Severe Weather Service and Helpline**, to serve as a central source of information in times of crisis. For this to succeed, it would be essential for the service to be **properly publicised**, for it to acquire **a reputation as a known and reliable source for relevant information** in the eyes of those using the service, and for there to be an effective way of **coordinating and relaying emergency information to parts of the City where it was most needed** (Local Action Teams and voluntary neighbourhood organisations come to mind in this respect)

**2.4 FUNDING AND RESOURCES:** anticipate the rainy day that will happen sometime, and ensure that contingency money and the other physical resources (such as vehicles, salt and grit,) are available so that responses to bad weather can be swift and effective

- 3 CONCLUSION:** The new Chief Executive has talked recently of developing a Council the City deserves. If the Council can be seen to respond effectively to challenges such as have been posed by the recent hard winter, it will have moved significantly towards that broader goal, but this is not to suggest that the sole responsibility for providing that response to severe weather lies with the Council. The community can play a part and there have been many examples of local groups responding well in the recent difficult conditions. With **positive leadership** from the Council, local people and community organisations can be vital **partners** in providing the necessary help and support.

John Barry as Secretary of, and on behalf of, the Brighton & Hove Older People's Council  
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