



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Winter Readiness: Roads Service Briefing

21 November 2012

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr John Dallat  
Mr Stewart Dickson  
Mr Alex Easton  
Mr Ross Hussey  
Mrs Dolores Kelly  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Ian McCrea  
Mr David McNarry  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

**Witnesses:**

Mr John Irvine	Roads Service
Dr Andrew Murray	Roads Service

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I welcome Andrew Murray and John Irvine. Andrew is the chief executive. You are both welcome. You can make your presentation, and the meeting will be open for questions and answers afterwards.

**Dr Andrew Murray (Roads Service):** I thank you for giving us this opportunity. Before we start, I would like to introduce myself, Andrew Murray, chief executive of Roads Service, and giving the presentation is John Irvine, director of network services in Roads Service. This is really an opportunity for us to explain to you the preparation work that we do prior to each winter to make sure we are in a state of readiness for whatever the elements throw at us. It also gives us the opportunity to tell you how we allocate our limited resources to make sure that we keep the busiest roads in the Province running as best we can during periods of adverse weather. We will do a presentation for about 10 minutes, and then we will answer any questions that you have.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** That is fine.

**Mr John Irvine (Roads Service):** OK, you should all have a departmental presentation. As Andrew said, I am going to speak to this for about 10 minutes. I will summarise it; I do not intend to go through it in detail but I will refer to the slides as I go through.

Slides 2 to 5 set out why we salt roads and the resources and costs associated with that. That is very much a routine operation. We get frost and snow every winter, so that is a routine operation for Roads Service. We grit, really, to keep main road traffic moving freely. We have about 300 staff on stand-by across Northern Ireland from the end of October until the middle of April to deal with whatever the

weather throws at us. We have 130 gritters and eight snow blowers. We have 110,000 tons of salt in stock, which is significantly more than we would normally have held, following the two harsh winters in the two years before last winter. In an average winter, we grit maybe 70 times a year, covering about 4,300 miles of the network. It takes about three hours and each time we grit costs about £70,000. So, as Andrew said, we have to target our resources carefully because of the cost of the operation.

So, we aim to target main routes carrying over 1,500 vehicles per day, and then certain other lesser routes with difficult circumstances — where there are hills, for example — that carry over 1,000 vehicles per day. We then like to provide links between small settlements with populations of more than 100 to connect them to the main network. On top of that, to deal with the other areas, we put out salt grit piles in rural areas, and there are some 50,000 of those across the network, and we put salt bins in more urban areas that are not on salted routes. That sets out the scale of our operation.

Slide 6 sets out the very sophisticated decision-making process during the winter season. We get information from the Met Office. There are sensors on the roads that relay information to our engineers and to the Met Office, which feeds into duty controllers. There are five of those on any one night across the Province, and they take the information and make decisions on whether to grit. They then call out our drivers and decide on the timing of the salting operation. Timing is critical, because if you salt too early and there is rain coming, the salt washes off and the frost comes in. So, these people are very important, and they play a vital role in the service that we provide.

On top of that, we have a lead communicator, who interacts with the media and feeds information to the media on what we have done and the state of the network. We cannot guarantee frost-free roads. We do our best to keep the main network treated and the majority of the traffic flowing, but there is never a guarantee of frost-free roads, and drivers must always drive in accordance with the conditions that they see.

Slides 7 and 8 set out the dramatic increase in the cost of salting operations for disproportionately less benefit in the network salted. What I mean by that is, for £6 million, we get about 30% of the network treated, and that covers 80% of the traffic. If you ramp that up, for an additional £4 million, you only capture an additional 10% of the traffic and 20% of the roads. That is where the balance is in what we grit throughout the network.

Slide 9 is quite interesting. It sets out the cost of salt versus the cost of asphalt. To re-emphasise the previous point, for £40 a ton, you get asphalt that resurfaces roads, and that lasts for 25 years. For £32 a ton, you get salt, and that lasts for 24 hours. That puts the cost into perspective, so that is quite an interesting slide.

Slide 10 sets out the metres of network salted per head of population. We are right up there in terms of the UK and the other devolved Administrations.

Slides 11 to 13 set out the rationale for our current level of intervention and the fine balance between putting more money into salting or more money into other valuable activities that we do to promote road safety, for example.

Slides 14 and 15 deal with exceptional incidents. That is what we call secondary salting. Once we have the main network clear in exceptional circumstances, we have a strategy for working our way down and dealing with other areas. On top of that, we have a snow plan for dealing with a snow event. That effectively follows the same principles to get the main network clear and then work our way down. In relation to the secondary snow plan, we have a network of farmers and contractors who we can call upon to help clear snow in exceptional circumstances.

Slides 16, 17 and 18 set out some statistics that you can have a look at. Slides 19 and 20 discuss climate change. As I said, last winter was relatively mild or average, but the two previous winters were very severe. I suppose the question is whether we will get more severe winters. That is the whole climate change debate. Interestingly, through the Met Office, we get 30-day forecasts, and looking ahead for where we are now, the Met Office is saying wet and colder, but there is no hint of significant snow. That is what we are looking at at the minute. We will always keep an eye on that and look ahead. We get daily forecasts that will deal with, say, tonight, but on a weekly basis, we will be looking ahead to the weekend so that we can gear up. We work very closely with the Met Office to see what the situation looks like going forward.

The next slide deals with communications. I mentioned the lead communicator, who deals with the media. We have distributed, or are in the process of distributing, our winter service leaflet to 810,000

households throughout the Province. The slide shows a photo of our traffic control centre. We have a website, [trafficwatchni.com](http://trafficwatchni.com), which has winter service and emergency news. So, if, for example, we have a severe snow event, we can put up information, and people can log in and find out the state of the network.

Finally, the remaining slides set out the issues relating to the salting of footways. In 2011, DRD and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) developed a co-operative approach to the treating of footways in periods of prolonged — and I emphasise prolonged — ice and snow. We had prolonged ice and snow in the two winters before last year. Effectively, we have a memorandum of understanding with 23 out of 26 councils, in which they have agreed a schedule of routes in town centres. Roads Service will provide the salt, and if we get into an event of prolonged ice or snow, Roads Service or council resources will be used to treat those routes in the schedule. The memorandum was not used in 2011-12, the first year since it was signed, but last year was a mild winter.

In summary, Roads Service is well prepared. Our planning is taking place. We have done all our routine checks. Staff rosters have been agreed. Any new staff who have come in have been trained. As I said, our salt stocks are very high. Our equipment has been checked, and we are ready to go.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thanks for that presentation. Before I bring members in, I have one or two questions. John, you finished by saying that you are well prepared. I do not question that but I have always said that it is a harsh winter that will test it, and I hope that we do not get it. Your presentation refers to the use of farmers. You said that, for additional gritting, farmer contractors were brought in to help to clear snow. That is an issue in very rural areas such as my area, Fermanagh, where there is access and contractors there. In Scotland, they have some formal input into the gritting of roads. Have you considered that here? It could be very helpful to do that. Outside of bringing farmers in during very extreme times, they could be given a role in any period of winter gritting.

**Dr Murray:** We undertake two distinct tasks during the winter season. One is to prevent ice from forming on roads, and that is the salting operation. We have the specialised equipment to do the salting operation, and we have the specialised forecasting information that allows us to get the salt down on a damp surface before freezing takes place. That is quite a sophisticated operation. Our view is that it is not really possible to get farmers or other contractors in to do that. It is a one-off operation that needs to be centrally controlled in each division.

The second part of our winter service operation is the removal of snow. That can be achieved partly through pre-salting and then putting a mixture of salt and grit on the roads after the snow has fallen. On occasions in which we have heavy snow, we need to bring in a contractor, and that is why we have these standards contracts throughout the Province in which we bring in farmers and contractors. They have the specialised equipment to do the snow-removal task for us.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Secondly, you touched on footways, John. They have always been a very complex issue. You said that there was a memorandum of understanding. The Department has been in discussions with NILGA since 2011. Is there formal agreement now? If not, why not?

**Mr Irvine:** I will let Andrew take that one because he is involved with the discussions with NILGA.

**Dr Murray:** We drew up a formal agreement, which we thought safeguarded the Department and the local authorities that signed up to it. A number of them signed up to it. It was developed by Belfast City Council's legal side, who thought that the agreement protected local authorities. Other councils felt that it was too legalistic, and they did not like the agreement in that form. Rather than say that it is either the agreement or nothing, we allowed local authorities to exchange letters with us. In other words, we are concerned with the principle of co-operation, whereby whoever has the resources available will provide them for the footway salting operation. We will provide the salt, and we need to agree a schedule of footways that are going to be treated during that period. Where that can be dealt with by an exchange of letters, we are content. Therefore, we have either a formal agreement in place, which is the case with 23 of the 26 councils, or an exchange of letters, which outline the main responsibilities. We are content with either arrangement.

**Mr I McCrea:** I apologise for the coughing and spluttering. Hopefully, by winter, I will have passed it on to somebody else. I have always said that we do not give the credit that is deserved to the men, and, I assume, some women even, who drive the ploughs, because they go out in what are

sometimes very difficult weather conditions. We should always take that into consideration. Sometimes, they put themselves in danger by going out in extreme weather conditions.

As a councillor, I am not sure whether our council has an official arrangement or an exchange of letters. I have seen so many letters going back and forth that I do not know. In any event, we have to go back to the issue of indemnity. I have seen legal opinion that says that indemnity is still not what Roads Service says it is. Footpaths are probably one of the more difficult issues. I would encourage businesses to help with footpaths and to try to do it themselves, but their concern is indemnity and that someone could put in a claim if they slipped and fell on the footpath in front of their shop, which they had cleared. Where are things in that regard? Is it any clearer this year than it was last year? Can you give us an assurance that it is in place?

**Dr Murray:** It is fairly clear to me. To be honest, I think some people have made it overly complicated. The Department's indemnity relates to whether we salt and where we salt. That is what our indemnity covers. It does not cover operations that are carried out in a negligent manner; we are not indemnified for that. If we decide to salt or not salt a road, we are covered. If we decide to salt busy roads, but not salt less busy roads, we are indemnified there, too. If we go out with a snow plough and rub it against the side of somebody's car, we are not covered, because that would be considered negligence.

If a council is working as our agent, or if a council or traders' organisation is working under agreement as our agent, it would have exactly the same indemnity in relation to whether it salted and the extent of the footway network that it would salt. However, if somebody with a shovel breaks a window of a shop that they are salting beside, they would not be covered against that because that would be considered as negligence.

**Mr Irvine:** I refer you to slide 24, which sets out the legislation. In effect, that is the indemnity and that is our statutory defence. That reads across into the agreements. Slide 24 summarises this if you want to have a look at it in your own time.

**Mr I McCrea:** I have looked at it in great detail.

Moving away from that, I have always been a firm believer in driving a bit more carefully and taking extra time for a journey instead of driving as usual on roads that have been treated for snow. I wonder how they do things in Scandinavian countries, where they have a lot more snow than we have.

**Mr Dickson:** I have a genuine belief that you are as ready as you have been for many years and that you have learned many of the lessons of previous years in respect of your winter readiness programme.

Following some of the points that Mr McCrea was raising about the connection with local authorities, can we be sure that, regardless of legal arrangements, memorandums of understanding and letters being exchanged, the Department will apply common sense when someone, particularly an elected representative, asks for salt box or a yellow box to be put in an appropriate place? I accept that sometimes the requested locations for salt boxes are not appropriate but I suspect that most of the time the requests are due to genuine local concern. Will common sense be applied as well as your rules?

**Dr Murray:** The rules are designed to make sure that a salt box or a salt pile will be provided if there is a genuine need for one. We have considerably increased the number of salt bins across the Province to nearly 5,000, all of which have to be maintained and replenished. There are about 50,000 salt piles, for which there are similar arrangements. So, it is quite a task. The requests that I have seen turned down have been from areas where the provision was not needed or which were made by people who intended to use the salt privately rather than on the road network.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** We are revisiting much of what we discussed last year. I would like definitions for a couple of things.

My council was one of the first, in 2009-2010, to action the clearing of the footpaths. We did that, possibly against our better judgement, on the back of scores of injuries. That winter period came in on 19 December and was with us for over a month. It was around 10 January when we got together — I was mayor at the time — with the Roads Service people, and we cleared the footpaths in both town centres in the borough within 24 hours. That was very much welcomed. John, you described the criteria as being "a prolonged period". At what point does a period become a prolonged period?

**Mr Irvine:** The 2009-2010 prolonged period led to the discussions with NILGA.

**Dr Murray:** There is a judgement to be applied. It is not just a question of, "Three days, and then we salt." We certainly would not do it for one or two days. Footway salting is a messy and slow operation. Generally, if the cold spell lasts for a day or two, people who are more vulnerable will not go out in the snow, but when it lies for three days or more, people need to get out to get groceries. We are more likely to step in at that stage, but before stepping in, we will look at the forecast. If snow has been lying on a road or footpath for three days, and we may be about to trigger a salting operation, and the forecast says that there is going to be a quick thaw, we would hold off.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** The problem, Andrew, is that the longer you leave it, the more difficult it is to do physically.

**Dr Murray:** Yes, that is absolutely right.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** My other question is about the criteria for salting certain roads, particularly those around rural schools. In some areas, there was an understanding whereby the road from the school gates to the nearest main road would be salted. Sometimes that suited people who were coming that way, but if they were coming from another direction, it did not. Is that a formal or informal agreement? What is the status of that agreement, even if a road falls beneath the criteria for the volume of traffic required?

**Dr Murray:** We spend about 20% of our annual budget for winter service on treating roads outside of the salted road schedule. The schedule is for the busier roads, on which we try to stop ice forming in the first place. So, we try to get out there in the middle of the night, early in the evening or whenever is necessary before the frost forms. However, there are roads outside the network that perform important functions. For many of them, we simply respond to requests, such as where animal feed needs to get somewhere or if there is a funeral.

For schools, we have set up a slightly more formal arrangement. Under that arrangement, we agree to give certain schools priority treatment for secondary gritting. So, once we get the main routes treated, if a school contacts us, or we become aware of a problem with a road where there is a school, we will go out and give the road secondary treatment.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** A number of schools seem to have fallen through the grating.

**Dr Murray:** There are about 50 schools on our list. We constantly update the schedule, and if we get requests from schools, we consider adding them to the list.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** I will get in touch with you about a number of schools.

**Mr Irvine:** That is fine.

**Mr McAleer:** In the first slide, you say that there is "no legal obligation to salt roads". You then made reference to legislation in slide 24, although the legislation is not specified. You are carrying out this operation in a legislative vacuum, which, in some ways, has contributed to councils raising the issue of indemnity. Is that a factor?

Given that last winter was milder, were savings made? Hopefully, there were.

Lastly, you said that farmers and local contractors are sometimes required to move the heavy snow. What mechanism is used to recruit those people?

**The Deputy Chairperson:** You got three questions in there.

**Mr McAleer:** Jimmy's away, you see.

**Mr McNarry:** You are suspended for seven days. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Irvine:** The legislation referred to in slide 24 is the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, which states that the Department "may" take such steps; it does not say it "shall" do it. That is why slide 1

talks about, "no legal obligation". However, we recognise that to keep the economy going and to keep traffic going on the main roads, we have to salt them. There is no definite legal obligation to do that, but we do it anyway. It is not really a legal vacuum.

Last year, we built up our salt stocks and did not use them, so we have still got them. I suppose that is a saving.

There are snow-clearance contracts that farmers can apply for.

**Dr Murray:** They are advertised in the local press, and the farmers' union knows about them. They are generally three-year contracts.

**Mr Hussey:** First, I congratulate you on what you have done in the plan, particularly the provision for clearing roads for funerals, etc.

I have two concerns. My background is in insurance, and I have concerns about indemnity. I do not believe that councils would be indemnified if a member of their staff was injured putting salt down, because that is not one of their jobs.

The other question I have is about the staff rota. There were problems in the western region with certain members of staff being excluded. The matter went to HR Connect. Has it been resolved?

**Dr Murray:** On indemnity, councils generally carry insurance for staff who are injured in the course of their business. I suspect that that would cover any business in which they were involved.

**Mr Hussey:** I would argue, from my background, that it is based on their job description. In my opinion, it would not be seen as the council's responsibility to clear footpaths. We will wait and see, but I do have major concerns about that. I remember it being debated several years ago when I was here as an observer. I sat and almost put my teeth through my lip because I could not speak, but today I can, and I have major concerns in relation to this.

**Dr Murray:** I am certainly not aware of any council in Northern Ireland having had such a claim, but I cannot rule out the possibility. I am not aware of the details of the second issue, so I cannot comment specifically, and, in fact, I would not comment specifically in an open forum anyway. We have different roles within the winter service operation and we try to make sure that the people who decide when to call a gritting operation are from the client side of the Roads Service operation — the side that is under John's control now. We try to make sure that the people carrying out a winter service operation — the people who are actually out driving — are from the contractor side of the organisation if possible.

**Mr Hussey:** You mentioned staff rotas, and this is in relation to your direct staff. DRD employees, and certain grades, were excluded. It was taken to a tribunal within HR Connect and that particular issue was resolved. The person concerned was found to have been discriminated against in one form or another, basically. I want you to report back that, in the western region, that particular issue is now resolved and it will not happen again.

**Dr Murray:** I was not aware of the issue. I cannot give a guarantee that it will not happen again. What I can say is that we have asked our network maintenance committee to develop criteria for the selection of staff for the different rotas. It is working on that now. It is something that has not been formalised in the past, and it is possibly because of that that gave rise to that particular case. Work is ongoing now to formalise those arrangements.

**Mr Hussey:** Chair, with your agreement, if it happens again and that particular person brings me the paperwork back again, I will put it to this Committee. It has been brought to the attention of Roads Service through HR Connect. Should it happen again, I will bring it back to this Committee.

**Dr Murray:** It sounds like a matter that would possibly be better brought directly to me.

**Mr Dallat:** This conversation is going nowhere, but it helps to illustrate the problem. Here we have three members of this Committee who are also members of local councils speaking on an issue on which there has been a lack of agreement since 2002.

**Mr Hussey:** Can I state, for clarification, that I am not a member of a council any more.

**Mr Dallat:** The public do not care about the bureaucracy. They do not care whether there are Lord Mayors and chief executives sitting with their quills and their robes writing letters to the Department of the Environment, saying that it is not their responsibility. People do not care whether there are civil servants with their word processors sending back responses, saying that it is not their responsibility. That debate should be finished, because there is an orthopaedic department in Altnagelvin — Cathal knows it — where it is extremely difficult to get an operation. You have to go on a waiting list. As soon as the footpaths are snowed up, the department is blocked, and people who are sitting at home waiting on planned operations have them cancelled. What value do you put on that? I suggest that you cannot put a value on it, particularly if it is an older person. That needs to be sorted and sorted now. This age-old argument has gone on for too long. I am sorry for taking up your time, but it really annoys me that we are still having this conversation. The public are probably paying the councillors expenses for sitting discussing it. I heard one of them on the radio last week, and he should have stayed off it because he did not do himself any good at all.

I have a couple of wee questions. The east Derry area has two major routes. One is the Glenshane Pass and the other is the Limavady mountain road. If the snow comes down, it is ages before the public are made aware that, two thirds of the way up the hill, an eight-wheeler has blocked the road and that a whole convoy of traffic cannot get up the hill. Eventually, a policeman will come out of Limavady or Coleraine, put on his blue lights and tell people. There should be some kind of warning system. What is the level of collaboration between you and the emergency services to try to keep the traffic moving so that motorists do not drive into obstacles?

**Dr Murray:** I will take those questions. First, you are quite right. The footway issue has been going on for a very long time, and for a very long time, it did not get anywhere. However, I now regard the issue as being almost fully resolved. A total of 23 of the 26 councils have signed agreements with us, and in times of prolonged snow or ice, we co-operate with almost all the councils in the Province and cover almost all the busy town and city centre footways in the Province. Three councils have decided not to do that. They are accountable to their ratepayers, and it is fine if they have made that decision. That is what local democracy is all about. We will do what we can in those areas, and we do. The agreements with councils cover only busy town and city centre footways.

I am aware of the very large number of casualties that occur through people falling on slippery footways during the winter. However, if we were to try to treat all the footways, it would be a hugely expensive operation, and an impractically expensive operation at that. Most of those who are injured are not injured in towns or city centres, but in local housing estates or rural areas. You might want to come back on that.

The second issue that you raised was the Glenshane Pass and other areas such as that —

**Mr Dallat:** The mountain road in Limavady, also.

**Dr Murray:** Yes. The decision to close a road resides with the PSNI. We work closely with them and are in contact with them about what we and they think the conditions are. When they think that the conditions are too bad, they will close roads. Quite often, they close roads when they are passable. They tend to do so because they are afraid of lorries jack-knifing and blocking up the rest of the traffic. During the winter, that is the biggest problem we have. Generally, roads remain open during snowy conditions or are passable with care. However, when a lorry has an accident or gets stuck on a hill, it blocks everything else. We also cannot get up with gritters. So, it is a PSNI operation. I think that there have probably been a couple of occasions in the past when changes in personnel in that organisation meant that they did not act quickly enough to close roads. Hopefully, that has now been resolved.

**Mr Dallat:** Chairperson, I am not going to go back over any of that. To be honest, it is all old hat. Like others, I should have paid tribute to those who are involved in gritting our roads. They are the salt of the earth, and I hope that I do not read in any paper that gritting lorries have been attacked by clowns this year.

What kind of preparation goes into making salt available in salt boxes? What happens when some selfish individual backs up with his link box and takes the salt box off to service his own property?

**Dr Murray:** That has been a problem for us in the past. It was a particular problem during the past couple of very bad winters, when those who owned commercial premises were unable to purchase



salt. We try to replace or replenish salt bins when that happens. This year, we have also been fairly active in putting out further publicity, and in trying to get people to prepare themselves for the winter and buy salt when it is available in the DIY stores around the Province.

**Mr Irvine:** Those incidents are probably the exception rather than the rule. There are 4,300 salt boxes, and the vast majority of people respect them. You do get those incidents and it is very irritating if someone takes the salt away. We try to replenish them as stocks go down.

**Mr Dallat:** That is grand. Good luck to you.

**Mr McNarry:** The record shows that you are doing an excellent job. Apart from the footpaths, the work done, certainly in my constituency, has been very warmly welcomed. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, the standards have been set.

The footpaths cause particular problems. I am pleased to hear about the number of councils that have signed up to this. Local retailers will be on your and everyone else's back if their turnover is affected, particularly in these terrible times, because people cannot get to the shops. In line with the shopping issue, will somebody make sure that car parks are freed up? There is no point in going to a car park that has become a skating rink, which does happen.

I want to mention briefly the weather forecast. After the last false prediction, I understand that you have plenty of salt, so we do not envisage that running out. I do not think that the Minister was very successful in trying to auction or sell it, so you still must have it. The weather forecast is key to the information. How will you work with the forecasters to ensure that your message, which is an extra message, gets out about where problems are likely to arise?

**Dr Murray:** We are the Met Office's biggest customer in Northern Ireland; Roads Service pays it quite a fee every year for its specialised service.

**Mr McNarry:** You should review it.

**Dr Murray:** It is actually very good —

**Mr McNarry:** It is no good if you are a golfer. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr Murray:** It is very good at predicting low temperatures; it is also pretty good at predicting rain and large snow falls. For example, the year that we had the snow, it told us exactly when it would come and gave us about two weeks' notice. It also told us exactly when it would thaw, which was really good.

Where it has great difficulty — I know that it is working on its models — is predicting patches of snow that fall over an area the size of a town. If snow falls in a town, it is very bad news; if it falls five miles away, nobody pays any attention to it. It has some real difficulty with that. It also has difficulty with long-range forecasts, which have not been particularly helpful to us over the years. The long-range forecasts did not pick up the really bad winters; similarly, the Met Office did not pick up last year's mild winter. However, it continues to rerun the models. John gave you the information on the current model, which suggests no real problems. It is rerunning that model this week, so we will get another long-range forecast on Friday, and we will react to whatever it says.

**Mr McNarry:** I am pleased with that. We will have to wait and see. It has proven to be a problem. You said that you were given two weeks' notice about the snow. If something unexpected comes along, it is about getting the news out.

There should be a little bit more emphasis on what freezing conditions are. People can see snow, but they can rarely see freezing conditions, which are just as perilous; in fact, sometimes even more so. For some reason, Katesbridge is always cold, but it is not too far from where I live, which is not cold. Motorists need more information about freezing conditions

**Mr Irvine:** I mentioned the lead communicator, who is charged with communicating to the media. That person will generally put out a report at 4.00 am every morning over the period. Those are the messages that we would like to get out. It is back to the point about drivers being aware.

It is very tricky for the Met Office because of our climate. The west could be frost-free, and the east could have frost, or frost could develop at 6.00 am. The information that we get, particularly on marginal nights, comes through every couple of hours — *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr McNarry:** I do not want to dwell on this, but the weather forecast that I have seen this week is pathetic. It is too short. It tells me that there will be rain in the west that will then hit the east, where I live. When I get up in the morning, it has already vanished from the west and is in the east. It has arrived with me five hours too soon. I understand what you are saying, but I am just saying: get it right. I am not saying that to Angie, Cecilia or whatever you call them, because you should not shoot the messenger.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I think that it is the Met Office's responsibility.

**Mr McNarry:** It is a great science for which you and I pay a great deal of money. I think that a wee bit more attention should be paid to it as we reach crucial situations in which people's lives are at risk. Perhaps the BBC will do that; it has plenty of time to get on with things.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** One of the members said that people should drive carefully. Cars now tell you when the temperature is coming close to freezing; I think that it does that at 4°C.

Thank you both for your presentation. Hopefully, we will not have a winter this year that tests your responsibilities.