

No discontent this winter?

Following a succession of mild winters, the UK has experienced unusually harsh winter weather for the past three years. Despite the best efforts of the road authorities, the UK's transport network has been severely tested on these occasions and the freight industry hamstrung. With another tough winter predicted this year, what are the issues facing road haulage operators and what support is available? **TOBY CARROLL** investigates.

In January 2011, FTA responded to the Commons Transport Select Committee inquiry into the impact of the adverse weather on transport in England. FTA identified several key issues – poorly treated road surfaces increased the risk of jack-knifed lorries; use of winter tyres by heavy goods vehicles (hgv's) should remain an operational decision and not a legal requirement; banning hgv's from the road network in the event of snow and ice was not a solution; and finally the Department for Transport (DfT) needs to be quicker in reacting to drivers' hours and working time relaxations.

Part of the Committee's inquiry was an in-depth winter resilience report conducted by David Quarmby, Chairman of the RAC Foundation. Relating to roads the Quarmby Report said that local highway authorities overall performed well with many engaging with local councils and communities on snow clearance; that the Highways Agency similarly did a good job, but it should report to the Secretary of State on the most severe incidents; and suggested that although stocks of road salt had been high, local authorities should follow a salt usage best practice guide devised by the Highways Agency in order to maximise its efficient usage.

Speaking at FTA's recent Transport Manager Seminar in Chatham, the Highways Agency's Head of Severe Weather Strategy Martin Hobbs stressed the fact that "Salt isn't magic dust", and dispelled several misconceptions surrounding its ability to work in all winter conditions. Hobbs pointed out that salt ceases to be effective when road temperatures drop to around 17°C, as recorded in parts of the UK last winter. What's more, traffic is

still needed to grind salt into the road surface and distribute it effectively. The mutual dependency between salt and traffic can create a *Catch 22* situation when roads are deemed too dangerous for vehicles.

To make sure authorities are gritting areas that need salt the most, the Highways Agency has identified points in the road network that are particularly vulnerable to snow and ice. Other strategies devised by the Agency to keep the road network open include improved co-ordination between its winter fleet, traffic officer and national vehicle recovery services, and enhanced communications with road users through social media, weather alerts and a pre-season media launch.

So what can operators do to ensure their operation runs as smoothly as possible this winter? Malcolm Bingham, FTA's Head of Road Network Management Policy, says that "Keeping on top of maintenance is vital during severe weather when vehicle performance can be as much as 10% poorer." Bingham emphasised that while the use of winter tyres, chains and socks was an operational decision. "Tyre depth is key, with a recent recommendation from the IRU suggesting that a 4mm tread at the very least should be used." Operators should be aware that using snow chains and socks in the wrong conditions could damage both the tyre and the road surface (for which the operator will be liable) and it is advisable to follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Making sure that drivers are prepared for winter weather is also vital. Each driver should have appropriate clothing, food supplies, equipment and information in the event of getting stuck in snow and traffic.

Furthermore, it would be worth educating drivers about winter driving techniques and including the subject within Driver CPC training.

In addition to vehicle maintenance and driver preparedness, journey planning will greatly influence operators' ability to cope with severe weather. Best practice requires managers to anticipate disruption, allow more time, consider discussing delivery expectations with customers, and prioritising deliveries.

Transport managers can keep up to date with changing weather conditions and road closures via FTA's traffic and weather alert email service. Bingham explains that FTA passes on amber weather warnings issued by the Highways Agency, which are only released if the weather will significantly affect the road network, and have now become an essential resource for operators. "The warnings we've developed over the last three years, particularly regarding areas susceptible to high winds, have really gained credence with the industry." Plus, the FTA website now contains up-to-the minute RSS news feeds on traffic disruption throughout the UK, plus tips for operators and drivers on adapting to poor weather conditions.

FTA will also use its email service to alert members on changes to drivers' hours' rules and working time relaxations. The Association believes that essential deliveries and collections during severe winter weather benefit from a temporary, modest increase in daily driving time and greater flexibility with rest breaks. However, this is clearly a very sensitive issue and relaxations in the rules have to be judged on a case by case basis through the appropriate

Government department and on to the Transport Minister for decision. Aside from website announcements and email bulletins FTA members in any doubt can contact the MAC for appropriate information.

Whilst the UK has enjoyed record high temperatures at the beginning of October, there has also been speculation that snow may arrive earlier than normal this year. Who knows. But it is clearly imperative that the Government, road authorities and freight industry learn the hard lessons of previous winters and implement strategies enabling the UK to keep its supply chains working.

Snow's no joke!

■ *Members can download a briefing note on the FTA website titled 'Planning for, and operating in, severe winter weather' – go to www.fta.co.uk. Members can also subscribe to FTA's traffic and weather alerts www.fta.co.uk/trafficandweather, plus find traffic RSS feeds and advice for driving and operating in poor weather.*

■ *ShopFTA has available a range of winter resilience support equipment – go to www.shop.fta.co.uk or call 08717 11 11 11*