

Severe Winter Weather Guidance for West Berkshire Schools October 2010

In 2009 and 2010 schools in West Berkshire suffered the impact of severe winter weather. Guidance has been developed to assist schools, and the community, to reduce the impact in the future.

Schools are expected to remain open in all but the most extreme circumstances. Factors such as site size, slope and spread, the access to the site, the distance of staff from the site and the variation of weather patterns in different areas making travelling unpredictable will need to be factored in. The decision to close a school, restrict opening hours or limit pupil attendance should not be taken lightly. Decisions are best taken locally by those who are closest to the situation and should always take into account a balance of risks against disruption to pupil learning, and always put the safety for pupils and staff to the fore.

It is recognised that Headteachers might have fewer staff to supervise pupils on days of bad weather. Schools should plan for how, if they have fewer staff available in the short term, they will continue to supervise pupils and deliver as much of the curriculum as possible.

When to take the decision to close the school is important; the benefits of an early decision to provide parents with enough time to arrange childcare and avoid unnecessary journeys must be balanced against any likelihood that a bad situation may not result as initially feared. If weather forecasts make it likely that a school will not be able to open the next day it may be appropriate to take a decision the previous afternoon.

Closing at short notice may cause difficulties for families if they need to make arrangements for children to be cared for during the school day. In some cases this may result in loss of earnings, loss of employment and / or have a detrimental impact on vulnerable pupils. Any children at the school should remain there until the Headteacher is satisfied that appropriate alternative arrangements have been made.

Advance planning and preparation can help to mitigate the impact of severe weather. Whenever possible, work should be planned for pupils to do at home should a school have to close. Headteachers should consider training requirements for staff on the use of learning platforms and websites to ensure that work can be set for pupils during a prolonged closure.

Additional Guidance to Help Prepare for Severe Weather Conditions

Appendix 1 - Preparing the Premises

Appendix 2 - Planning and Organisation to Enable Opening of School

Appendix 3 - Communications

Appendix 4 - Checklist

Appendix 5 – Generic Risk Assessment for Snow/Ice Clearance

Key Contacts

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Appendix 1 – Preparing the Premises

To prepare your premises for severe weather conditions, Headteachers should ensure the following actions have been taken:

- Sufficient fuel is stocked - allow for increased usage during extreme cold weather. Plan a system for regular monitoring and ordering, allowing for delay in delivery times.
- Boilers are fully serviced.
- Thermostat is set to **at least** ten degrees to avoid pipes freezing.
- Radiators are bled periodically through the heating season to remove air locks that prevent water circulation.
- Before leaving for any breaks ensure the system is set up correctly and you are familiar with the working of your heating controls.
- At times of extreme cold the heating system is monitored on a regular basis, especially during periods where the school is not in occupation.
- Before returning to school check to ensure the heating system is working effectively. If a fault is discovered contact your maintenance contractor immediately to rectify the problem prior to school starting.
- Familiarisation with the water system – be aware of how to turn off the water and who to call in cases of emergency. Test plumbing shut off valves to check they work and prevent them from seizing.
- Sufficient insulation around your water tank(s), loft and external water pipes.
- Drain down outside taps and insulate any exposed pipe work.
- Sufficient salt/sand is stocked appropriately. Plan to manage stocks allowing for increased usage and delay in delivery times.
- Remove rubbish from roofs and valleys - Drink cans, plastic bags and balls are often the cause of blockages, floods and ingress into the building.
- Gutters and rainwater pipes are clear.
- Ground drains are cleared to avoid flooding.
- Check roof is fully watertight. Replace any slipped or missing tiles.
- Masonry is cleared of any vegetation. Roots will cause frost damage as well as damp penetration.
- Check outside lights are operational.

Appendix 2 - Planning and Organisation to Enable Opening of School

To prepare for opening when there are severe weather conditions, Headteachers should ensure the following actions have been taken and systems are in place.

- A system to regularly check weather forecasts via news and websites. A designated member of staff could check the Met Office website on:
<http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/index.html>
- Monitor weather forecasts - **prevention is key**. Action is required whenever freezing temperatures or snow are forecast.
- Ensure staff travel distances are mapped and a plan is in place for designating staff who can get in by walking, short drive (five miles) / long drive (10 miles) / very long drive (10 miles +). Take into consideration disability, nervous/new drivers, four-wheel drive and other factors that affect ease of journey. This plan will inform any decision to open the school with expected availability of staff. There should be good reason for non-arrival of staff but the decision is ultimately theirs. Staff remaining at home should have evidence of work related activity. **Please remember, you cannot direct a member of staff to drive in conditions they consider to be dangerous.**
- If possible, arrange for staff to accommodate each other locally in severe conditions if return home is impossible.
- Obtain a list of volunteers that would be prepared to offer assistance in the event of severe weather.
- A risk assessment is completed of the hazards associated with snow and ice on the school site. Identify procedures to be implemented, when and by whom. All staff should be familiar with, and be able to follow, these procedures (see Appendix 5). This assessment should be updated and reviewed regularly and before use.
- Please be aware that snow and ice increases the potential load on unsupported cantilevered canopies. There were instances of collapse during snow in 2010. If you have this type of canopy ensure that you do not use the area below during periods following heavy snow until they have been independently assessed.
- The following measures may form part of your local procedures, where appropriate to your site and circumstances:
 - Identify in advance all key routes and areas to ensure safe access and operation of the school. Show these on a site plan and communicate the designated routes to all users.
 - These identified routes and areas should be treated with salt/grit and this should be repeated at appropriate intervals where temperatures remain below freezing.
 - Following your assessment of the site those areas deemed to be more affected by snow and ice, e.g. shortcuts, slopes, areas in shade or wet should be restricted and

all persons on the site are made aware. Ideally signs/cones/tape would be used to identify the hazard.

- Where time and resources permit other areas and pathways to entrances and between buildings should be cleared and gritted.
 - Ensure levels of supervision are appropriate for the conditions at break and lunchtime.
 - Supplies of salt/grit should be stored appropriately.
 - Gritting should be carried out when frost, ice or snow is forecast or when walkways are likely to be damp or wet and the floor temperatures are at or below freezing. The best time is early in the evening before frost settles; if that is not possible use early in the morning before employees arrive. Salt does not work instantly; it needs sufficient time to dissolve into the moisture on the floor. Rock salt starts to become ineffective at -6 °C.
- Consider training requirements for staff on use of learning platforms and websites to ensure work can be set for pupils during a prolonged closure.
 - If staff remain at home they should have evidence of work related activity.

Liability for Snow Clearance

The approved code of practice which supports the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations states that "arrangements should be made to minimise risks from snow and ice. This may involve gritting, snow clearing and closure of some routes.....".

WBC includes volunteers in its liability insurance programme, that is for both Public and Employers Liability Insurance. We are covered for our legal liability as defined, both for injury caused to them, for which we are legally liable and injury / damage caused by them, for which we become legally liable, providing that a suitable and sufficient risk assessment has been carried out to include these people.

It is important to complete a suitable and sufficient risk assessment – See Appendix 5. Ice slippages and back injuries from clearing snow are likely to be the greatest concerns. When areas are cleared, an assessment is still required to ensure that it is safe to open on the day.

Ultimately, if **all reasonable precautions** have been taken then we will significantly reduce the possibility of a claim. Bear in mind that claimants in civil action only have to prove their case on the balance of probabilities. All hazardous areas **must** be put out of commission. There has in recent years only been one successful claim against the Authority within the school environment for slippage on ice where prior knowledge was not acted upon.

Health and Safety legislation provides a duty to clear ice and snow and also to make sensible decisions about opening depending on the safety for the entire site. If a claim is made, the Council has the expertise to defend it providing all reasonable precautions are taken, such as a suitable and sufficient risk assessment, safe working practices, frequent rest breaks and the provision of suitable equipment.

Appendix 3 - Communications

At times of severe weather there will be occasions when you need to communicate with parents, governors, staff and West Berkshire Council. Should you need to close the school or open with restricted hours. Headteachers should ensure the following actions have been taken.

- A system is in place to be able to make a timely decision. A decision between 6am and 7am is preferred or, in extended adverse weather conditions, the day before where possible.
- Decisions to close or restrict opening hours to be communicated by e-mail to: schoolclosures@westberks.gov.uk Details are required of the reason for the closure and any amended opening hours. This is the most effective means of notification at times of severe weather and helps keep other phone lines clear. For other emergencies and temporary closures please use the guidance on Critical Incidents.
- Ensure any notification to WBC includes details of any public examinations, or critical school events for the students, due to take place.
- Be aware that the information provided to WBC will be used to update the WBC website and notify council officers and contractors, including transport services. You may wish to inform your parents of this.
- Ensure you have a plan for communicating with parents and staff. Recent experience shows text and e-mail systems are effective.
- Contact local radio stations, as per the details supplied by WBC annually in the Autumn term. Ensure your parents are aware of which radio stations you will be using.
- Ensure you are able to update your school website.
- Contact WBC on 01635 519727 should you have any queries or require assistance. For emergencies please notify the Education Critical Incident Team on 01635 519027 during office hours or 01635 42161 Out of Hours. This Out of Hours number should only be used for Emergencies, not to notify school closures during periods of severe weather.
- Once a decision to re-open the school is made please ensure you e-mail schoolclosures@westberks.gov.uk This will trigger the updating of your school status on the West Berkshire website.

Appendix 4 - Checklists

Winter Property Maintenance Preparation

Action	Completed By	Date
Boiler Serviced.		
Loft and pipe insulation checked.		
Heating set up for holiday correct and thermostat set to a minimum of 10 degrees.		
Fuel levels checked, monitoring and ordering system in place.		
Radiators bled.		
Plumbing shut off valves located and working.		
System in place for monitoring heating during periods of extreme cold.		
Outside taps drained down and exposed pipes insulated as required.		
Gutters, rainwater pipes and drains checked and cleared as necessary.		
Outside lights working.		
Vegetation removed from masonry.		
Plentiful stock of salt/grit.		

Winter Weather Planning and Organisation Checklist

Action	Completed By	Date
Risk assessment completed for Snow/Ice clearance.		
Site plan identifies routes/areas to be cleared and those to have restricted access. Who will salt/grit and when?		
System in place to monitor temperature and weather forecast.		
Who will salt/grit and when?		

Action	Completed By	Date
List of volunteers available for snow clearance and 4x4 transportation.		
System in place to monitor safety of canopies.		
Can staff work from home and provide work for pupils? Any additional training required has been provided.		
Pupils know to access websites for work during periods of closure.		

Winter Weather Communication Checklist

Action	Completed By	Date
System in place to make early decision to close/open school or restrict hours.		
System in place to communicate with parents / carers, staff and Governors.		
Who will notify schoolclosures@westberks.gov.uk ?		
System in place to notify radio stations. Parents/carers and staff know which radio station/s you will be using. Code word for notification is known.		
System in place for updating your own website. Including any training required.		
Inform WBC of special circumstances including public examinations.		
Once decision taken to reopen school notify schoolclosures@westberks.gov.uk , update own website and notify parents/carers.		
Know who to call for additional assistance.		