

What's the truth about the great gritting fiasco?

Winter comes and yet again Britain is woefully prepared to deal with it. On television, radio and in the newspapers the great debate about why we are unable to cope has continued for days. But, despite the miles of newsprint and hours of discussion devoted to the subject the truth seems ever harder to identify. There are a few questions I am sure the man in the street would like to have answered but no one ever seems to ask them.

1. Why were stocks of salt so low at the start of winter?

The official line is that the government advised the highways agency to carry two weeks stock, while local authorities were advised to carry one week's stock. No one has explained the rationale for this difference. Who in central government decided that one week's stock was a safe level for all authorities no matter where they were located?

While one week's stock might be adequate cover for London and the Home counties, in a mild winter, it is hardly a sensible level for authorities based in the Pennines or other upland regions, where frost and snow are regular occurrences most winters. So why was this figure proposed and why did local authorities accept it?

Perhaps they were happy to make savings by cutting back on stock that might not be needed? Perhaps the recent mild winters lulled them into a false sense of security? Kirklees Council, for one, seems to have decided to cut its highways budget, including the budget for grit, presumably following the central government guidelines, and thus started the winter with low stocks, that were quickly used up when the snow came.

2. Why is there no emergency plan for these bad winters?

Given the importance of keeping the country running in bad weather, especially at a time of economic difficulties, surely there should be an emergency plan that can be put into operation when serious snow arrives. There are thousands of trucks and tractors in this country and millions of unemployed people; surely it's possible to get grit spread on the roads it's not exactly rocket science? Why is there no reserve of grit stored by the government for just such an eventuality? After all this situation is bound to arise again at some future date.

3. Who decided to only grit the main routes?

What is the use of keeping the main routes open if the vast majority of people can't get onto them? Wednesday January 13 illustrates the problem perfectly. All the main routes in Kirklees were open, having been gritted the night before. But, all the minor roads were covered in black ice and impassable. The result was very few people were able to get to work and most of the schools were closed.

When will the government and local councils understand that the vast majority of

people don't live on the main roads, they live on the minor ones and especially on the estates that never seem to be gritted at all? The misguided policy of not gritting these minor roads results in a massive loss of productivity, which the UK can ill afford. The cost to the economy surely outweighs the cost of gritting all the roads.

To add insult to injury it's the very people who pay the taxes who aren't getting their streets cleared, or their bins emptied, lose income and have to make arrangements every time the schools are closed.

4. Why is there such a focus on salt?

Gritting has been cut back because of a lack of salt, yet there are many alternatives, which, while not as good, could at least help to keep people moving. In the old days we used ashes and cinders, there is an abundance of sand. In other countries, such as Austria, where snow is common, they simply spread chippings on roads and pavements, which seems to provide adequate grip. Why have we failed to employ alternatives to keep things moving?

5. When will we ever learn?

The fact that we get bad winters only infrequently is not a good enough excuse for allowing this chaos to continue. The cost to the economy is far too great for that. Instead of claiming that nothing more can be done and encouraging people to stay at home we need a bit more determination to tackle the problem and keep things moving. And that starts with some honesty about why we got into this mess, because those who don't learn from the past are destined to repeat it.