

Action with Communities in Rural England

Supporting vibrant and sustainable rural communities through the RCC network and its partners



Snow and ice clearing in external areas

Concern is often expressed by village hall committees regarding the implications of clearing snow and ice from pathways, entrances and car parks. The concern is that by trying to make things easier and clearing snow and ice, they could make themselves open to claims if someone subsequently has an accident. On the other hand, accidents are far more common if conditions are icy and village hall committees will want to make it easier for the users of the hall.

The information given below should help towards making decisions and formulating a policy.

Advice from the Health and Safety Executive:

1. To reduce the risk of slips on ice, frost or snow, you need to assess the risk and put a system in place to manage it.
2. Identify the outdoor areas used by pedestrians most likely to be affected by ice, for example: building entrances, car parks, pedestrian walkways, shortcuts, sloped areas and areas constantly in the shade or wet.
3. Monitor the temperature, as prevention is key. Take action whenever freezing temperatures are forecast. Keep up to date by visiting a weather service website such as BBC Weather, Met Office, or Highways Agency. There are also 'smart signs' on the market, available to buy at low cost that will display warning messages at 5 degrees or below.
4. Put a procedure in place to prevent an icy surface forming and/or keep pedestrians off the slippery surface:
 - Use grit or similar on areas prone to be slippery in frosty or icy conditions.
 - Consider covering walkways, e.g. by an arbour high enough for people to walk through, or use an insulating material on smaller areas overnight.
 - Divert pedestrians to less slippery walkways and barrier off existing ones.
5. If warning cones are used, remember to remove them once the hazard has passed or they will eventually be ignored.

Clearing snow and ice – Is it practical?

Whether or not to clear snow, and salt or grit can be contentious and village hall management committees will need to reach their own conclusions.

By not touching snow and ice village hall management committees cannot be sued if someone slips over. Trying to make conditions easier, could in fact leave them open to claims, if someone subsequently has an accident. Management committees will be aware of the work involved in keeping a surface as large as a car park ice free and may feel vulnerable that they are leaving themselves open to an insurance claim if someone subsequently has an accident.

On the other hand the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) advocates accident prevention ahead of fears about being sued because someone has slipped on a surface that has been cleared.

The reality is that there will be an expectation that in most cases snow and ice is cleared from pathways so that they remain safe and clear thereafter. In most situations this will not be unreasonable and with some thought and planning it should be achievable. Car parks are more difficult, partly because of that expectation that once it has been cleared it will be kept so, but also because of the issue of whether it is actually practical to clear the entire area in the first place. If it isn't or if it would be problematical to maintain it once it has been cleared, then it is usually better not to attempt to clear it at all, as a partial clearance is more likely to lead to problems than leaving it untreated.

Risk Assessment

Conducting a risk assessment by identifying the risks and considering what can be done to reduce them will help with reaching conclusions. There may be nothing that can be done in which case it may be appropriate to close the hall until conditions improve. **Village Hall Information Sheet 15, Health & Safety legislation and village halls**, contains information on risk assessment.

A record should be kept of the findings in every risk assessment that is undertaken. These can then be taken into account when the problem arises again. Each time, the problems may be different and will have to be dealt with in a different way. For example, a lot of snow may have fallen on the roof that might be prone to an avalanche, particularly as a thaw sets in – it may be prudent to cone off the particular area where it might fall. When checking entrances and exits consider the risks caused by blocked fire exits, particularly those that are not used regularly.

Gritting

The most common method used to de-ice floors is gritting as it is relatively cheap, quick to apply and easy to spread. Rock salt (plain and treated) is the most commonly used 'grit'. It is the substance used on public roads by the highways authority.

Salt can stop ice forming and cause existing ice or snow to melt. It is most effective when it is ground down, but this will take far longer on pedestrian areas than on roads.

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 times are early in evening before the frost settles and/or early in the morning before people arrive. Salt doesn't work instantly; it needs sufficient time to dissolve into the moisture on the floor.

If gritting is done when it is raining heavily the salt will be washed away, causing a problem if the rain then turns to snow. Compacted snow, which turns to ice, is difficult to treat effectively with grit. Be aware that 'dawn frost' can occur on dry surfaces, when early morning dew forms and freezes on impact with the cold surface. It can be difficult to predict when or where this condition will occur.

Bags of rock salt can be purchased from most large Builders' Merchants.

When clearing snow and ice there some key points to remember:

- It is easier to move fresh, loose snow rather than hard snow that has packed together from people walking on it. If possible you should start removing the snow and ice in the morning. If you remove the top layer of snow in the morning, any sunshine during the day will help melt any ice beneath. You can then cover the path with salt before nightfall to stop it refreezing overnight.
- Pouring boiling water over the surface is not an option; this will just make conditions worse.
- You may need to tackle an area more than once as changing conditions occur.
- When shovelling snow, care should be taken, so that drains are not blocked. Make a path down the middle area to be cleared first, so you have a clear area to work on. Then shovel from the centre of the path, to the sides.
- For a small area you can use ordinary table salt or dishwasher salt. Ash and sand can be used as an alternative as it will provide a grip underfoot.
- Pay extra attention when clearing steps and steep pathways.
- Pay particular attention to fire exits that aren't used regularly.
- People walking on snow and ice have a responsibility to be careful themselves.

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