

Dear XXXXXX

Re: Reporting of Multi Agency Response to adverse weather conditions on Haldon Hill.

Over the years, and especially the past two winters, the Highways Agency, Devon and Cornwall Police and Devon County Council have enjoyed a good working relationship with BBC Radio Devon in updating people on the impact of severe weather on our local road network. This has been an effective partnership in keeping the public informed, which is why it is with some regret that we are writing to raise concerns about the reporting of the effectiveness of the Haldon Hill Severe Weather response plan on Tuesday, December 21.

Following severe weather conditions on Haldon Hill in previous years, the Highways Agency, Devon and Cornwall Police and Devon County Council have put in place a multi agency response plan to ensure a co-ordinated approach should difficulties be experienced on the Hill.

BBC Devon has run numerous reports on recent severe weather conditions on Haldon Hill and on the effectiveness of the response by all agencies involved since the weather conditions deteriorated at the end of last week. In general we feel the BBC news coverage has been fair and balanced giving a good overview of the issues.

By contrast we have to express disappointment with reports on the BBC Devon website and on the BBC Radio Devon breakfast show on Tuesday morning which were unbalanced and inaccurate in parts.

When the multi-agency response plan to severe weather on Haldon Hill was launched to the media in September it was made clear that despite the plans being put in place, there was no guarantee that in the event of very heavy snowfall disruption could be avoided completely. It was however made clear that the plans would go a long way towards minimising disruption and improving communication between all parties involved. Part of the plan also addressed how the agencies would deal with any stranded vehicles in the event of extreme conditions.

We are concerned that reporting on the BBC Devon website and on Tuesday's breakfast show stated the plan had not worked because vehicles had become stranded.

All agencies agree that the plans have worked well since Friday and traffic on Haldon Hill has been managed in such a way to allow snow clearance vehicles better access to work quickly and effectively when severe weather has been experienced. It needs to be made clear that the severe weather experienced towards the end of last week was extraordinary and whilst approximately 20 vehicles did become stranded, for the most part delays were kept to a minimum.

The radio report also stated that communication had been poor between the agencies, which all partners strongly dispute. We have all made staff, officers and councillors available for virtually every interview request, and on Monday Devon County Council's Control Centre reported to you that there was a "major incident on the A38" as it received that information. It was grossly unfair the following day to suggest that the lack of initial detail was down to poor communication as the incident had only just become live and therefore not all of the information was relayed instantaneously. The control centre staff seem to have been criticised for trying to be helpful, but the alternative would have been to cut short the interview short to allow staff to respond to events as they unfolded and then pass the detail on when they had had chance to gather the information.

We would welcome a response from you and look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

XXXXXX XXXXXX, Highways Agency Press Officer

Tony Parker, Devon County Council Acting Head of Communication

Dan Mountain, Devon and Cornwall Police Media Services Manager

XXXXXX XXXXXX
XXXXXX
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6th January 2011

Dear XXXXXX

Thank you for your letter dated 24th December I am sorry you feel that our reporting of the emergency response to the weather conditions on Haldon Hill on December 20th was inaccurate and unbalanced.

I believe your concerns as outlined in your letter were as follows:

- We reported that the plan had not worked because vehicles were stranded.
- We didn't make it clear that the weather experienced was extraordinary and that delays were kept to a minimum.
- We claimed communication between agencies was poor.
- We unfairly suggested the lack of initial detail was down to poor communication and we criticised control room staff for trying to be helpful.

In response I would stress that in all our reports we strive for balance and accuracy. To investigate your allegations fully I have listened back to programming from both Monday 20th and Tuesday 21st when we followed up on the story. I have also spoken to all members of staff who were involved in producing the output for both days and have also examined our email and text log to get a view of the audience reaction to our coverage.

During the programme on the Monday 20th our main focus was to provide information for motorists affected by the snow. We were receiving calls from stranded motorists but had no way of finding out how many people were stranded as the authorities we asked; county council and police, didn't have any idea of numbers. Our reporter on the scene was also seeing stranded motorists and in the light of previous incidents we treated this as a major news story.

During office hours on the 20th we tried unsuccessfully to get clarification about the number of stranded motorists from the Highways Agency but were re-directed to the police who then redirected us back to the Highways Agency. This enhanced our view that communication between agencies was poor as no one seemed able to tell us what had happened or be able to agree on who should speak to us about the situation. A technical fault with our phones added to the situation and we were unable to speak to the Highways Agency press officer before the interview.

During our breakfast programme on 21st December we wanted to react to the situation the previous day and ask questions about the effectiveness of the emergency response plan. It was not our intention to pre judge the success or failure of the plan but simply to ask questions on behalf of listeners who were telling us it hadn't worked as they had been stranded. Our questioning was aimed at discovering if the plan would be adapted and if methods used on other roads in the county such as the A380 may be deployed in future to prevent lorries from continuing to attempt Haldon Hill despite the action plan being in place.

Before all live interviews the participants were briefed either by the studio producer or our reporter in the control room about the questions we would be putting to them including comments from members of the public. This was above and beyond our normal briefing process as we were aware of the challenging nature of some of the comments. In addition XXXXXX XXXXXX was briefed about the problems broadcasting via matrix where there is a delay between the conversation starting and what is broadcast on air, making conversations more cumbersome and leading to people talking over each other or otherwise leaving long gaps which can reflect badly on the interviewee.

Having taken into account all of the above I regret the incident where XXXXXX XXXXXX comments were taken out of context and used as an example of a lack of communication. We have had an excellent service from the Devon County Council Control Room and I have spoken to the staff involved in the decision to use that incident as part of the following days programming and I would like to apologise on their behalf for any distress this has caused to the individual. Our reporter in the County Council Control Room was aware of the problem this had caused on the morning of the 21st which is why XXXXXX XXXXXX was interviewed later in the programme.

BBC Devon featured the following sentence on it's message board:

On Monday 20 December 2010 commuters have been trapped on the A38 at Haldon Hill - buses and trains were affected.

I can not find any inaccuracies in the web coverage if you have other examples please let me know.

On both 20th December and 3rd January the emergency response plan was put into place at 1am but yet again the information wasn't disseminated to the press until we had calls from drivers reporting stranding. I accept that from your debrief of the situation you feel communication is adequate amongst your agencies but I would like to stress the importance of passing this message to the

media and providing someone for interview on a regular basis during the incident so that we can ensure the information we are broadcasting to the public is the most accurate and balanced as possible.

I would appreciate the chance to meet with you and discuss a way forward in our relationship and hope that we can arrange a mutually convenient date as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

XXXXXX XXXXXX
News Editor
BBC Radio Devon

cc Tony Parker, Devon County Council Acting Head of Communication
Dan Mountain, Devon and Cornwall Police Media Services Manager