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Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> January 2010

To all Local Authority Leaders and Chief  
Executives

Dear Colleague

## **SEVERE WEATHER**

The current severe weather is posing challenges for public services, businesses and communities across the nation. It is clear that Local Authorities have a crucial role to play in rising to this challenge – both in maintaining essential services at this difficult time, and in providing local civic leadership. It is absolutely essential that central and local government work together in partnership to support the public at this challenging time.

As you know, the most immediate and pressing challenges are on the transport system. I'd like to thank you for the tremendous efforts that you've made, and are continuing to make, to ensure that roads and pavements are passable and safe. Your efforts to work with us to make sure that salt and grit are being used appropriately are ensuring that essential supplies are going to where they are most needed by the public.

However, if the severe weather continues, there could be a much greater and wider impact. We must do all we can to ensure that the most vulnerable in our communities are not left isolated in the ice and snow. Central Government has a role to play, for example, providing Cold Weather payments to help those vulnerable people who receive Pension Credit or an Income Related Benefit (subject to certain qualifying conditions) so that people aren't afraid to keep their heating on, but it is Local Authorities that provide many of the essential services people need to get by.

There have been tremendous examples of communities really pulling together, digging out stranded cars, getting essential food supplies to neighbourhoods, and rescuing ambulances stuck in the snow. One person even used their 4x4 vehicle to get a medic to a woman giving birth.

This community spirit is a tremendously important part of Britain, and it is something which councils can both inspire and draw on. Local Authority workers are often some of the best known and respected people in their communities. Your staff can help to promote this spirit even if they can't do it from the office; they can provide a reassuring presence for vulnerable or elderly neighbours, calling on those in their street or neighbourhood, perhaps putting them in contact with other public services if necessary, or contacting local voluntary organisations to offer their time as a volunteer.

There have been some concerns raised about legal liability for injuries, if people clear paths and pavements. Whilst it is for the courts to decide issues of liability, we think that as long as their clearing the snow does not make it worse and create a more dangerous situation, then it is highly unlikely that any claim would be successful. I hope that people will use their common sense in this matter and not be put off helping others.

The Government will also be promoting the message of community spirit and support within Whitehall by urging all Government Department to encourage staff to reach out to their local communities.

By its very nature, most volunteering is spontaneous, generous and does not need to be organised by central and local government. But it is important to do everything we can to ensure that isolated or vulnerable people are contacted to see if they need assistance - particularly those who may not previously have been in receipt of support.

People can contact their local Volunteer Centre, whose function is to match both individuals and groups interested in volunteering with appropriate opportunities in the local community. This could be anything from helping the British Red Cross to get people discharged from hospital home safely to working with Age Concern/Help the Aged supporting older people. The location and contact details for the nearest office can be found on [www.volunteering.org.uk/finder](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/finder).

I hope you will support me in promoting the importance of this kind of community support - perhaps by working with local volunteering groups and local media to highlight some of the excellent efforts that have already been made and to encourage others to join in.

People will look to us for support during this difficult time. We must work together to ensure that that support is as effective as it needs to be.

Thank you for all your hard work and dedication.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Denham". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**JOHN DENHAM**