



Northumberland County Council

LOCAL AREA COUNCIL

NOVEMBER 2017

Winter Services Preparedness and Resilience Report

Report of Paul Jones, Director of Local Services and Housing Delivery

Cabinet Member: Cllr Glen Sanderson, Environment & Local Services

Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to provide an overall update of the pre-season preparations ahead of the forthcoming winter services period.

Recommendations

The Local Area Committee is recommended to accept this report as an information item.

Key Issues

The Council undertakes its winter services activities to ensure, 'as far as is reasonably practicable' that the highway is maintained in a safe condition in accordance with our legal obligations under Highways Act 1980.

Work has been undertaken to optimise the precautionary salting routes for this winter to make the service more efficient, cost effective and resilient.

We are still treating the same lengths of road within the same agreed timeframes and meeting all of the Council's agreed policies and standards for winter services.

Our arrangements for dealing with snowfall and prolonged periods of extreme cold weather remain unchanged and no areas will be 'worse off' as a result of the routes being optimised.

Background

Staffing and Control of Operations

Steve Bucknall, Highways Delivery Manager, has countywide responsibility for winter services, with Michael Carle, South East Area Highways Manager, acting as countywide operational lead.

During the 2016/17 winter we worked with a specialist partner Vaisala to have them thermally map and update all of the current primary gritting routes within Northumberland. This was carried out over the whole of last winter using differing extremes of conditions.

Over the summer months the highly detailed information has been extracted and a completely new thermal map of the primary gritting routes has been produced. This will help aid staff in determining which routes will need to be treated and when, taking into account detailed weather forecast and actual weather station data to further strengthening the accuracy of the decision making process.

We have also worked with Vaisala to undertake a route optimisation process to enable the primary gritting network to be treated as efficiently as possible, whilst ensuring this is undertaken in accordance with existing policy. This has allowed us to reduce the total number of gritting routes from 29 to 28 whilst still treating the same lengths of carriageway.

We require 106 staff to deliver winter services including managers, supervisors, drivers and operatives. Staffing rotas are in place to ensure sufficient staffing resource is available on a three shift rota. The majority of staff involved in winter services come from Technical Services.

All staff involved in the service are being offered a flu jab in recognition of the essential role they play in keeping our roads safe during the winter period. It is hoped that this will reduce the potential for sickness absence and improve the resilience of service delivery.

We have 3 Winter Services Delivery Managers (i.e. Michael Carle, Kris Westerby and Duncan Roberts) who operate on a three weekly rota (24/7) and whose job it is to consider the variable forecasting information and make a decision on the most appropriate course of action based on the forecast information provided by our forecaster (Meteogroup) and bureau provider (Vaisala). The rota for these managers will be circulated to Members shortly. As you can imagine, this role can be very stressful and hectic at times; Members are, therefore, asked to only contact them directly in an emergency situation. All non-emergency situations should be reported through the Council's CRM and the out of hours arrangements via Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service in the usual way.

Salt Management

We operate from 11 manned or unmanned depots and salt is currently being delivered to these sites. We already have a significant stockpile of salt from last winter and a further

16,000 tonnes of salt has been ordered to replenish this and deliveries will continue into early November with a full stock of circa 37,000 tonnes expected to be in place thereafter. Mick Carle has the responsibility for ordering and management of salt and will oversee the ordering, delivery and ongoing monitoring of stock levels throughout the winter period for each depot assisted by the Area based Quantity Surveyors.

Vehicles and Gritting Routes

The optimisation process has enabled us to carry out the routes more efficiently resulting in a reduction in one gritter whilst still treating the same length of network in line with NCC Policy. This will also aid in the resilience of the service as we can operate with a larger pool of 'reserve' winter maintenance staff who are not on the core rota's but can be drawn upon to cover sickness / holidays etc.'

Our fleet of 28 multi-purpose gritting vehicles with plough attachments have been fully serviced and prepared by Fleet ahead of the winter and all vehicles will be on station by mid October. In addition to the front line gritters, we also have 2 purpose built snowblowers for use in the high areas of the County to be deployed when conditions dictate, as well as a fleet of 5 gully tankers that are deployed throughout the County, which are available to assist should the need arise with flooding caused by rapid snow melt.

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service make available 5 smaller vehicles which are capable of spreading salt and ploughing snow and these are used as conditions demand primarily to treat side streets that a full size gritter would struggle to access.

This coming season, we have 28 primary gritting routes. These routes are gritted regularly throughout the winter period as a precaution against icing. In addition, we have 28no secondary gritting routes which are treated in more severe conditions and after the primary routes have been satisfactorily treated.

Our colleagues from Fleet Services provide all the necessary expertise to keep the vehicles operating at full capacity throughout the winter period.

Grit Bins/Heaps

All grit bins and salt heaps throughout the County are currently being inspected and replenished as necessary. We maintain an inventory of over 1,600 grit bins and over 200 heaps. Each bin has a notice and serial number attached giving contact details so members of the public can report a bin or heap requiring a refill during the winter period via

the website or the call centre. Whilst the majority of grit bins are bright yellow, you may notice some green grit bins. These bins have been provided by the town or parish council who remain responsible for their upkeep and replenishment although, in practice they generally ask NCC to carry out this service on their behalf on a rechargeable basis.

Weather Monitoring

The usual arrangements are in place for the winter services manager to use the web based Vaisala system and they also have direct access to regional forecasting through the MeteoGroup system. Vaisala is a company who collect weather information from various sources including the Meteogroup and their own monitoring equipment on site. They then run a large amount of weather models with this information to accurately predict weather conditions over the next 24 - 36 hrs allowing Council's to make informed decisions on road surface treatment.

Customer Services

Winter services information contained on the NCC website has now been reviewed and updated accordingly to accurately reflect our operations for 17/18. In addition, there will be ongoing meetings between Technical Services and Customer Services to ensure call handling procedures and internal communications are in place so that a joined up service is delivered to the customer with one point of contact.

As with previous years, we will again be producing our customer information leaflet titled 'Highway Services in Winter', that provides useful information to the public on all aspects of the service. The leaflet, which includes when gritting will take place and on which roads and footpaths, as well as giving general advice on how to drive in winter conditions for instance, will be available by the end of November following a thorough review of the information it contains. The leaflet can be picked up from various Council buildings including our customer contact centres, libraries, depot reception areas and is also available online. The leaflet will also be distributed to all County Councillors and Town and Parish Councils.

Updated and accurate information is now included on the website and includes details of our policies and maps of our primary gritting routes, along with those showing our strategic footpath network which will be treated in severe conditions such as snow or heavy icing.

Alerts are sent out daily during the winter period advising on weather conditions and our proposed response and this information is also placed on the website.

Additional Support

Farmers and sub-contractors assist our operations by removing snow from the more remote roads in rural Northumberland. A pre start letter will be issued to each farmer shortly requesting copies of insurance documentation and a schedule of equipment to be made available. Visits will also take place from NCC staff to check and verify the equipment and its condition. This is ahead of the winter period and the exercise will be concluded by the end of October 2016. In addition, we have 5 voluntary groups which we refer to as “snow squads” who help with snow clearing from footpaths in villages such as Wooler, Belford and Bamburgh; Hexham Town Council also assist with snow clearance. In addition, we rely on our colleagues from Neighbourhood Services to assist with snow clearing and gritting of key car parks and footpaths

Cross Boundary Working

We have arrangements in place with Newcastle City, Durham County Council, Cumbria County Council & Scottish Borders Council to assist each other in periods of heavy snow, to ensure that the strategic routes such as the A69, A686 and A68 are kept clear as far as possible. It should also be noted that the County Council provides a management service to Newcastle City Council, whereby we determine when precautionary salting is required across their administrative area as well as in Northumberland. This service is provided under a contractual arrangement and generates additional income for the County Council, which helps protect front line services from budget cuts.

Severe Weather Procedures

During heavy snow conditions, it is normal for a “snow room” to be set up to coordinate our response to ensure an efficient service delivery on the ground.

Winter Storms/ Flooding

The recent trend of mixed mild winter weather with periods of colder weather have continued of the last few years and the current trend seems to show that this may continue in years to come.

The succession of Atlantic storms experienced by the region in the early part of winter 2016 has shown the necessity for a requirement for extra resilience. This would make staff available to respond to flooding issues countywide as well as other associated storm damage.

Staff on the Winter Service rota will respond to precautionary gritting and winter events as normal. Where applicable and when the weather dictates they will also respond to flooding issues supporting the existing Out of Hours rota in anything above and beyond the normal response levels. The authority receive severe weather warnings many days in advance from several sources including the Met Office Hazard Manager. This gives us the ability to track storms and plan resources around the potential impact.

Implications

Policy	Supports Corporate Plan
Finance and value for money	Winter Services are delivered as part of the overall highway maintenance revenue budget. Whilst adequate provision is made to cope with 'normal' winter conditions any periods of prolonged snowfall / severe cold weather are not budgeted for and would create a financial pressure on the highway maintenance budget.
Legal	The Highways Act 1980 places a legal obligation on highway authorities to maintain the highway in a safe condition. However, for winter services, this obligation is qualified with the term "as far as is reasonably practicable".
Procurement	In line with NCC policy and current frameworks.
Human Resources	A total of 106 staff deliver winter services and this is supplemented from other sections during severe conditions.
Property	Work is required to improve the storage facilities for salt used in winter maintenance. The provision of capital funding to develop additional covered salt barns will be considered as part of the Council's capital programme in its Medium Term Financial Plan.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	N/A

Risk Assessment	A full set of operational risk assessments are in place for this activity.
Crime & Disorder	N/A
Customer Consideration	Customers are kept up to date during the winter period via the website and social media.
Carbon reduction	The optimisation of routes will reduce unnecessary mileage saving on fuel and reduce carbon production.
Wards	All wards

Report sign off.

Finance Officer	initials
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Human Resources	N/A
Procurement	N/A
I.T.	N/A
Executive Director	PJ
Portfolio Holder(s)	GS

Author and Contact Details

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