



Northumberland County Council

Tynedale Local Area Committee

Tuesday, 12 November 2024

Winter Services Preparedness and Resilience Report 2024/25

Report of Councillor(s) John Riddle, Cabinet Member for Improving Roads and Highways

Responsible Officer(s): Simon Neilson, Executive Director - Place and Regeneration

1. **Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan**

Driving economic growth. Ensure roads and footways are maintained and kept safe throughout the winter period. Allow traffic to move freely across the road network.

2. **Purpose of report**

This report provides an update on the pre-season preparations for the forthcoming 2024/25 winter services season, outlining key issues, staffing, operations, vehicle readiness, and management strategy

3. **Background**

The County Council provides its winter services activities in compliance with legal obligations under the Highways Act 1980. There have been no changes to service standards or winter maintenance policies since last winter. The Council maintains the same lengths of road within established timeframes, adhering to agreed policies and standards for winter services.

The Highways and Transport division oversees winter services. Kris Westerby, the Highways Delivery Manager, holds countywide responsibility, while Andy Olive, the Area Highways Delivery Manager, serves as the countywide operational lead.

3.1 **Staffing:**

The winter service operation requires 116 staff, including managers, supervisors, drivers, and operatives. Staffing rota's are in place to ensure adequate coverage for a three-shift system. Most staff are sourced from the Highways team, with a small number of drivers from Neighbourhood Services.

3.2 **Decision-Making:**

Three Winter Services Delivery Managers—Russell Mason, Tony Bell, and Andy Olive—operate on a 24/7 rota, utilising forecasts from Meteogroup and Vaisala to determine necessary highway treatment actions.

3.3 Emergency Protocols:

Members are encouraged to contact the Council's contact centre for emergency situations on 0345 600 6400. These reports will be directed to the operational managers on duty. Please respect that we manage a rota for staff and they may not be on duty or resting. Therefore, we request direct contact is kept to an absolute minimum during winter events.

3.4 Weather Monitoring

Weather conditions are monitored through the Vaisala weather system, which integrates data from our own local network of weather stations located at key parts of the network across the county and regional forecasts. This enables informed operational decisions, with detailed 24 and 36 hour weather forecast updates received three times daily.

3.5 Technology Enhancements

Mobile Communication: All staff involved in winter services are equipped with mobile devices, ensuring effective communication and operational efficiency.

Automated Systems: In-vehicle hardware provides enhanced vehicle tracking, route management, and automated gritting patterns, significantly improving operational resilience, consistency and response capabilities. Detailed digital records of treatment activity are generated by the in-cab systems which are retained within our asset management systems to enable us to evidence winter services activity and treatments and where necessary respond to any third-party insurance claims.

3.6 Vehicles and Gritting Routes

Fleet Composition: The fleet consists of 28 multi-purpose gritting vehicles equipped with plough attachments, two purpose-built snowblowers for high-altitude areas, and four gully tankers. All vehicles are scheduled to be ready 'on-station' by late October.

Gritting Routes: There are 28 primary gritting routes treated regularly and 26 secondary routes activated under more severe conditions when there is widespread ice and snow forecast.

3.7 Treatment of footways and cycleways: The treatment of footways is based on the footway hierarchy. Normally only the higher usage footway categories 1 and 2 in urban centres and environs will be treated for snow and ice. (See tables below)

Table 1. - Footway Treatment

| Footway Category and Description | Overnight Frost Conditions Forecast not likely to extend beyond 10.00 am | Daytime Frost Conditions Forecast likely to extend beyond 10.00 am | Extended Frost Conditions Forecast likely to continue throughout daylight hours | Snow Clearance |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| 1a and 1. Prestige Walking Zones - Very busy areas of towns with high public space and streetscene contribution. Primary Walking Routes - Busy urban shopping and business areas and main pedestrian routes | No treatment except reactive salting at specified locations of exceptional difficulty | Reactive salting as required | Reactive salting as required | Clearance to be undertaken, as resources become available, priority given to locations of highest usage |
| 2. Secondary Walking Routes - Medium usage routes through local areas feeding into primary routes, local shopping centres etc. | No treatment | No treatment | Reactive salting as required following completion of category 1 footways in prolonged conditions | Clearance undertaken as resources become available in prolonged conditions with priority given to higher usage locations |
| 3. Link Footways - Linking local access footways through urban areas and busy rural footways | No treatment | No treatment | Normally no treatment other than locations of greatest difficulty in prolonged conditions | Normally no clearance other than at locations of greatest difficulty as resources become available in prolonged conditions |
| 4. Local Access Footways - Footways associated with low usage, short estate roads to the main routes and cul-de-sacs | No treatment | No treatment | Normally no treatment other than locations of greatest difficulty in prolonged conditions | Normally no clearance other than at locations of greatest difficulty as resources become available in prolonged conditions |
| 5. Minor Footways - Little used rural footways serving very limited numbers of properties | No treatment | No treatment | | |

The treatment of cycleways is based upon the cycleway hierarchy.

Treatment will be in accordance with the table below

Table 2. - Cycleway Treatment

| Cycleway Category and Description | Overnight Frost Conditions Forecast not likely to extend beyond 10.00am | Daytime Frost Conditions likely to extend beyond 10.00am | Extended Frost Conditions to continue throughout daylight hours | Snow Clearance |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| A. Cycle lane forming part of the carriageway, commonly 1.5 metre strip adjacent to the nearside kerb | Treated in accordance with priority given to carriageway it forms part of | | | |
| B. Shared cycle / pedestrian paths, either segregated by a white line or other physical segregation or unsegregated | No treatment | Reactive salting as footway | Reactive salting as footway | Clearance as footway |
| C. Cycle track, a route for cyclists not contiguous with the public footway or carriageway | No treatment | Reactive salting of underpass ramps | Reactive salting of underpass ramps and salting of highest usage routes in prolonged conditions | Clearances undertaken as resources become available in prolonged conditions with priority given to highest usage routes |
| D. Cycle trails, leisure routes through open spaces (These are not necessarily the responsibility of the highway authority) | No treatment | No treatment | No treatment | No treatment |

3.8 Salt Management and Supply

Rock salt across the North East is currently supplied by ICL. This is through a North East Procurement Organisation (NEPO) agreement across member authorities. Northumberland County Council orders all 6mm dry salt through ICL, coordinates deliveries across multiple depots and organises a restock if required throughout the winter season. Most of the salt provided is mined at Boulby in Saltburn-by the sea.

Current Stock Levels: The Council will commence the winter season with a starting stock of 44,000 tonnes of salt, including a strategic reserve of 6,000 tonnes located at the Powburn depot, enhancing overall resilience in the case of a more harsh than average winter period.

Depot Management: Salt operations are managed from ten depots across Northumberland. Andy Olive oversees the ordering and management of salt, assisted by area-based Quantity Surveyors, while route optimisation software monitors exact salt usage throughout the fleet when treating the road network.

3.9 Grit Bins and Community Engagement

Grit Bin Maintenance: All grit bins and salt heaps, totalling over 1,700 grit bins and 2,100 heaps, are inspected and replenished at the start of the winter season as necessary. Each bin has a notice with contact details, allowing the public to report

refills via the Fix My Street website or the Council's call centre. Refilling of Town and Parish Council funded grit bins also takes place as part of this activity.

3.10 Public Communication:

The Council is updating its customer information document "Highway Services in Winter," detailing gritting schedules, road conditions, and driving safety tips. This refreshed document will be circulated to all County Councillors and Town and Parish Councils. Information on winter services can be found on the following webpage <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Roads-and-streets/Winter-services.aspx>

3.11 Additional Support and Community Initiatives

Snow Clearing Contracts: Local farmers and subcontractors are contracted to assist in undertaking snow and ice clearance and gritting upon request to help respond to snow and widespread ice weather events especially to clear more remote parts of the network. An audit of equipment is being conducted to ensure readiness.

Voluntary Snow Squads: Community volunteers, referred to as "snow squads," will help clear footpaths in villages like Wooler, Belford, and Bamburgh. Training and necessary equipment, including salt, will be provided to enable effective operations.

3.12 Cross Boundary Collaborations

Cross-boundary agreements are in place with Newcastle City Council, Durham County Council, North Tyneside, Cumbria County Council, Scottish Borders Council, Colas, and Highways England. These partnerships aim to keep strategic routes like the A69, A686, and A68 clear during heavy snowfalls. Additionally, the County Council manages winter services decision making and deployment for Newcastle City Council under a contractual arrangement, generating additional income to protect our frontline services.

3.13 Severe Weather Procedures

During significant snow events, a "snow room" will be established to coordinate responses, ensuring efficient service delivery. If the situation escalates, an incident support room will be opened to work alongside the civil contingencies team and emergency services. Advanced severe weather warnings from the Met Office Hazard Manager provide crucial information for tracking storms and planning resource allocation.

3.14 Conclusion

The County Council is well-prepared for the upcoming winter services season, emphasising the high priority and commitment given to maintaining safe highway conditions through effective planning, technology integration, and community engagement. Continuous monitoring and adaptive strategies will enhance resilience against winter challenges, ensuring the safety and well-being of all residents.

More information can be found at <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Roads-and-streets/Winter-services.aspx>.

4. Implications

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|---|--|
| Policy | Highways and Transport Winter Services Policy |
| Finance and value for money | The Council allocates £4.495m in its revenue budget to meet the cost of Highways Winter Service provision and holds a severe weather reserve should additional funds be required to deal with a more severe winter than expected. Use of in-cab treatment technology to manage and automate spread rates and use of local weather stations to inform detailed forecasting all help to ensure that decision making and deployment of the service is as effective and efficient as possible. |
| Legal | The winter services activity is undertaken to fulfil the Council's statutory obligations as a Highways Authority |
| Procurement | Not Applicable |
| Human resources | Not Applicable |
| Property | Not Applicable |
| The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached? | No - not required at this point |
| Risk assessment | The provision of the winter services activity aims to ensure that the highway network is safe for users throughout the winter period. Road users are always advised to drive to the prevailing road conditions |
| Crime and disorder | Not Applicable |
| Customer considerations | Positive |
| Carbon reduction | We seek to minimise mileage undertaken in delivery of the service by effective decision making using detailed weather forecasting so that the service is only deployed when weather forecasts temperatures at or below zero. |
| Health and wellbeing | Not Applicable |
| Wards | (All Wards); |

5. Background papers

Not Applicable

6. Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable

7. Author and Contact Details

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