



Northumberland County Council

COMMITTEE: NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND LOCAL AREA COUNCIL

DATE: 18 NOVEMBER 2021

TITLE OF REPORT: Winter Services Preparedness and Resilience Report

Report of Interim Executive Director – Rob Murfin

Cabinet Member: Councillor John Riddle

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 season.

Recommendations

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

Key Issues

The County 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 the Highways Act 1980.

There has been no change to the service standards or winter maintenance policy since last winter. The Council is 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.

Arrangements are still in place to ensure operations are Covid-19 compliant to protect the operational teams delivering the service throughout the winter period.

Background

Staffing and Control of Operations

Winter Services are carried out by the Technical Services division within Local Services. Kris Westerby, Highways Delivery Manager, has countywide responsibility for winter services, with Michael Carle, Lead Highways Delivery Manager, acting as countywide operational lead.

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 the Highways Act 1980. All of our primary and secondary routes remain unchanged from the 2020/21 season. Following the completion of previous contracts, the arrangements for additional support from agricultural contractors for dealing with snowfall and prolonged periods of extreme cold weather have been re-procured.

The delivery of the winter service overall requires 105 staff, including managers, supervisors, drivers and operatives. Staffing rotas are in place to ensure sufficient staffing resource is available on the three-shift rota.

The majority of staff involved in winter services come from Technical Services, with a small number of drivers also coming from within Neighbourhood Services.

Highways have 2 Winter Services Delivery Managers (Michael Carle and Andrew Olive) who operate on a two-week 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 and what, if any, treatment is necessary based on the forecast information provided by our forecaster (Meteogroup) and bureau provider (Vaisala). The Winter Services Delivery Managers then pass instructions on to the Winter Services Supervisors who manage the gritting operations. The Winter Services Supervisors also work on a rota basis with their shifts.

The rota for the Winter Services Delivery 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 contact centre and the out of hours arrangements via Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service in the usual way. Similarly, Members are requested not to contact Winter Services Supervisors out of hours as their rotas can change and officers not on call or on rest periods can be unnecessarily disturbed.

Weather Monitoring

Arrangements are in place for the winter services manager to use the web based Vaisala weather system which collates all of our local weather station data. This also gives the Council direct access to regional forecasting information across neighbouring authorities. The Council has access through the MeteoGroup system and the Met office Hazard Manager for accurate weather data/forecasts.

Vaisala is a company who collect weather information from various sources including the Meteogroup and their own weather and road surface temperature 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 using weather stations which are positioned around Northumberland. This allows the Council to make informed decisions on road surface treatment.

Forecasts are received on three occasions through the day to allow operational decisions to be made, with any change of forecast also notified to the Winter Services Delivery Manager at any time 24/7 so that changes to planned actions can be made as necessary.

Covid 19 Measures

The Highways team have reviewed existing processes and brought them in line with the current Covid 19 guidance. This has meant the introduction of revised risk assessments and operational procedures to make sure we keep all staff involved in winter services as safe as possible. To minimise the potential impact Covid 19 may have on the delivery of winter services we have reviewed how we deliver the services and introduced new operational guidance to staff and additional checks to ensure the working environment is as safe as possible. Any necessary PPE has been provided to all winter services drivers. Antibacterial wipes are available for vehicle cleaning between shift swaps. All staff involved in winter services have also been strongly encouraged to have a flu jab.

Managers and supervisors will conduct winter services activities remotely using the web-based software systems we have available, as well as on site should the requirement arise. Supervisors and managers will have the ability to communicate with operational staff through a new radio communication which is installed on laptops. All staff involved in Winter Services are available on mobile communication. This allows the teams to still ensure the operation is being conducted in an efficient and effective manner.

During the summer we have set up and are now completing the testing and introduction of a new IT system and vehicle hardware for specialist winter maintenance route management and automated salt spreading technology across the Council's gritter fleet. This will provide a system that allows enhanced vehicle tracking, route management, automated navigation, automated gritting spread patterns, improved data collection and recording, and improved live monitoring of operations. This will improve the resilience of operations considerably as we will be able to deploy any driver with any gritter to any of the routes across Northumberland without them needing prior training on navigation and gritting spread patterns on the particular route. It also improves driver health and safety by automating the control of the spreading rate and patterns for the salt, so that they can focus on driving the vehicle in often very challenging weather conditions. This new system once fully installed and tested will be extremely valuable given the risks of potential driver absence due to seasonal illnesses and coronavirus.

Vehicles and Gritting Routes

The fleet of 28 multi-purpose gritting vehicles with plough attachments have been serviced and prepared ahead of the winter so that all vehicles are on station by mid to late 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 4 gully tankers that are deployed throughout the County, which are available to assist should the need arise with flooding caused by rapid snow melt.

This coming season, we have 28 primary gritting routes. These routes are gritted regularly throughout the winter period in accordance with forecasts as a precaution against icing. In addition, we have 26 secondary gritting routes which are treated in more severe conditions and after the primary routes have been satisfactorily treated.

As part of the ongoing Fleet Replacement programme we are about to take delivery of nine state of the art Mercedes/Econ 6m³ and 9m³ capacity gritters. These will be put into service as the winter commences replacing selected existing fleet.

Fleet Services supply all the necessary expertise to keep the vehicle's operating at full capacity throughout the winter period.

Five Hiltip spreaders and ploughs have been put in service and fitted to NCC 4x4 vehicles. These are placed across the operational areas and provide another highly useful piece of equipment that can be deployed rapidly to some of the more difficult areas across the network. This will reduce demand on our gritting fleet and allow it to continue to be dedicated to the primary and secondary network during snow events.

Salt Management

The operation is delivered from 11 manned or unmanned depots across Northumberland. Michael 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. As mentioned above our new route optimisation software will also monitor exact salt use across the entire fleet and across the network. This will provide the most accurate salt usage data the Council has ever received.

At the end of last season, we had 14,000T of salt in stock across Northumberland. This is being replenished in all of our main depots and we will have a starting stock of 44,000 tonnes at the commencement of winter. This includes our strategic reserve in Powburn which holds 6,000 tonnes to add to Northumberland's resilience levels.

The service is continuing to progress the construction of new salt barns. The Council has constructed a new salt barn in Otterburn highways depot. We are also going through the process of identifying locations for two more salt barns/strategic storage structures in Bellingham and Morpeth, so that once these final two salt barns are constructed all of Northumberland's 42,000 tonnes of salt will be covered. This investment in salt barns is essential to deliver increased efficiency, better consistency of gritting, reduced wastage of rock salt.

Grit Bins/Heaps

All grit bins and salt heaps throughout the County are currently being inspected and replenished as necessary. This includes removing litter etc and making sure the existing condition is to standard. The service supports 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 Councils 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.

Customer Services

For all winter service requests for additional gritting, grit bin replenishment and general enquiries please contact our customer services and out of hours teams on **0345 600 6400**.

Winter services information contained on the NCC website is being reviewed and updated accordingly to accurately reflect our operations. There will also 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, will be available by the end of November following a thorough review of the information it contains. Given Covid considerations this will be distributed electronically rather than in the usual paper format, with paper copies available on request. The document will be distributed to all County Councillors and Town and Parish Councils. Information on the website 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 using social media. This will advise people on weather conditions and our proposed response. This information is also made available on the Northumberland County Council website.

Additional Support

We have recently renewed our Snow Clearing contract with local Farmers and sub-contractors to assist our operations by removing snow from the more remote roads in rural Northumberland. We are currently issuing pre-start letters to the farmers and contractors. The Council has requested copies of insurance documentation and a schedule of equipment to be made available to provide support. We are conducting an audit of the equipment and its condition. This is ahead of the winter period and the exercise will be completed by the end of October early November 2021. The new contract will provide the farmers and sub-contractors with designated routes. This will ensure that we are clearing the area in the most efficient way we can during a snow event and not revisiting areas which have been cleared. The contractor's plant and equipment will be integrated into our new automated gritting system to allow the Council full visibility of resources during intense periods of weather.

The Council has still retained the 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 aid with snow clearance. The offer to be included in the 'Snow Squads' will be rolled out again this winter. All volunteers have been trained, equipped with tools, and supplied salt to assist the Council and clear local footpaths around the County helping to keep residents safe.

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

Arrangements are in place with Newcastle City, Durham County Council, Cumbria County Council & Scottish Borders Council, Colas and Highways England to aid 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 supplies a management service to Newcastle City Council, whereby we decide when precautionary salting is needed across their administrative area as well as in Northumberland. This service is provided under a contractual arrangement and generates added 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 efficient service delivery on the ground. Also, if required due to the severity of the event we will open the incident support room and work alongside the civil contingencies team and all emergency services within the area.

Winter Storms/ Flooding

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 receives 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	There are no changes to winter services policy or gritted network for the 20/21 winter season.
Finance and value for money	None
Legal	None
Procurement	None
Human Resources	None
Property	None
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	None
Risk Assessment	Additional risks due to coronavirus have been considered in operational processes
Crime & Disorder	None
Customer Consideration	The delivery of winter services will assist the public to travel safely during the winter period.
Carbon reduction	None
Wards	All

Background papers:

None

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full name of officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	N/A
Relevant Executive Director	Rob Murfin
Chief Executive	N/A
Portfolio Holder(s)	John Riddle

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