

# Title of report: Highways Winter Maintenance

**Meeting: Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee**

**Meeting date: Wednesday 12 March 2025**

**Report by: Head of Highways and Traffic**

## **Classification**

Open

## **Decision type**

This is not an executive decision

## **Wards affected**

(All Wards);

## **Purpose**

To provide a review of winter maintenance of highways following the 2024/25 winter period, endorsing or otherwise the current arrangements and providing recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Roads and Regulatory Services ahead of the 2025/26 winter season.

## **Recommendation(s)**

**That:**

- a) the efforts of the whole team in delivering the winter maintenance service be noted;**
- b) the importance of utilising professional weather services through highly experienced meteorologists, drawing on extensive dedicated industry and location specific forecast models, supported by information from seven weather stations across the county be noted;**
- c) the gritting network be reviewed to understand how development and changes to the functionality and usage of roads may impact the risk associated with adverse winter weather;**
- d) Scrutiny Committee provides its initial views on the criteria when establishing priority and secondary routes (as set out in paragraphs 14 and 16 of this report);**

- e) work be undertaken to review individual routes in order to contain them within a domain so as to avoid a 'one-out, all-out' approach;

### Alternative options

1. That the highway winter maintenance service continues as operated in 2024/25 and as set out in the Winter Service Plan.

### Key considerations

#### Why we provide a winter maintenance service

2. As the local highway authority, Herefordshire Council is responsible for the management and maintenance of almost 2,100 miles of public highway across the county.
3. Under Section 41 (1A) of the Highways Act 1980, the Council has a duty to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice. Reasonably practicable is subjective, and involves balancing the risk against factors such as time, cost and effort. Given the substantial resource required to deliver the Winter Service, it is unreasonable to expect that all routes are kept free from snow and ice at all times, even on treated sections.
4. Section 150 of the Highways Act 1980 imposes a duty to remove obstructions on the public highway, including those arising from the accumulation of snow, on the Highway Authority. This reinforces the need to actively manage and clear snow to maintain access and safety on public highways.
5. The Traffic Management Act 2004 also places a network management duty on the Council. Section 16 requires the Council ensures, as far as is reasonably practicable and with consideration for policy, priorities and other factors, that traffic can move freely and quickly on its road network and those of adjacent authorities.

#### How we provide a winter maintenance service

6. The Council's Winter Service Plan explains the arrangements that are deployed for dealing with snow and ice on the county's roads. The Plan outlines how the service will be delivered in line with the winter service policy, which itself has been developed in line with recommendations made in the 2016 Code of Practice: Well Managed Highway Infrastructure as well as from the National Winter Service Research Group (NWSRG) Practical Guide. A copy of the Winter Service Plan is provided at Appendix 1.
7. A team of 48 staff provide the service during a typical season, with further resources called upon such as snow contractors when conditions dictate. Staff are split between two teams, who are on call during the day and during the night on alternate weeks throughout the season, from 15 October to 15 April each year.
8. The team have access to a fleet of 17 gritters that are used to treat the road network and that are tracked at all times and are speed restricted when spreading. The fleet of gritters are supported by two quad bikes with towable spreaders, as well as three dedicated snow blowers, a tractor plough with a towable spreader and a tractor mounted snow blower.
9. Rock salt is used to treat the road network and works by lowering the temperature at which water freezes. As it is unrefined, the salt is brown in colour and is often mistakenly referred to as grit. Salt can work at temperatures down to minus 8 to 10 degrees Celsius, after which it becomes less efficient. Where snow and ice already exist on the road, a mixture of salt and grit can provide traction to vehicles and help break up the frozen surface.

### When we treat the network

10. Forecast data is provided through the Council's contract with MetDesk Ltd who provide professional weather services, monitoring and providing on call support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through highly experienced meteorologists. The forecast data draws on extensive dedicated industry and location specific forecast models, supported by information from seven weather stations located across the county and images from traffic cameras on both our network and that of National Highways. Forecasts are received three times a day as standard with the following detail set out on an hourly basis over a period of 24 hours:
  - Road surface temperatures
  - Air temperatures
  - Weather type forecast (dry, damp, wet, rain, dew, hoar frost, ice, snow, sleet, hail or freezing rain)
  - If a hoar frost will occur
  - If ice will form
  - Snow accumulation
  - Wind speed
  - Visibility
  - Precipitation
11. Once received, forecasts are reviewed and a decision taken by a duty decision maker in line with the Winter Service Plan as to what treatment should be undertaken across the network and in what domains and specifically at what time of day or night to ensure the network is treated prior to freezing. The decision is then checked by a verification officer after which it is communicated to the relevant staff and teams deployed.

### Where we treat on the network

12. Herefordshire's geographical and climatic conditions present unique challenges in terms of delivery of winter maintenance. The county's varied topography, including the Welsh Mountains to the west and the Malvern Hills to the east, leads to diverse weather patterns. To assist with decision making, the county is split into three geographical domains.
13. A network of 15 priority routes exists across the county and provides treatment for 597 miles, or 27% of the overall network. Priority routes tend to represent roads where traffic volumes and/or speeds are higher and so the risk to road safety is similarly high, if untreated.
14. Criteria when establishing priority routes include:
  - The strategic network
  - The principal roads required for economic and community continuity
  - Commuter routes
  - Routes of importance to the emergency services, including the highways that provide access to all operational premises
  - Regular rural public transport routes with weekday frequencies of 2 hours or better

- Known problems, including significant gradients, exposed areas and other topographical factors
  - Public transport routes and access to stations, bus garages and depots; safe and reliable access to emergency facilities including fire and rescue, police, ambulance services and hospitals
15. A secondary network of 25 further routes results in the treatment of an additional 420 miles, or 19% of the overall network when deemed necessary. Secondary routes are not as high risk as the priority routes but a failure during prolonged adverse weather conditions can compromise access to key services and increase the risk of isolation (particularly in rural communities).
16. Criteria when establishing secondary routes include:
- access to all schools from the priority routes.
  - key links to rural communities.
  - key links within urban communities; and
  - regular public transport routes with daily frequencies.
17. Separate to priority and secondary routes, designated locations are also treated, including Hereford High Town, the Market Towns, footways and cycleways and transport interchanges.
18. It is considered that treating 46% of the network is a high proportion and suggests that Herefordshire are currently delivering a highly conservative approach to winter maintenance. It is understood that the gritting network has not been reviewed in a significant period of time. With evolving use of highways over time, it is considered essential that risk is periodically reprofiled to understand how development and changes to the functionality and usage of roads may impact the risk associated with adverse winter weather.

### Historical Trends

19. The number of treatments undertaken on the network will vary from year to year as it is dependant on weather. Between 2021/22 and 2023/24, 219 treatments were undertaken on the network, with 98% or 215 being on the priority network, with only 4 treatments of the secondary network. 81 treatments of the priority network took place in 2021/22 and 79 in 2022/23, typically driving some 48,000 miles per year. 2023/24 saw what was considered a significantly milder winter season, with only 55 treatments taking place, with some 34,000 miles driven.
20. Whilst the county is split into three geographical domains to assist with decision making, current practice means that routes cross into and out of domains, often leading to a 'one-out, all-out' approach, rather than using a targeted domain-based approach to delivery. It is therefore considered appropriate for work to be undertaken to review individual routes in order to contain them within a domain.

### **Community impact**

21. During the winter period, the highway winter maintenance service aims to:
- keep road users safe through effectively managing the risk to the travelling public from the hazardous effects of ice and snow on highway surfaces.

- keep the county moving; maintaining accessibility to services through the availability and reliability of the highway network during the winter period.
- to coordinate our actions in regard to the highway with those that the council undertakes to, so far as reasonably practicable keep both the public and its employees safe as they move around those external spaces for which the council is directly responsible.

## Environmental Impact

22. Any future development of the winter service plan and specifically any potential changes to the gritting network will seek to minimise any adverse environmental impact and will actively seek opportunities to improve and enhance environmental performance.

## Equality duty

23. The Public Sector Equality Duty requires the Council to consider how it can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that it is paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.
24. A full Equality Impact Assessment is not required as a direct result of this report. However, such an Equality Impact Assessment will need to be undertaken to determine the impact on protected characteristics should any review of the treated network be undertaken and any parts removed or added Sections 14 and 16 of this report set out how priority and secondary routes are established.

## Resource implications

25. Total revenue costs of £860k were allocated through the Public Realm Contract in 2024/25 for the provision of winter maintenance based on 83 treatments, as set out in Table 1 below.

<u>Item</u>	<u>Budget Allocation</u>
Winter Standby	£151,842.71
Winter Stand Down	£37,735.54
Gritting Runs	£397,501.81
Salt Bins	£37,723.91
Driver Training	£27,492.13
Footpath Treatments	£7,047.71
Winter Preparedness	£200,633.21*
<b>Total</b>	<b>£ 859,977.02</b>

\*involves maintenance of gritting fleet and provision of other items such as telehandlers and yard operatives during the season

Table 1: 2024/25 Winter Maintenance Budget Allocation

26. Table 1 does not account for:
- a. The cost of purchasing the salt used when undertaking gritting operations and which is purchased by the Council directly. To date, 6,389 tonnes have been purchased in 2024/25 at a cost of £388k and delivered to and stored in salt barns at Thorn and Kingsland depots. There is capacity to store a total of 6,200 tonnes of salt across both sites, with approximately 100 tonnes used per 15g treatment of the priority network across the county. Typically, a stock level of 75% or 4,800 tonnes is maintained to ensure resilience over the winter period.
  - b. The cost of utilising a specialist weather forecasting service provider to accurately forecast road surface temperatures and conditions across the county in order to determine if and when gritting operations should be undertaken. In September 2024, the Council awarded a contract to MetDesk Ltd for a period of up to three years at a cost of £33,697.87 per annum.
27. Whilst a budget allocation is provided based on 83 treatments per year, £895k is currently held in reserves to fund additional treatments should they become necessary.
28. Since 2023/24, £1,402,000 of capital funding from corporate prudential borrowing has been invested in Winter Resilience to enable the purchase of 9 new frontline gritters.

### **Legal implications**

29. Under Section 41 (1A) of the Highways Act 1980, the Council has a duty to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice. Reasonably practicable is subjective, and involves balancing the risk against factors such as time, cost and effort. Given the substantial resource required to deliver the Winter Service, it is unreasonable to expect that all routes are kept free from snow and ice at all times, even on treated sections.
30. Section 150 of the Highways Act 1980 imposes a duty to remove obstructions on the public highway, including those arising from the accumulation of snow, on the Highway Authority. This reinforces the need to actively manage and clear snow to maintain access and safety on public highways.
31. The Traffic Management Act 2004 also places a network management duty on the Council. Section 16 requires the Council ensures, as far as is reasonably practicable and with consideration for policy, priorities and other factors, that traffic can move freely and quickly on its road network and those of adjacent authorities.

### **Risk management**

32. There are no direct risk implications as a result of this report, the purpose of which is to seek the views of the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee regarding Highway Winter Maintenance.
33. Any recommendations made by Scrutiny Committee will be subject to a Cabinet Member decision that will set out the full risks and opportunities to the council.

### **Consultees**

34. The purpose of this report is to seek the views of the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee regarding Highway Winter Maintenance.

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1: Herefordshire Council Winter Service Plan 2024/25

## **Background papers**

None identified.