

Winter Service Policy

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to set out the principles that the County Council uses to meet its obligations and duties in respect of the winter service. It lays down which categories of road are to be treated, in what order of priority, and how quickly they should be treated. It is intended, through the use of this Policy, to ensure that there is a uniform level of service throughout the county.

This policy reflects the recommendations of Well-maintained Highways: Code of Practice for Highway Maintenance Management (Roads Liaison Group, July 2005 and Appendix H revised September 2013) and the risk based approach promoted in the Well-Managed Highway Infrastructure Code of Practice, October 2016.

The County Council, as the Highway Authority, is responsible for providing a winter service on adopted public highways within the county except for motorways and trunk roads. The purpose of the winter service is to provide assistance to road users by treating the highway network to mitigate the effects of ice and snow and to maintain traffic movements, whilst minimising the impact of the service operations on the environment.

The service is essential for public safety and to the national and local economy in maintaining movement of vehicular traffic and pedestrians. Owing to limited resources and available finance it is essential that provision of winter service reflects the importance of traffic routes. It will not be reasonably practicable to provide the service on all parts of the network or to ensure all surfaces are kept free of ice or snow at all times, even on the treated parts of the network.

2 Legislation

Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980 imposes a duty on highway authorities to maintain highways maintainable at public expense. In particular, Section 41 (1A), as inserted by Section 111 of the Railways and Transport Safety Act 2003, imposes a duty on highway authorities to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice.

The Department for Transport has advised that it is for the courts to decide what is reasonably practicable. However, the Department strongly recommends that local highway authorities carry out winter maintenance in accordance with Section 13 of Well-maintained Highways: Code of Practice for Maintenance Management and from October 2018, the Well Managed Highway Infrastructure Code of Practice. Amongst other recommendations, the Code states that best practice would be for local highway authorities to adopt and publish a Winter Service Operational Plan, reviewed annually to take account of changing circumstances.

Under Section 150(1) of the Highways Act 1980, there is a requirement for the Highway Authority to remove an accumulation of snow which forms an obstruction, and Section 150(3) of the Act states that the following factors should be taken into account:

- (a) The character of the highway and the nature and amount of traffic using it.
- (b) The nature and extent of the obstruction.
- (c) The resources of manpower, vehicles and equipment available to the Highway Authority and extent to which those resources are being, or need to be, employed on such work.

Thus it is recognised that it would not be practical for a Highway Authority to treat all roads and footways in the event that ice forms or snow falls.

It has been said judicially that when there is a transient danger due to the elements, be it snow or ice or heavy rain, the existence of danger for a short time is no evidence of a failure to maintain the highway.

3 Objectives of the Winter Service

The objectives of the winter service, so far as is reasonably practicable, are to:

- Ensure the safe movement of vehicles and pedestrians on the highway network.
- Minimise delays, accidents and damage to the highway resulting from ice and snow.
- Undertake the winter service effectively and efficiently within the limitations of finite resources according to network hierarchy and severity of weather conditions.

Good practice is also important to minimise both the environmental impact of salt and affordability implications.

The overall Winter Service period is 1st October to 30th April.

The core winter period starts on the 8th October and continues for 25 weeks.

Provision of winter service may be extended to suit seasonal variations in weather.

4 Weather Forecasting and Monitoring

Weather information will be obtained from specialist forecasters, roadside monitoring stations and in unpredictable circumstances it may be supplemented by patrol inspections.

The County Council maintains a contract with an appropriate forecasting organisation that provides daily weather forecasts that are detailed for Warwickshire and updated frequently. In addition, forecasters are available at any time of the day or night to discuss the forecast and changes in conditions. Additional real-time information is provided by a network of roadside sensor stations around the county that report on air temperature, ground temperature, relative humidity and other related measures.

These sources of information inform treatment decisions that are made by the duty winter manager.

5 Winter Service Operational Plan

A Winter Service Operational Plan is to be maintained that details the necessary operational, procedural and functional arrangements and responsibilities needed to provide the service in accordance with this Policy.

The Operational Plan includes:

- Policies, Responsibilities, Procedures and Decision Making
- Treatment Routes, Networks and Self-help Facilities
- Weather Prediction and Information
- Organisational Arrangements and Personnel
- Facilities, Vehicles and Equipment
- Salt, Salt Storage, Testing and Critical Salt Level
- Operational Communications
- Information and Publicity
- Review Management

The Operational Plan is to be reviewed annually after the end of the winter season and before the next. The revision is carried out by the Winter Service Team and includes representation from the Highway Maintenance Service Contractor and from Highway Operations depots.

6 Precautionary Salting

Resources do not permit all roads to be treated and hence a priority network has been established for precautionary salting. Routes are reviewed annually by the County Highways Policy team taking into account any service requests received or difficulties encountered in delivering the service during the previous winter season.

Precautionary Network (Primary Gritted Routes)

The Precautionary Network is pre-defined and comprises:

- All main traffic routes, A roads, B roads and one or two other strategic routes
- in addition in urban areas the accesses to hospitals, main industrial estates and
- a single route into villages so far as is reasonably practicable.

Treatment of the precautionary network takes place in accordance with available forecast and local condition information and the decision matrix in the Winter Service Operational Plan. The aim is to treat the precautionary network in advance of the onset of potentially hazardous conditions so far as is reasonably practicable.

Treatment is usually carried out during the evening so as to avoid late afternoon traffic and to limit disruption to operations next working day due to statutory limits on driver's working hours. There will be some occasions when prevailing weather conditions make late-call or night-time treatment unavoidable.

The target response time for the precautionary network from the point at which gritting is called to the point at which the gritting vehicles leave the depots is 1 hour. The target completion time for each route is 3 hours from the point at which the gritter leaves the depot to the point at which treatment is complete.

All routes are treated at agreed spread rates and using local conditions.

Other Routes

The rest of the network is only treated during prolonged severe weather spells when air temps remain below freezing for a prolonged period of time.

This comprises less important local, village and estate distributor roads having significant traffic flows.

Treatment of the network not included on primary gritted routes takes place after the Precautionary Network has been completed, so long as physical resources are available, and in exceptional conditions such as freezing rain forming ice on surfaces and heavy falling or lying snow. Hoar frost is not treated unless conditions are exceptional.

7 Snow Clearing

Priority for snow clearance is given to the resilient network followed by the precautionary network. During prolonged periods of adverse conditions high priority footways can be cleared according to network hierarchy and resources being available.

The objective will be to carry out snow ploughing/clearing operations to maintain carriageways open to traffic, to remove blockages and to re-open routes by salting, gritting, ploughing, excavating and snow blowing as appropriate to the conditions.

Where forecasts indicate that adverse conditions are likely to result in the need for snow clearance, appropriate resources are placed on standby to be mobilised. Appropriate resources can be any of the County Council's highway contractors, pre-assessed private contractors, the National Farmers Union (NFU) and resources and contractors of other councils and public bodies.

Although rare there is no effective way of dealing with freezing rain. It occurs when rain first falls upon the freezing road surface where it immediately turns into ice. Road travel during a period of freezing rain will be severely disrupted and it is unsafe to send heavy gritting vehicles on to the network during the event as they too will have no visibility and traction to the road surface.

Primary Gritted network

Priority is given to clearing the roads on the precautionary salting routes. Snow clearance routes will follow the precautionary salting routes, however some roads will be omitted where ploughing is not possible due to persistent parked cars and road features.

In prolonged or very severe snowfalls, resources will be concentrated on keeping the resilient network open and only after this objective has been achieved will attention be given to the remaining roads on the precautionary salting routes. When conditions or site circumstances require, 24 hour working will be introduced to maintain or restore the resilient network to provide a basic network from which further snow clearance operations can proceed.

Other roads

Snow clearing of all other roads is restricted to normal working hours and proceeds only when the precautionary salting network has been cleared.

In such circumstances there will be a delay from the onset of adverse weather conditions to the commencement of clearance operations. Priority will then be given to re-opening a route into isolated communities from the main road network.

Footways and Cycleways

The clearance of snow from footways and cycleway is undertaken when labour resources normally employed on highways maintenance work and precautionary salting become available. Warwickshire County Council (WCC) does not routinely treat footways and cycleways because priority is always given to the Precautionary carriageway network.

However, in prolonged periods of adverse conditions categories 1A and 1 footways that are within town centres may be treated. Clearance work will be restricted to normal working hours.

8 Salt stocks

Salt is restocked over the summer months in advance of the winter season when prices are lower plus demand on salt suppliers is minimal and it can therefore be planned and coordinated with the supplier and contractor to minimise cost.

By careful use of advance weather forecasts the aim is to reduce stocks towards the end of the winter season in order to enable maintenance of the salt storage areas and restocking at summer supply rates.

The winters of 2009 and 2010 exposed the fragility of Local Authorities salt stock resilience and the dependence upon salt stock replenishment during a winter season. Salt stock resilience levels are based on analysis of historical usage taking in to account replenishment time, weekends and public holidays.

9 Critical Salt Levels Emergency Plan

In the event that salt stocks approach critical levels during the core winter period all salt conservation measures are initiated.

As soon as it is identified that this condition is likely to develop, an emergency meeting involving the Winter Services Team is to be called in co-ordination with external stakeholders.

Salt supplies

In the event that supplies from the contracted supplier are insufficient or stopped the following action or actions are to be taken:

- Continually press the supplier to increase deliveries stressing how many grit runs remain so that the urgency is clear.
- Contact alternative suppliers.
- Contact adjacent highway authorities requesting supplies on loan or for purchase.
- Contact Highways England for assistance.
- Work with any national arrangements in place for salt priority distribution.

Extending existing salt stocks

Targeting depots with the least stocks first, extend rock salt by pre-mixing with fine 3mm aggregate or sharp sand in a proportion of 1:1 or as may be deemed appropriate.

Conserving salt stocks – general actions

The purpose is to extend the availability of salt or salt mixtures for use on strategic routes. Actions can be one or any of:

- Cease refilling of grit bins. Cease responding to requests for spot treatment. Exceptions may be made for genuine immediate emergencies involving threat to life.
- In snow conditions, plough routes without salting if practical. When snowfall ceases, assess the conditions and consider applying salt, salt/grit mixture or grit to the ploughed surface.
- Allow snow to compact under the action of traffic on some or all of the precautionary routes without salting.

Conserving salt stocks – route restrictions

Actions can be one or any of:

- Reduce the extent of initial ploughing on Precautionary Network routes.
- Treat only the resilient network.
- Treat ploughed routes only on the resilient network

Media

Engage with the media to provide realistic expectations of people's ability to travel for essential purposes only.

Update the website.

10 Grit Bins

Grit bins will normally be provided and maintained where they provide a necessary improvement to road safety and benefit to the community subject to assessment of each location using consistent methodology and available resource.

Requests and reviews will take into account the available resources for providing the winter service.

All grit bins provided and maintained with stocks of highway salt will be clearly labelled 'WCC - Highway Use Only'.

Grit bins will generally be provided when determined using the Grit Bin Assessment Form.

Grit bins will not be provided:

- On roads that form part of precautionary gritting routes, except at known points of difficulty on steep gradients in severe winter conditions and subject to site assessment.
- Where they attract anti-social behaviour or cause nuisance to nearby residents.
- Where their provision would create a further proliferation of street furniture to the detriment of disabled or visually impaired people and/or the community.

- Where there are no suitable local self-help arrangements for the use of the grit bin.
- On un-adopted highways whether subject to future adoption or not.

Roadside rucks or salt piles are not permitted because they are a source of concentrated and localised environmental contamination.

11 Cross-boundary arrangements

Reciprocal arrangements for precautionary gritting are made with neighbouring authorities under section 8 of the Highways Act 1980 and are confirmed by exchange of letter before each season.

12 Winter Service Operational Plan

A Winter Service Operational Plan is to be maintained by WCC Policy Section that details the necessary procedural and functional arrangements necessary to provide the service in accordance with this Policy. The Operational Plan is to be reviewed annually after the end of the winter season.

The Operational Plan includes such things as:

- Details of the treatment routes.
- Decision matrix.
- Arrangements for communications between the Winter Duty Manager, Winter Service Supervisors, contractor, inspectors and emergency services.
- Procedures for linking to weather forecasters and Bureau services.
- Procedure for recording daily decisions and actions during the winter season.
- Record of current Winter Service fleet vehicles and equipment.
- Pre-season fleet preparation activities.
- Snow clearing conditions and arrangements.
- Prolonged severe weather arrangements.
- Salt restocking arrangements.

13 Communications and Publicity

The primary means to inform stakeholders about the Winter Service is on the Warwickshire County Council website. This is supplemented by press releases and our printed primary winter service gritting routes. We use social media to communicate live treatment information.

Information is provided to assist the public in understanding the objectives of the Winter Service including:

- Plans of the treatment routes and the typical conditions in which they are treated.

- The principle criteria used in assessing placement of grit bins and also where they are not placed.
- Advice on winter driving to assist drivers to drive according to conditions.

In prolonged severe weather conditions additional information is made available through all available media.

Links to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) winter driving advice will be found on the WCC website at <https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/gritting>

14 Winter Service fleet

The winter service fleet is maintained to operational standard by our in house service provider County Fleet Maintenance (CFM). The serviceability of the Warwickshire County Council fleet will be maintained and monitored by CFM to ensure operational resilience throughout the season.

15 Resilience

A severe Weather Emergencies Plan has been established by the CSW resilience in consultation with others, including emergency services, relevant authorities and agencies. The plan compliments the County Highway Winter Service Operational Plan.

CSW is a single unified team of Emergency Planning Officers that represent the local authorities of Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire.

The Severe Weather Emergencies Plan includes operational, resource and contingency plans and procedures to enable timely and effective action by the Highway Authority to mitigate the effects of severe weather on the network and provide the best practicable service in the circumstances.

The plan is only likely to be implemented in full where there is a serious long-term disruption within the community involving loss of life/injury and/or damage to property as a result of severe weather. Elements of the plan may be implemented in less serious situations.