

ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 12th September 2023
Report Subject	Winter Maintenance Policy Review 2023-2025
Cabinet Member	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Regional Transport Strategy
Report Author	Chief Officer – Streetscene & Transportation
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the winter maintenance service over the last season and responsibilities of the Council, as well as seeking approval for the review of the winter maintenance policy.

Winter service operations play a fundamental role in ensuring that highway networks are safe and available during adverse weather conditions from around October through to April each year. The winter maintenance service is recognised as one of the most important functions that the highway authority provides. Maintaining access to the network is crucial for emergency services, businesses, social services, education, and the public.

This report outlines the current winter maintenance policy (see **Appendix 1**), the legislative requirements for providing such a service, and the actions taken by the Streetscene and Transportation portfolio to support winter service operations. In addition, the report outlines the County's response to other adverse weather events, such as heavy rainfall and high winds.

We have committed to reviewing the winter maintenance policy every two years and this report explains winter maintenance operations and seeks approval of the proposed winter service plan and winter maintenance policy for the next two years 2023-2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Scrutiny Committee notes the refreshed winter maintenance service policy as presented in this report and as attached in Appendix 1
2	That Scrutiny Committee notes the portfolio's response to adverse weather events over the Winter season 2022-2023.
3	That Scrutiny Committee supports the continued need to maintain the revenue budget at present levels along with earmarked reserves of £250k.

4	That a further report is presented to Scrutiny Committee in 2024 following a review of the 2023-2024 season by the weather forecasting provider in relation to geographically specific treatment decision making.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	BACKGROUND OF THE WINTER MAINTENANCE POLICY
1.01	The Council, as the local highway authority for county roads, has a general duty, under Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980, to maintain the highway network in a good state of repair to render it safe for ordinary traffic at all times of the year.
1.02	Highway authorities in England and Wales also have a duty “ <i>to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice</i> ” (Highways Act 1980, Section A1 (TA) as modified by Section 111 of the Railways and Transport Act 2003). The council’s winter maintenance service is essential in aiding the safe movement of highway users, maintaining communications, reducing delays, and enabling everyday life to continue. The Council must prioritise its response to winter weather, whilst exercising due regard to logistics and available resources.
1.03	In addition, under Section 150(1) of the Highways Act 1980, there is a requirement for the highway authority to remove an obstruction caused by the accumulation of snow, subject to a number of factors stated in Section 150(3) of the 1980 Highways Act.
1.04	<p>Furthermore, the Traffic Management Act 2004 has placed a network management duty on all local traffic authorities, which requires authorities to do all that is reasonably practicable to manage the network effectively to keep traffic moving. In meeting the duty, local authorities are required to establish contingency plans for dealing promptly and effectively with unplanned events, such as unforeseen weather conditions, in so far as is reasonably practicable.</p> <p>We are also required to conduct our operations having due regard to the requirements of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and Driver Hours Regulations.</p>
1.05	The legislation does not impose an absolute duty, but rather involves a balance between the degree of risk and the steps necessary to eliminate the risk. This legislation informs the best practice identified to highway authorities on winter service operations, which has changed in recent years. Given this duty, the industry has developed a best practice guide to manage the network with the principles set out in the new national code of practice, the latest version of which is the Well Managed Highway Infrastructure 2016 Code of Practice (COP), which provides a broader view of asset management. It is supplemented by Practical Guidance from the National Winter Service Research Group (NWSRG) which was issued in 2020. The COP reflects many years of operational practice and current issues and problems and is regarded as a benchmark by which local authorities will be assessed by both the public and the courts should disputes occur.

1.06	Flintshire County Council liaises with other North Wales highway authorities and the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency (NMWTRA) to ensure a consistent approach is adopted when reviewing operations and introducing changes or improvements. The council also liaises closely with NMWTRA during the winter service operational period.
1.07	Under the COP, local authorities must have a policy on winter maintenance services, which should be reviewed on a regular basis. In Flintshire, we have committed to reviewing the policy every two years, the previous policy reviewed in 2021.
1.08	The winter operating period starts in October and continues until April each year and is a year-round process with planning and preparations for each season commencing in the preceding Spring/Summer. For this reason, the response to winter weather is linked to the authority's resilience planning and it is important that the performance of the service is reviewed at the end of each season and that any learning is used to improve the delivery of the service in the future.
1.09	<p>Planning and preparation work over the summer period includes the following operations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - carrying out maintenance work on salt storage facilities - ensuring that salt stocks are replenished - checking and replacing salt bins where required - reviewing arrangements with snow ploughing contractors - recruiting staff for the delivery of the winter service - arranging and delivering training for all staff involved in the winter service - arranging and delivering training to all driving and loading staff and ensuring that they have achieved the appropriate accreditation before the start of the season - ensuring that all gritters and equipment are serviced and calibrated, including vehicle telematics - liaising with neighbouring local authorities and NMWTRA to identify best practice
1.10	<p>Below is a summary of the winter service operations delivered over the 2022-2023 winter period: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of miles/km covered by the gritters: 70,000km / 43,495 miles - Tonnages of salt spread by the gritters: 7,012 tonnes - Tonnages of salt used for salt bins: 510 tonnes - Number of turnouts: 125 (average year is 115 turnouts) - Number of labour hours used in response to the weather: 84,373 hrs
1.11	<p>At the end of each season, a review of the operational service is undertaken by officers from the Streetscene and Transportation portfolio and considers the following key areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compliance with statutory requirements 2. Any changes to standards that should be incorporated into the new policy 3. Any local concerns or complaints with the service that may require a change to operational working practices 4. Any changes in local circumstances that may require changes to policy

	<p>5. Effectiveness of the current supply chain to support the service</p> <p>6. Adequacy of current salt stocks for delivering the service effectively</p> <p>7. Effectiveness of salting car parks and footways</p> <p>8. Effectiveness of communications during a weather event</p>
1.12	<p>The review has concluded that the current operating model is adequate in responding to the risk presented during periods of adverse weather. The service is effective in the deployment of resource, whilst limiting the impact of disruption to the rest of the operational service and road users.</p>
1.13	<p>The following factors have, however, resulted in increased costs for the service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developments to the resources and equipment required during the winter maintenance season • Steadily increasing average numbers of callouts and application of preventative salting due to more frequent and more severe winter weather • Price rises in fuel, labour, and materials (gritting salt).
1.14	<p>The conclusion of the review is that no changes are required to the standards set out in the policy. However, we continue work to improve the timing of communications and the channels for communication both internally, through better use of technology, and externally, through increased access to social media. It is important that the public are aware of and understand the council's approach to delivering its winter maintenance service. It is intended that this will be achieved by issuing a pre-season press statement with all relevant information made available on the council's website.</p>
1.15	<p>The review has highlighted that there is an opportunity to reconsider the structure for winter maintenance decision making, as well as the format for the weather forecast, which is currently based on two weather stations located in Hendre and Brynford. Officers have been exploring the use of route-based forecasting or domain-based forecasting instead of the current approach. Work will be undertaken during 2023-2024 with MetDesk, our current weather forecasting providers, to analyse the results collected over the forthcoming winter season, to determine whether this weather forecasting modelling may offer any savings and can be adopted by Flintshire in the future. It is proposed that a further report will be presented to Cabinet in the summer of 2024 once this work has been completed.</p>
1.16	<p>Adverse weather arrangements (i.e., high winds, heavy rain) are planned in advance of the winter season and have now been included within the Winter Maintenance Operational Handbook, which had been revised and will be distributed to all personnel involved annually and updated as a controlled document throughout the season.</p>
1.17	<p>The decision-making process for carrying out winter maintenance action is carried out by nominated Duty Managers. Five Duty Managers will be rostered throughout the winter period to monitor weather forecast information and decide on appropriate preventative action. This decision will be based largely on predicted road surface temperatures (NOT air temperatures), the amount of moisture on the road and/or the amount of residual salt on the network from previous treatments. All Duty Managers are required to have received advanced weather forecast training and to have undertaken at least six months of continuous shadowing before commencing in the role.</p>

1.18	A minimum of 26 operational staff will be rostered to be on-call throughout the season to respond to adverse weather. There are also on-call highways response teams, if necessary, alongside the wider operational teams in times of prolonged adverse weather, such as high winds or heavy rainfall.
1.19	<p>Normally, on receipt of a severe weather warning (high winds, flooding, snow event, etc.) an operational control room will be established in Alltami. It will be operated by staff from Streetscene & Transportation, who will act as a dedicated point of contact for the Contact Centre staff and coordination of the response. The staff within the operational control room have direct contact with Streetscene area coordinators and supervisors, who will be on-site to investigate complaints, inspect the network and mobilise dedicated gritting vehicles and operational teams under their direct control.</p> <p>It also acts as a single point of contact for the senior leadership team and corporate communications, through which communications will be made.</p>
1.20	If high winds are forecasted, the details of the forecast are examined by the Duty Officer and consideration will be given as to whether or not to close the Flintshire Bridge (A548). The process to follow in the event that the bridge needs to be closed is set out within the updated Winter Maintenance Service Policy 2023-2025.
1.21	<p><u>Allocation of Salt Bins/Sandbags</u></p> <p>Salt bins are provided for residents to self-help in salting the adopted highway in their areas (not for private footways and driveways). Requests for additional salt bins across the county are subject to an assessment scoring matrix and must conform to the policy for the purpose of consistency. Requests for community council funded salt bins will be supported with the installation of green bins.</p> <p>At the start of each winter all salt bins will be filled with salt, the cost of which will be borne by the council. In the event of severe weather, further refills will be carried out as time and resources permit.</p>
1.22	The distribution of sandbags in the event of heavy rainfall and flooding will be applied as described in the Sandbag Policy adopted in September 2017.
1.23	In January 2021, a joint portfolio project was set up in response to Storm Christophe between Streetscene & Transportation and Planning, Environment & Economy and the group has been meeting regularly to prioritise investigations and works for managing flood risk on roads and highways within the county. The purpose of the joint project group is to identify assets and responsibilities of those assets and address any infrastructure issues across the county. This has resulted in infrastructure improvements; new maintenance programmes and response plans being developed in each case. The group oversees the developments and progress of each scheme and programme.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	The winter maintenance service budget is ringfenced and earmarked reserves are reviewed annually to ensure that adequate funding is available throughout the season. The demand on the budget is subject to weather conditions and every effort will be made to contain expenditure within the overall budget. In recent years, the average number of turnouts per season has increased steadily and the running costs of operations, including labour and fleet costs, have also risen. Consequently, earmarked reserves have regularly been used to meet the shortfall in revenue budget.
2.02	Winter maintenance operations on the highway network are carried out by Streetscene staff and resources are supplemented by local agricultural contractors as necessary.

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	The winter maintenance service has undertaken various risk assessments on the provision of road surface treatments, which are outlined within the policy.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
4.01	<p>Consultation has taken place with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the Cabinet Member • Operational service teams and stakeholders • Neighbouring local authorities in relation to their Winter Maintenance Operations • North and Mid-Wales Trunk Road Agency (NMWTRA) • Trade Unions

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 - Winter Maintenance Policy

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	Highways Act 1980.
6.02	Railways and Transport Act 2003
6.03	Traffic Management Act 2004
6.04	Well-managed Highway Infrastructure (2016) (UKRLG)

6.05	Planning For Winter Service Delivery (2020) (NWSRG)
6.06	Quarmby Report – July 2010
6.07	Welsh Government Trunk Road Maintenance Manual
6.08	Welsh Government Advice Documents
6.09	WLGA Advice Documents

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: Barry Wilkinson, Highway Network Manager Telephone: 01352 704656 E-mail: barry.wilkinson@flintshire.gov.uk

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	Financial Year (FY): the period of 12 months commencing on 1 April
8.02	Budget: a statement expressing the Council's policies and service levels in financial terms for a particular financial year. In its broadest sense it includes both the revenue budget and capital programme and any authorised amendments to them.
8.03	Winter Maintenance: the particular network management requirements during winter are not 'maintenance' in the traditional sense, but specialist operational services responding to adverse weather events