

DATE: November 2025

TITLE OF REPORT: Winter Services Preparedness and Resilience Report

Report of Director of Environment and Transport: Paul Jones

Cabinet Member: Councillor Mark Mather, Roads and Highways

Purpose

This report provides a comprehensive update on the County Council's preparations for the 2025/26 winter season. It highlights our robust planning, operational readiness, and the strong resilience measures in place to ensure the effective delivery of winter services across Northumberland.

Key Issues

The County Council continues to deliver winter services in full compliance with its statutory obligations under the Highways Act 1980.

There have been no changes to the approved service standards or maintenance policies since last winter, ensuring continuity, consistency, and reliability in the service provided.

The Council remains committed to maintaining all designated roads within established timeframes, adhering to the highest standards of operational performance and public safety.

Background – Staffing and Control of Operations

Winter service delivery is managed by the Highways and Transport Division under the leadership of Kris Westerby, Head of Highways. Andy Olive, Highways Delivery Manager, holds overall operational responsibility countywide.

- **Staffing:** A total of 116 staff, including managers, supervisors, drivers, and operatives, are allocated to winter operations. A structured three-shift rota system ensures full coverage, with most personnel drawn from the Highways team, supported by trained Neighbourhood Services drivers.



Northumberland County Council

- **Decision-Making:** Winter Service Delivery Managers – Russell Mason, Tony Bell, and Andy Olive – operate a 24/7 duty rota, supported by real-time data from Meteogroup and Vaisala forecasting systems. Decisions are made promptly to ensure timely and effective treatment of the network.
- **Emergency Protocols:** Members and the public are advised to contact the Council's Contact Centre for non-emergency winter issues. This ensures appropriate response coordination and prevents unnecessary disruption to on-duty staff.

Weather Monitoring

Through the Vaisala weather system, detailed local and regional data is continually monitored. Forecasts are updated three times daily, enabling informed, data-led decisions and proactive deployment of resources. This advanced system is a cornerstone of the Council's resilience strategy.

Technology Enhancements

- **Mobile Communication:** All winter service operatives are equipped with a mobile device, ensuring seamless coordination, live reporting, and operational efficiency.
- **Automated Systems:** In-vehicle technology provides precise route management, vehicle tracking, and automated gritting patterns. These innovations significantly strengthen service resilience and our response speed, accuracy, and accountability on Northumberland's network.

Vehicles and Gritting Routes

- **Fleet Readiness:** The fleet comprises 28 multi-purpose gritting vehicles with plough attachments, two purpose-built snowblowers, and four gully tankers, all scheduled for readiness by late October.
- **Gritting Routes:**
 - **28 primary routes** treated on a regular basis driving by forecast.
 - **26 secondary routes** activated during more severe conditions.

Nine new Mercedes-Benz gritters will be added later this season under the fleet replacement programme, further enhancing reliability and environmental efficiency within Northumberland.

Salt Management

- **Stock Levels:** The Council enters the 2025/26 season with 44,000 tonnes of salt, including a 6,000-tonne strategic reserve at Powburn depot. This ensures strong resilience against extended or severe winter periods.
- **Depot Network:** Operations are supported by 10 depots (manned and unmanned) strategically located across the county. Salt management is overseen by Andy Olive with support from area Quantity Surveyors and real-time tracking via route optimisation software.

Grit Bins and Community Engagement

- **Grit Bin Maintenance:** Over 2,440 grit bins and 2,100 salt heaps are inspected and replenished annually. Each site displays contact information for refill requests via the **Fix My Street** platform or the Council's call centre.
- **Public Communication:** The annual "Highway Services in Winter" information leaflet provides clear guidance on gritting operations, road safety, and driving in winter conditions. This will be distributed to all County Councillors, Town, and Parish Councils before the onset of severe weather.

Additional Support and Community Initiatives

- **Snow Clearing Contracts:** Local farmers and subcontractors play a crucial role in keeping rural and remote roads open. A full audit of contractor equipment is being completed to ensure readiness by early December.
- **Voluntary Snow Squads:** Trained community volunteers in villages such as Wooler, Belford, and Bamburgh will assist in clearing footpaths and local access routes. All volunteers will receive appropriate training, safety guidance, and materials to operate effectively.

Cross-Boundary Collaborations



The Council maintains effective cross-boundary agreements with Newcastle City Council, Durham County Council, Cumbria County Council, Scottish Borders Council, Colas, and National Highways.

These partnerships ensure coordinated responses and clear strategic routes such as the A69, A686, and A68.

Northumberland County Council provides winter service delivery for Newcastle City Council under a contractual arrangement which helps generate valuable income that supports the protection of local frontline services.

Severe Weather Procedures

In the event of significant snow or severe weather:

- A “Snow Room” will be activated to manage operational coordination.
- If conditions escalate, an Incident Support Room will be opened to work alongside Civil Contingencies and Emergency Services.
- Early alerts from the Met Office Hazard Manager enable proactive decision-making, ensuring swift mobilisation of resources and clear communication with the public.

Winter Cold Route Trials

Northumberland has undertaken comprehensive reviews of the entire road network, covering both primary and secondary gritting routes, to support the development of additional routes across the county. Currently, three gritting schedules are in operation, with 25 frontline gritters assigned to main routes, 7 to high-ground routes, and 2, to the 1000 metres above sea level routes.

Over recent years, surveys of the network have been carried out to identify opportunities to streamline and improve the efficiency of gritting operations, particularly between main and high-ground routes. This season, Northumberland will be trialling revised routes across the county, beginning mid-season, which will involve 15 gritters operating flexibly across both main and high-ground areas. The aim is to enhance coverage and coordination while achieving greater efficiency through a potential reduction in fleet requirements and salt usage when responding to ‘marginal’ nights when the county’s road network particularly along the coastal



areas do not require widespread pre-treatment and just need pre-targeted treatment to address known temperature critical 'cold spot' areas on the network.

Trials this season are therefore to refine cold route methodology, focusing on temperature-critical road sections that require targeted pre-treatment. Data from these trials will enhance route efficiency and optimise salt usage without compromising safety.

Conclusion

The County Council is fully prepared and highly resilient for the 2025/26 winter season.

Through strategic planning, advanced technology, dedicated staff, and strong community partnerships, the Council continues to deliver a high-performing, reliable winter service.

Our commitment to maintaining safe highways, supporting communities, and responding swiftly to changing conditions underscores our position as a well-prepared, professional, and dependable authority in managing winter resilience across Northumberland.