

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Operational Delivery Committee
DATE	27/05/2021
EXEMPT	Yes / No
CONFIDENTIAL	Yes / No
REPORT TITLE	Winter Maintenance Operations – Post 20/21 Winter Report
REPORT NUMBER	OPE/21/113
DIRECTOR	Rob Polkinghorne
CHIEF OFFICER	Mark Reilly
REPORT AUTHOR	Paul Davies
TERMS OF REFERENCE	1.1.1

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report is intended to provide Members with an overview of the strategy that the roads operations operated throughout the city during the winter of 2020/21.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:

- 2.1 Note the content of this report; and
- 2.2 Instruct the Chief Officer of Operations and Protective Services to bring back a further report to this Committee in September 2021 incorporating a revised Roads Winter Service Plan in advance of the 2021/22 winter period.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Winter operations commenced for 2020/21 on the morning of the 19th of November. Winter treatments were carried out on 77 days between that date and the 12th of April (please note that any finance figures quoted will not include the 8 days in April during which winter treatments were carried out). Treatment was carried out in line with the winter service plan, available here: [Roads winter maintenance report appendix 1.pdf \(acc.gov.uk\)](#)
- 3.2 Winter 2020/21 was significantly more severe in Aberdeen than previous recent winters and, set against a backdrop of the global pandemic, presented some new challenges.
- 3.2.1 Weather patterns this past winter saw significant temperature variations throughout the day, particularly challenging conditions to treat for. Day time temperatures would rise enough that precipitation was regularly in the form of rain but would then be followed with sharp drops in temperature into the evening and night-time. This had the effect of causing widespread ice formation across

the network. This challenge would be compounded by the daytime rain having the effect of washing off the salt spread during the preceding gritting operations.

3.2.2 This winter also saw more snowfall than in recent years with snow accumulations at various points between December and March.

3.2.3 It should be noted that current resource levels are geared for a winter which is around 'average' level, in terms of severity. While this may limit the service that can be provided, having an excess supply of winter resource may result in poor resource utilisation in the event of a mild winter (such as we have had in recent winters) and therefore may result in poorer service value; for instance, having gritting vehicles unused represents a significant service overhead.

3.2.4 The Roads service acknowledged well in advance of the commencement of winter operations that an outbreak of Covid 19 in one or more of the squads could severely affect ability to deliver a winter service. Careful planning helped ensure that no major staffing issues were encountered as a result of the pandemic, with a range of sanitisation measures implemented, as well as measures such as staggering staff start times and minimising the sharing of vehicles. Eight staff from grounds and waste were trained as City and Guilds Gritter/Plough drivers as a resilience measure. It should be noted that inter-service cooperation with grounds is normal for winter operations and without the help of grounds operatives, the roads service would be unable to deliver the service that it does. Grounds staff are key to our treatment of footways, as well as helping with tasks such as the replenishment of grit bins. Supervisory staff were largely working from home which afforded a level of protection and engineers trained as winter duty officers were available as resilience if required.

3.2 Winter service delivery summary – Statistical highlights

- 77 days on which winter service took place
- 10 Priority one routes - 4 Gold and 6 Silver
- 479 Gold routes completed* over 77 days, covering 31,400 miles and spreading 3,500 tonnes of rock salt
- 605 Silver routes completed* over 72 days, covering 42,500 miles and spreading 3,600 tonnes of rock salt
- Priority two and three roads treated on 38 days covering 18,400 miles and spreading 1300 tonnes of rock salt**
- 195 one tonne salt bags delivered for community use

*Including multiple running's of the same routes on some days due to rain/refreeze events and snowfall

**Please note this may only have been partial treatment and does not mean all priority 2/3 roads were treated. Treatment was prioritised by need and completed within resource limitations.

3.3 Footpath & Cycle Path Operations

Footpath operations were given additional support from Environmental Services when necessary. With over 1200km of footways it was not feasible to have widespread coverage as anticipated by some members of the public. With a further 480 km of remote paths and areas within Council housing estates requiring treatment, the widespread expectation of "black" footpaths and car parks is not achievable with the resources available. Only priority one footways

were treated on a preventative basis and other areas were treated on a reactive basis.

3.4 Grit bins

Grit bins were filled prior to the start of the winter season and maintained throughout the period. This proved challenging as the freeze/thaw nature of the winter, combined with regular rain washing off salt meant that operatives were forced to re-run gritting routes throughout the days in time that could otherwise have been used to replenish bins. Over 500 requests for refills were received, more than half the total number of bins on the network. The committee agreed policy of not adding further new grit bins to the network was continued, with the struggles to keep existing bins filled illustrating the reasoning behind this decision. The larger “community grit bins” remained from previous years and allowed residents to collect quantities of salt.

3.5 One Tonne Salt Bags

3.5.1 The one tonne salt bag scheme attracted 268 applications for 20/21. These resulted in 195 bags being delivered with other applicants failing to continue with their applications or their applications being deemed unsuitable.

3.5.2 During the winter period, and in response to high demand in several locations, some slight loosening of scheme requirements was made in the interest of improved customer experience. This included the delivery of salt bags beside several unadopted grit bins, allowing residents to fill an unadopted grit bin. The locations where this exception was made were steep sections of adopted road where developers had left grit bins. The service will carry out a review of eligibility criteria prior to winter 21/22 to see if further changes can be made to give an improved customer service, but whilst continuing to work with the resources available and not compromising other operations in the process. Plans for changes to the scheme will be outlined in the pre-winter committee report which will be presented to committee in September 2021.

3.6 Salt

3.6.1 A total of around 11,760 tonnes of rock salt was used treating the council’s network during winter 2020/21. This compares to around 4,500 during winter 19/20.

3.6.2 From customer feedback, it is apparent that for a number of customers, the purpose and limitations of salt are unclear. It became apparent during the periods of snowfall that customers were using excessive quantities of salt – from both grit bins and the one tonne bags – in a bid to clear snow. While salt will have a melting effect on snow, it will be extremely localised and is not at all effective as a snow clearance tool. For this, there is no substitute for a plough or shovel. Where snow is compacted by traffic – foot or vehicle – the mechanical action of this will turn the compacted snow to slush rather than ice, but it will still not clear it. Even without the presence of salt, vehicles can have a clearing effect on snow, and with a significant reduction in traffic levels as a result of Covid restrictions, it was observed that roads were not clearing as

quickly as when subject to normal traffic levels in both treated and untreated areas.

3.6.3 Customers using large quantities of salt on snow was one factor which led to an elevated number of grit bin and salt bag refills during the periods of snowfall. With operatives at the time primarily engaged in snow clearing activities, grit bin refills became a secondary task which in turn led to some customer dissatisfaction as a long backlog of refill requests resulted. It may be desirable to seek to educate customers on the best use of salt. An example given as a response to some enquiries is that a standard household bucket can hold enough salt to treat one third of the footways of Union Street. Whilst there is no suggestion that excess salt use was the sole reason for a backlog of grit bin refill requests, it did certainly play a role.

3.6.4 Salt levels dropped extremely close to resilience levels (4485 tonnes remaining) during the winter period. Had it not been possible to obtain further supplies of salt, the service level would have had to be cut back to resilience levels with only priority one routes treated. The difficulty in obtaining salt was largely attributable to the ongoing pandemic and, hopefully, will not be repeated in future winters. Before the start of winter, salt stores were maximised as the possibility of difficulties in obtaining salt had been foreseen.

3.7 Complaints, enquiries and compliments

3.7.1 Through the official complaint channels, the winter service received 46 complaints about the winter service throughout the winter period. The two biggest areas of complaint were slow response to grit bin refill requests and lack of gritting at the customers location. As discussed in section 3.6, excessive salt use by some customers exacerbated the challenges of keeping grit bins filled with snow periods meaning that operatives were not available to refill bins. The backlog of refill requests exemplifies why the policy of not placing new bins on the network was agreed, as doing so would only serve to compound the issue.

3.7.2 Complaints about a lack of gritting at a particular location are always expected as it is well out-with Council capabilities to maintain all roads in a snow and ice-free condition throughout winter. The complaints further highlighted that some customers have an expectation that a treated road will be “black” and free of signs of snow or ice when the reality is that treatment does not necessarily mean this will be the case. Complaints came from across the network and did not come from one or more specific areas.

3.7.3 A number of complaints were made direct to officers, despite requests for these to come through the official channels. As these are not possible to track it is difficult to comment on how many there were, or the areas they concerned, however Anguston Road and Heathryfold Circle were subject to higher levels of complaint. Both were removed from priority one gritting routes prior to winter 19/20 when the adoption of the former trunk roads (A92 and A96) along with budget update required officers to review winter priority winter routes. Both locations were targeted as a priority following the completion of the priority one routes. Anguston Road was discussed in the pre-winter report (section 3.3.3 –

available here: [Roads winter maintenance report.pdf \(acc.gov.uk\)](#)). It remains officer's opinion that this road has been correctly classified and it should be noted that the steepest section of the road, and entrance to it, lies within Aberdeenshire who do not treat it as a priority one route either.

- 3.7.4 Members enquires followed a similar trend to customer complaints with most concerning why there had been a lack of service in a particular location. In total 73 were received through Firmstep. Many of these were complaints that had been made to members and then passed to the service to respond to as opposed to coming in direct through the customer complaints channel. Requests for new grit bins featured highly on the list of enquiries, however as mentioned previously, policy is not to issue new bins and so these requests were rejected. The higher and more exposed areas of Kingswells, the North Deeside Road corridor (especially Peterculter) and the higher roads such as Lee Crescent North (Bridge of Don) were each the subject of several enquiries. These areas were prioritised once primary routes had been completed.
- 3.7.5 The C128C which runs north from Blacktop Road to the A944 (Kingswells roundabout), was the subject a selection of enquiries. The area between the two locations has been extensively developed and a new route between them is now in use. Sections of the old road have become cul-de-sacs and little of the original road is now used by through traffic. The gritting route follows the new roads between the two locations. Prior to the commencement of winter operations, these sections were reclassified and removed from priority one routing. One section which used to be the main through road now serves only around 7 properties and so was removed from a priority one route. This led to some dissatisfaction from customers who were used to living on a priority one route. It is officer's opinion that the sections were correctly reclassified. An additional one tonne salt bag was delivered to the location to aid residents.
- 3.7.6 As well as the complaints and enquiries, officers were also pleased to receive a number of service compliments from members and the public. The one tonne salt bag scheme had particularly good feedback with 15 of the recipients feeding back praise and appreciation.

3.8 Media team

The communications team first approached the roads team in the autumn of 2017 with the suggestion of being more proactive with informing the public through social media about what winter maintenance for the forthcoming winter, building on an already-established winter maintenance communications plan. A series of social media graphics were produced, and these are used alongside posts informing the public about which areas we are gritting, why we have to prioritise routes, how we prioritise routes for roads and pavements, why we cannot be everywhere at the same time, where grit bins are located, weather forecasts, information on roads badly affected by snow or ice, and updates on school closures or bin collections or other council services adversely affected by the weather.

The social media graphics are complemented by a video showing the day in the life of a gritter driver, animated versions of the infographics, and the ability to see where gritters are around the city through a gritter tracker.

The social media graphics are used throughout the day and evenings and, in periods of heavy snowfall or ice, about 10 messages can be put out in a day. They are also used, alongside media releases, to warn the public of snow forecast in the days beforehand.

Since the introduction of the proactive social media messages, it is estimated inquiries and complaints by telephone to ACC have reduced by about 50%, freeing up resources in both the roads team and the customer contacts team. For a social media comparison, in a one-week snow period in 2018, there were 1,720 incoming comments on ACC social media feeds. For the seven month period from 29 September 2020 to 28 April 2021, there was a total of 1,584 incoming comments on social media feeds.

Local media are also kept informed throughout the day by receiving the same information after it has gone out on social media. The reach of local media is very important in spreading the messages particularly for commuters. During periods of heavy snowfall or ice, the messages are complemented with additional media releases.

In the 2020/21 winter, the communications team also started sending out the same information used in social media posts to all councillors, so they can use the information to inform their constituents about where gritting is happening and to provide a greater understanding for how the gritting operation works.

3.9 Spaces for people

Spaces for people presented a new challenge to the service for winter 2020/21. The nature of the spaces meant that traditional treatment methods were not always possible, for instance the wooden structures on Union Street to facilitate people boarding busses. These were treated by hand. The spaces for people interventions were treated to the same level as the footways adjacent to them as if to be an extension of that footway. When treating Union Street footways, for instance, we use a Kubota which will leave a strip of salt and we rely on the public spreading it over a wider area as it is walked. These widened footways require more salt to achieve the same results. Additional gritting was also required on the Beach Boulevard and Esplanade which was completed at the same time as the Union Street footways.

3.10 Future developments

Prior to next winter a review will be carried out of current practices to ensure these are optimal. The winter service plan will be reviewed and lessons learned during the past winter will be implemented. Gritting routes will be checked in line with alternations to the network to ensure these are still running efficiently. The road service will continue to monitor the market for any solutions or technologies which may be able to provide further efficiency gains or enhanced service.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Council's revenue budget for 2020/21 for winter maintenance was £1.57m. The final expenditure was £2.1m, £0.53m above the allocated budget. This winter was relatively severe compared with last year, however not overly severe in the context of less recent winters.

The total expenditure on the salt used on the adopted roads network this financial year (2020/21) has been in the order of £430,000.

When the city experiences a more severe winter the additional costs of winter maintenance would need to be covered by the council's contingency budget.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Failure to provide a robust and justifiable "Roads Winter Service Plan" will leave the Council more vulnerable to legal challenges and injury claims.
- 5.2 The Council is obligated under Section 34 of the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 to take such steps as they consider reasonable to prevent snow and ice endangering the safe passage of pedestrians and vehicles over public roads: and this is achieved through the Council's "Roads Winter Service Plan".

6. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

To ensure that the service meets its obligation in the coming years, the following risks need to be considered and addressed:

	Risk	Low (L), Medium (M), High (H)	Mitigation
Financial	The additional burden placed on the winter service by the creation of the Spaces for People and difficulties treating them could impact the wider winter service.	H	Ensure that resources are made available and identify the likely additional demands from Spaces for People
Legal	As per section 5	M	Ensure that the winter plan is fit for purpose and fulfils our statutory obligations. Ensure operations are carried out in accordance with the plan

Employee	Staff resources	M	Ensure that there are sufficient adequately trained staff resources to deliver the winter service plan.
Customer	Variable numbers of Community Salt Bags depending on the prevailing weather.	H	Use Corporate Communications to continue to highlight the importance of the community salt but to set a cutoff date after which provision cannot be guaranteed.
Environment	Salt spread on the network enters the water system and can have a negative environmental effect	M	Ensure that excessive salt is not used when carrying out treatments.
Technology	Poor public engagement through social media/web services	M	Ensure the media team continue with social media posts to keep customers informed.
Reputational	Winter service is always very much under customer spotlight making it vital the best service possible is delivered	M	Ensure the winter service plan is robust and adhered to.

7. OUTCOMES

<u>COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN</u>	
	Impact of Report
<p>Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement</p> <p><i>3. Refresh the Local Transport Strategy, ensuring it includes the results of a city centre parking review, promotes cycle and pedestrian routes, and</i></p>	<p>Continue to work to facilitate safe transport for customers during winter weather events.</p>

<i>considers support for public transport.</i>	
Aberdeen City Local Outcome Improvement Plan	
Prosperous Economy Stretch Outcomes	The provision of an effective winter maintenance service that keeps the transport network working effectively is important to support the economy of Aberdeen during adverse winter conditions.
Prosperous Place Stretch Outcomes	The Council is committed to providing a winter maintenance service that will help to enhance Aberdeen as a place to invest, live and visit. An effective winter maintenance service will also make the city safer for all road and transport users.
Regional and City Strategies	The proposals within this report support the Strategic Regional Transport Strategy facilitating safe winter transport links for the benefits of communities and businesses.
UK and Scottish Legislative and Policy Programmes	The winter service plan considers the guidance of the National Winter Service Research Group (NWSRG) and Society of Chief Officers of Transport in Scotland (SCOTS) and our statutory obligations under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984.

8. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Impact Assessment	Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) completed
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Winter service plan 2020/21 - [Roads winter maintenance report appendix 1.pdf \(acc.gov.uk\)](#)

Pre winter report 2020 - [Roads winter maintenance report.pdf \(acc.gov.uk\)](#)

10. APPENDICES (if applicable)

11. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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