

# **East Sussex Highways Winter Service Plan: Operations 2025-2026**

**Strategic Document**

Highways and Infrastructure Services Contract 2023-30



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## Document Control

This document forms part of the documentation required under Clause S1905 and Core Activity COR-009 (Winter Service) of the HIS Contract (2023–2030).

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## **1. Executive Summary**

Each year from 1 October to 30 April, East Sussex County Council delivers a comprehensive Winter Service to help keep the county moving during cold weather. This plan sets out how we prepare for and respond to winter conditions — including frost, ice, and snow — using expert forecasting, targeted road treatments, and community support schemes.

We treat approximately 844 miles (1,358 km) of the Primary Network on a routine basis, with a further 181 miles (291 km) of Secondary Network treated during severe or prolonged conditions. Within this, a defined Essential Treatment Network of 492 km (306 miles) provides a minimum service level to safeguard access for emergency services, hospitals, and key communities.

This service is delivered using:

- A fleet of 23 GPS-tracked gritting vehicles, including operational reserve vehicles.
- 5 strategically located depots
- Salt barns stocked before winter and replenished as required.
- Trained Duty Officers, real-time monitoring systems, and strong coordination with our highways contractor.

Community support is central to our approach. We maintain over 900 county-owned grit bins, work with local councils and farmers through the Community Snow Plough Scheme, and supply bulk salt during extended cold periods. Our live online maps and weather alerts help the public stay informed and travel safely.

Winter weather can disrupt daily life, interrupt transport, and isolate vulnerable people. It can also affect the local economy by causing delays and closures. That is why a well-run winter service is essential: it ensures public safety, maintains emergency access, supports business continuity, and strengthens community resilience across East Sussex.

This plan reflects our commitment to delivering a proactive, efficient, and adaptable winter service that protects people, supports essential services, and keeps East Sussex connected in all conditions.

## **2. Scope**

This Winter Service Plan sets out how East Sussex County Council (ESCC) delivers its statutory responsibilities for winter service between 1 October and 30 April each year.

What is included

- Approximately 844 miles (1,358 km) of the Primary Network treated routinely during the winter period.
- Approximately 181 miles (291 km) of the Secondary Network, treated during prolonged or severe conditions.
- The Essential Treatment Network (492 km / 306 miles), a defined subset of the Primary Network, providing a minimum service level when conditions or resources demand prioritisation.

What is not included

- National Highways' Strategic Road Network (SRN) in East Sussex, which includes the:
  - A21 (Hastings to Flimwell)
  - A26 (Newhaven to Beddingham)
  - A27 (Falmer to Pevensey)
  - A259 (Pevensey to Kent boundary via Bexhill, Hastings, and Rye)
- Most footways and cycleways - which are only treated reactively during severe or prolonged conditions and subject to available resources (see section 7 ).
- Private roads and land, which remain the responsibility of the owner or occupier.

This scope reflects a risk-based, reasonably practicable approach, consistent with the Highways Act 1980, the Well-Managed Highway Infrastructure (UKRLG, 2016) Code of Practice, and guidance from the National Winter Service Research Group (NWSRG).

## **3. Introduction**

This Winter Service Plan explains how East Sussex County Council (ESCC) delivers its responsibilities for keeping key roads safe and usable during the winter period (1 October to 30 April), in line with the approved Winter Service Policy (Sept 2025).

It sets out:

- how weather conditions are monitored, and treatment decisions are made.
- which parts of the network are prioritised for salting and snow clearance.
- how resources such as vehicles, salt, and staff are managed; and
- the governance, communication, and coordination arrangements in place.

## **Legal Duty**

Under the Highways Act 1980 (Section 41(1A)), the Council is required to:

“Ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice.”

We apply a ‘reasonably practicable’ standard. This means we cannot guarantee that all roads will always be ice-free, but we take all reasonable actions to manage risk, particularly on our most critical routes.

### **Best Practice Frameworks**

This Plan adopts a risk-based approach in line with:

- Well-Managed Highway Infrastructure (UKRLG, 2016) – national Code of Practice for highway management.
- National Winter Service Research Group (NWSRG) Practical Guidance – the UK industry standard for forecasting, treatment, and resilience.
- Met Office / National Severe Weather Warning Service (NSWWS) – for weather monitoring and decision-making.
- ADEPT and Local Resilience Forum guidance – ensuring coordination across local authority boundaries and with emergency planning partners.

### **Wider Context**

The Winter Service Plan forms part of a broader suite of documents, including the East Sussex Local Transport Plan, the Network Resilience Plan, the Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Strategy, and the Contractor’s Operational Handbook. Together, these documents guide how the Council plans for, delivers, and improves its winter service.

## **4. Objectives of Winter Service**

Our winter service plays a vital role in keeping East Sussex safe, connected, and resilient throughout the winter. We are committed to:

- Keeping people safe by helping to prevent accidents caused by ice and snow
- Supporting daily life by keeping important roads open for emergency services, public transport, and essential travel
- Prioritising treatments in a fair and risk-based way, focusing on the most used and most critical routes
- Providing clear and timely updates to the public, partners, and local services
- Enabling and encouraging community action with grit bins, salt deliveries, and local snow clearance schemes
- Following expert advice and national best practice to guide our work

We work efficiently to make the best use of our staff, equipment, and budget — helping ensure a reliable service for everyone in East Sussex.

## 5. Governance and Responsibilities

East Sussex County Council is responsible for setting the overall approach to winter service and making sure it is delivered to a high standard. Day-to-day operations are carried out by our highway's maintenance contractor, working closely with Council staff.

We follow a clear structure that separates decision-making, operational delivery, and performance monitoring:

- **ESCC Contracts Management Group (Highways):** Sets winter service policy, agrees the priority network, manages the wider Highways Term Maintenance Contract (which includes winter service), monitors performance, and leads service planning and improvement – in accordance with Clause S1905 and Core Activity COR-009 of the Client's Work Specifications.
- **Contractor:** The current service provider is: xxxxxxxxx, appointed under the county's Highways Term Maintenance Contract. They are responsible for delivering winter service operations – including the management of depots, vehicles, gritting crews, salt stocks, and daily treatments.
- **Duty Officers:** Monitor weather forecasts, decide when and where to grit, and record all treatment decisions. They also act as the main point of contact during winter operations.

This structure helps us stay organised, responsive, and accountable – making sure that winter services are delivered safely, fairly, and efficiently across the county.

**NOTE:** Where arrangements are made by the Contractor with other parties for Winter Service provision on the Area Network, the Contractor retains full responsibility for ensuring that such services are delivered in accordance with the contract requirements. These delegated arrangements do not absolve the Contractor of their obligations under the Term Maintenance Contract.

## 6. Network Priorities

Our winter service is based on a clear priority system that aligns with the Council's Winter Service Policy and our wider approach to risk-based asset management. This ensures we make the best use of available resources while maintaining safety and network resilience.

The winter service network in East Sussex is structured as follows:

- **Essential Network:** A subset of the network maintained during the most severe conditions to preserve emergency access, connections to critical services and strategic movement. This is closely aligned to the Resilient Network identified in

the Councils Network Resilience Plan and forms the baseline we will maintain when resources or conditions restrict wider treatments.

- **Primary Network:** Main A and B roads, principal bus routes, and key access routes into towns and larger settlements.
- **Secondary Network:** Important local links, including roads to schools, smaller communities, and key rural routes. These are treated when conditions are prolonged or particularly severe.

This approach is based on:

- How busy the road is
- Access to hospitals, emergency services, and transport hubs
- Location of schools and community centres
- Known local risks, like steep hills or exposed areas

These priorities are supported by the Councils Strategic Asset Management approach (risk based) - ensuring a transparent and consistent approach through all Highway activities.

Footways and cycleways are not treated as standard. However, in severe weather and if resources allow, the Council may prioritise areas with high pedestrian use - such as town centres, schools, or transport links (see section 7).

Route maps and gritting priorities are published online for the public to view at any time.

<https://live.eastsussexhighways.com/services/services-winter-service>

### **Activation of the Minimum Winter Service Network**

In line with Well-Managed Highway Infrastructure (UKRLG, 2016), East Sussex County Council has defined a Minimum Winter Service Network, referred to in this Plan as the Essential Network. This provides a guaranteed baseline of service during the most severe or prolonged winter conditions.

Activation will be considered when:

- Forecasts indicate severe and/or prolonged winter weather (e.g. heavy snowfall, extended sub-zero temperatures).
- Resource constraints limit the ability to maintain the wider salting network (e.g. salt stocks, gritter availability, staff shortages).
- National or regional guidance directs authorities to prioritise critical infrastructure.

### **Governance and Agreement**



- The decision to activate the Minimum Winter Service Network will be made jointly by the Duty Officer and the Principal Operations Manager XXXXXX, in consultation with the Contract Manager (ESCC).
- Agreement will be confirmed with the ESCC Emergency Planning Team and the Head of Highways (ESCC) to ensure senior officer oversight.
- Where appropriate, activation may be coordinated with neighbouring authorities and National Highways to ensure consistency across administrative boundaries.

## **Communication**

- Activation will be formally logged within the daily treatment decision record.
- Notifications will be issued to emergency services, schools, transport operators, parish and town councils, and community partners.
- Public information will be shared promptly through the East Sussex Highways website, live gritting maps, and social media channels.
- Deactivation and recovery arrangements will be agreed with senior officers and communicated in the same way.

This structured protocol ensures that the Essential Treatment Network is activated in a transparent, risk-based, and well-coordinated manner, safeguarding critical access routes and maintaining public confidence during the most challenging winter conditions.

## **7. Footways and Cycleways**

We do not routinely pre-treat footways and cycleways.

The decision to deploy resources for treating footways and cycleways will be made by the Duty Officer in consultation with the Principal Operations Manager XXXXXX, considering available resources and operational priorities.

Treatments are manual/mechanical (e.g., bagged salt, pedestrian spreaders) and may be supported by community self-help using grit bins.

During severe or prolonged conditions, and subject to resources, we will prioritise:

- town centres and busy shopping streets,
- approaches to hospitals, health centres, and transport hubs,
- areas near schools at opening times,
- locations with steep gradients or persistent icing risk.

This approach follows a risk-based method consistent with Well-managed Highway Infrastructure (UKRLG, 2016) and NWSRG guidance.

## **8. Forecasting and Decision-Making**

Accurate, real-time data is essential to ensure the right treatments are delivered at the right time. Every day during the winter period, trained Duty Officers assess conditions and decide whether action is needed to keep the network safe.

We use a combination of forecasting tools and on-road monitoring equipment, including:

- Specialist weather forecasts supplied by DTN (previously MeteoGroup), tailored for highway conditions
- Route-based forecasting supported by thermal mapping to account for varying road surface conditions
- Five roadside weather stations across East Sussex that provide continuous data on:
  - Road surface temperature
  - Air temperature and humidity
  - Surface state (e.g. wet, dry, ice)
  - Vaisala RoadAI and IceAlert systems for automated monitoring and alerting
  - Live vehicle data from GPS-enabled gritting vehicles, including treatment progress and conditions

Duty Officers use this information, along with national guidance from the NWSRG and their own experience, to decide:

- Whether treatment is needed
- Which routes to treat
- What salt rates and methods to use
- When treatment should begin

### **Treatment Decision Matrix**

Duty Officers follow a structured decision-making framework when planning treatments. This includes:

- Road surface temperature thresholds (e.g. approaching 0°C and falling)
- Forecast of precipitation, frost, or snow
- Residual salt levels from previous treatments
- Time of day and expected traffic volumes
- Road surface conditions (wet, dry, damp)

This information helps determine:

- Whether treatment is needed
- The right treatment type (e.g. dry salt, pre-wet salt, ploughing)
- How much salt to apply (based on standard spread rates)

- The full treatment matrix, along with risk assessments and spread rate charts, is included in the internal Operational Handbook.

All decisions are logged digitally and reviewed regularly to ensure accountability and continual improvement.

### **Cross Boundary Agreements**

To ensure consistency and efficiency across adjacent highway networks, the Contractor is encouraged to implement cross boundary agreements with neighbouring authorities. These agreements support seamless winter service delivery where roads cross jurisdictional lines.

East Sussex County Council currently shares Winter Service treatment decisions with neighbouring authorities including Brighton and Hove City Council, West Sussex County Council, Kent County Council, and National Highways (Area 4). This helps ensure coordinated treatments on connecting routes and avoids service gaps along network borders.

These arrangements are reviewed annually through the East Sussex Local Resilience Forum to ensure consistency of approach and effective cross-boundary coordination

## **9. Treatment Approach**

Our winter treatments are guided by national best practice and tailored to East Sussex's unique geography and climate. The approach balances safety, efficiency, and environmental responsibility, using a risk-based method to target the most appropriate locations with the right treatments at the right time.

We do not apply a "one size fits all" model. Instead, treatment decisions are shaped by:

- Forecast severity and timing
- Type and condition of the road surface
- Levels of traffic (affecting how salt activates)
- Residual salt from previous treatments
- Available resources and route coverage priorities

By adjusting spread rates, treatment types, and timing, we ensure that treatments are effective even under fast-changing or localised conditions. For example, forecast freezing rain may require multiple successive treatments, while dry but cold nights may need no treatment if salt remains active from earlier applications.

Our operational delivery partner uses GPS-tracked vehicles and live route data to monitor progress, ensure coverage, and provide real-time feedback to Duty Officers. This allows for dynamic updates to treatment plans if conditions change overnight or if new risks emerge.

Treatments are adapted to reduce salt use, minimise environmental impact, and ensure effective coverage of high-risk areas. All operations align with the Contractor's ISO 14001 Environmental Management System, ensuring compliance with environmental requirements.

The specific treatment types, spread rates, decision matrices, and escalation thresholds are fully detailed in the Operational Handbook. This ensures that operational teams have consistent, data-driven guidance to inform delivery, while maintaining the flexibility to respond to real-world conditions.

All treatment decisions are digitally logged and reviewed regularly to ensure they remain proportionate, timely, and aligned with the Council's commitment to a fair, resilient and well-managed highway network.

## **10. Resources and Resilience**

We're well prepared to deal with winter weather across East Sussex. We have the people, vehicles, and materials we need to carry out daily gritting and snow clearing, as well as back-up plans for more extreme or prolonged weather.

### **Network Coverage**

- **The Essential Network** – a defined subset of the Primary Network – provides 306 miles (492 km) of critical routes that are maintained during the most severe conditions to safeguard access for emergency services and essential facilities.
- **The Primary Network** covers approximately 844 miles (1,358 km) of key A and B roads, bus corridors and access routes into towns and larger settlements.
- **The Secondary Network** adds approximately 181 miles (291 km) of important local links, including routes to schools, smaller communities, and key rural roads. This network is only treated during prolonged or particularly severe conditions.

Our winter service resources include:

- 23 gritting vehicles: All GPS-tracked and well maintained, ready to treat roads across the county
- 5 highway depots: Strategically located to allow fast and efficient response
- Salt barns: Stocked before winter begins, with regular monitoring and restocking throughout the season

### **Resilience Measures**

To ensure continuity even in the most challenging conditions, we also have:

- The Emergency Network based on the Resilient Network, used when only key roads can be maintained. A transition to the Essential Treatment Network can be

implemented within 2 hours of trigger decision, ensuring continuity of access to critical routes.

- Back-up rotas and trained staff to sustain operations during extended severe weather.
- Contingency plans covering fuel shortages, vehicle breakdowns, and other emergencies.

Our approach follows NWSRG national guidance and supports the Council's wider highway management strategy. Detailed procedures and contingency arrangements are set out in the Operational Handbook.

### **Mutual Aid Agreements**

Mutual aid may be required when a winter service provider experiences a temporary resource issue. In such cases, support may be provided by other service providers through the sharing of materials (e.g. salt), facilities, or the delivery of Winter Service on parts of another network.

Mutual aid also enables cooperation during periods of exceptional demand to ensure continuity of service for road users. Any agreements for mutual aid must be discussed in advance, with contact details and capabilities of provision agreed between parties.

The Contractor shall document all mutual aid requests and resulting decisions, including justifications. It is important to note that mutual aid arrangements do not remove or reduce the Contractor's contractual obligations.

## **11. Community Support**

We know that local communities play a vital role in helping East Sussex stay safe and connected during winter weather. The Council supports this with a range of tools, resources, and advice.

Support available includes:

- **Grit bins:** Placed at key locations such as hills, bends, or junctions where slipping is more likely. These are checked and filled before winter, and restocked when possible, during the season.
- **Bulk salt bags:** Delivered to parish and town councils during prolonged cold spells to help treat local roads and paths.
- **Community Snow Plough Scheme:** Local contractors and farmers are equipped and trained to help clear snow in rural areas. They work to agreed routes and are covered by insurance when supporting the Council.

We also provide:

- Guidance for safe community action

- Risk assessments and public liability cover (where registered)
- A named contact within the highways team

This approach helps build local resilience while ensuring safety and coordination across the county. Full operational details, including registration forms and scheme criteria, are set out in the internal Operational Handbook. To enquire about taking part in a local winter support scheme, please visit [www.eastsussexhighways.com/contact-us](http://www.eastsussexhighways.com/contact-us) to speak with the Highways Team.

## **Community Actions**

Residents, organisations, and local volunteers all play an important role in supporting East Sussex's winter service. The Council encourages safe, practical actions that help keep communities moving during cold or severe weather.

Ways the public can help include:

- Using grit bins responsibly. Grit bins are placed at key locations to support local safety. They are intended for use on public roads and pavements and should not be used for private property.
- Clearing pavements safely. Residents can help by clearing paths near their homes using a shovel and grit or salt. This should be done carefully and in line with government safety advice.
- Limiting non-essential travel. During severe weather events, the public is advised to avoid unnecessary journeys and to follow official updates before setting out.
- Reporting problems. Grit bin refills, road hazards, or untreated areas can be reported directly via the Council's website or contact centre.
- Joining local support schemes. Many town and parish councils operate snow clearance or salt-spreading schemes supported by the County Council. These schemes may be open to farmers, contractors, or local volunteers.

All community involvement should be carried out safely and with regard to others. For more information, or to get involved with a local scheme, visit

[www.eastsussexhighways.com](http://www.eastsussexhighways.com)

## **12. Communication**

Clear and timely communication is essential to the success of the winter service. It helps residents, road users, partners, and stakeholders stay informed, plan, and remain safe during periods of severe weather.

East Sussex County Council works closely with its contractor to provide coordinated updates before, during, and after winter weather events. Communication supports public awareness, operational decision-making, and community involvement.

Our approach includes:

- Daily public updates via the Council's website and social media channels during the core winter period
- A live online gritting map showing which routes are being treated and when: [Gritting routes | What we do - Winter service | live.eastsussexhighways.com](https://live.eastsussexhighways.com)
- Severe weather alerts and travel advice issued ahead of forecast snow or ice
- Internal briefings and reports shared with emergency services, schools, transport operators, and partner organisations
- Support for community schemes, including proactive contact with town and parish councils

Key messages include:

- When and where gritting is planned
- Advice on driving and walking safely in wintry conditions
- How to access and use grit bins responsibly
- Updates during snow clearance and escalation events

The Council also uses insights from previous years, customer feedback, and local reports to improve how and when information is shared. Operational communication protocols and escalation arrangements are detailed in the Operational Handbook.

### **13. Severe Weather and Escalation**

When winter weather becomes more severe, the Council activates its escalation procedures to protect the most important routes and keep essential services moving.

In extreme conditions, we:

- Activate a dedicated Snow Desk to coordinate 24/7 operations
- Prioritise the Essential Treatment Network to maintain emergency and critical access routes
- Deploy additional support from local contractors, farmers, and community partners
- Increase the frequency of public updates, alerts, and advice

Escalation is based on:

- Widespread snow or prolonged freezing conditions
- Significant impact on travel, access, or public safety
- Forecasts indicating extended severe weather

A stepped approach is followed, including:

- Standby/Preparedness – monitoring forecasts and ensuring crews and supplies are ready

- Enhanced Response – treating more frequently and extending coverage (e.g. to secondary routes)
- Severe Weather Protocol – activating the Snow Desk, involving third parties, and focusing on essential routes only
- Recovery Phase – supporting snow clearance, restocking salt, and assisting community access

All actions are logged and coordinated in line with the internal Operational Handbook, which sets out clear triggers and procedures for escalation.

### **Abandoned Vehicle Arrangements**

If abandoned vehicles obstruct Winter Service operations, the Contractor must make every effort to contact the owner and request removal. If the owner cannot be contacted, the Contractor must provide full details of the vehicle, location, and reason for removal to the Police, and maintain a log of all such communications.

Vehicles may only be moved after direct instruction from a Police Officer for each individual case.

## **14. Monitoring and Improvement**

We continuously monitor the performance of the winter service to ensure it remains effective, efficient, and responsive.

Key monitoring activities include:

- GPS tracking of all gritting vehicles to confirm coverage and timing
- Digital logging of all treatment decisions and completed actions
- Salt usage monitoring to ensure supplies are used efficiently and replenished when needed
- Public feedback gathered through online forms and customer services
- Daily reporting during active periods, and post-event reviews following major incidents

At the end of each winter season, we carry out a formal service review. This includes analysing:

- Route performance and network coverage
- Salt usage and stock management
- Weather forecasting accuracy
- Community scheme participation
- Any issues, delays, or public complaints

This review helps identify lessons and supports ongoing improvements to our service, routes, and communications. It also ensures alignment with our Highways Asset



Management Strategy and national guidance, including the NWSRG and the Code of Practice for Well-managed Highway Infrastructure.

## **Appendix 1. Operational Handbook Summary**

The Operational Handbook is a contractual document issued in accordance with Clause S1905 and Core Activity COR-009 (Winter Service) of the Highways and Infrastructure Services Contract 2023–2030. It supports the delivery of the Winter Service as set out in the Council’s Winter Service Policy (approved July 2025), which establishes the strategic objectives and risk-based approach to winter maintenance across East Sussex.

This Handbook provides the detailed operational guidance required by the Contractor to implement the Winter Service Plan. It complements the Plan by translating policy and strategy into practical, on-the-ground procedures for safe, effective, and timely service delivery.

As it contains personal and operationally sensitive information, the Handbook is not a public document. A redacted version may be made available on request via East Sussex Highways.

The Handbook will contain as a minimum:

### **Organisational Structure and Contact Information**

- ✓ Key roles and responsibilities
- ✓ Full contact directory
- ✓ Decision-making and escalation chart

### **Duty Officer and Forecasting Procedures**

- ✓ Access to Vaisala / MetDesk systems
- ✓ Forecast interpretation guidance
- ✓ Daily decision log process
- ✓ Email, text, and Teams communications procedure

### **Treatment Planning and Dispatch**

- ✓ Use of NWSRG-compliant spread matrices
- ✓ Treatment selection and adjustment guidance
- ✓ Calibration and spread rate control procedures

### **Routes and Scheduling**

- ✓ Driver rotas
- ✓ Detailed route maps
- ✓ Treatment duration and shift timings

### **Fleet and Equipment Management**

- ✓ Gritter maintenance checklist

- ✓ Spreader calibration and setup guidance
- ✓ Vehicle breakdown and callout response procedures
- ✓ Fuel shortage and adverse weather contingency plans

### **Salt Management**

- ✓ Salt stock tracking and restocking process
- ✓ Moisture testing and salt barn storage procedures
- ✓ Salt ordering thresholds

### **Community Support Coordination**

- ✓ Grit bin inspection and refill logs
- ✓ Community snow plough participant list
- ✓ Payment, indemnity, and activation process for community support

### **Severe Weather and Emergency Response**

- ✓ Snow Desk activation criteria and staffing plan
- ✓ Emergency escalation templates
- ✓ Cross-boundary and emergency responder coordination

### **Health & Safety and Risk Management**

- ✓ RAMS documentation
- ✓ PPE requirements and driver safety guidance
- ✓ Lone working instructions

### **Training and Competency**

- ✓ Staff training records and certification logs
- ✓ Induction records for decision-makers and contractors

### **Operational Monitoring and Records**

- ✓ Decision logs and archiving process
- ✓ Treatment logs and GPS tracking records
- ✓ Audit trails and claims defence process