



I H I E

**INSTITUTE OF HIGHWAY
INCORPORATED ENGINEERS**

IHIE Policy Position Statement

“WINTER MAINTENANCE: A JOB WELL DONE?”

Is the bad publicity every year justified? If not, what can we do to counter it? If so, how can we improve?

From the customer perception it would appear that maintenance engineers have still not got it right, but is it all bad?

1. Public expectations are extremely high and, from the most heavily trafficked highways to the lightest, engineers experience problems and hence criticism.

Expectations, strengthened by Government promises, are not always realistic. Budgetary and operational constraints, coupled with the rapid changes of weather in a temperate climate, often mean that expectations cannot be met.

Climate change over recent years has seen generally milder winters coupled with short sharp cold snaps which produce heavy snow showers which are local and can be overwhelming.

The forecast warning of such showers results in workers simultaneously leaving for home, swamping strategic networks and causing gridlock at junctions such that gritters and snowploughs are unable to access trouble spots.

The outcome of this scenario has become popularly known as a ‘whiteout’.

Unless dispersal is controlled and regulated to some degree, winter maintenance providers are not able to guarantee that incidents such as ‘White Friday’ on the M11 will not happen again.

America, for example, takes a much more pragmatic view of snow conditions. ‘Snow days’ are built into annual leave calendars and workers stay at home without loss of income – a much more functional approach!

With the ability to work flexibly and from home should the UK perhaps look to the US lead?

IHIE recommends that Local Authorities discuss with big employers (including the authority) notification systems and policies to help mitigate staff travel patterns.

2. Budget restrictions impact upon the level of service provided. In the case of Local Authorities there are wide variations in the amount and style of treatment. Most only treat roads of high importance in terms of volume and access, unlike the national network of Motorways and Trunk Roads which receives 100% coverage.

IHIE recommends that Local Authorities publish policy statements and publicise treatment routes. More needs to be done to advise highway users that the service is competing with many others for local authorities’ funds and that resources are limited.

3. The Traffic Management Bill places a duty on Local Authorities to keep traffic moving. It will be interesting to see how this is interpreted in terms of winter maintenance and the impact upon individual networks.

4. Within the last decade, forecasting has become both better and more scientific, rendering it less of an art and more of a science. Decision makers still have to call upon their experience when deciding upon appropriate action especially on 'marginal nights' and in local areas.

5. Term Maintenance Contracts are encouraging partnerships where expertise from both design and construction can be pooled to achieve better decision making and application techniques. Combining resources, together with the use of Network Control Centres which are now becoming essential to the role of Emergency Response, can provide better monitoring and 24 hour coverage.

6. Engineers need to explore new technology more. Stand alone sensors are now available from the USA to give 'real time' information on critical lengths of highway. There are new treatment systems such as prewettted salt/saline solutions or precoated salt with 'Safecote' environmentally enhanced coating.

IHIE recommends that new technologies be piloted and evaluated in order to achieve a better value for money service.

7. Training, continuity and regeneration of staff are essential elements in the standard of service and its quality and the professional Institutions need to take an active supporting role.

IHIE for its part actively encourages training at all levels.