

Lessons from Europe

Preparation is key to ensuring the effective maintenance and safety of our roads during winter. But what lessons could be learned from our neighbours in mainland Europe to help us deliver a better quality of service, asks John Saint, Scarab's Epoke product manager

When the snowfall and icy temperatures hit the UK last winter, parts of the country came to a standstill. Councils, highway maintenance specialists and even local farmers battled to clear the roads so that organisations and commuters could continue 'business as usual', without danger or delay. In some instances however, this simply was not possible.

As we enter the coldest months of the year, it is therefore crucial that a proactive stance is taken. Back in September, former local transport minister Norman Baker reportedly committed to maintaining a substantial strategic salt reserve, ahead of possible severe winter weather. Considering the number of councils that started to run out of gritting salt in 2009, Baker's forward thinking attitude was certainly encouraging. The updated strategic salt protocol note was also welcomed back in October, as was the Highways Agency's winter safety campaign and the new quality salt standard SaltAS.

Yet it is important to realise that there could be more to effective winter maintenance than just spreading dry salt. In many instances this traditional approach will suffice. However, a 'one size fits all' approach rarely reaps the best results, and in some cases it may be more beneficial to think outside the box to improve the UK's resilience to severe winter weather.



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Alternatives

According to the UK's Salt Union it costs over £150 million to salt our roads each winter, so it is no surprise that councils are striving to provide not just the best possible service, but one that is also kind to the environment, keeps road users safe and ultimately saves money. So what alternatives could be investigated?

Pre-wetting has steadily grown in popularity since the late 1990s, when it was first introduced into the UK, having been adopted on the continent for some time. Devon County Council started trialling the pre-wet approach, whereby salt adheres to the ground and enters into the solution more quickly, enabling the thawing action to begin sooner. This method can reduce salt usage too. The smaller, fine material is more likely to stick to the ground and get to work, before it is blown away by traffic, alleviating the need for salt to be redelivered.

It is also particularly helpful in geographical areas or coastal locations that are flatter and less trafficked where greater control and faster action is needed. This is perhaps why parts of Lincolnshire's County Council's fleets were converted to accommodate the pre-wet high purity salt technique in 1998. A 20 per cent salt saving was forecast and this was easily achieved. By 2006, all operations in Lincolnshire were converted to pre-wet, and the savings were ploughed back into the service. Fast forward to 2013 and the council now treats its 3,008 km precautionary network with 43 gritting vehicles using 6mm marine salt. According to a report in *The Telegraph*, the Highways Agency is also said to have invested £45 million converting its winter maintenance fleet to pre-wet, back in 2008. ➔

Councils, highway maintenance specialists and even farmers battled to keep roads clear last winter

