

**From:** Peter Osborne, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport  
Simon Jones, Corporate Director Growth, Environment and Transport  
Andrew Loosemore, Interim Director of Highways and Transport

**To:** Scrutiny Committee – 1 April 2026

**Subject:** Winter Service – Update Report

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Electoral Division:** All Districts.

**Summary:** This report updates the committee on the progress of our Winter Service up to the end of January 2026 and looks at pressures experienced during the most recent winter period and lessons learned. It also considers adequacy of resources and capacity. Clarity on the definition and responsibilities around street cleansing and pothole maintenance as well as future planning and long-term resilience.

**Recommendation:**

The Committee is asked to note the details of this report and actions being taken regarding our ongoing winter service and highway repairs.

## 1. Introduction

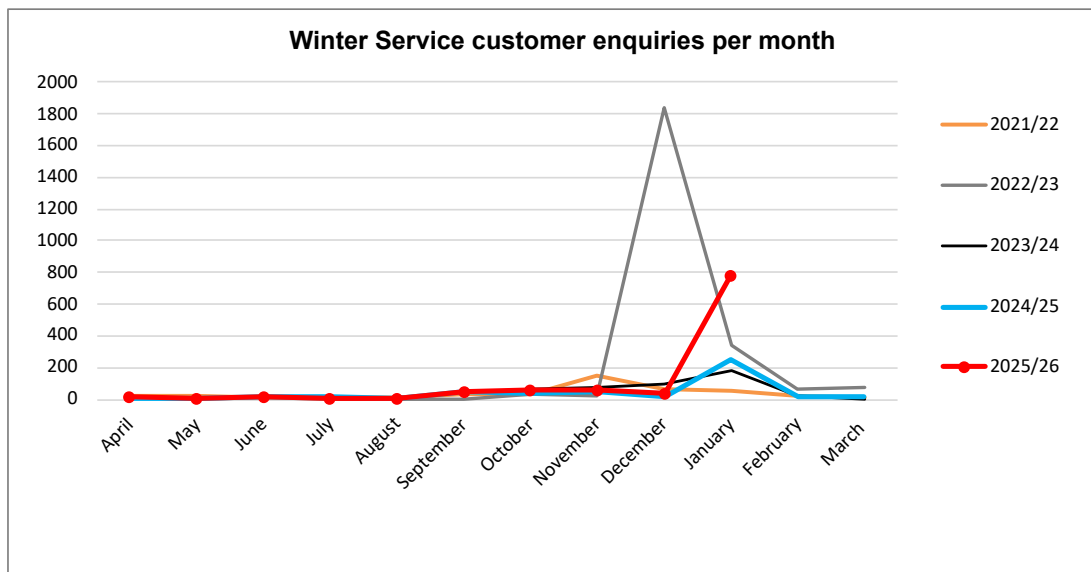
- 1.1 A report detailing the Winter Service Policy was presented to GETCC on 9th September 2025.
- 1.2 The winter service started on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 2025 and runs through to 17<sup>th</sup> April 2026.
- 1.3 This report is an update on our winter service, which covers not only the normal winter hazards, but also the demands on our service for other weather events such as high winds and rain. In addition, it includes pressures experienced during the most recent winter period and lessons learned. Adequacy of resources and capacity. Clarity on the definition and responsibilities around street cleansing and pothole maintenance and future planning and long-term service resilience.
- 1.4 During the period 17<sup>th</sup> October 2025 to 31<sup>st</sup> January 2026 we have had five named storm events covering wind and rain with additional enquiries being received across the highways' teams.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 Kent County Council's winter service starts on Friday 17 October 2025 and runs until Friday 17 April 2026. This means we are closely monitoring weather and road conditions to be ready to deploy our winter service resources at anytime during this period.
- 2.2 **October** was a warmer but wet month, with **Storm Amy** arriving on the 3<sup>rd</sup> before rain eased in the second week as high pressure moved in with persistent cloud. There was further rain across the rest of the month, particularly after the 22<sup>nd</sup>, as heavy rain and strong winds were present across the south coast. Temperatures were 0.7°C above average for October and rainfall was barely below average at 99% of the long-term average. This was the 3<sup>rd</sup> dullest October on record for the UK with only 69% of the average sunshine hours across the month.
- 2.3 **November** started with a warm note with temperatures above average by as much as 7°C across the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of the month. The first two weeks were also wet with bands of rain across the country, with the 14<sup>th</sup> seeing exceptional heavy rain due to **Storm Claudia**. Temperatures dropped following this but returned toward average at the end of the month, which was mild but still wet. Overall temperatures were 0.7°C above average for November with a much wetter-than-average 131% average rainfall across the UK.
- 2.4 **December** was wet and warm as low pressure brought unsettled conditions across the country. The 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> saw heavy rainfall as **Storm Bram** arrived, along with some strong winds. These unsettled conditions continued through the month until the 24<sup>th</sup> when high pressure arrived with further strong winds and some freezing temperatures and frost. Conditions remained clear, sunny and cool for the remainder of the final week. The majority of the rainfall occurred in the first half of the month before turning drier, this resulted in a 14% above average rainfall across the country. Overall temperatures were 1.6°C above average for December, along with 108% long-term average sunshine hours.
- 2.5 **January** The month started cold with frost, fog, even ice and snow in parts, across the county. **Storm Goretti** reached the UK on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> bringing in very strong winds and poor weather. After the storm, wet and unsettled weather continued throughout the middle of the month. The final week saw two further storms Ingrid (24<sup>th</sup>), closely followed by **Chandra** (26<sup>th</sup> & 27<sup>th</sup>) brought heavy rain and strong winds before closing out the month. Overall, the temperature across the country was 0.5°C below average for January, along with an average amount of sunshine hours for the month. Finally, there was 117% long-term average rainfall for the UK, with the regional variation provisionally setting the South & South-East at 188% average rainfall (159mm).
- 2.6 **February** – Weather data not available at time of writing report.

### 3. Winter Service

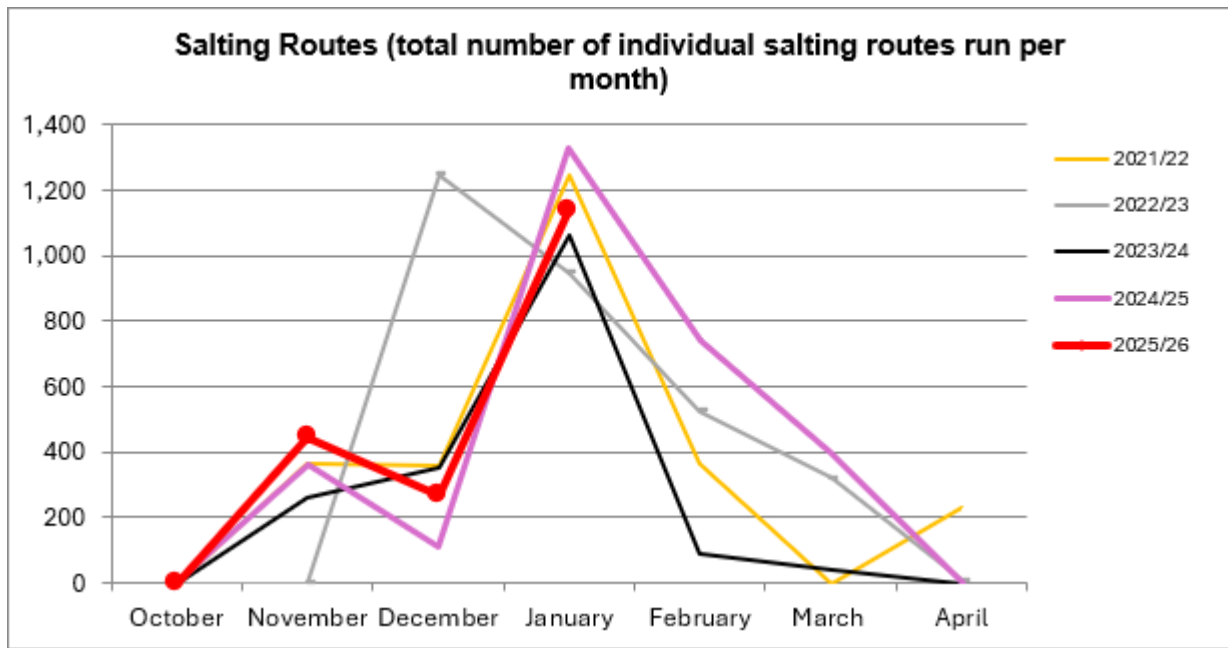
3.1 The data provided below demonstrates our current general winter service enquiries:



- 3.2 Our annual winter service budget is **£4.3** million this does not budget for emergencies or other exceptional weather such as prolonged snow / ice events.
- 3.3 If icy conditions or snow is expected, we salt about a third (30% - 2586 km) of the county's total carriageway (road) network which includes the A and B roads, major strategic, other strategic and locally important roads – these are termed Primary Routes.
- 3.4 Salting routes are published online at [www.kent.gov.uk/highways](http://www.kent.gov.uk/highways), throughout the winter service.
- 3.5 This service is time sensitive. The salt must be laid before ice forms or snow falls to be effective. Operational instructions are issued based on the days' forecast received from Metdesk, our contracted weather forecast service.
- 3.6 A series of infographics have been prepared which gives information about the winter service in an engaging manner. These feature in a range of media, including social media. Updating when crews are going out, giving details of where we are operating, and the expected road hazards.
- 3.7 In addition to the 60 salting vehicles which are on standby, we have more than 100 farmers around the county with snow ploughs, that can be fitted to their tractors. Under a formal agreement, they clear pre-determined rural routes, when there is more than 50mm of snow on the ground.
- 3.8 In addition to our normal highways out of hours service, we have four dedicated Winter Duty Officers (WDO), monitoring and actioning salting instructions throughout the winter period. Each WDO is on call for a week at a time on a rota basis.

#### 4. Monitoring

- 4.1 Winter data is produced monthly highlighting the volume of salting shouts and the action taken by the winter duty officers.
- 4.2 Since the start of the season (17<sup>th</sup> October 2025 – 31<sup>st</sup> January 2026) we have had 40 salting shouts covering 1855 individual salting runs, using 8,390 t of rock salt.



- 4.3 Salting Routes: November saw a slight increase in salting runs when compared to the same period over the last 4 years. December and January were on par with previous demand over the past 4 years, with a total of **1141** salting runs in January 2026.
- 4.4 Operation Performance Measure 17 (OPM17) across the season so far, for Salting runs completed within the specified timeframe **98.36%**.
- 4.5 At the start of the winter service season we hold 23,000 tonnes of salt in stock in depots around the county. National guidance to local authorities suggests a resilience benchmark of 12 days/48 runs i.e. the authority would be able to continuously salt its winter network during its core winter period for 12 days. This equates to 16,800 tonnes therefore the level of salt in stock ensures that this number of runs can be carried out. Each of our depots has received an additional **200 tonnes** of salt. This is to ensure we meet our minimum resilient stock levels for the remainder of the season and are ready for any further winter events.
- 4.6 Salt is supplied by Cleveland Potash Limited, Boulby Mine, Loftus Saltburn by the Sea, Cleveland. The salt supply is managed and purchased by the Highways Term Maintenance Contractor, and this will continue under the new contract from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2026.
- 4.7 We continue to monitor requests for additional roads to be added to our primary salting routes and assess their suitability in line with the Winter Service Policy

- 4.8 In most cases, it is not possible to add additional sections of road to our existing primary salting routes, without removing something from a route. Our routes have been designed to capacity, either in length of network covered or available time to complete the salting operation. The Highways Act 1980 S.41(1A) states that we must do what is reasonably practicable to ensure that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice. Our policy approach and network length receiving treatment balanced against available resources meets this requirement.
- 4.9 At the end of the season we will review all of our routes, to ensure that any changes to the network are considered and altered, as deemed necessary in-line with our Winter Service Policy.
- 4.10 Where we are unable to include extra sections of network on our primary routes or snow routes and we have identified at certain times it may benefit the community as a whole if treated, then these may be considered for inclusion in the Highway District plans for local action, should the need arises during an event. These will be subject to the primary routes and snow routes being clear along with the available resources.

(Note: Highway District Plans are agreements we have with District and Borough Councils to provide resources for local snow clearance and gritting during extreme conditions and particularly when they are unable to provide their services due to conditions)

- 4.11 A common request we receive is the road is a bus route, so it should be treated. Unfortunately, it is not possible to treat every route a bus takes, we do however cover many routes, as they form part of the primary routes or snow routes.
- 4.12 The allocated budget for winter service for 2025/26 is £4,364,600  
The budget is broken down as follows:

<b>Winter Service</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Forecast Spend to 31/03/26</b>
<b>PRE-SALTING GRITTING OPERATION</b>	<b>1,676,100</b>	<b>1,689,789</b>
<b>PLANT &amp; EQUIPMENT</b>	<b>2,481,400</b>	<b>2,387,033</b>
<b>MAINTENANCE OF FARMERS PLOUGHS</b>	<b>50,000</b>	<b>2,262</b>
<b>WEATHER FORECASTING</b>	<b>21,300</b>	<b>24,086</b>
<b>ICE PREDICTION</b>	<b>37,300</b>	<b>77,473</b>
<b>MAINTAIN SALT BINS AND JUMBO SALT BAGS FOR BOTH PARISH AND UNPARISHED AREAS</b>	<b>83,200</b>	<b>25,710</b>
<b>SUPPLY OF SALT TO DISTRICTS</b>	<b>10,300</b>	<b>9,247</b>
<b>PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN</b>	<b>5,000</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£4,364,600</b>	<b>£4,215,600</b>

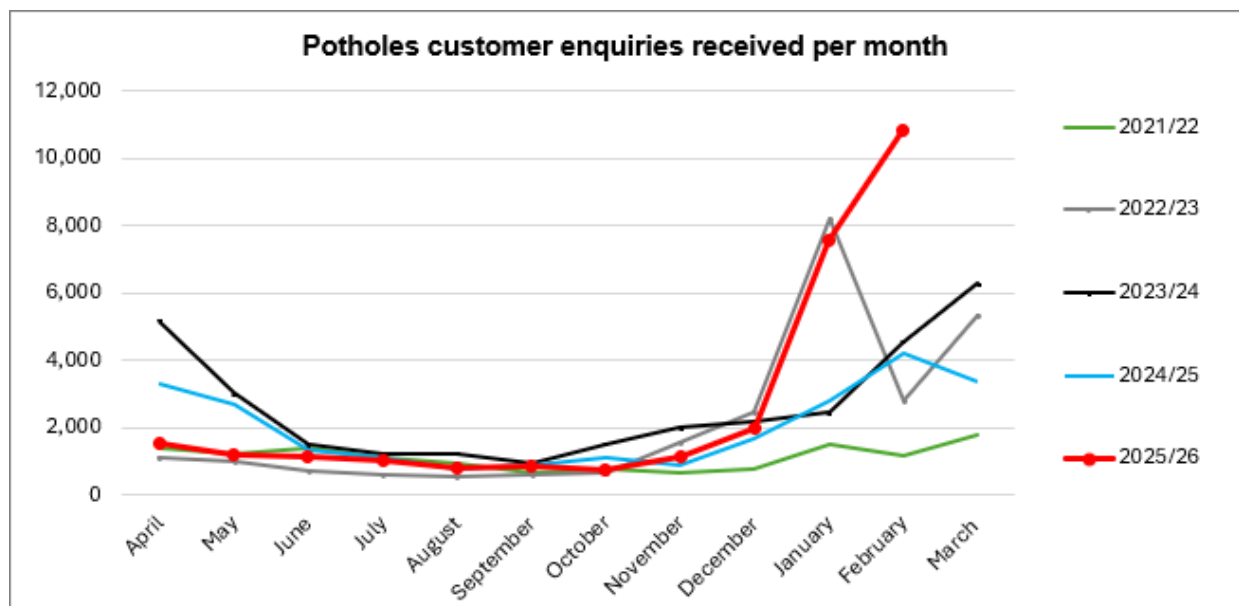
- 4.13 Following the end of the 2025/26 winter season (post April), we will produce a final end of season report, with lessons learnt and the next steps for the 2026/27 winter season. A previous decision has been taken to allocate any in year Winter Service underspends to the Highways Soft Landscaping Service for the following financial year to address exceptional seasonal growth.

## Winter Service improvements

- 4.14 Currently, we are in the mobilisation period with Ringway for the new HTMC, starting on the 1 May 2026. As part of the HTMC, we will have a new gritting fleet with full telematics and reporting facilities.
- 4.15 Once we embed the new provider after year one, we will be looking to further optimise our salting routes for greater efficiency and route utilisation.
- 4.16 Increasing the number of directly employed operatives within the HTMC contract to increase resilience for Winter Service delivery.
- 4.17 Ensure one Supervisor on duty in each highway depot during instructed pre-salting operations.
- 4.18 Maintain separate winter and emergency service resources, no operative on both standby in the same week.
- 4.19 Provide full monitoring and routing service via telematics, including auto-salting, GPS tracking, and compliance auditing.
- 4.20 Opportunity to share real-time data from ACP telematics, compliance monitoring, and in-cab technology with KCC to support innovation and improvement.

## 5. Winter weather and impact on the network

- 5.1 Kent has experienced very poor weather conditions so far this winter season, including an ice emergency in January along with intermittent freeze-thaw weather cycles in the weeks that followed. Additionally there has been persistent rainfall since the start of the winter season which has seen an overall average of 199% increase in rainfall for the South East. The persistent wet weather we have been experiencing is the worst we have seen for a number of years, leading to a significant increase in potholes enquiries from the public. Please see below graph.



- 5.2 **October Potholes: 744**, a decrease of ~16% demand across the month. Trends suggest that demand peaks around the Winter months.
- 5.3 **November Potholes: 1162**, an increase in demand of ~56% placing this year around the average point when reviewing across the previous 5 years. All previous December months have seen an increase in demand
- 5.4 **December Potholes: 2013**, an increase in demand of ~73% across December, potentially due to the ease-of-use of the improved reporting tool currently live for pothole enquiries only. Excluding anomalies, the average increase across the previous January months over 5 years suggests a further increase
- 5.5 **January Potholes: 7557**, an increase of 275% following consistently poor and damaging weather. A similar anomaly was seen in January 22/23 financial year.
- 5.6 **February Potholes 10861**, an unprecedented number of incoming enquiries for this service, rising ~44% higher than the significant increase of the month prior. This is the largest number of incoming enquiries ever received for a service within a single month on record. The data shows the peak of enquiries were received across the first week of February.
- 5.7 These prolonged weather events have put additional demands and pressure on our operational teams both in and out of hours. This level of enquiries received about network condition has also impacted the team both financially and in terms of team capacity to deal with this unprecedented service demand to keep the highway safe. Unfortunately, these events are starting to become more common and as such we will need to review operating methods and standards both internally and with our new term maintenance contractor Ringway to ensure the service remains fit for the future.
- 5.8 Currently, KCC's Highway Stewards and Highway Safety Inspectors are required to actively respond to address the backlog of pothole reports received, prioritising their repair using a risk-based approach.
- 5.9 In order to address the prevailing backlog additional resources have been secured from our current Term Maintenance Contractor, their supply chain sub-contractors and other highways framework contractors. Our highway operational teams also undertake minor repairs utilising permanent cold lay material when it is safe and practical to do so. Under normal operating conditions we have a permanent first-time repair approach. However, in times of extreme demand a temporary repair will be necessary to remove a highway danger, returning at a later time to undertake a permanent repair. Our focus is to remove the safety hazard and keep the highway safe for all road users until we can attend to complete a permanent repair.
- 5.10 Sometimes temporary repairs fail quicker than expected, but by their nature they are short term fixes and changing prevailing conditions can accelerate their dilapidation.. When undertaking permanent repairs, we don't just "fill" potholes, but wherever possible cut out the area to create a wider patch or incorporate in to a larger scheme that will last.

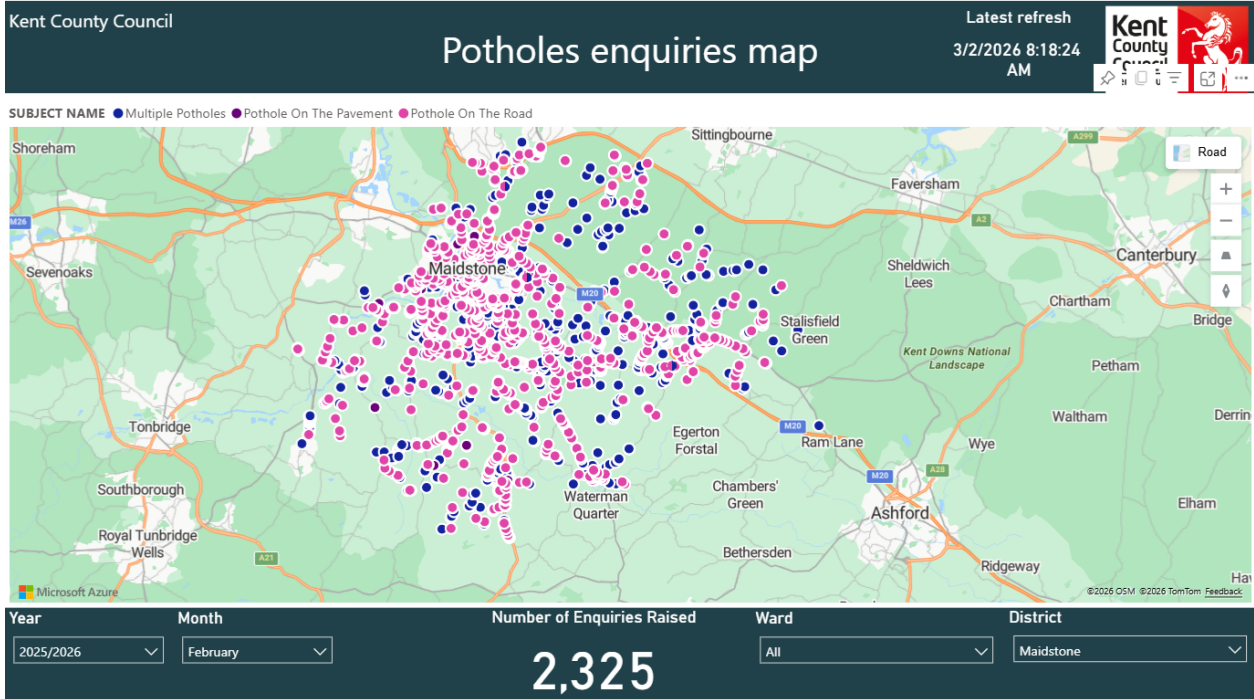


- 5.11 Roads deteriorate and fail for a number of reasons. These include heavy use (mainly by HGVs), oxidation of the bitumen caused by UV light from the sun, historic inadequate design and construction particularly on rural roads material choice, underlying geology, standing water, water ingress, and insufficient planned maintenance due to available budget.
- 5.12 Not all visible highway damage can be accurately described as potholes, but it's a term that most people understand and use to describe damage to the highway road surface.

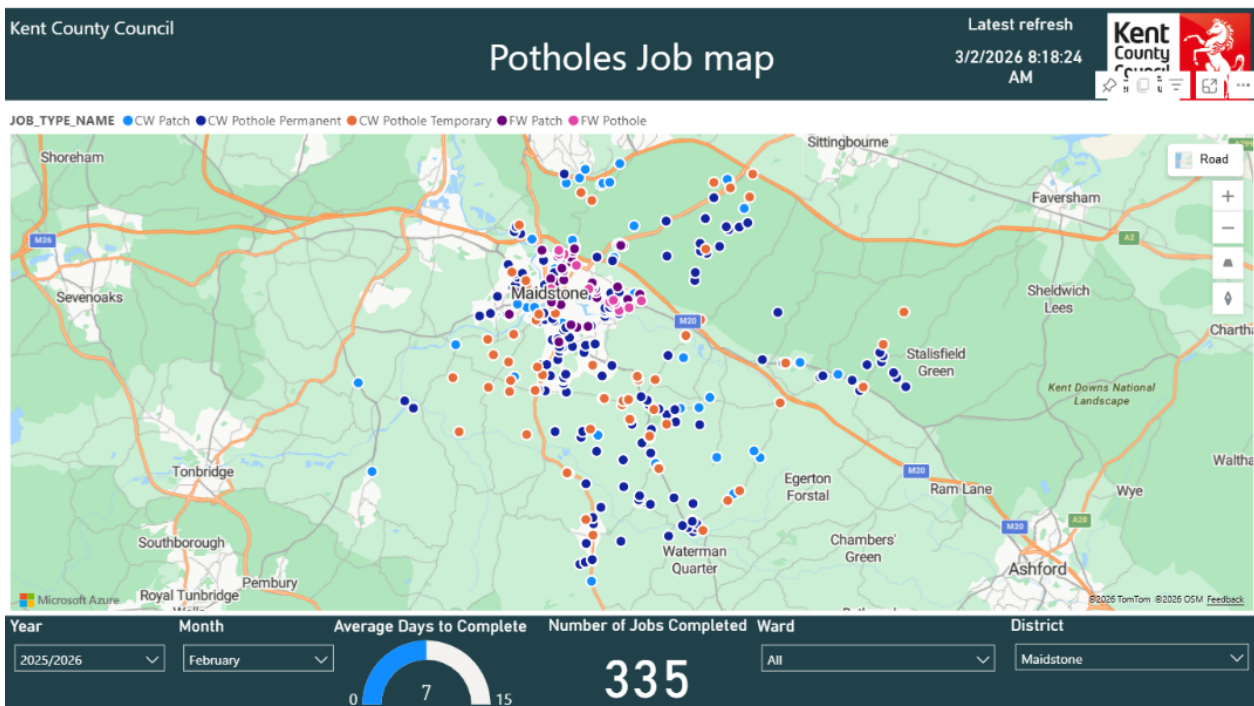


- 5.13 Potholes (Surface defects) are caused by many factors which include the age of road / footway surface, traffic usage, underlying geology, road construction, previous openings in the highway, extremes of temperature, water ingress into the fabric of the surface, which can all contribute to weakening the road surface, causing weakness which can result in failures. However, the volume of them can be significantly reduced with a medium to long-term consistent investment approach as set out in the Highway Asset Management Plan.
- 5.14 We focus resources on repairing the highest priority surface defects. Routine non dangerous 28-day enquiries will be attended after the more serious and dangerous defects have been repaired. It is important to note that during periods where high volumes of surface defects have been recorded following damage caused by winter weather conditions it can take the service some considerable time to return to normal operating standards.
- 5.15 The prevailing winter weather conditions have had the effect of accelerating the end-of-life failure of structurally unsound or weaker roads. It is worth observing that well-maintained and new road surfaces are able to withstand winter weather and this illustrates why it is important to proactively invest before roads reach this stage of their life.
- 5.16 As part of our ongoing approach to improve service delivery we are developing data tools such as the Pothole enquiries map (example below Maidstone for February 2026) to show our data in a more visual way.
- 5.17 This type of information can be used to help identify areas for improvement or more extensive works, especially when combining with other service areas such as drainage.





Jobs completed Map (with average days to complete)



## **Service Improvements**

- 5.18 With the new HTMC we have been able to consider lessons learnt over the years to make improvements to the service:
- 5.19 This will include dedicated emergency crews, to avoid disrupting the programmed works.
- 5.20 The use of hot boxes to keep patching material at an optimal temperature, and ready for use. It also reduces the number of daily vehicle movements collecting material from the asphalt plant saving on time, allowing crew to be more productive in delivering works. It also allows for improved resilience and material supply should additional work be required to repair a defect (i.e. if more defects have formed or the existing defect has worsened since raising the job)
- 5.21 Dedicated hub to monitor live data, to deploy the closest work crew.
- 5.22 During the winter months Ringway will be looking to use Viafix, a permanent cold lay material, which provides a reliable solution for cold and wet conditions. As we have often seen failures with hot material during inclement and colder weather conditions.
- 6.0 **Street Cleansing** – this is not a Kent County Council function and as such comes under the remit of each District / Borough Council – we are therefore unable to comment further on this matter. However we do liaise with District and Borough Council colleagues to co-ordinate work activities around street cleansing where it is possible.

## **7. Financial Implications**

- 7.1 Exceptionally adverse weather conditions and the consequent service demands is not included within our core operational revenue budgets. This is managed in year through close monitoring of all highways budgets and can be subject to reserves bid to fund these activities.

## **8. Legal implications**

- 8.1 KCC has a duty under the Highways Act 1980 to maintain the highway network and associated highway assets.

## **9. Equalities implications**

- 9.1 Not applicable, as this report is for information and has no effect on policy or service standards.

## **10. Background Documents**

- 10.1 Link to KCC web site for Winter Service <https://www.kent.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/what-we-look-after/winter-service>

10.2 Link to KCC winter Service Policy <https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/strategies-and-policies/service-specific-policies/roads-paths-and-transport-policies/highways-winter-service-policy>

## 11. Recommendation:

The Committee is asked to note the details of this report and actions being taken regarding our ongoing winter service and highway repairs

## 12. Contact details

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