

Press Release

27 January 2000

Release number 394

Met. Office clears path for most successful forecasts ever

The Met. Office is celebrating the most successful December ever in the battle to keep Britain's roads ice-free.

Its OpenRoad forecasting system, that provides the majority of the UK's local highway departments with vital early warnings of freezing conditions on our roads, successfully forecast 92.9% of frosts last month, with a mere 9.1% of alerts recorded as false alarms. The results are the best since the OpenRoad service began operating in 1987.

The job of determining when to issue the order for lorries to start gritting relies on a network of 700 weather sensors lining the country's major roads. These sensors constantly supply information to highways engineers about the surface temperature and road conditions.

This data is fed through to The Met. Office, where it is applied to a forecasting model to predict the changing state of roads over the following 24 hours. The Office currently holds contracts to supply 92% of local authorities with advice and information on when to give the green light to road gritting.

According to Anthony Astbury, who heads up the Infrastructure Unit at The Met. Office, December's successful figures were no mean feat given the sudden cold snap. "Last December was the frostiest since 1995. There were even several inches of snowfall around the 19th and some extremely low temperatures. Under the circumstances, the system performed extremely well to predict icy conditions so accurately."

The difficult forecasting conditions were emphasised by some high-profile slip-ups made predicting the conditions of the 8% of roads not covered by Met. Office forecasts. Notably the M4 suffered when snow forecasts failed to identify an impending white-out.

The successful forecasts meant that staff at Transportation Departments across the South of England in particular were raising a glass to The Met. Office. On the night of December 14th OpenRoad correctly predicted below zero temperatures. However rain threatened to sweep away the grit and freeze leaving a treacherous layer of ice. Luckily The Met. Office warned its customers who were able to salt the roads in time for the morning's rush hour.


Having shattered all the targets set out by the Highways Agency for December, The Met. Office has been maintaining a close vigil on our roads in January, hoping to make the first month of the millennium equally successful.

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