

Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee

4 March 2024

Major Incidents affecting the Highway

Report by Assistant Director (Highways, Transport and Planning)

Summary

- As Local Highway Authority, the County Council has a duty to maintain the road network. This means responding to a variety of incidents that occur on the roads ranging from minor to major, some of which have a significant impact on highway infrastructure, local communities, and the travelling public.
- Due to Climate change, the County Council is having to respond to major incidents more frequently.
- Our reactive service operates 24/7 365 days a year and provides an initial emergency response to make the highway safe. The follow up work to resolve the issue is then planned between the relevant services and may involve teams from across the organisation.
- We work closely with the County Council's Resilience & Emergency Team and Tactical Co-ordination Groups to respond to significant incidents such as severe weather and we also have a specific Highways Severe Weather Plan.
- Some incidents cannot be resolved within a short-time frame due to the complexity of the issue and scale of the repairs, which need to be designed, planned, and managed or because the work is the responsibility of a third party or reliant upon third party land or consent.
- There are no resources or funding dedicated to managing significant events. Whilst small scale issues are regarded as part of the job larger issues can be extremely resource hungry.
- Further work is required to develop our understanding of resilience across the network and service areas.

Focus for Scrutiny:

That the Committee is invited to consider the approach to major incidents on the highway, and whether this remains appropriate given that the frequency of such events is forecast to increase in coming years.

1. Background and context

- 1.1 Major incidents that affect the highway tend to fall into three categories:
 - a. Weather Related – strong winds, heavy rain, snow and ice, etc
 - b. Specific emergencies – fire, road traffic collisions, etc

c. Infrastructure failure – drainage inundation, road collapse, etc

- 1.2 It should be noted that the Service does not specifically denote any particular incident as a “major” incident affecting the highway. The process for addressing any incident (major or otherwise) is largely as set out in Appendix A. What separates a major incident from a minor is the time for which the incident affects the network – but this is not specifically defined.
- 1.3 In the last few years, there has been an increase in more extreme weather events resulting in heat affected roads, wide-scale flooding, wind damage and embankment failures. Infrastructure has been severely tested – particularly that associated with managing water.
- 1.4 The County Council, as the highway authority, has a duty to ensure that the network is maintained fit for use. As a part of this duty, we provide a reactive safety response through contract 24/7 365 days a year. Our contractor is required to attend to emergency events within 2 hours to ‘make safe’. This is a wide-ranging provision reflecting the very diverse nature of incidents we are called to. In terms of significant incidents, our response will normally be to close the road or provide suitable guarding to protect the public. Where appropriate, traffic management will be designed and alternative routes for traffic assigned. However, many parts of the county have limited alternative high-quality routes for drivers, giving rise to numerous issues.
- 1.5 Road closures impact on the communities, businesses, and the travelling public. Those impacts include lengthy diversion routes to by-pass the incident, accessibility issues for residents, and also loss of footfall for the businesses themselves. Increased traffic on diversion routes and traffic seeking to short cut the diversion can lead to rapid deterioration of road surfaces and the need to intervene to keep routes safe. Local roads, typically in rural areas, are often ‘evolved roads’, having not been designed with a sub-base and wearing course, causing them to deteriorate rapidly when subject to significant volumes of traffic.
- 1.6 Once the issue has been made safe, an assessment is undertaken by the relevant highway team with a view to a suitable solution being designed. Specialist input may be sought, for example geo-technical assessment where there is structural failure. Issues having wider consequences will require input from the County Council’s resilience and emergency team. Where necessary, other teams are brought in to support the project such as Law and Assurance and Communications and Engagement.
- 1.7 Major incidents are extremely diverse in their nature and a solution to one will not necessarily be applicable elsewhere. In many cases third parties are involved, such as landowners. In most cases (to date) landowners are willing to act or allow the County Council to implement a solution on their property. However, the complexity of land management can lead to delays.
- 1.8 Finding solutions to more complex problems requires the County Council to be mindful of the balance between its own liabilities and the impact any issue is having on road users and communities. The County Council does not have unlimited powers to undertake work to secure the opening of a length of road and the County Council must always work within the parameters of the law.
- 1.9 In some instances, physical constraints will delay the implementation of a solution. For instance, many flood issues cannot be addressed until flood waters have subsided. Sites must be safe for teams to work on.

2. Examples

- 2.1 In the last 2 years there have been 7,893 call outs to emergency issues (2-hour response).
- 2.2 Of these only the following were classed as major highway incidents
 - a. Flooding - Shripney, Pagham and Bognor Regis
 - b. Embankment Failures – Duncton, Pulborough, Wiston Bends.
 - c. Fire – Midhurst
- 2.3 By way of example, a more detailed description of the issue, impact and actions at Midhurst is given in Appendix B.

3. Communication

- 3.1 Keeping stakeholders informed of what is happening with regards to a major incident is fundamental to ensuring the issue is managed effectively. It is recognised that in these circumstances, there is pressure on local members and highway officers to provide regular and timely updates.
- 3.2 Early on in any incident the Communications and Engagement Team is made aware of the issue and the likely impact, as well as an estimate of how long the issue may take to resolve.
- 3.3 Direct communication with local members falls to the highways officer tasked with overseeing the incident.
- 3.4 For incidents that impact a wide area or are likely to be in situ for some time, communication channels such as social media and web sites are set up. On occasion, officers attend community meetings to update on progress.

4. Resources

- 4.1 Based upon historical data we can estimate the number of emergency call-outs the Service will respond to over any one year. However, it is impossible to accurately predict the number of these that will turn into major incidents and what impact they will have on our resources. The Service does not hold a specific budget for these occurrences, nor does it have specific people or contractors available to resource these incidents. This applies equally to other service areas that may be called upon. The outcome is that whilst these incidents are ongoing, business as usual will be impacted. As an indication of the costs involved it is estimate that the issue at Duncton resulted in additional expenditure of £350k.

5. Lessons Learned & Comments for Consideration.

Preparedness

- 5.1 More significant incidents caused by surface water and groundwater flooding, extreme temperatures, and high winds are expected in future. These bring about risks of slope and embankment failures, and risks to roads, bridges and structures.
- 5.2 We undertake regular inspections of our main highway asset groups including roads, streetlights, bridges, and culverts. Changing weather patterns have

highlighted that more work is required to understand asset resilience and a plan will need to be developed.

- 5.3 We have a robust set of contracts in place that support the County Council in terms of response to emergencies and this has largely been effective in ensuring incidents have a minimal impact upon the overall operation of the network.
- 5.4 Whilst work has been done to strengthen the teams responsible for addressing these incidents there is little contingency. The impact on resourcing needs to be understood; a part of that is communicating the impact diverting resources has upon other projects and operations within the service.
- 5.5 Better communication with all stakeholders of what to expect in the event of an emergency helps to manage expectations. For instance, issues will be prioritised based upon their impact on the overall road network. Dealing with reactive issues means that remedial work is often undertaken when there are ongoing issues and delivery is subject to risk such as weather, services on site, unforeseen damage which may require dynamic redesign, and slippage. The time needed to resolve an issue, delays and the complexity of issues, are often not appreciated more widely, while the desire from local communities is to see the issue urgently resolved.

Process

- 5.6 Where incidents are deemed to be more long term and/or major in terms of impact then we need to consider how this is managed to best affect network operation. There is a standard reactive response for this type of emergency issue (see Appendix A). As per the County Council's own emergency incident procedures there may be benefit in calling an incident "major" to invoke a specific set of operational procedures. It should be noted that severe weather responses are set out in the 'Severe Weather Plan' which includes up-to-date risk assessments for any high-risk sites and required action related to weather events. This includes details of any emergency protocols/traffic management which may be invoked and a plan for communications.
- 5.7 Out of hours, stakeholders are emailed by the Duty Highway Manager with details of any significant traffic management deployed to roads on the 'Resilient Network' or are deemed traffic sensitive. This includes local members and parishes. This could form the basis of any major incident protocol. Any process would need to secure the buy-in of other stakeholders within the County Council.
- 5.8 It needs to be remembered that major incidents on the network are still extremely rare and the resource we put into preparing for them needs to be commensurate with the risk they present the County Council. The types of incidents are very varied and there is a risk that we spend too much time preparing for something that is unlikely to happen, at the expense of addressing issues we know will and do.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Outline process for out of hours emergencies

Appendix B - Specific Example, Midhurst High St Closure

Appendix C – HTP Severe Weather Plan