

Report to Cabinet

28 November 2023

Highway Maintenance – in depth performance report at Quarter 2 2023/24

Report by the Director of Place Services

Electoral division(s):All

Summary

During the autumn and winter of 22/23 West Sussex along with other South East local highways authorities experienced unprecedented maintenance challenges to the highway network. The reasons for this are well rehearsed and stem from:

- long term planned maintenance backlog as government capital grant is insufficient and has flatlined for many years;
- more pressure on the highway from utilities digging up the roads and weakening the structures; and
- changing weather patterns with wetter winters and drier summers; and the autumn/winter of 2022/23 was exceptionally wet.

The County Council highways maintenance budget comprises capital for planned maintenance – mostly highway resurfacing - and revenue for responsive repairs, notably potholes but also drainage and grass cutting.

In setting the 2023/24 budget the Council added a one-off allocation of £4.5m revenue for highways maintenance to tackle the exceptional pressures being experienced on the network as it struggled to deal with the unprecedented volume of defects on the network which in turn generated a large volume of customer complaints which it also struggled to handle and respond to in a timely way.

This report provides an in-depth assessment of the performance of the highways service at the end of Quarter 2 (September 2023), including how the additional investment has been deployed and outlines the plans for the winter, which is the most challenging period for the service.

Recommendations

That Members note the improved performance of the Highways service and the preparations for winter service.

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1. The County Council as local highways authority is responsible for around 4,000Km of roads – all public highway in the County except the M23, A23 and A27 which are the responsibility of National Highways. The County Council's network is a mix of A, B, C and unclassified highway but mostly C and unclassified roads.
- 1.2. Maintenance of this ageing network is a significant challenge, made increasingly difficult by the intervention of the utilities and the changing climate.
- 1.3. In essence the funding arrangement is that Government provides capital grant for planned maintenance such as resurfacing or major structural repairs to bridges and the Council provides revenue for responsive repairs such as potholes and gully cleaning. Over the last few years, the Government grant has flatlined at around £17m and is therefore rapidly eroding in its real value. The impact is that a highway typically needs resurfacing every 10-20 years but the current capital funding available to the Council even when supplemented by the Council's own borrowing means a road will be surfaced roughly every 80 years. The backlog of maintenance for carriageways alone in West Sussex is more than £151 million. With the addition of the backlog from other highway assets this figure will greatly increase.
- 1.4. In recent years the Council has supplemented the Government grant with its own capital resources to try and tackle the maintenance backlog with a focus on resurfacing work. For example, an additional £12m of County Council capital funds were allocated to highway resurfacing and spent in 2021/22 and 2022/23. A further £21m was allocated in 2022 that will be fully utilised by the end of 2023/24.
- 1.5. The impact in the lengthy periods between resurfacing is that the revenue costs increase for responsive repairs as the surface fails and is increasingly prone to potholes. To start to address this and other areas of concern the Council increased its revenue funding for highways maintenance in 2023/24 with a £4.5m one off exceptional budget.

2 Details

2.1 Headline Service Performance

- 2.2 The performance of the highway network is a key element in the Council Plan and there are three headline KPIs that are reported in the quarterly Performance and Resources Report (PRR). There is a narrative in the Quarter 2 (Q2) PRR on the same agenda so it is not repeated in this report. In summary the KPIs are:
 - KPI 18a – A roads in good condition (RAG rated Green and on target)
 - KPI 18b – B and C roads in good condition (RAG rated Green and on target)
 - KPI 19 – Highway defects repaired within the required timescale (RAG rated amber and improving)

2.3 Highways service performance is also tracked by specific operational dashboards. This in-depth report at the end of Quarter 2 provides a supplement to the Q2 PRR.

2.4 The details of how the additional £4.5m funding was to be spent were set out in the Cabinet Member key decision report and the specific activities includes drainage maintenance and investigations, proactive pothole repairs, signs & line maintenance, trees, ditches, and vegetation maintenance.

2.5 The headline performance of the service is as follows:

- Record number of total reactive repairs (all safety repairs) completed. 2022/23 completed c.41k 2023/24 forecasting to complete c.49k.
- Record number of pothole repairs April to Sept. 2022/23 was c9.5k, 2023/24 for the same period was c17.3k
- Three Jet Patcher units have been deployed Countywide between April and October. As at 06/10/2023: - c.22,000 sqm of patching meaning that .c18,500 safety defects have been removed from the network.
- Customer pothole enquiries – annual average (over 5years) 17.3k, in 9 months to September 2023 there have been 26.7k.
- Customer complaints and claims for damage to vehicles were at record levels over the winter of 2022/23 but have now reduced to more normal levels. It is hoped that the improvements such as using cut and sawn repairs and resurfacing programme over the summer will have improved the resilience of the network over the winter 2023/24.

2.6 The table summarises the comparative performance of non pothole works comparing 2022/23 to projected 2023/24 outturns. In particular, increasing the volumes/frequency of gulley cleansing will improve the resilience of the drainage and reduce the likelihood and/or severity of surface water flooding. Annex A provides the detail on the deployment and progress on the activities being funded through the one off £4.5m revenue.

Item	2022/23	2023/24 projected
Gullies cleansed	90k	121k
Ditching	1500m	3000m
Trees		+471 jobs
Signs (replace / repair)	1500	2250
White Lining	175km	287km
Sign Cleaning/clearing		5000 signs
Footway Siding		+30km

2.7 Additional capital funding for resurfacing has resulted in the largest ever programme of work in 2023/24. More than 440 resurfacing schemes are planned for the year and the majority of these have already been completed as the work is best done over the drier summer months. In total more than 270km of road will have a surface treatment applied this year.

2.8 Communications

2.9 A strong communications plan has been developed to support the service improvement. The programme of communications runs through to summer 2024 and includes:

- A programme of social media messages highlighting the work being done;
- A dedicated [web site](#) with links to resources such as media, data and how to report faults;
- Information in the Member's bulletin;
- Engagement with Districts and Boroughs;
- Articles in the residents' e-newsletter;
- Articles for local papers; and
- Boards on site linking the programme on the ground to the messaging;

2.10 The development of a customer facing performance dashboard to enable customers to get information on the number of safety repairs being carried out (including potholes) and the timeliness of the repairs.

2.11 Winter Preparedness

2.12 The winter season is when most damage occurs to the road network. This is primarily caused by water either being pumped through the road by vehicle pressure or by freezing resulting in the water expanding and breaking out the road material. Roads are not designed to be under water for prolonged periods and so flooding shortens a road's life and will lead to more potholes.

2.13 Acknowledging this will occur the Council is preparing by setting up systems to divert resources from routine activities to support more repairs on the network when bad weather occurs. A full briefing on this is included in Annex B.

2.14 The Council also treats a proportion of the road network to minimise risk associated with freezing conditions. Details of the Council's current winter service plan is available on the web site [Winter service - West Sussex County Council](#).

2.15 Conclusion

2.16 This report explains why the performance of the highways network has deteriorated and why last winter this came to a head, not just in West Sussex, but across the South East.

2.17 The exceptional revenue investment in the highways maintenance service and continued Council capital funding in 2023/24 has been deployed by the service to improve the condition of the network through resurfacing works, to upgrade the quality and volume of pothole repairs and undertake more preventative work such as gully cleaning. As a result customer contact and complaints have

subsidised and the service is now in a reasonable state of preparedness for the oncoming winter season.

2.18 Finally, it should be noted that the Council does not have the financial resources on its own to make the sustained level of improvements that the highways network requires and it has continued to work with other councils, notably the SE7 to lobby Government to provide the funding necessary to maintain the highway network and deal with the backlog of repairs.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

3.1 The budget could have been allocated in a multitude of different ways but the areas addressed were considered to be where the highest need was identified.

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

4.1 The proposals are largely reactive and as such do not require the County Council to undertake formal consultation.

5 Finance

5.1 Revenue consequences

	Current Year 2023/24 £m
Revenue budget	4.5

The budget allocation is for one year only

5.2 The effect of the proposal:

(a) How the cost represents good value

Services are being delivered through term contracts that have been tendered through a competitive process.

(b) Future savings/efficiencies being delivered

A proportion of the money is being used to address areas such as better mapping and improving the management of riparian responsibilities. This will improve how the service operates in the future and alert land owners to their duties – and as such remove some of the burden from the authority.

(c) Human Resources, IT and Assets Impact

None

6 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
The expectation as to what can be achieved exceeds the ability to deliver	Clearly setting out the extent of what can be done and updating members and the public (see the comms element) as the programme progresses
The funding is not spent in year	Working closely with delivery partners to ensure the funds can be utilised effectively within year. Close monitoring of spend throughout the year

7 Policy alignment and compliance

7.1 Activities have been proposed that are extensions of existing work and fall within the remit of normal highway maintenance.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Summary tables showing budget spend/delivery outcomes against the additional funding.

Appendix B - 'Winter Preparedness' all member update note.

Background Papers

None