

Place Scrutiny Committee

Highways Working with Town and Parish Councils Spotlight Review

January 2013

The spotlight review requests that the Place Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet endorse and then take action on the five recommendations below.

Recommendations

1. DCC Highways provide lists of planned works to Town and Parish Councils and investigate publishing on the Devon County Council website. This should also be updated to reflect when works have been carried out and Clerks notified.
2. At the beginning of a planned visit to a Town or Parish the lengthsman should speak to the Clerk or nominated person and discuss the planned works as well as to notify them when they are completed.
3. Ensure that the planned conference for Town and Parish Councillors and lengthsman does take place in the summer of 2013 and consider the following for the agenda:
 - Town and Parish Councils working with landowners
 - How to protect smaller roads by limiting unsuitable vehicles
4. Undertake further investigation into offering Chapter 8 training for Town and Parish representatives. Particularly where Local Councils employ their own lengthsman.
5. To look at improvements to the IT system to make reporting easier. Particularly to enable reporting of multiple issues as well as reporting via smartphone.
6. To ask the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation to enhance the current budget commitment for highways maintenance.

The Place Scrutiny Committee should re-visit these issues in nine months (September 2013) to monitor progress.

Background

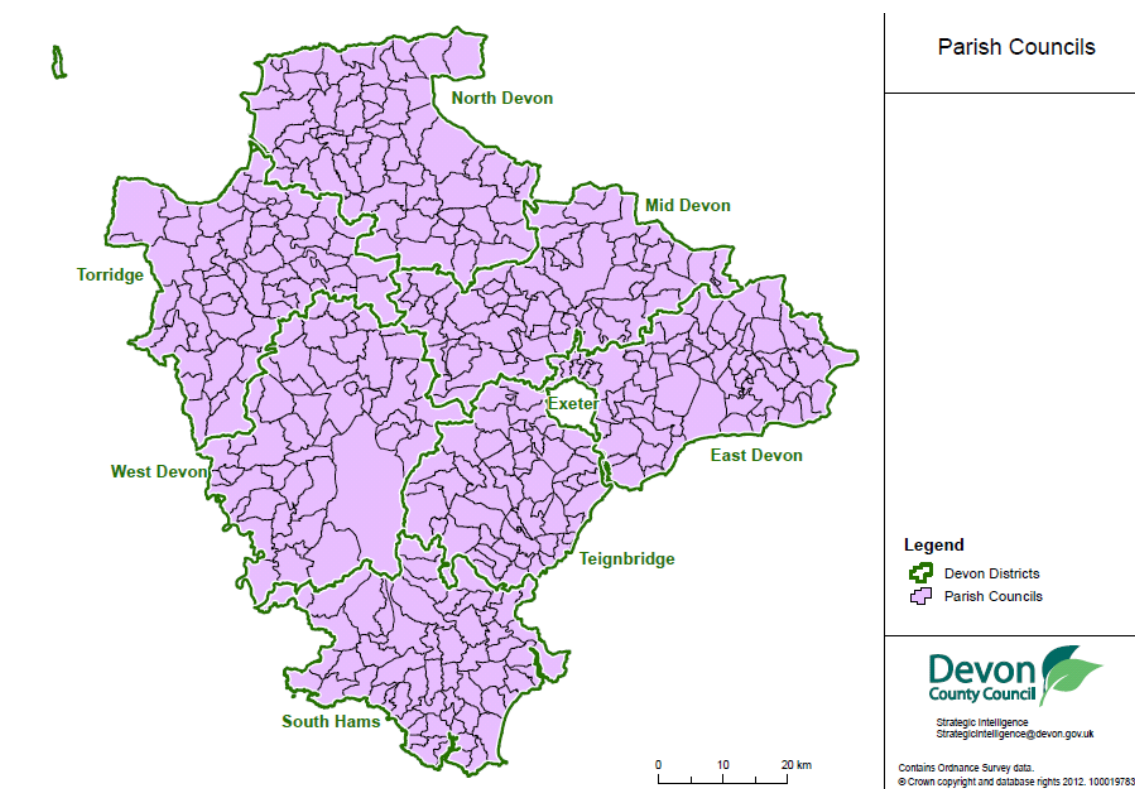
The Place Scrutiny Committee held a spotlight review on Tuesday 18th December 2012 to explore the process by which highway defects are identified and resolved and review the role that Town and Parish Councils have in supporting this maintenance and essential safety work. The meeting aimed to investigate operational benefits that might be identified through an open discussion between Councils. It should also be noted that whilst Town and Parish Councils are mentioned in the report, similar arrangements are in place with Exeter City Council, which should be taken as read when Town and Parishes are referred to.

The review was chaired by Councillor Gordon Hook, and attended by the following members: Councillors Eastman, Marsh, Owen, Way, Colthorpe, Edgell, Boyd, Moulding and Diviani. The Cabinet member for Highways and Transportation, Councillor Stuart Hughes also attended.

The meeting was attended by representatives from Town and Parish Councils across Devon as follows, in the main part they were identified through the Devon Association of Local Councils. The spotlight review would like to thank them for their time and invaluable input to the spotlight review.

- Cllr Bob Collier (Vice Chairman DALC), Colyton Parish Council
- Cllr Rod Hawes, Barnstaple Town Council
- Cllr Richard Andrews, Bradninch TC
- Tracey Bell, Parish Clerk for Luppitt, Rockbeare and Dunkeswell
- Cllr Gavin Brake Luppitt Parish Council
- Cllr Bill Lane, Peter Tavy Parish Council
- Cllr Brian Frazer Smith Burrington Parish Council
- Cllr Trevor Pennington Marldon Parish Council
- Cllr Barry Warren, Willand Parish Council

There are some 357 Town and Parish Councils in Devon as shown on the map below. Whilst the elected representatives present were not drawn from all Parishes in Devon, the issues that are raised in this report were echoed throughout and the recommendations were universally supported by attendees.



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Findings:

1. Identifying Highways Issues

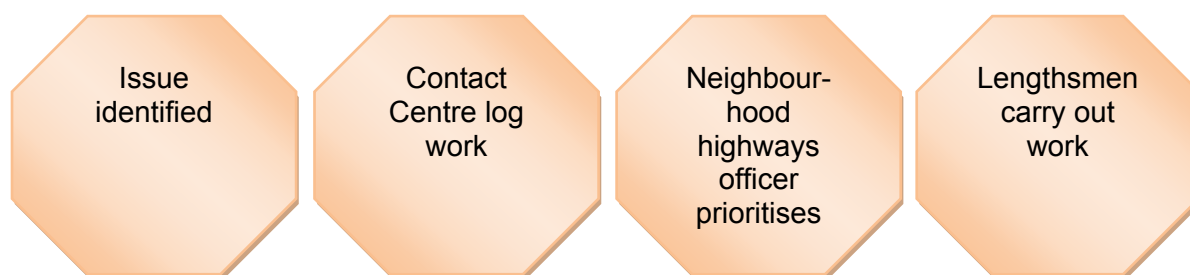
Devon County Council carries out programmed safety inspections to the entire highways network; this includes footways, carriageways and verges. In addition members of the public, local councils and Members report issues. This information is then used to formulate a schedule of works determined by need and category against the safety defect criteria. In urgent cases there is immediate reaction to remedy an issue.

¹ Map courtesy of Strategic Intelligence Dec 2012

Parish Lengthsmen undertake minor highway maintenance on a rolling programme across their assigned parishes. Whilst there has been a recent increase in lengthsmen, up to 24 from 17 last year, many local councils remember a time when there were many more. At the moment highways are trialling a scheme where two man teams are in operation to try to tackle issues that cannot be resolved by one person alone. Each parish is visited four times a year. However the spotlight review feel strongly that just 12 teams covering the whole of the highways network in Devon is too few and would like the Cabinet Member to consider ways in which to increase this number.

Each parish has a number of days allocated to this work. As well as clearing drainage areas, trimming hedges to gain access to drainage and other outlets, clearing debris and keeping signs maintained, the Parish Lengthsmen report larger problems and use detailed knowledge of the area to anticipate where problems may occur in future. The Neighbourhood Highway Officer advises local councils when the Lengthsmen are programmed to visit and prepares the schedule of work.

Reporting Process for Non-urgent Lengthsmen Work



2. Communication

The main criticism with the current process is that there is a discord in communication with Town and Parish Councils and local councillors are often unaware when the Lengthsmen teams have visited. Town and Parish Councils are well placed to identify and give information on problems but do not, as a matter of course speak to the Lengthsmen carrying out the work. In part this is due to the legal situation where Lengthsmen are employed by the County Council and should not be specifically instructed by the local council. However the spotlight review believes that there needs to be a greater dialogue between both parties (**Recommendations 1 and 2**). This could potentially save the Lengthsmen time as the local representative maybe able to advise if a problem has already been remedied, or utilise their local knowledge in other ways.

The spotlight review group believe that by making the schedule of works public, local councils as well as residents will be able to see what is planned in their area. (**Recommendation 1**). This will potentially save time by preventing issues being logged many times if they are already on the programme. Currently once a problem has been resolved, or scheduled into a longer-term programme there is limited feedback to either the local council or the person who logged it as an issue. This could be remedied by updating the online spreadsheet to reflect when repairs have taken place, but may have significant staffing resource implications

The updated process would then look like this:

Reporting Process for Non-urgent Lengthsman Work



Technology was also identified as a barrier. Currently an individual can only log one fault at a time and has to log in each time to report each issue. In fact the spotlight review heard that people are giving up and not individually logging each concern. Instead they are sending problems via e-mail to Devon County Council officers who then manually input the same data.

A possible solution to this problem would be to purchase more up to date technology. **(Recommendation 5)** The spotlight review has specifically heard about 'fix my street'. This system enables anyone with a smart phone to take a photo and log it automatically the concern with a corresponding photo. The technology pinpoints the exact location of the problem. The review cannot specifically comment on this system as it has not reviewed it in depth; however it is understood that there are incompatibilities with DCC's software.

3. Schedule of Works

The timing when work is carried out is also important. The spotlight review heard that some drains are cleared just before leaves fall and re-block the drains or before verges are cut. This seems like the antithesis of what should be happening and is creating further work. Again communication is the issue with the County Council, District and Town or Parish Council needing to share with each other when works are scheduled. However the work does take place on a rolling twelve month programme so some of these issues may be unavoidable.

4. Parishes providing Lengthsman

Whilst many Town and Parish Councils have praised the work carried out in their localities, some are finding that the Lengthsman are spread thinly on the ground and in periods of extreme weather more needs doing. To address this some local councils are choosing to directly employ Lengthsman themselves (see the case study below). Some Town and Parish Councils have asked for assistance in providing their own Lengthsman. It is unlikely that financial assistance will be available however there may be other ways of supporting schemes in localities. **(Recommendation 4)**

Following the success of the Snow Warden Scheme across Devon the spotlight review believes that there is merit in exploring the options that may be available for drain watch groups. In recent years in Devon there have been many more severe

weather warnings with flood alerts than dangerous conditions caused by snow and ice. Central government are proposing to cap any increase in Town and Parish Precept at 2%. Although this will not come into effect this year, this may pose significant challenges in the future.

Case Study: Brentor, Mary Tavy and Peter Tavy

1. In April 2012 these three large, rural parishes decided that the Lengthsman services from Devon County Council Highways would probably not meet the requirements in the winter and in periods of heavy rain.
2. They created a joint venture to engage a Local Parish Lengthsman with one councillor from each parish forming the management committee. A grant was made from the County Discretionary Fund of £2300 to cover the period of 1 June 2012 to 31 May 2013. The money was held in one parish account.
3. The Local Lengthsman is now paid hourly to respond within 24 hours to flooding, blocked drains and gullies and water on the road in icy conditions. He is self-employed, provides his own suitable transport, has his own insurance and is Chapter 8 trained.

5. Future work

The spotlight review understands that there is a conference planned in the summer of 2013. Whilst the attendees at the spotlight review welcomed the opportunity to explore the issues discussed in this paper in greater depth and work to find solutions, there is still much more to be done. Several issues were raised in this discussion that merit further consideration and should subsequently be on the agenda for the conference (**Recommendation 3**). These include:

- How Town and Parish Councils can work with local landowners to support the community. For example working to ensure that farming activity doesn't block drains or utilising farmers' skills in helping to support the network.
- Protection of smaller roads by discouraging their use by large and heavy vehicles. This may entail working with sat nav companies to ensure that the most suitable routes are always recommended or simply changing signage.

Conclusions and Actions

This spotlight review has looked at the relationship between Devon County Council and Town and Parish Councils throughout Devon when working on highways, and particularly the process of reporting issues and getting them resolved. This review was never about the quality of the work that was carried out, but about the awareness, transparency and communication between different councils and their residents. In a reality where public services are all seeing significant budget reductions there is a defined need to work smarter and better together. Town and Parish Councils are the experts when it comes to awareness of their community and its needs. The clear lesson that came from the spotlight review was that this wealth of knowledge and the willingness to get involved could be utilised better. The spotlight review group hopes that this work contributes to developing the best possible service for the residents of Devon. The final comment from the spotlight review is to ask the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation to fight for the highways budget.