

## **Report of the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022**

### **1. Introduction**

The Standing Overview Group of the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee meets regularly as an informal information sharing and member development session where issues are presented to the councillors to raise awareness and increase knowledge. The Standing Overview Group considers key updates and pertinent issues from across different services, with the aim of developing Members' knowledge, and bringing to the forefront any areas which may benefit from further scrutiny.

Any action points arising from the sessions are reported back to the next formal Committee meeting.

This report outlines the topic(s) covered at the meeting of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

### **2. Recommendation(s)**

The Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee accepts this report as an accurate record of the meeting and makes the following recommendations to Cabinet, namely that:

- (a) repair and maintenance of our road networks be underpinned by a positive and proactive approach and efforts to be made to implement this mindset into the working practices of DCC staff and contractors;
- (b) the Community Road Warden Scheme and the Snow Warden Scheme be continued and expanded;
- (c) annual work programmes be produced to cover integrated schemes and additional detail is included where these include drainage repair;
- (d) graffiti be explicitly recognised in the Plan as a notable problem and innovative solutions to graffiti removal be investigated; and
- (e) further exploration of local council involvement in highway maintenance is undertaken, to include closer relationships between local councils and the County Council.

### **3. Attendance**

Councillors: Councillors A Dewhirst, C Slade, M Hartnell, J Hodgson, Y Atkinson, M Asvachin, J Wilton-Love

Apologies: Councillor R Radford

Officers: Roberts Richards, Joe Deasy

Scrutiny Officer: Camilla de Bernhardt Lane, Fred Whitehouse

#### **4. Summary of Discussion**

##### **Highway Infrastructure Asset Management Plan**

###### **Introduction**

The Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan comprises of three sections; the Policy, the Strategy and the Plan. The Policy is a concise document describing the service's approach and how it links with the Council's overarching objectives. The Strategy refreshes the one approved by Cabinet in 2016, taking into consideration changes in national guidance and a revised code of practice. The Plan, which describes in detail how the Council uses asset management tools to support the highways network, is required to be approved by the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee in March 2022 before it then goes to Cabinet in April 2022 for final approval. This Standing Overview Group was organised to provide Members a briefing on updates to highway asset management and give them the opportunity to provide input.

At the meeting, Members were presented with draft versions of the Asset Management Policy and Strategy which can be viewed as supplementary reports online (<https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=427&MIId=4488>).

###### **Capital Budget**

The Council had received a three-year settlement for the capital funding of its Highways network via the Department for Transport. Members were advised that, after inflation had been applied, the settlement reflected a reduced amount of funding. As such, from an asset management perspective, it would be necessary to undertake a 'managed decline' approach to try and minimise the decline in the condition of Devon's road network.

###### **Performance Framework**

Required by the code of practice, the Performance Framework outlines eight key measures relating to asset management under which progress against the Plan are measured. This is to ensure the Council has the right measures in place to measure performance and to be certain that continual improvements in ways of working are made.

Members queried the relationship between the framework and the Council's strategic objectives, in particular how the Plan relates to the promotion of 'active travel' and other measures intended to reduce carbon levels. It was noted that, from an asset management perspective, the focus would be on enabling the Authority's corporate aims rather than promoting them but that the two are intrinsically linked.

Suggestions were also made of ensuring that a positive, proactive approach to repair and maintenance of our highways underpins the Plan; namely, that a culture of contractors undertaking work beyond that assigned to them (such as tidying litter if awaiting a delivery)

could translate to greater efficiency and increased savings for the Council. This has been incorporated into recommendation (a).

## **Levels of Service**

Members were presented with the main asset categories broken down into key priorities under each category. These fall under the Asset Management Strategy which dictates the scope of the service; specifics (such as frequency of any particular undertaking) will be laid out in the final Plan and dictated by budgetary constraints and other considerations.

Points of interest are detailed below alongside Member discussion surrounding each area.

### Carriageways

The points outlined here focused primarily on inspection and repair of the Council's highways network, as well as response to emergency situations and a proactive winter service.

Most of the points under this asset category were explained to be statutory requirements. The Community Road Warden Scheme, whereby minor works were delegated to local councils (such as town or parish councils), and the Snow Warden Scheme, where local parish/town councils, individuals and community groups can assist in winter maintenance support, were both explained to be optional but that the aim was to continue to expand and grow both schemes.

Members supported the continuing of both schemes, noting that not all local councils sign up to this. They therefore agreed that aiming to expand both schemes would be valuable. This has been incorporated into recommendation (b).

### Drainage

The points outlined here focused on investigating reported flooding and blocked drains on a reactive basis alongside some scheduled annual work.

Member discussion centred around an integrated approach where, for instance, work that falls under the Drainage category can be undertaken alongside that which falls under Carriageways; namely, undertaking a more efficient and proactive approach to our highways network. This forms part of recommendation (a).

Members discussed the potential of an annual programme of drainage repair being produced. Officers did advise that this may be limiting where an integrated scheme – namely, one that covers numerous service areas (such as Carriageways and Drainage) – would be more appropriate. Members were more receptive to the idea of a focus on integrated schemes and the production of an annual programme to reflect this. This has been reflected in recommendation (c) below.

### Traffic Management

Traffic Management focused largely on safety such as response to emergency signal failures and the repair or replacement of safety signs.

Members accepted the necessity to prioritise safety signs as a measure to prevent injury or death on Devon roads but did express that delays to the repair of directional roads caused notable annoyance to residents. They were advised that Highways does have an ongoing programme that tries to prioritise need and repair for major network signs such as directional signs on A-roads.

### Footways and Cycleways

The points here focused on inspection and repair of safety defects alongside an annual programme of maintenance repairs.

### Structures

The points here focused on inspection and monitoring of structures as well as targeting those that pose a risk to safety.

Member discussion centred around graffiti both as unsightly and a potential distraction to motorists. Officers explained that whilst graffiti is unsightly, traditionally more focus had been given to areas that posed a more definite risk to driver safety and that the potential benefits of diverting money to graffiti removal would likely be outweighed by a resulting decrease in finances available for other works such as drainage works and carriageway repair. Councillor perspectives on graffiti have been incorporated into recommendation (d) below.

### Public Rights of Way

Of note was the Parish Paths Partnerships (P3) programme which was noted by Members as an impressive initiative.

### Safety Fencing

The focus here was on replacement, repair or removal of safety fences as required, where 'safety fences' refers to road restraint systems such as crash barriers on dual carriageways.

### Green Infrastructure

This focused on an annual programme of grass cutting to maintain safe visibility at junctions, and inspection of trees and prioritisation of repairs to safety defects in accordance with the Tree Inspection Policy.

Member discussion centred around problems regarding littering, especially when grass is cut only once per year which leads to a large amount of built-up rubbish being shredded and therefore very difficult to clean up. The potential for local councils to become more involved in the minor maintenance of grassy areas was discussed.

### Conclusion

In general discussion, Members expressed that the briefing document provided to the Standing Overview Group seemed somewhat negative, with focus being on what Highways

were unable to do as opposed to what could be done. Officers advised that this was largely due to budgetary constraints with this process acting as an early opportunity to manage expectations: in reality, the maintenance of Devon's highways network given the current budget position would not be easy.

Members also discussed the importance of continual engagement with town and parish councils and other community representatives to assist with minor works and maintenance which would therefore allow the County Council's budget to be stretched further. It was expressed that Councillors would like further guidance on how they can use their roles, influence and funding available to them to support the undertakings of the Highways team. Officers advised that there were available case studies within Devon that demonstrated collaboration between Devon County Council and town/parish councils in this way that could be included in the final Plan. This is incorporated into recommendation (e) below.

The meeting began at 2.20pm and ended at 3.16pm.

Councillor A Dewhirst  
Chair, Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee

Electoral Divisions: All

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Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

Nil.