

Report of the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group of 8th February 2023

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 8th February 2023, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

2. Recommendation(s)

That 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:

- (a) that the Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan contains further reference to taking opportunities for joint working with districts, towns and parishes on wider aspects of road maintenance such as litter picking; and
- (b) that a map system to allow councillors to easily identify the maintenance category of Devon roads be developed (alongside the plans to provide councillors with access to the asset condition map).

3. Attendance

Councillors

Councillors A Dewhirst (Chair), C Slade, J Trail BEM, P Bullivant, J Berry, R Chesterton, J Wilton-Love, I Roome

Cabinet Member

Councillor S Hughes

Apologies

Councillors Y Atkinson, M Hartnell, M Asvachin

Officers

Rob Turner - Programme Manager, Highway Asset Programme Delivery Team
Robert Richards - Deputy Director, Highways and Infrastructure Development

4. Summary of Discussion

Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan

Introduction

The Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan and associated Annexes are key documents that sit alongside the Highway Asset Management Policy and Strategy. The Standing Overview Group (SOG) was given the opportunity to comment on the Policy and Strategy in March 2022 (report available here: <https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=427&MId=4488>) wherein comments from members were incorporated, reviewed by the scrutiny committee and approved by Cabinet in April 2022. This meeting of the CIRS Standing Overview Group was to provide councillors with an opportunity to provide feedback on the plan for review at the next scrutiny committee and subsequent approval by Cabinet.

In advance of the meeting, members were provided a briefing note that covered key concepts relevant to the asset plan, the structure of the plan, its alignment with wider corporate objectives, and maintenance standards. It also outlined the purpose of the Standing Overview Group in the overall process of final approval of the plan.

At the meeting, councillors received a presentation on the plan which expanded on the key points of the pre-circulated briefing paper. The contents of the presentation are summarised below, alongside key discussion points. Shortly following the meeting, the draft asset plan was circulated to councillors for comment with information on where to direct feedback and when by (available here: <https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=427&MId=4491&Ver=4>).

Strategic Asset Management

Key elements of strategic asset management were outlined, namely that:

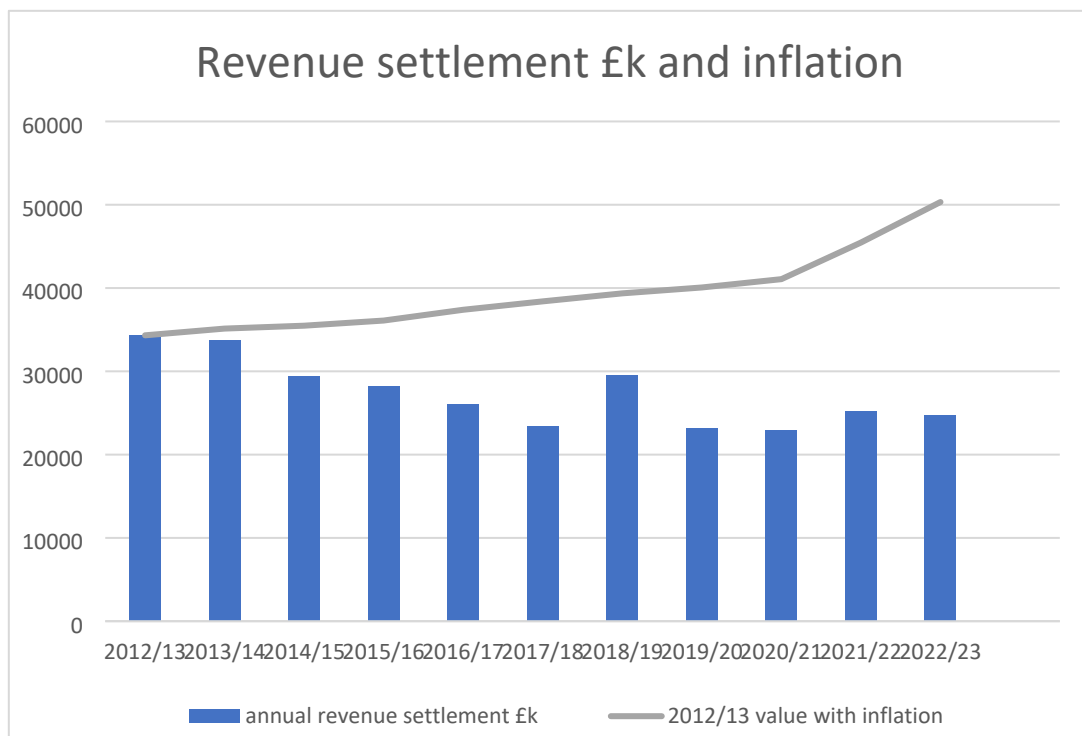
- Plans for each asset must be appropriate;
- The plan must be aligned with larger corporate priorities;
- Risk, cost and performance over time must all be balanced;
- There are cultural challenges to be considered as much as technical challenges.

'Reality Check' and Financial Considerations

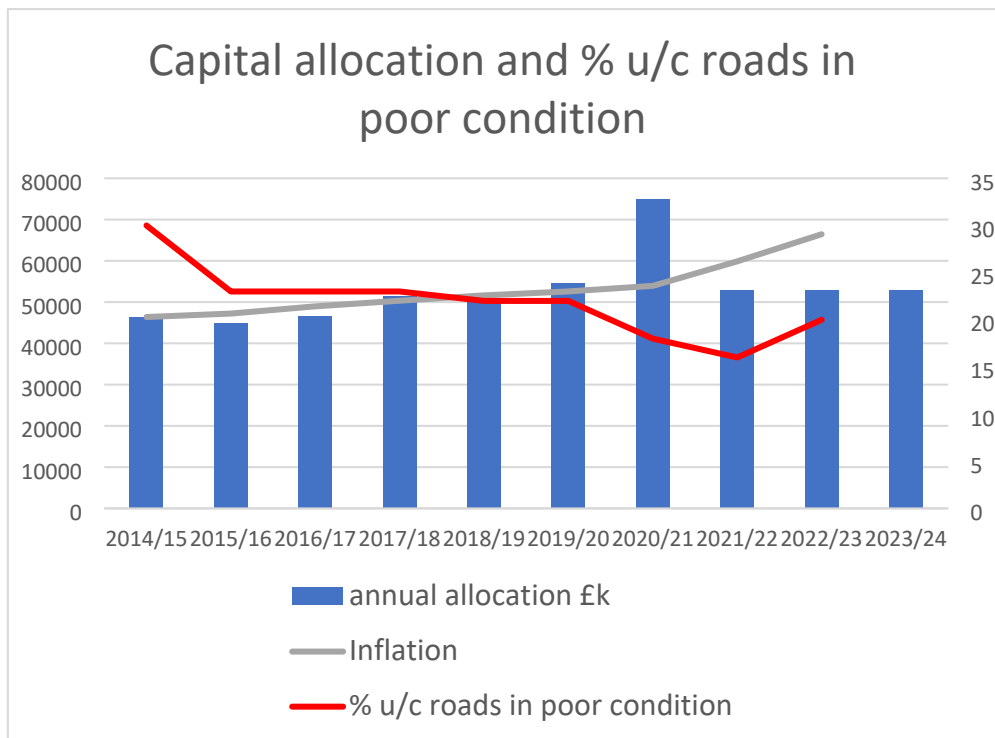
The national context was outlined, highlighting that Devon is not the only area in the country with difficulties around its highway management. Members were told that the national catch-up cost of highway repair sat at £12.64 billion in 2022; and that even before the current inflationary surge the funding given to local governments had, for many years, been inadequate for road maintenance leading to a gradual decline in conditions. Department for Transport (DfT) data highlights that local authorities are having to adopt short-term fixes to spread their budget across the aging highways network with strengthening works that have a long-term scope being ruled out by budgetary constraints.

Devon

The table below shows that since 2012/13 the annual revenue settlement given to Highways for maintenance of Devon roads had gradually fallen from around £35 million in 2012/13 to approximately £25 million in 2022/23. Coupled with inflationary change, in particular the rapid increase in inflation seen in 2022/23, this meant that the maintenance budget had halved in real terms compared to a decade ago. This also has the knock-on impact of forcing change in priorities with safety taking higher consideration and proactive works being stopped, leading to rapid deterioration of roads.



As seen below, funding from the Department for Transport for asset renewal had, until 2019/20, been mostly consistent and in-line with inflation with a large boost in 2020/21. However from 2021/22 there was a fixed three-year settlement of funding that did not increase with inflation. Taking into consideration this year's inflationary pressures, this represents a funding cut of approximately 15% with the result that the percentage of unclassified roads considered 'poor condition' had been on the rise since 2021/22, reversing the downward trend seen since 2014/15.



Impact of Funding Challenges

The reduced real-terms funding and inflationary pressures means that the local authority not only has less money to spend on road maintenance and improvement, but also that the money it does have is worth less. For instance, the cost of surface dressing had increased from £2.50 per square metre in 2018 to £4.93 in 2022, representing a 97% increase.

Overall this will have significant implications for Devon's road network. In particular:

- Devon's policy is to prioritise the maintenance of A and B roads, with C roads and unclassified roads declining;
- Over one-third of Devon's bridges are in 'poor', 'very poor', or 'severe' condition and any reduction in funding means further deterioration. This will lead to more closures and increased repair costs;
- Devon, alongside the rest of the country (as shown in DfT data) has had to shift its attention towards short-term fixes at the expense of long-term strengthening works which are more cost effective;
- Potholes, which are a key consideration not only of the local authority but of residents and councillors, are likely to become more prevalent and will remain a hotbed of discussion and resident concern.

Response to Funding Challenges

Despite these pressures, the Highways and Traffic Management service has developed some suggestions which are primarily focused around revision and improvement of current working practices to increase efficiency and reduce disruption, recognising that in the absence of adequate funds, the authority must prioritise. Some of these include:

- Revised approach to defect identification and repair, focusing on risk as key (prioritising safety);
- Improving inventory and condition surveys and documenting levels of service and maintenance standards, both which allow the authority to have a more nuanced and detailed view of, and structured approach to, its road network;
- Development of integrated work programmes;
- Increased community engagement and community self-help schemes.

The Plan

Consideration of the Asset Management Plan follows on from the SOG feeding into the Policy and Strategy in March 2022. The plan provides the “detail and depth describing how the Council uses asset management tools to develop effective processes to plan, operate, monitor and review the highway network assets.”

Key aspects of the plan were included within the presentation to direct members’ attention to the salient points, with the full detailed plan circulated afterwards.

Code of Practice

The UK Roads Liaison Group’s code of practice on managing highways infrastructure was published in 2016 and lays out best practice for highway infrastructure management. It has been endorsed by the Department for Transport who have, in recent years, linked packages of funding to the adoption of the code by highway authorities. As such, Devon have structured their approach to mirror the code.

Asset Plan – Annexes

The plan consists of twelve annexes which represent the main asset groups of focus in the plan. These have been reviewed and recategorized to communicate and identify the approach of Devon to its highways more easily. Each annex is similarly structured with categories such as Inventory, Maintenance Approach and Improvement Actions. This consistency helps with navigation and with highlighting inconsistencies across asset areas, for instance Inventory, where some areas may be better documented than others.

Aligning with Priorities

Devon County Council has six strategic priorities under its 'Best Place' plan for 2021 – 2025 which have been considered in the development of the Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan. Member attention was particularly drawn to the authority's commitment to "Respond to the climate emergency" which formed a key part of the plan. The Service aims to:

- Improve understanding of carbon emissions generated by work by developing and using design tools. Members were advised that Devon is a national leader in developing emission understanding in this respect;
- Be prepared to respond to the increasing frequency of extreme weather;
- Continue investment in LED streetlight technology. Much work has already been done on this, reducing annual carbon emissions by over 10,000 tonnes and representing an annual revenue saving of £2.9m with current energy prices.

Maintenance

In essence, due to the financial position of the authority, decline of some roads is unavoidable. The Service has developed a framework of Maintenance Strategies ranging from 'improved condition' through to 'safety only'.

Strategy	Description
Improved condition of priority assets	<i>e.g. Drainage cleaning</i> Targeted investment
Maintaining steady state	<i>e.g. A and B roads</i> Sustaining the current level of service
Reducing serviceability	<i>e.g. Minor Road Network</i> Allowing an asset to gradually deteriorate from its current level of service
Minimal Maintenance	<i>e.g. Unclassified Roads</i> Safety and routine maintenance only

These Maintenance Strategies can then be applied to the various asset types to create a set of Maintenance Standards. The example for carriageways can be seen below. Descriptions have been added to ensure consistency across the county and help manage expectations.

Provision of Safety related issues only	Provision of Safety and Serviceability related issues	Provision of Safety, Serviceability and Sustainability Issues	Provision of Safety, Serviceability and Sustainability Issues
Carriageway surface uneven and rutted with multiple localised repairs and defects of a non safety nature. In rural areas suitable only for use by agricultural & similar vehicles.	Carriageway surface irregular. Limited evidence of recent resurfacing. Significant localised repairs & defects of a non safety nature.	Carriageway surface generally well maintained, Busier roads will be regular with localised repairs & defects of a non safety nature.	carriageway surface regular with very few localised repairs or defects of a non safety nature.

Carriageway Hierarchy	Carriageway Maintenance Standard
MC3	
MC4	
MC5	
MC6	
MC7	
MC8	
MC9	
MC10	
MC11	

The table to the left shows the road classifications versus the intended maintenance standard, with MC3 and MC4 referring to the major link roads in the county such as the A380.

Consistency of application was highlighted as being key, with the Service keen to work alongside districts to be clear that due to the current situation not all roads can be maintained, and then to identify their most important roads. Maintenance standards can then be applied accordingly to ensure that the road network is being managed effectively and to the benefit of as many users as possible.

In relation to maintenance, other improvements relating to data collection and management were proposed such as:

- A ‘softening’ of approach to data to incorporate local informal intelligence (such as local residents and councils), recognising the value of information coming from local communities;
- Software improvements to allow officers to record visual road inspections, viewable via an app;
 - It is planned to explore opening this up to local members to allow wider access to the data and a more formal means of communicating councillor priorities;
 - Also planned is the inclusion of footways and cycleways;
- The use of the increased data to better inform overall decision making and to support future funding bids.

Recent Innovation

The authority has been developing good practice and adopting positive initiatives to benefits in:

- Efficiency savings (£6.7 million in 2021/22) as well as streetlighting savings;

- Materials, such as early adoption of warm asphalt and use of Methyl Methacrylate (MMA) high performance road markings;
- Triage inspections for safety defects reducing duplication;
- Working with universities (Exeter, Cardiff, Bristol) to develop the resilient network.

Member discussion

Discussion took place throughout the presentation at various times, with the key areas of the discussion recorded here for clarity.

Overbanding

Overbanding is the practice of using thermoplastic to seal joints in tarmac and was an area of member discussion who queried the use of it in Devon. It had been discontinued some years ago due to safety concerns as it can become slippery in certain conditions and causes a hazard to motorists, particularly those on two wheels.

Councillors questioned this as they saw it as a cost-effective way of preventing future damage to tarmac, which often results from water leaking in through seams, which overbanding prevents.

Working Practices

General improvements in working practices, and other queries on working practices, came up during the discussion. In particular:

- The efficiency of asset repair and maintenance. For instance, members queried whether a repair gang can fix a pothole that they have not been assigned to, and were advised that they are able to do so. However it was also explained that in many cases there are considerations outside simple proximity to an unfixed pothole such as availability of materials, or where prioritising damage to a road that poses a serious safety hazard is seen as more important from a public safety and financial liability perspective. This related to the presentation's mention of integrated work programmes, where the plan recognises that there is capacity to improve efficiency of works, but that the capacity for operatives to do so only goes so far;
- Working practices around road inspection, where members recalled that Lengthsmen used to be employed to inspect a particular subset of road. Councillors were advised that changes in technology and inspection practices had led to an increase in efficiency, rendering the role largely obsolete in Devon.
- Closer liaison with district councils across a wider spectrum of road management issues. Litter, in particular, was an area of discussion where further collaboration with local authorities ahead of the grass cutting

programme within Devon could yield benefits in efficiency and providing a valuable service. The inclusion of reference to wider collaboration with authorities within Devon has been reflected in recommendation (a).

Data

Members saw the development of better data as a positive move for Highways. As well as being provided access with the data on road condition, an 'environmental map' outlining road management categorisation was also requested. Officers responded that this data is held and could be made available. This has been reflected in recommendation (b).

The meeting began at 2.04pm and ended at 3.45pm.

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](#)

Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Committee (24th March 2022),
[Standing Overview Group - Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Strategy](#)