

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Special Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2 - County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 21 March 2019** at **10.30 am**

Present:

Councillor E Adam (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors O Milburn, B Avery, D Bell, L Brown, J Carr, R Crute, S Dunn, D Hicks, P Howell, C Kay and R Manchester

Co-opted Members:

Mrs P Holding

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Clark, C Martin, A Patterson, A Simpson, P Sexton and M Wilson, and Mr T Bolton. Apologies were also received from Councillor J Atkinson from the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillor C Kay did not declare an interest, however, he noted he was Chairman of the Highways Committee.

4 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

5 Highways Maintenance

The Chairman introduced the Head of Technical Services, John Reed and the Strategic Highways Manager, Brian Buckley who were in attendance to give an update presentation in relation to Highways Maintenance (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Technical Services thanked Members for the opportunity to provide an update in terms of highways maintenance. He explained that the Council's Highways Maintenance Plan set out the Council's inspection, condition survey, and reactive and routine maintenance service levels. He added that the Council's Traffic Asset Management Plan (TAMP) set out the long-term plan for managing the highways asset by applying programmed maintenance, including works such as resurfacing of roads and footpaths and works to structures such as bridges.

The Head of Technical Services explained that, in terms of the Council's highways inventory, there was approximately 3,800km of road and just over 3,700km of pavement. He reminded Members that County Durham was a large county and also there was around 1,500 bridges and other structures, and over 83,000 streetlights. Members noted there were also other elements including signage, grit bins and trees.

Councillors were referred to a slide setting out the asset condition relating to carriageways and footways. The Head of Technical Services noted that performance was very much linked to and reliant upon the funds available for programmed works and refurbishment in relation to roads, footpaths and streetlights. He drew Members' attention to the improvements in terms of the condition of Category A roads, from 4.9 percent where maintenance needed to be considered in 2015, down to 2.6 percent in 2018.

Councillor C Kay asked if every kilometre of road was inspected each year. The Head of Technical Services noted that the inspection regime would be described by the Strategic Highways Manager a little later within the presentation. The Chairman asked if this included potholes. The Head of Technical Services noted that the Annual Condition Survey was an indicator to highlight if there needed to be further investigations by the Strategic Highways Manager's Team. He added that our statistics were fed into national statistics. The Chairman asked how County Durham compared. The Head of Technical Services explained that County Durham was improving and in terms of Category A, B and C roads the Council was slightly above average. He added that for unclassified roads the Authority was slightly below average, with an overall average position across all roads. Members were reminded that this was in the context of County Durham having a large road network.

Councillor S Dunn asked if these statistics were a true representation of improvement, comparable with previous years due to long standing standards. The Head of Technical Services explained that standards were the same and the surveys were very technical and scientific, utilising a machine with laser sensors for the Category A, B and C roads. He noted for unclassified roads there was an Independent Inspector working to national standards. The Head of Technical Services reminded Members that while there was a good condition target of zero percent where maintenance should be considered, in reality achieving zero percent would not be achievable. He noted that the target therefore was to achieve a fair condition and then have a "steady-state" position maintaining those standards.

In respect of unclassified roads, The Head of Technical Services noted that performance information showed that there had been slight deterioration and he added that these roads represented most of our roads and included rural roads and estate roads.

He added performance reflected the money available to spend and was always a challenge, and these roads remained an aspiration in terms of improving performance, following the improvement and stabilising of the condition of the A, B and C roads.

The Head of Technical Services noted the position in terms of footways and additional funding that had been allocated. He noted that improvement to footways helped to reduce incidents and in defending public liability claims. He noted that while there had been improvement it was still hoped to make further improvements. Members were referred to graphs highlighting the trends relating to road and footway condition for the period 2004/05 to 2017/18.

Councillors learned that in relation to streetlighting, lighting columns had an expected lifespan of around 40 years. The Head of Technical Services noted improved performance in respect of this area and that extra funding in terms of £1 million of capital budget had helped to provide that improvement. Members noted that in terms of the lanterns, expected lifespan was around 20 years and that this had seen a large improvement in performance. It was explained that this was in part due to the retrofitting of new efficient LED lighting as part of the Street Lighting Energy Reduction Programme, also helping to reduce energy use and carbon emissions. The Head of Technical Services noted that in terms of signage that was required to be lit, there was a slight improvement in performance. The Chairman noted that policy had changed nationally in this regard. The Head of Technical Services noted this was the case, with the Department for Transport (DfT) noting a sign did not necessarily need to be lit, for example signs could be produced using modern, highly reflective material as to be illuminated by car headlights. The Chairman noted the improvement appeared to be relatively small in that case, the Head of Technical Services noted that it was not permitted by the DfT for all signs to be de-lit, however the Council did look to reduce where possible.

The Head of Technical Services noted the performance data in relation to major structures, such as bridges, footbridges, retaining walls and culverts. He explained that for bridges, a national indicator, the Bridge Condition Index (BCI) was used, and it was explained that there was a grading system, with 90-100 representing very good, 80-90 representing good and so on. Members noted that the figures within the presentation were averages across all structures. The Head of Technical Services noted that in the last few years more accurate condition data had been gathered and also the funding available in terms of maintenance had reduced. He added that there was the DfT "Challenge Fund" and the next round was focussing on structures, accordingly the Council had prepared a bid for this. The Chairman asked if the condition of structures was because DfT had focussed on roads and footpaths, or whether it was simply down to the funding situation. The Head of Technical Services noted that there had been some focus on roads and footways, aided by some ringfenced DfT funding following national concerns as regards potholes. He added that structures were also a priority, however, the recent additional funds had been specifically for carriageways.

Councillor P Howell noted that the BCI figure listed was 80.7, just within the good condition band, and asked what number of bridges fell within the various bands, given that the 80.7 was an average across all structures. The Head of Technical Services noted this was correct and that he did not have the breakdown to hand, though of course would be happy to collate the information and share with Committee.

Councillor O Milburn asked if Network Rail provided any funds towards maintenance of bridges. The Head of Technical Services noted that there was a general rule that if the bridge was “road over rail” it would be the responsibility of the Council and “rail over road” it would be the responsibility of Network Rail. He added there were a few exceptions to this, however that was the general position.

The Strategic Highways Manager noted that in terms of inspections, there were two types, safety inspections and service inspections. He explained that safety inspections were designed to identify all defects that were likely to create danger or serious inconvenience to users of the network or the wider community and that these related to carriageways, footways and cycle routes. It was explained that service inspections were detailed inspections tailored to the requirements of the particular highways asset to ensure that they meet requirements for serviceability and these related to street lighting, highways trees and traffic signals. The Strategic Highways Manager explained that the safety inspections were on a risk-based approach and that having good systems in place helped to maintain the asset and also helped in terms of defending public liability claims.

The Strategic Highways Manager explained that for Category A, B and C roads the survey type used was a national standard, the Surface Condition Assessment for the National Network of Roads (SCANNER) and was UK Pavement Management System (UKPMS) compliant and all surveyors and equipment were accredited, with all data processed through the Council’s UKPMS. He explained that a rating was given in terms of “red, amber, green” to help direct where the Council’s Engineers would look to investigate further and assess the treatment required. He noted the machine used for this was quite large and therefore was restricted to the areas in which it could operate. Members noted the resolution of the machine was to 100mm and that 100% of the A, B and C roads and some unclassified roads were surveyed annually in one direction, the other direction surveyed the following year.

The Committee were informed that in terms of unclassified roads a coarse visual inspection (CVI) was carried out, a two-person operation which looked at a minimum of 25 percent of this element of the network, effectively a four-year inspection cycle. The Strategic Highways Manager noted that this was carried out by an independent company, separate from the safety inspections. In addition, a minimum of 25% of footways are inspected annually. It was explained that there were skid resistance surveys carried out, and vehicle restraint systems surveys in addition. Councillor L Brown asked if these were as regards crash barriers and similar systems. The Strategic Highways Manager noted that the vehicle restraint systems included crash barriers.

The Strategic Highways Manager noted the survey regime in terms of structures and noted general inspections, a visual inspection carried out every two years, and also principal inspections, which were in-depth surveys where all aspects of the structure would be assessed. Members noted that special surveys could be carried out as and when required and that for underwater inspections a specialist company was engaged, looking at areas every two years or following a flooding incident.

The Strategic Highways Manager added that the Council had all the information in terms of condition and this was used to give the maintenance backlog figures, which in turn were fed through to the national UKPMS.

He noted that those figures were then used in conjunction with the relevant rates to give the projected costs and these were reported via the TAMP.

The Chairman noted that the backlog amount for all structures had increase from £9.9million in 2014 to £40.6million by 2018 and asked if this all related to bridges. The Strategic Highways Manager noted mostly bridges, however, he highlighted that the quality of the 2018 data was much greater than the 2014 data, and the Council had a much-improved knowledge of the condition of all its highway structures. He gave an example in the Deerness Division where a bridge had been found to be in poor condition and had therefore been replaced.

Members noted that DfT allocations were based upon the length of the road network within an authority area and the information from condition surveys. The Strategic Highways Manager explained that DfT guidance noted that a recommended allocation of resources with a split of: 84 percent carriageways and footways; 14 percent structures; and 2 percent streetlighting.

Councillor P Howell noted that within the report it explained that a zero percent target for those elements that required maintenance would not be possible, accordingly, he asked what a reasonable target would be and how Durham County Council (DCC) compared to other Local Authorities. The Head of Technical Services noted that within the TAMP and report to Committee there were details in terms of the maintenance backlog and fair condition targets. He noted for carriageways the target was 4 percent where maintenance should be considered, and the Council was ahead of this with only 2.6 percent where maintenance should be considered. It was added for structures the Council was slightly behind target. The Head of Technical Services noted that a rough calculation in terms of the cost of the backlog to reach the fair condition target, rather than zero percent, would still be in excess of £100million.

Councillor S Dunn reiterated previous speakers in terms of understanding the number of structures within each category and being able to prioritise by urgency. He added that if those structures that were not in urgent need of maintenance and were in a safe condition then in his opinion they could wait, especially in the context of austerity, and he would rather see the money focussed on footways and carriageways. Councillor P Howell noted he agreed. The Head of Technical Services noted that high, medium and low priorities were identified, and he reassured Members that DCC's bridges were inspected and are safe, with any bridge determined as unsafe being closed with immediate effect. He gave an example of a bridge at Witton Park closed for further investigations. Councillor C Kay asked as regards the bridge and options available. The Head of Technical Services noted that more detailed investigations were being undertaken and he would be happy to speak to the Councillor as regards this.

The Strategic Highways Manager noted that the lifespan for bridges was on average around 120 years, and that the Council had a good knowledge of the condition of the bridges within the county. Councillor P Howell noted the further details in relation to the numbers within each condition category would be useful for Members.

The Head of Technical Services added that while the average lifespan for a bridge was around 120 years, it was to be noted that many of the bridges in our county were Victorian and therefore many would be approaching the end of their life.

He explained that replacement bridges were expensive projects, noting the replacement bridge at Deerness costing around £2million, with the annual budget for such capital works being around £1million.

The Head of Technical Services referred Members to information relating to the DfT Incentive Fund, with the Council being initially one of two Local Authorities to achieve a maximum Band 3 efficiency rating in 2016. He noted that subsequently this Band 3 rating had been maintained in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Members learned that in the National Highways and Transportation (NHT) Public Satisfaction Survey, the Council had 5 out of 6 indicators above the national and north east averages. The Head of Technical Services noted that the Council would still look to improve as best it could in this regard.

The Head of Technical Services noted that there were exciting new initiatives, working with partners Rainton Construction and MacRebur to utilise plastipave “plastic road” asphalt. Councillor C Kay asked if this material had been used in the new cycleways constructed as he noted they had been of a very good quality. The Head of Technical Services noted this product had not been used, however, that was an idea that could be looked at for future cycleways.

The Head of Technical Services noted that DCC had won the Highways Maintenance Services category at the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Highways Innovation Awards 2019.

Members congratulated the Head of Technical Services and his staff for their work. The Head of Technical Services referred Members to a table highlighting the amount of tarmac used in the three trial schemes that had taken place at the A689 Sedgefield, Murton and the A68 Toft Hill. He added that the benefit of the scheme was in replacing 6 percent of the bitumen binder with the recycled plastic product. It was noted that in future it may be possible to increase the percentage, following further investigations.

Councillor L Brown asked what happened to the plastic particles when the road surface broke down over time. The Strategic Highways Manager noted that the process for hot rolled asphalt utilised around 94 percent crushed stone and aggregate, with 6 percent binder. He noted that 6 percent of the 6 percent was that being replaced with the plastic product. Members learned that in the resurfacing process the road surface was 100 percent reused.

Councillor B Avery left the meeting at 11.21am

Councillor S Dunn asked if the plastic being reused was “single use” plastic. The Head of Technical Services noted it was and therefore it was a much better end use for the material and the project had captured the public imagination.

Mrs P Holding asked whether the plastic component was recycled material from within County Durham. The Head of Technical Services noted the company involved was based near Lockerbie in Scotland and their plastic product was from material collected in Scotland and the North East of England, therefore a proportion would be from County Durham. He added that if the use of the material was to be utilised in future schemes, then the use of a larger amount of waste plastic from County Durham could be an element to be explored.

Members were shown videos of the trial schemes, including a report from the ITV Tyne Tees North East Tonight programme. The Head of Technical Services noted a correction to the number quoted within the videos, 60,000 bags. He noted this had been an underestimate, with the amount being as set out within the information presented to Members at Committee, around 1.6 million bags.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Technical Services and the Strategic Highways Manager and asked Members for any further comments and questions.

Councillor R Crute left at 11.30am

Councillor P Howell referred to the graphs showing trends in terms of road and footway condition and asked as regards what work was undertaken differently by Technical Services as he could not see a correlation to funding input, however there was clear improvements since 2011. The Head of Technical Services noted that in the context of funding cuts across the Council, his service had seen a revenue budget reduction of around 25 percent. He noted that however, from both the DfT and DCC there had been additional capital allocation. He added that the work of the Strategic Highways Manager's Team in respect of the TAMP had helped Members to be able to make informed decisions in terms of where to target resources. The Head of Technical Services added that this, alongside improved techniques and works being carried out at the right time had helped.

Councillor P Howell noted the pressures on the Highways Teams, especially following the previous winter, and remarked it had been fortunate this winter had not been as severe. The Head of Technical Services noted that the "beast from the east" in 2017/18 had been a challenge. The Strategic Highways Manager noted that "water was the enemy of the highways engineer", and therefore the Council had introduced technologies to try and mitigate this as much as possible, preventing potholes. The Strategic Highways Manager noted this approach had worked well with the Category A, B and C roads and modelling in terms of the unclassified roads had been undertaken and at this stage it may be possible to look to seek improvements for those roads. The Head of Technical Services noted that there was a fund of £5.3million from the DfT and that this was targeted by DCC for unclassified roads.

The Chairman noted that Members understood the impact of austerity and commented that the decision by DCC to invest in their highways appeared to have been correct. Councillor S Dunn noted that in overall terms the DCC budget had been cut by a quarter of a billion pounds and he felt that the political decision to invest in our roads, based upon the data that had been gathered, had helped significantly. He added he hoped that investment in footways would follow next, and in terms of the work undertaken by this Council he felt that Members and Officers should be proud and promote their achievements.

Mrs P Holding asked if staffing costs were an issue, asking whether there was an increased cost in engaging external companies. The Head of Technical Services noted the Council retained a significant in-house capacity, with 267 staff, however it had been shown that a "mixed economy" approach, with partners such as Rainton Construction and MacRebur for specialised schemes was preferable.

He added this also allowed for flexibility within the in-house team in terms of reactive works, for example in relation to severe weather and winter maintenance.

Councillor J Carr noted the trial schemes as mentioned seemed to be a “win-win” and felt they should be applauded. Councillor C Kay noted there was a lot of positives within the report and presentation and the Officers should be proud and keep up the good work. The Chairman agreed and felt that Members could take confidence in the DCC approach given the local and national recognition. He concluded by thanking the Officers again and noting Members looked forward to receiving the breakdown in respect of bridge condition information in due course.

Resolved:

- (i) That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the report and presentation.
- (ii) That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee include within its future work programme for 2019/20 a progress update on highways maintenance in the county.