



Report of Corporate Management Team

Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change

Councillor Brian Stephens, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on actions taken with respect to the coronavirus pandemic and the impact of highway asset management service delivery.

Executive summary

- 2 The pandemic of Covid-19 has had an extraordinary effect on the delivery of highway services. From the outset, understandably, an extremely cautious but proportionate approach has been taken on deciding which services are critical to the authority and should continue to be provided.
- 3 An emergency-only service was implemented from the onset of the pandemic and, more recently, risk assessments and social distancing management has enabled the resumption of highway asset services on a phased approach.
- 4 Weekly meetings are scheduled to ensure that the resumption of services is compliant with systems and procedures put in place to protect our workforce and, indeed, external service providers.

Recommendation(s)

- 5 It is recommended that the actions taken to implement emergency/urgent and, subsequently, a phased resumption of highway services be noted and approved.

Background

- 6 The pandemic of Covid-19 has had an extraordinary effect on the delivery of highway services. From the outset, understandably, an extremely cautious but proportionate approach has been taken on deciding which services are critical to the authority and should continue to be provided.
- 7 This approach was consistent with other authorities in the region and, also, nationally. In this respect and in accordance with national guidance, the following actions were agreed and implemented:

- a) All highway service provision ceased except critical/emergency services (such as pot-hole repairs, street lighting knockdowns and damages)
- b) Essential staff required to manage delivery of these services are attending work
- c) Highway inspections to discharge our statutory duty to maintain the highway continue albeit modified to 'one person' inspections only.
- d) Most staff are working from home, where possible, to continue delivering their work on a 'business as usual' basis. This includes design of schemes for delivery as and when normal services resume
- e) Others unable to undertake their normal duties are furloughed until further notice
- f) Where possible, redeployment of highway operatives has been undertaken to assist with DCC essential services, such as bin collections
- g) Further redeployment of staff is being managed to support those services either struggling to cope or to supplement emergency responses, such as, delivery of PPE
- h) All staff are completing the online questionnaire to offer support to those frontline and critical services suffering difficulties due to lack of resources and depletion of personnel

Issue relating to Suspension of Normal Services

- 8 The issues relating to the suspension of normal services are, as you would expect, numerous. However, the main issue for consideration is the need to continue delivering essential services, wherever possible. As the Covid-19 scenario developed, the early and correct decision was to take decisive action as described above. Over time, we have awaited further guidance from central government and, in particular, the DfT, on how we should proceed. In the meantime, we have undertaken risk assessments to determine whether we are able to resume some form of service delivery with measures in place to mitigate the Covid-19 situation.

Consideration for Resumption of Highway Services

- 9 There is much media coverage about the construction industry with a strong focus on who should or shouldn't be working.
- 10 Our approach has been to stop all services other than those considered to be emergency/urgent. This continues to be the case.

- 11 However, as we enter a new financial year, we and our framework partners are keen to seek some indication of the likelihood of restarting the highway programme in the near future.
- 12 In discussion with other authorities in the region, there is an appetite to resume where safe to do so, some construction activity
- 13 In this region, we already have some construction sites (albeit very few) still operating and this being on the basis that they are able to comply with Public Health England (PHE) and Government guidance on self-distancing, welfare arrangements etc.
- 14 In Durham, for example, external contractors continue to deliver on two major projects, namely Chester le Street De-culverting and the new County Hall.
- 15 The contractors delivering these projects have risk assessments/safe operating procedures and management plans in place covering their health and safety requirements, as you would expect.
- 16 Elsewhere, Highways England, for example, are continuing to deliver major projects on the strategic road network nationally.
- 17 Our road maintenance contractors and the associated supply chain are now appealing for guidance on their potential to return to work on the basis that:
 - a) They are able to meet PHE and government advice and guidance
 - b) Traffic volumes are significantly reduced and contact with the travelling public is negligible
 - c) As a consequence, this is considered an ideal time to undertake maintenance on the network.
- 18 In addition as an authority it is critical that we support our supply chain so that when the Covid-19 restrictions are totally lifted, the supply chain has survived and we are able to bounce back and deliver the Capital programme
- 19 It is recognised that we must not compromise the good work that is being delivered nationally in containing and managing the Covid 19 pandemic. However, the construction industry is an essential service and advice is that works should continue where it is safe to do so. Following a review, it is considered that there are numerous services that are considered suitable to resume. These include:
 - a) Road resurfacing schemes
 - b) Specialist Surfacing Schemes (surface dressing, micro-asphalt)
 - c) White-lining and Cats-eyes
 - d) Gully cleansing and maintenance
 - e) Street lighting
 - f) Bridges and Structures

- 20 To facilitate these works there will be a requirement for essential site visits from our design staff, this will enable the provision of robust designs allowing delivery through this mechanism. Working closely with H&S, protocols and safe operating procedures have been developed to ensure compliance with current guidance
- 21 This is not an exclusive list but it sets out examples of where it is considered feasible to resume essential services to maintain the highway infrastructure.
- 22 The annual highway maintenance programme delivers approx. £25m across the various assets listed above.
- 23 It is considered that we are able to commence delivery of a number of schemes across all of the areas with due regard to the health and well-being of the workforce and, of course, all highway users.
- 24 We are able to plan the delivery of works predominantly on the major network (classified A, B and C-roads) together with more remote, rural locations.
- 25 This would separate the workforce from the public in general.
- 26 All schemes would be risk assessed for suitability and a communications plan developed to inform the public of our intentions.
- 27 Where appropriate and to ensure compliance Covid-19 marshals will be utilised on site to ensure all staff at all times adhere to guidance
- 28 Close working with our communications team will ensure the correct message is effectively communicated to our key stakeholders, members and the public
- 29 All schemes would be well signed with specific signs highlighting that we are carrying out essential highway maintenance works, as shown in attached example.

Options (if appropriate)

- 30 There is an option to not resume delivery of the highway capitalised maintenance programme

Main implications

- 31 The council, as highway authority, has a statutory duty to maintain the highway and may be liable for third party damage claims should it fail to do so.
- 32 The absence of highway maintenance services has the consequence of deteriorating assets over time.
- 33 The non-resumption of services is having an impact on the ability for our

service providers to sustain furloughed workers in the longer term with ensuing difficulties in resuming 'normal' working arrangements.

Conclusion

- 34 The effects of the coronavirus pandemic has been managed in a two phase, emergency only and staged resumption of services.
- 35 The service will continue to be reviewed regularly to support our service providers, both internal and external, to safeguard from the risks associated with the disease.

Background papers

- 36 None

Other useful documents

- 37 None

Author(s)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The council, as highway authority, has a statutory duty to maintain the highway

Finance

Existing revenue and capital maintenance budgets

Consultation

Consultation internal with Cabinet member

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

n/a.

Climate Change

n/a.

Human Rights

n/a.

Crime and Disorder

n/a.

Staffing

n/a.

Accommodation

n/a.

Risk

Managing the risk to highway users, as legal above.

Procurement

n/a