
West Berkshire Council Highway Defect (Pothole) Management Review

Committee considering report:	Individual Executive Member Decisions
Date of Committee:	19 July 2024
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Stuart Gourley
Report Author:	Jon Winstanley
Forward Plan Ref:	ID4571

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To report on the findings of an external review into how the Council prioritises and manages highway defects.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That the portfolio holder for Environment and Highways approves an update to the Highway Inspection Procedure so that the Investigatory Levels for highway defects are reclassified from a depth of 50mm to 40mm.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	It is anticipated that reducing the investigatory level for highway defects from 50mm to 40mm would cost an additional £400k in the first year (due to the need to repair additional potholes to transition) and additional £200k per annum thereafter. This would be subject to a successful capital bid or would have to be found from existing surfacing budgets reducing the coverage of the Highway Improvement Programme.
Human Resource:	None

Legal:	As set out in the body of this paper the Council has a legal obligation to maintain the highway, which it already complies with.			
Risk Management:	N/A			
Property:	N/A			
Policy:	These proposals detailed in the report result from an independent expert review and designed to improve the Highway Service.			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		x		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		x		
Environmental Impact:		x		None as a result of this report.
Health Impact:				N/A
ICT Impact:				N/A

Digital Services Impact:				N/A
Council Strategy Priorities:				Improving the Highway Asset directly contributes to the Council priority of promoting a prosperous and resilient West Berkshire.
Core Business:				Service improvement.
Data Impact:				N/A
Consultation and Engagement:	<p>Officers Consulted:</p> <p>Legal Services, Andrew Reynolds, Leah Rinaldi, Peter Walker, Nick Dale, Nick Coulson, Robin Mann, Clare Lawrence.</p> <p>Full public consultation will be undertaken as part of the review of the Highways Asset Management Plan later this year.</p>			

4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 Following an increase in defect reports during 2023 the Council's Executive requested review of how the Council Manages defects to ensure that best practice and value for money is being achieved for the District's residents.
- 4.2 Consultants WSP had already been engaged by the Highways Service to assist with the update of the Council's Highways Asset Management Strategy and Plan. Matthew Lugg OBE, Director of Local Transport for WSP UK is a pre-eminent expert in the field of potholes having led on the government's 2012 Pot-Hole Review (Prevention and a Better Cure) whilst seconded to the Department of Transport for Transport Minister Norman Baker. Matthew also led the development of much of the national Local Roads Highways Asset Management Guidance and oversaw the review into West Berkshire's Highway defect management process.
- 4.3 WSP's review can be seen in Appendix A. In general, it recognises that the road condition in West Berkshire is consistently better than the national averages in England, concluding that the road network in West Berkshire is generally in good condition. Also, that the Council's Highways Service follows national best practice when identifying and prioritising highway defects. However, there are 7 clear recommendations identified that will, in the main, be taken forward as part of the Highways Asset Management Plan refresh. These recommendations are summarised below and are detailed in full in section 5.10.

No.	Recommendation
1.	Continue to develop the use of AI technology to gather data and inform decisions.
2.	Review the network hierarchy to ensure correct inspection regimes and prioritisation is in place.
3.	Update the Highway Inspection Procedure - including a review of the Investigatory Levels.
4.	Review the current defect response times.
5.	Develop the asset management system to link the follow-up permanent repairs with initial temporary repairs.
6.	Review current repair methods and material with a view to trialling alternatives.
7.	Adopt and implement a Highways Communication Plan.

4.4 These recommendations will be considered as part of the refresh of the HAMP. This individual decision is proposed to implement a reduction in the investigatory level from 50mm to 40mm with immediate effect.

5 Introduction/Background

Introduction

5.1 Consultants WSP have undertaken a review of the way West Berkshire Council undertakes carriageway defect management across the highway network. This followed growing concern of West Berkshire residents regarding the condition of the Council's roads.

Background

5.2 The review considered several aspects of highway defect management and focussed on the following topics:

- Current best practice across the highway industry.
- Existing practices in West Berkshire Council.
- Comparison and benchmarking with neighbouring Berkshire Authorities.
- Existing West Berkshire Council Inspection Procedure.
- Explore the definition of 'right first time'.
- Information from claims made against West Berkshire Council.
- Establish how defects are considered as part of the wider highway infrastructure asset management system.

Proposals

- 5.3 In developing the review, it became clear that the road condition in West Berkshire is in generally good condition when compared locally and nationally, however the number of defects, both identified as enquiries to the service and being recorded as part of routine safety inspections, has significantly increased in the last 12 months reflecting national trends. Alongside this there was a significant increase in the volume of claims related to highway defects being received by the service.
- 5.4 To understand a possible reason for this increase, the Highway Safety Inspection Procedure was reviewed, and it was noted that West Berkshire has a less onerous investigatory level than their geographical neighbours. In West Berkshire, a pothole would have to be a minimum of 50mm deep to be fixed, whereas most other authorities would have a threshold of 40mm. This may be contributing to a negative customer perception as road users believe that defects are severe enough to be repaired but would not be progressed as the investigatory level is not reached. It should be noted that changing from 50mm to 40mm would have financial implications, however this will result in more potholes being fixed earlier and give a much more satisfactory outcome for the road user.
- 5.5 The review established that the highway service, and their contractor Volker Highways, operates a consistently high standard of repair, with a process to revisit the repairs that have been temporarily repaired with permanent repairs. However, the repair techniques should be regularly reviewed to ensure the latest innovative techniques are adopted. The Council's Highways Team and contractor Volker Highways currently keep an innovation log which can be seen in Appendix B. It is proposed that this is reviewed and updated monthly and included in the communications plan (referred to later in this report).
- 5.6 The Council aspires to maximise the use of 'right first-time repairs'. The review identified the Highways Service has a culture of promoting and ensuring first-time solutions where possible. But it is also acknowledged there are often factors that make doing a right first-time repair difficult. For example, severe weather events can often lead to a significant number of rapidly appearing road defects which can mean that permanent repairs are simply not achievable in every location.
- 5.7 As a highway authority West Berkshire has a duty to keep the network safe and to maintain safety it is often necessary and generally appropriate to carry out temporary repairs and then follow these up with a permanent repair. Keeping the network safe with temporary repairs as a short stop solution reduces the authority's liability and risk for claims.
- 5.8 As the highway service in West Berkshire cannot always deliver a first-time permanent fix, after temporary repairs, it will always follow on with a permanent solution. There is not currently a link that can be tracked in the defect management system but formalising these links should be explored to allow the conversion of temporary repairs to permanent solutions to be tracked. A digital solution within the highways asset management system is currently being explored.
- 5.9 Communications were also highlighted as an area for improvement. The highway defect reporting system has clearly made reporting defects more accessible. Building

on this improvement the development of the communication principles across the service was identified as being an important part of engagement with both councillors and road users. It is therefore proposed that a Highway Service Communications Strategy be included in the Highway Asset Management Plan refresh and that it encompasses the following points:

- Develop better information for Councillors related to highway service activities in their wards.
- Develop better ways of communicating to residents and road users about highway activity in the district.
- Develop the wider use of video and blogs to communicate the details and reasons behind highway works.
- Develop increased engagement with councillors.
- Improve the way that the service listens and provides feedback to those who make contact.

5.10 The following is a full list of recommendations that will be taken forward and included in the Highway Asset Management plan refresh.

No.	Recommendation
1	Utilise Vaisala Road AI to establish not only condition bands but inform on potential future issues on the network and establish if it is feasible to deliver preventative interventions.
2	A review of the network hierarchy in order to ensure that the current inspection regime and wider asset management decisions are applied appropriately to the network and changes are captured.
3	Update the Highway Inspection Procedure to more reflect the guidance in Well Managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice. This is to include a review of the Investigatory Levels set out in the documents.
4	Review the current defect response times across all defect types to ensure that the balance of keeping the network safe and that the delivery of repairs and interventions occur in an efficient and effect manner.
5	Explore the development of a method to link the follow up permanent repairs with initial temporary repairs.
6	Review the current repair methods and materials delivered on the network with a view to trialling and adopting a wider, more flexible suite of repair options.
7	Adopt the updated Highways Communication Plan and ensure its implementation to keep stakeholders informed of highways operations. This will include improved information and engagement for Councillors, the wider use of video and other direct communication channels and greater listening and feedback from the service.

6 Options for consideration

- 6.1 Consideration was given to not altering the investigatory level; however this would not result in an improvement in the highway condition.

7 Proposals

- 7.1 It is proposed that the recommendations detailed in 5.10 be included in the refresh of the Councils Highways Asset Management Plan. Also proposed that the definition of a highway defect depth, or 'investigatory level', be changed from 50mm to 40mm and that this will be implemented with immediate effect. A communications strategy will be developed and implemented ahead of the Councils Highways Asset Management Plan (HAMP) refresh but will also be included within the HAMP.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 WSP are a leading national consultancy in highway asset and defect management. Several clear recommendations have been proposed following a thorough review.
- 8.2 Implementing these recommendations will bring the Council's Highways operations in line with neighbouring Local Authorities and provide an improved service for the Council's residents.

9 Appendices

- 9.1 Appendix A – WSP Defect Management Report
- 9.2 Appendix B – West Berkshire Council Highways Term Contract Innovation Log

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: No:

Wards affected: All Wards

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