



Committee and Date

Place Overview Committee

3 September 2020

Item

6.1

Public

Highway Maintenance: Agricultural Vehicles and Rural Roads

Responsible officer

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1.0 Summary

1.1 As the second largest inland county in England with a population of circa 325,000 Shropshire is a largely rural county. Shropshire has a thriving agricultural sector which is reliant on ensuring that goods and operational vehicles can manoeuvre around the highway network safely and efficiently.

1.2 This paper reviews the impact on the highway network of this activity and recommends opportunities for future review.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 That the committee notes the contents of the paper.

3.0 Opportunities and risks

3.1 There are several opportunities to bid for Government funding for specific areas of maintenance with routes such as the DfT challenge fund and other authorities, such as North Yorkshire, have successfully secured funding through the Local Enterprise Partnership because of the significant impact that agriculture has on the local economy.

3.2 The Council is currently managing a highway network with increasing maintenance needs, with the rural road network need accelerating at a faster rate than other road types. Investment in highways maintenance is prioritised according to a variety of assessed needs with road speed and road safety risk assessment being key measures. Continuing deterioration will result in more of the available budgets required to be targeted at reactive maintenance to keep the carriageway safe as potholes appear and therefore further reducing the proportion of budget available for preventative surfacing of the network.

4.0 Financial assessment

- 4.1 There is no specific financial impact of this report however without additional future external funding or innovation of more cost-effective technical solutions, this could lead to the deterioration of the entire network accelerating which will place maintenance budgets under pressure.

5.0 Report

- 5.1 The road network and highway infrastructure play a fundamental role in connectivity and enables rural businesses and communities to thrive. The changing nature in rural businesses, especially around farming and agriculture, is also however, placing extra burdens on the road network.
- 5.2 The road vehicles (construction and use) (amendment) regulations 2015 increased the maximum laden weight limit for most category T tractor (wheeled agricultural tractor) and wheeled agricultural trailer combinations from 24.39 to 31 tonnes (t). It also increases the maximum permitted speed for certain wheeled agricultural tractors and agricultural trailers on public roads in Great Britain from 20mph to 40km/h (approximately 25mph)
- 5.3 At the time of this revision the DfT believed that the increase would have little impact on the highway condition. However, there is an increasing body of evidence that there is an acceleration in the deterioration of the carriageway condition in some locations which is creating a maintenance pressures which are difficult to address within the existing financial envelope. The rural road network requires significant investment in order to future proof them.
- 5.4 The Councils Asset Management Strategy identifies this challenge, stating “there are concerns about the condition of some minor roads. These minor roads, typically consisting of little pavement structure, are at most risk of rapid deterioration due to the ingress of water and overloading. Investment in these roads is more challenging to justify with the other demands on more popular routes, however these roads remain crucial links for our communities”.
- 5.5 Rural business of all types already face challenges, due to their geographical locations. Growth, innovation and productivity can all be affected by the special inequality of their rural locations. The road network is vital for rural business, especially where they operate exclusively in a rural location.
- 5.6 Shropshire Highways Service work in close partnership with Economic Growth to ensure advice, support and networking opportunities are provided to rural businesses , further liaison with key land owners, estate managers and National Farmers Union (NFU) is held, and issues such as the increase in size of agricultural vehicles their impact on the rural network and changes in agricultural

practices are and have been raised, as by itself this is not just a Highways issue to resolve, implicit within this is an industry or sectoral solution

- 5.7 Shropshire has a higher than average percentage of rural roads which is maintains with 2,372km of unclassified road network which accounts for 46% of the entire road network.
- 5.8 Shropshire Council receives below average funding per km of road network as part of the DfT highway maintenance grant, and in 2020 was allocated £13.275m which was supplemented by an additional incentive grant of £2.765m to reflect Shropshire's adherence to "good practice" on highway asset management. This is the typical level of annual investment the council receives for the renewal of all highway assets including roads, footways, cycleways, bridges, street lights, traffic signals, drainage, road signs and road markings. This equates to just over £5,000 per km per annum. The Council has made representations to Government for additional funding as part of the Fair Funding Review in part to help maintain the highway network in a good condition.
- 5.9 With the focus necessarily on maintaining the busiest routes in good condition this has led to a period of reduced investment in the rural road network and as such it's maintenance needs are growing at a faster rate than the rest of the road network. This is a national issue with approximately 15.67% of all unclassified roads being considered in need of repair (source: NHT PMF Benchmarking). Shropshire is slightly below the national average at 16% of unclassified roads needing repair.
- 5.10 Many rural roads are narrow historic lanes, which have not been designed and constructed to meet modern needs, and often are little more than a build-up of tarmac overlaid upon older surfaces. They are often narrow lanes under 5m in width with insufficient rook for wider vehicles to pass.
- 5.11 As agricultural equipment has evolved over the years it has grown both heavier and wider. Changes in agricultural machinery and vehicles is not regulated through other processes such as planning . However, when new buildings are proposed that have traffic implications then improvements to the highway network van be secured where necessary to make a development through the use of s106 legal agreements. This might include measures such as access, junction improvements, passing places and routeing plans to mitigate traffic impacts. Much of the unclassified network was not designed to take vehicles of this size and therefore many routes are deteriorating at an accelerated rate. In particular the width of the vehicles is often causing either the vehicle itself or passing vehicles to overrun the edge of the highway onto the verge. This has a two-fold effect in both crumbling of the edge of the highway, which without kerbing
- 5.12 To reduce the deterioration of rural roads as far as practicable the council has undertaken the following action;

- Targeted external funding opportunities and submitted a bid in June 2020 for £11.5m, if successful that would enable 90km of road to be upgraded.
- Focused budgets on a preventative maintenance strategy on the rural network, resulting in:
 - £10m investment in surface dressing (96% was targeted at rural roads).
 - 2,450 defects completed on U roads in 2020.
- Carried out a significant work on rural drainage and undertaken a programme of grip cutting.
- Employed a rural drainage specialist and developed an 'in-house' reactive drainage team, who are focus of highway flooding and drainage issue.
- Reinstated our rural ditching programme and we have completed 45km of ditching and culver clearance since April this year.

5.13 Whilst the above actions will maintain most of the surface of the carriageway additional measures should be considered which would include a programme of rebuilding the edges of carriageways to improve their edge strength and kerbed grips through the highway verge to protect them from overrunning. Within current budgets however, these are unaffordable without a significant detriment to the wider highway network

Meeting, date: Report heading

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

None

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Steve Davenport, Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport

Local Members

All

Appendices

None