



Communities Overview Committee	<u>Item</u>
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Communicating work on the highways

Responsible officer

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1.0	Summary
1.1	This report looks at how and why Shropshire Council and its highways partners communicate with residents, road users and stakeholders around highways maintenance work, plus the importance of good communications, and the improvements made in the past 18 months in the way that communications around highways maintenance is carried out.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	Committee members to note the report and make any recommendations for action that they see fit.
3.0	Background
3.1	<p>Shropshire Council is responsible for maintaining over 3200 miles (5100km) of roads in the local authority area. Highways maintenance is a priority for the council, which is working hard to improve Shropshire's roads and make these as safe as possible for all road users.</p> <p>The condition of our roads is highly visible, well known and a frequent source of comment and complaint, with potholes and other defects a common cause of concern. The condition of the roads impacts the reputation of the council's highways team, of the Shropshire Highways alliance, and the council as a whole.</p> <p>Highways maintenance work ('roadworks') will range from small scale work carried out by Shropshire Council and its contractors, to work being carried out by utilities companies and developers, to large scale projects such those being carried out as part of the Shrewsbury Integrated Transport Package (SITP).</p>

	<p>Work carried out under the ‘highways maintenance’ umbrella includes: pothole repairs; resurfacing and surface dressing; bridge maintenance; winter maintenance; drainage work; street lighting; footpath repairs; and traffic lights and signals; signs and lines maintenance; and verge maintenance including grass cutting</p> <p>Whatever the work, it is important that this is effectively communicated so that people know what is happening and why and, where appropriate, are consulted in advance.</p> <p>Whatever the reason for the work we appreciate that roadworks may cause disruption and inconvenience to road users, residents and businesses. To increase awareness and minimise questions and complaints our aim is always to ensure that people know – as early as possible - what is happening, why, when and how it may affect them.</p> <p>People will never like roadworks and any disruption this may cause, but by knowing and understanding what work is taking place and why, they are more likely to be supportive of this action.</p>
3.2	<p>Reporting highways faults</p> <p>Though regular inspections of the county’s roads are carried out, with such a large county as Shropshire the public also have an important part to play in helping to be the eyes for the council and reporting defects so that these can be inspected and, as necessary, repaired. Much work has taken place recently to make it easier for the public to help report highways issues through the corporate adoption of Fix My Street (FMS) as the default reporting tool for the public to use. Over half of all enquiries and reports are now received through the FMS channel.</p> <p>This is a simpler platform for the public to use than was previously available. A second phase of Fix My Street’s implementation will shortly start, focusing on how to further improve processes and keep people who report issues updated on the progress of their report and any outcome. This will seek to address the commonly reported issue that people receive little detail on the progress of reports that they have made to the council.</p> <p>Effective two-way communication around highways maintenance is therefore essential, to ensure that people are kept informed, to minimise complaints, and to prevent damage to the council’s reputation – and to ensure that people can easily report issues to the council.</p>

3.3	<p>Types of communication</p> <p>It's important to highlight that highways communications takes a number of different forms. It includes communicating with residents via traditional channels – e.g. the council website, social media, the news media – generally led by the council's communications team in line with the 'We're improving your roads' communications strategy (see below).</p> <p>However, it also includes internal communication (with highways staff); direct communication with councillors, town and parish councils, MPs, and other stakeholders; awards submissions; and reporting – generally led by the council's highways teams, and by its partners Kier and WSP.</p> <p>For all planned roadworks an agreed consultation and communication framework is followed. Activity carried out will depend on the anticipated level of disruption (based on type of road; location; work duration; nearby local influences).</p>
3.4	<p>In addition to the above:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Streetworks team holds quarterly works co-ordination meetings with all Utility companies, National Highways and Network Rail. The next meeting is in January 2023. • For major schemes (eg SITP) a period of public consultation will be carried out in advance of work starting. • Information about upcoming work by utilities companies is shared via the council's Newsroom and social media channels to help raise awareness • Information about emergency response work – eg. due to flooding – is shared as necessary before, during and after such incidents.
4.0	<p>Recent successes and developments</p>
4.1	<p>In the past 18 months considerable efforts have been made to develop and improve communications around highways – especially highways maintenance – work.</p> <p>The success is, in large part, due to closer working together by the council's communications and highways teams, and colleagues from our contractors Kier, WSP and Multevo working to provide and share regular, up-to-date information about planned and completed work. This information can then be communicated more widely</p>
4.2	<p>Notable developments include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development and delivery of a new highways communications campaign, primarily focussed on highways maintenance but also

	<p>guiding communications in the transport and environment service area. See below.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A review of the highways maintenance webpages – www.shropshire.gov.uk/highways - to ensure the information is current and relevant, and remains so. • Much closer working between officers working for the Shropshire Highways partners, ensuring better – and earlier – provision and sharing of information. • Earlier planning/programming of maintenance work, ensuring that information can be shared further in advance. • Sharing – each month – information about maintenance work being carried out the following month – via the council’s Newsroom, social media channels, and website • Greater use of photos, videos and animations in our communications. • Regular and greater use of social media for sharing information about forthcoming work, Social media activity around highways maintenance work has been increased over the past 18 months, helping to inform people about forthcoming and recently completed work, and allowing them to comment and ask questions. Responding to such questions enables us to inform people about what is happening and why, and to correct and address any misconceptions and misunderstandings – helping to ensure that people are better informed and have a better understanding of the work. In particular the social media platform NextDoor is being greatly used to enable the sharing of this information at electoral division level. • The appointment of a new Kier communications manager for Shropshire earlier this year has helped to improve communication with stakeholders, and between Kier and the council. They also work on relationship building and reputational management through phone calls/emails and meetings; and responding to enquiries and complaints at the earliest opportunity • The appointment of a new Shropshire Council highways engagement officer in April 2022 has improved communication and engagement within the highways service.
5.0	Communications with councillors, and town and parish councils
5.1	We recognise the importance of good communications with councillors and town/parish councils around highways maintenance work. It’s important that they are kept informed and have the opportunity to comment on planned work, but they also play a key role passing information on to residents, businesses and constituents.

5.2	<p>In the past year a number of significant improvements have been made in this area:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shropshire Council's new highways engagement officer works, including working with local councillors and town/parish council to provide an opportunity for them to comment on planned work before the work programme is finalised. • Kier's new communication manager ensures that councillors and town/parish councils receive information about forthcoming work in advance of it starting. • The recruitment of these officers has also enabled the development of a Customer and Stakeholder Engagement Plan (CSEP) which will help to define how we collectively engage with residents and stakeholders and ensure back office processes are aligned to make communication successful. The first steps have been taken with the new approach to CSEP and officers have been consulting with members, parishes and town councils on the Council's capital programme, for road repairs in the 2023/24 fiscal year, to ensure the impact and any disruption is mitigated. • Work is being carried out to develop a regular, monthly, communication with councillors and town/parish councils to inform them of work due to be carried out the following month. We are currently in discussion with the highways town and parish council working group to agree the best format for this.
6.0	<i>We're improving your roads communications strategy</i>
6.1	<p>It was acknowledged in spring 2021 that there was a need for a communications strategy – and a new approach to communications - to show and evidence the work that is being carried out to improve the county's roads, and to explain the context of why roads are as people find them.</p> <p>This “We're improving your roads.” Campaign is being delivered by Shropshire Council's communications team, the council's highways team and Shropshire Highways colleagues at WSP and Kier.</p> <p>This new approach will also apply to all communications work carried out by, or on behalf of, Shropshire Highways, and therefore incorporates pothole repairs, resurfacing, surface dressing, bridge maintenance, winter maintenance, drainage, and pavement maintenance. This strategy also guides and informs communications for projects and campaigns carried out under the 'transport and environment' service area, and communication for and about the introduction of Fix My Street as a new reporting tool.</p>

	<p>Along with ongoing communications activity around planned highways maintenance work, seasonal/mini campaigns are also carried out, for example around surface dressing, winter maintenance and Fix My Street. The key aims of this campaign are to embed a new proactive approach to communications around highways maintenance – and incorporate the key principles below, and to demonstrate that Shropshire Council is committed to improving our roads and making them safer for all road users.</p> <p>At the same time, we aim to enhance the reputation of Shropshire Council, Shropshire Council highways, and Shropshire Highways alliance; demonstrating that the council knows potholes/other defects are a problem and is working hard to tackle them (through prevention and repairs; enhancing people’s knowledge and understanding about the council’s highways maintenance work, and evidence the positive work being carried out to maintain and improve the county’s network.</p> <p>We are also working to raising the profile of Shropshire Council and its highways maintenance work nationally – via the national/trade press, and via awards entries/successes as this can play a key part in supporting recruitment.</p> <p>Additional investment into the highways budget in the current year has been key, providing greater certainty of work programmes than was previously available allowing for planned and improved communication at all stages.</p>
6.2	<p>Key communications principles/approach</p> <p>Our communications activity is guided by the following key principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular, proactive, positive information • Clear, simple messages and information • Visual - using photos, videos, graphics, images (evidence work that is, or has been, carried out) • Open/honest • Engaging • Forward planning • Manage expectations • Partnership approach • Information overload - Tell them what we are going to do, then tell them we are doing it, then what we did. • Tone – humility, injecting humanity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the scene/provide context • Celebrate our successes • Human (use real people in our communications; focus on people doing the work * • Local/hyperlocal – target the people/areas where work is taking place. <p>*The teams carrying out the work are the ‘public face’ of our highways maintenance works, and are we want to show that it’s local people carrying out work on the county’s roads.</p>
7.0	Evaluation
7.1	<p>Some of the key outputs from our communications activity in recent months, include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since March 2022, the number of letters mailed to local residents and businesses in relation to upcoming work was: March – 2,941; April – 39,130; May – 5,934; June – 9,686; July - 4,029; August - 6,104; September - 7,968; October - 6,627 • From 5 July 2021 to 31 September 2022, 115 press releases were issued in relation to highways maintenance work • From 5 July 2021 to 31 September 2022 around 400 highways-related posts have been made on the council’s social media channels, including Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and NextDoor. In total these posts have had a reach of 3.6m and 4m impressions. • Complaints: As one of the most visible council services, Highways and Transport traditionally account for a relatively high number of corporate complaints. The Council’s annual customer feedback report for 2021/2, states that while this area still receives the most complaints of any council services area, the level of complaints has fallen over the last two years from 34% of all complaints to 27%. Improved service, greater investment and improved communication are all likely to have contributed to this. • The council subscribes to the National Highways and Transport Network customer satisfaction which provides feedback from residents on the condition highways network and the council’s performance. This is a very useful and independent source of information and has shown over the past two years that the council’s communication and maintenance improvement strategies are starting to make a difference.
8.0	Conclusion and future improvements

8.1	<p>We place great emphasis on not just communicating regularly, consistently and effectively. We pride ourselves on the work that we do and the improvements that have been made in the past 18 months to our highways communications. But, there is more we can and will do - and do better – in the months ahead. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will take and share more before, during and after photos of work being carried out, to provide pictorial evidence of our highways maintenance work. • We will develop new vehicle livery to help emphasise that work is being led by Shropshire Council. • Further work will be carried out to develop the new CSEP. • We will develop and issue a monthly communication to town and parish councils, and councillors, to advise of forthcoming highways maintenance work. • A further review of the highways maintenance pages of the council website will be carried out. • We will work to include our highways teams/workers more in our communications, to demonstrate that it is real, local, people that are carrying out work on the county's roads.
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<p>List of background papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) All</p>
<p>Local Member All</p>
<p>Appendices</p> <p>None</p>