



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Place Overview Committee
23/03/2023

<u>Item</u>
<u>Public</u>

HIGHWAY WINTER MAINTENANCE SERVICE

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1. Summary

- 1.1. A report was presented to the Committee in March 2021, outlining current service provision for Winter Maintenance and plans for improvements to the service. The Committee endorsed the development of a revised Winter Maintenance Plan Winter Service and proposed that a Task and Finish group be set up to inform the review.
- 1.2. This report provides committee members with an update on how the highways service has put into place the committee's recommendations, following its review of Shropshire Council's highways winter service policy.
- 1.3. The report also provides an update on further initiatives that have been initiated in relation to the winter maintenance service and highlights some emerging issues that have been required to also be considered.

2. Decisions

The Committee is asked to;

- 2.1. Note the contents of the report.

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 3.1. Accessibility to key infrastructure and services across the county is essential to maintain the vitality of the county's residents and businesses. Incidents of severe ice and/or snow can at times compromise this access and therefore it is important that an effective Winter Maintenance policy and plan is in place to ensure that the highway network maintains access resilience.

- 3.2. Budget availability is however finite, and it is therefore important that the correct balance is struck between ensuring that the network remains as safe as practicable, accessibility to key destination points is available and affordability to ensure that we derive the greatest value from the available budgets.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1. There are no further financial implications as a result of this update report.

5. Climate Change Appraisal

- 5.1. The country has started to see an increasing regularity of severe weather events, and this has resulted in increased demand for severe weather service responses, which as including more demands on the winter maintenance service.
- 5.2. It is anticipated that these weather events will continue to increase in frequency and severity over the coming years and therefore it is essential that the Council has an effective plan in place to maintain the resilience of the highway network.

6. Winter Maintenance Service

- 6.1. In January 2021 the Place Overview Committee received a report from the Executive Director of Place that outlined the current winter service arrangements; and identified areas that would be the focus for service improvement, under plans to review the winter service plan. The service was happy to seek engagement from elected members of Shropshire Council, as well as town and parish councils in carrying out the review.
- 6.2. The committee agreed to form a working group to collate and discuss areas of potential focus for the officers carrying out the review of the winter service plan. The group would then present these areas to the officers to inform their review.
- 6.3. This report includes the work carried out, based on the findings of the committee's working group and makes recommendations to guide development of the highways winter service plan.

Gritting Routes

- 6.4. The current gritting routes are due to be reviewed to ensure that they best reflect the needs of the county, based on the current code of practice.
- 6.5. This review has now been scoped and a revised route optimisation exercise is in the final stages of commission. The exercise will ensure our existing routes are both efficient, effective and risk assessed. The optimisation will subsequently overlay Shropshire's key assets in Health, Education, Commercial Centres and Public Transport to develop new revised routes to meet the ambition of our future service model.
- 6.6. The highways depot strategy was an important factor in understanding how the routes would be delivered efficiently.
- 6.7. These revised routes will be rationalised against our grit bin assets to ensure synergy across the county and provide the greatest level of resilience.

Grit Bins

- 6.8. A full review of the counties grit bins was completed before the winter period started. This has enabled a comprehensive update of the database layer both within our GIS and Confirm digital systems.
- 6.9. Where missing or broken bins were identified, these were replaced during the inspection process.
- 6.10. This has enabled a programme of 100% replenishment all to be carried out prior to the winter. That meant that all 1,850 bins were full and ready prior to the winter. We are working towards each specific grit bin being available to report on Fix My Street.

Mini Gritter Trial

- 6.11. The service, through its developing mixed economy arrangements, have also developed its own fleet of smaller dedicated mini gritters (3.5T), which help support local need and less strategic sites.
- 6.12. These have been deployed in key locations, including town centres where 10T gritters cannot easily access, such as narrow road, pedestrianised areas and car parks. These can be driven on a standard driver licence, which has allowed us to depoly our direct labour workforce to support the service. This has given us greater resilience and allowed the service to expand its capability, as the 10T gritting fleets can operate at the same time as out 3.5T vehicles.

School Gritting Trial

- 6.13. During last winter we undertook the first trial involving Castlefield Primary School in Bridgnorth. They have a steep road on the approach to the school access and there had been issues with slippery footpaths, creating challenges for parents and children at certain times. This is not properly covered within our existing policy.
- 6.14. During a very productive meeting with the school about the issues, we offered them the chance to partake in a 'trial' where we would provide a push along gritter and salt in order for the school to treat the areas of concern at their discretion. We also provided them with a weather forecasting information to help them understand when cold weather could present risks. This would also enable them to email parents to remind them about taking extra care and the need to wear appropriate footwear, as footpath may be slippery on the journey to school.
- 6.15. This proved to be very popular and the school ran a competition for the children to name the gritter.

[Spready Mercury, meet . . . Spready Mercury | Shropshire Star](#)

- 6.16. Since the initial trial, this initiative has now been rolled out across the county with over 50 schools now signed up and equipped to deal with footpaths in and around their schools.

Private Snow Plough Contractors

- 6.17. There has been a historical relationship between Shropshire Council and a network of over fifty farming related sub-contractors.
- 6.18. The contractors are sent an order at the beginning of the winter maintenance season, which includes a fixed availability fee which is further supported by additional payments for retaining specific equipment, such as ploughs which are checked and verified by our transport colleagues. The average value of this initial availability payment is around £500.
- 6.19. The current contracting arrangements have the support of our procurement team on the understanding that Shropshire Council's procurement rules are followed which is the minimum compliance standard and is not optional.
- 6.20. If we require this equipment to be deployed, a request is raised followed by a further works order based upon an hourly rate of £35. This cannot ever be self-initiated, contractors cannot raise their own orders.
- 6.21. We are aware that there are some frustrations with the existing arrangements. Some contractors have contacted the Shropshire Highways service seeking to receive an order in circumstances where we felt no work was required. We

know that these contractors come under pressure locally to act and their costs are such that to do it out of goodwill isn't sustainable.

- 6.22. From a service perspective technology and data now plays a huge part in our winter maintenance service delivery. Forecasting technology is now more reliable, we have our own weather stations, our own decision makers, our own software.
- 6.23. It is no longer the case that the first sign of snow would bring an automatic response and trigger immediate action.

Communication

- 6.24. The service been very active during severe weather events, utilising a range of social media channels in order to publicise the amount of work that has taken place to keep the county moving during times of snow and cold temperatures.
- 6.25. These have been received positively and has helped manage public opinion as much of the work goes unnoticed, due to the majority of activity occurring during unsociable hours.
- 6.26. In addition, Fix My Street has enabled easier contact and engagement with the council and allows issues to be reported directly to us. The Fix My Street app will enable better quality reporting of issues across the service and allow the service to respond more efficiently to service requests.
- 6.27. The Shropshire Council Customer Service Centre now has a dedicated phone number for elected members to call if the matter is urgent or cannot be reported via the website, including out of hours provision for this, as this is currently only operated during office hours. Emails from elected members sent to customerfirst@shropshire.gov.uk which have "Members Enquiry" in the title are also prioritised by the team.

Future Service Development

- 6.28. Work will continue to develop the winter maintenance service, as we continue to build in greater levels of resilience.
- 6.29. We recognise that the existing service needs further work and must operate within the allocated budget.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1. The highway service has undertaken significant improvements to winter services since last year which will see a better ability to react more quickly to

gritting and to be more proactive in ensuring that salt supplies are available to gritting bins for local use.

- 7.2. The highways service has changed it is now a mature actively managed service with ambitions beyond now. The mixed economy approach will create greater opportunities for local contractors in the future, with sustainable income streams rather than occasional use.
- 7.3. The service now has over 50 community centred establishments supporting our gritting activity. We have our own employees, trained and delivering through our fleet of mini gritters, all delivered from the same budget with no additional funding, created purely from transformation savings.
- 7.4. We would like to embrace a future winter maintenance service that solely involves large vehicles travelling long distances, we would also like to see a competitive network of local providers delivering agreed satellite routes in remote locations across most of our 16 working zones.
- 7.5. The current winter maintenance service has not had a successful claim against it in five years.

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

Winter Maintenance Policy 2018

Winter Maintenance Plan 2018

Winter Maintenance Report – March 2021

Shropshire Council Winter Service Policy – report of the Place Overview Committee working group – April 2021

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) - Cllr Richard Marshall

Local Member - All

Appendices - None