



Committee and date

Development Services
Scrutiny Committee

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9

Public

**RURAL HIGHWAYS CONDITION IN SOUTHERN SHROPSHIRE – REPORT
FROM CRAVEN ARMS AND RURAL LOCAL JOINT COMMITTEE**

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Summary

This report sets out the concerns of Craven Arms and Rural Local Joint Committee regarding the perceived deterioration in the condition of rural highways in Southern Shropshire.

Recommendation

Scrutiny Committee investigate the listed concerns (perhaps drawing on the attached suggested line of enquiry) and consider what action needs to be initiated to avoid a growing problem of deterioration of rural highways, which will become increasingly expensive for Shropshire Council to resolve.

Report

Background

1. Following concerns expressed by Members and the public, the pilot LJC received a presentation from Shropshire County Council's Divisional Highways Manager in March 2009 and the present LJC from Shropshire Council's Director of Environment in July 2009 on highways management and related issues. Discussion on these occasions and subsequent correspondence left the LJC with the impression that deterioration of rural highways' condition is unlikely to be checked, much less reversed unless increased resources are devoted to the task.

Highway Condition

2. This is not about the day-to-day defect repair service, which is generally regarded as prompt and effective once defects are reported. Concerns relate to longer-term maintenance and the underlying condition of rural roads that are essential to mobility of those living in, working in or visiting rural areas. Concerns do not extend to trunk and urban roads, which are generally considered well maintained.
3. Large and heavy farm and goods vehicles cause structural damage to rural roads, especially road edges. Few rural roads were ever designed or engineered to carry such traffic, most being tar macadam strips laid over earlier stone tracks without kerbs or room for extra shoulders to support edges. Verge damage is also common on narrow lanes with few passing places.
4. In too many places poor drainage leads to rapid surface erosion when traffic drives through water. In winter, ice accelerates surface damage besides creating a driving hazard. Failure to maintain ditches and blocked drains and gullies are cited as the most common cause. Where ditching has been done, roadside banks of spoil have often been allowed to build up, preventing water run-off. Keeping drains running freely is difficult because they become blocked by silt and road gravel after heavy rain, besides debris from hedge trimming and autumn leaves, often with different contractors dealing with road sweeping and gully emptying.
5. It appears that increasing resources are being devoted to running repairs at the expense of a properly planned programme of improvement work on rural roads to enable the network to cope with the increased traffic imposed upon it. Patching and dressing clearly provides short-term benefits, but covers up a serious long-term problem stemming from the inadequate structure and drainage of many rural roads. It is submitted that this issue should be investigated with a view to putting work in hand to identify a remedial strategy and assessing the resources needed for implementation.

Suggested Line of Enquiry

- 6.1 Is there objective evidence from tests and inspection to confirm or refute the concerns expressed?
- 6.2 Is the problem confined to Craven Arms and Rural LJC area or a wider rural problem?
- 6.3 Is the Council getting the best value it can from existing arrangements between its highways management and contractors?
- 6.4 Are the resources available for highway maintenance more or less (per road mile) than in neighbouring rural counties?

- 6.5 Is the allocation of highways budget fair and commensurate with need as between maintenance of rural and urban roads and between highways divisions within Shropshire?
- 6.6 What long term plans are there for rural road improvement?
- 6.7 Are the costs of running repairs eroding proper provision for long-term rural road improvements?
- 6.8 Are there actions that could be taken to reduce heavy traffic on rural roads?
- 6.9 Can more be done to improve drainage?
- 6.10 What is the likely order of cost of a remedial programme?
- 6.11 Is there a need to identify rural routes for priority attention?
- 6.12 How should Council seek to engage with central government for increased funding to address these issues?