



Date: Thursday, 24 March 2022

Time: 2.00 pm

Venue: Shrewsbury/Oswestry Room, Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, SY2 6ND

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PLACE OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

TO FOLLOW REPORT

6 Update on Review of Winter Service Plan (Pages 1 - 12)

To scrutinise performance in carrying out the 2021 / 2022 highways winter service plan and monitor implementation of recommendations arising from the 2021 Place Overview Committee review of the winter service plan. (**To Follow**).

Contact: Andy Wilde (Tel: 01743 255472)

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Committee and Date

Place Overview Committee

24 March 2022

Item

6

Public

Shropshire Council Winter Service

Update on recommendations from the Place Overview Committee working group

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Job Title

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1.0 Summary

1.1 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.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The committee note the recommendations made by the committee has been put into place, and resources effectively prioritised to ensure delivery.

2.2 That the committee consider how it may further support the service in strengthening the role of town and parish council, as well as community and voluntary groups, in providing a good winter support service.

3.0 Opportunities and risks

3.1 This review provides overview and scrutiny with an opportunity to have early input into the review of the council's highways' winter service plan. In providing the service with feedback from district, town and parish councils on current service provision, it was able to work with the service to identify priority areas for review and development.

3.2 A failure to review the winter service policy could result in a less effective winter service. This could include: a failure to prioritise gritting effectively, poor utilisation of community resources, further deterioration of the highway and weak communications undermining operational plan.

4.0 Financial assessment

4.1 Drafting and reviewing the winter service policy is an administrative task that forms part the council's regular work. There are therefore no cost implications in carrying out this review. However, any changes to the winter service policy are likely to have cost implications. These should be assessed as part of the review

and considered by the Place Overview Committee when scrutinising recommendations that have been put into place.

Report

5.0 Background

5.1 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 of concern in the plan. Officers told the committee that they planned to review the winter service plan and that they sought to engage with elected members of Shropshire Council, as well as town and parish council, in carrying out the review.

5.2 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. The revised winter service plan would then be considered by the Place Overview Committee once drafted.

5.3 This report contains the findings of the committee's working group and makes recommendations to guide development of the highways winter service plan.

6.0 Methodology

6.1 As the working group sought to report back to the Place Overview Committee within a month, its work has been limited to identifying areas of concern for the officers to focus upon and makes broad recommendations on action to strengthen the plan.

6.2 In considering the operational plan, the group referred to Shropshire Council's *Winter Policy Statement* and its *Winter Operational Plan*. It scrutinised these in light of national guidance contained in UK Roads Liaison Group's *Well Managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice*.

6.3 To inform the group's work, the overview and scrutiny officers also conducted a rapid survey of district, town and parish councils and councillors. In total, 23 town and parish councils and three district councillors responded to the survey. In addition, the overview and scrutiny carried out a piece of desktop research to identify:

- the extent of defined minimum network in the local authority area
- the number of grit bins in a local authority area and
- arrangements for supplying and filling grit bins.

6.4 The working group, consisting of three members of the committee, considered the evidence in a single meeting. It based its work on a number of themes emerging from the survey of district town and parish councils.

7.0 Findings

7.1 The working group identified the following areas for the officers drafting the revised winter service plan to focus on.

7.2 *Defined network*

The group considered the size of the council's defined network, how the network was determined, how it compared in size to other local authorities, and discussed an appropriate way to review and amend the defined network.

The group heard that Shropshire Council's defined winter network constituted just 28% of the highways network in Shropshire, with the network not covering many lightly-used rural lanes or urban residential roads.

The group also heard that the network is unevenly distributed across the county, with a lower percentage of the network being treated in the south of the county compared to the north.

The group therefore recommended that Shropshire Council:

- **carries out a review of the defined winter network**
- **takes a risk-based approach in determining the network**
- **presents its proposals for a risk-based approach to the Place Overview Committee and**
- **ensures that town and parish councils are consulted when carrying out the review.**

7.3 *Grit and grit bins*

The group noted that grit bins could be a cost-effective way for Shropshire Council to extend its coverage in settlements and villages, empowering communities to help themselves. However, officers cautioned that an over-reliance on grit bins carried some risk, not only that routes assumed to be treated would be left untreated, but that the grit in the bins would be stolen to treat private property.

At present Shropshire Council provides relatively few grit bins compared to similar local authorities. However a lack of grit bins was in itself rarely raised as an issue. Instead the group, together with town and parish councils, were more concerned that:

- grit bins were not being filled automatically or regularly
- grit bins were sometimes placed in inappropriate locations
- people found it difficult to request bins in new locations or to replace damaged bins
- existing bins were not being logged on the public database and
- some grit bins logged on the network were missing.

Officers told the group that there was no system in place to regularly check and fill bins, and that it was the responsibility of local managers to check bins in their area. The group also heard that a planned project to update the log of current bins had not happened.

The group agreed the location, supply and refilling of grit bins should form a central part of the council's review of its winter service policy.

The group therefore recommended that Shropshire Council:

- **undertakes a register of its existing grit bins**
- **includes grit bins in its risk-assessed review of the defined network**
- **works with town and parish council to identify locations for new grit bins**
- **explores opportunities to co-fund grit bins in settlements with town and parish councils and**
- **develops a standardised process for checking and refilling grit bins.**

7.4 *Gulleys and groundwater flooding*

The group noted that a highways winter service plan should also address the issue of groundwater flooding. It noted that much of the flooding arose from gulleys that were blocked with silt from water draining from agricultural land or from mud left on the road by agricultural vehicles. This was also a common concern raised by town and parish councils responding to the group's survey.

Officers and the group agreed that there were a number of underlying issues exacerbating this problem. The changing nature of farming has resulted in larger farms, often owned by larger companies not based in the local area. In addition, a lack of flood risk officers at Shropshire Council limited the work that the council could carry out with agricultural businesses to minimise flood risk. Finally, a lack of focus on gulley cleaning and repairs had led to a historically high number of blocked gulleys, although Shropshire Council had now addressed this backlog.

The group noted that Shropshire Council appeared to understand the problem and its underlying causes and knew what it needed to do to address those causes. However, the group also recognises that any revised winter service plan should include gulley cleansing as part of its routine work, even if the operation of that work featured in other operational plans.

The group therefore recommended that Shropshire Council:

- **builds into its winter service plan a gulley cleansing programme that takes into account the higher risk of prolonged wet weather during the winter period**
- **recruits sufficient staff to support the flood risk manager in their work**

- **uses the new flood risk staff to work with agricultural businesses to minimise silt runoff from fields and**
- **liaises with farmers and other organisations through its agricultural vehicles group to minimise mud and other debris left on the highway.**

7.5 ***Community wardens***

The survey of town and parish councils identified significant self-support within communities in the event of severe weather. By far the strongest criticism from town and parish councils concerned the lack of support from Shropshire Council in these efforts.

The group agreed that a snow warden scheme would build on the significant mutual support that already happened in communities and would complement the defined network treatment that was carried out by Shropshire Council.

The group therefore recommended that Shropshire Council:

- **works with its highways partners to develop a new snow warden scheme**
- **aims to have this scheme in place by winter 2021-2022 and**
- **incorporates the snow warden scheme into its revised winter service plan.**

7.6 ***Customer Service***

Many of the elected members responding to the group's survey, as well as those in the working group, expressed frustration with not being able to contact Shropshire Council when needed.

The group noted that although the winter service plan contains processes for managing communications issued by the council, it makes no mention of customer service. It agreed that existing arrangements for managing customer queries were insufficiently responsive and did not take into account the nature of severe weather and other emergencies such as flooding. As a result of this, respondents to the group's survey advised that the council's customer service had been closed during the Christmas period, despite there being a period of severe winter weather.

The group therefore recommended that Shropshire Council:

- **specifies an effective customer service function within its winter plan.**
- **ensures that this function operates during the winter period, in particular during periods of cold or wet weather that is likely to result in flooded or freezing conditions.**
- **ensures that existing routine reporting tools, such as MyShropshire, are monitored and actioned upon.**

7.7 **Communications**

The group noted that the winter service contained a communications plan to be used in the event of severe weather. Both the group and questionnaire respondents felt that they had not received adequate communications from Shropshire Council.

The disconnect between the council's communications activities and the lack of knowledge about these activities in local communities suggested that Shropshire Council was not using the right media to communicate important messages. This was borne out by the responses from town and parish councils.

The group argued that online communications could not replace the benefit of close and regular communications through town and parish councils, as well as through community and third sector organisations. Such councils and groups could also act as a conduit for information through their local communities.

The group therefore recommended that Shropshire Council:

- **strengthens its communications plan to include closer communication with town and parish councils, as well as community and third sector organisations and**
- **ensures that any communications plan includes residents who do not use the internet.**

8.0 **Next steps**

- 8.1 The committee agreed that it would ask the service to consider these recommendations it was able to implement, and to report back to the committee on its progress.
- 8.2 Appendix 1 of this report lists the recommendation this committee made in April 2021, and the progress, if any, the service has made in implementing the recommendation made by the committee.

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

Shropshire Council *Winter Policy Statement*
Shropshire Council *Winter Operational Plan*
UK Roads Liaison Group *Well Managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice*

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Portfolio Holder – Physical Infrastructure

Local Member

Place Overview Committee 24 March 2021: Shropshire Council Winter Service Update on recommendations from the Place Overview Committee working group

All

Appendices

Update to committee on recommendations made April 2021

Appendix 1

Update to committee on recommendations made April 2021

Grit and grit bins

Shropshire Council Place Overview Committee working group recommendations	Update to committee
<i>includes grit bins in its risk-assessed review of the defined network.</i>	Grit bin inventory and audit is in-flight with the central area completed. Once complete this will enable smart routing of replenishment activities to be carried out. The inventory process will provide a unique reference number for each grit bin.
<i>works with town and parish council to identify locations for new grit bins.</i>	This has been incorporated into the SALC working Group. Once the inventory of grit bins has been completed and the GIS layer updated, we will be in a position to initiate discussions on informing the assessment. A method of assessment will need to remain in place.
<i>explores opportunities to co-fund grit bins in settlements with town and parish councils.</i>	Uniting customers with self-delivery means and materials has brought into focus schools. I pleased to note that we have identified the first school that will self-deliver treatment of pedestrian approaches to the school with Shropshire Council providing equipment and materials for the season. This is the subject communications exercise and we hope for significant take up of this initiative once for the formal application process is created.
<i>develops a standardised process for checking and refilling grit bins.</i>	We agree that a standardised process for quacking and replenishment and this will form part of the winter maintenance plan.

Gulleys and groundwater flooding

Shropshire Council Place Overview Committee working group recommendations	Update to committee
<i>builds into its winter service plan a gully cleansing programme that takes into account the higher risk of prolonged wet weather during the winter period.</i>	In the new financial year, the gully maintenance activities will be carried out directly in two of the three geographical areas as part of the mixed-economy service delivery model. These will be routed and controlled by local managers and informed by flood risk and local knowledge.
<i>recruits sufficient staff to support the flood risk manager in their work.</i>	The position on this will be finalised following the application of TUPE on the 1 st April in relation to WSP. This is part of the transition process linked to the mixed economy model and drainage arrangements (both strategic and operational) come in-house.
<i>uses the new flood risk staff to work with agricultural businesses to minimise silt runoff from fields.</i>	The service is very keen to see this issue progressed and awaits the outcome of the service transfer on the 1 st April.
<i>liaises with farmers and other organisations through its agricultural vehicles group to minimise mud and other debris left on the highway.</i>	<p>There are real challenges in rural communities and clearly, our road network and highway infrastructure plays a massive part in connectivity communities, but also enables the rural businesses to thrive. The diversification in rural businesses, especially around farming and agriculture is also placing extra demands on the highways network. Larger farm machinery, often working collaboratively, is now commonplace utilising roads that are often not designed to accommodate their size. This is leading to accelerated deterioration, damage to verges and drainage assets and this is evident in across Shropshire. This creates cross-cutting issues for residents, businesses, the police, planning alongside highways.</p> <p>These issues are recognised at various levels within the council and pro-active work is taking place. The aim of which is to try and find ways of</p>

Shropshire Council Place Overview Committee working group recommendations	Update to committee
	continuing to support rural growth and development whilst also reducing, where possible, the impact that has on highway infrastructure.

Community wardens

Shropshire Council Place Overview Committee working group recommendations	Update to committee
<i>works with its highways partners to develop a new snow warden scheme.</i>	This has been incorporated into the SALC working Group. We are actively seeking methods of bringing together equipment and materials to empower local community to self-prioritise with empowered arrangements that enable them to contribute to winter maintenance resilience.
<i>aims to have this scheme in place by winter 2022-2023.</i>	Noted
<i>incorporates the snow warden scheme into its revised winter service plan.</i>	This is one of a number of supported self-delivery options that will be presented.

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Customer Service

Shropshire Council Place Overview Committee working group recommendations	Update to committee
<i>specifies an effective customer service function within its winter plan.</i>	This is one of a number of community enabled, supported self-delivery options that will be presented.
<i>ensures that this function operates during the winter period, in particular during periods of cold or wet weather that is likely to result in flooded or freezing conditions.</i>	The test phase of “Fix My Street” is on-going.

<p><i>ensures that existing routine reporting tools, such as MyShropshire, are monitored and actioned upon.</i></p>	<p>There have been structural amendments to allow more officers to be available out of hours and further temporary arrangement that are initiated by weather forecasting.</p>
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Communication

<p>Page 11</p>	<p>Shropshire Council Place Overview Committee working group recommendations</p>	<p>Update to committee</p>
<p><i>strengthens it communications plan to include closer communication with town and parish councils, as well as community and third sector organisations</i></p>	<p>This has been incorporated into the SALC working Group.</p>	
<p><i>ensures that any communications plan includes residents who do not use the internet.</i></p>	<p>Shropshire Council has committee to providing services on line. This will look to support communication methods where possible</p>	

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