



Committee and Date

Cabinet

Item

Public

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

Responsible officer

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1.0 Summary

1.1 This report of a working group of the Place Overview Committee details its review of Shropshire Council's highways winter service policy. This report also provides the council with recommended to support its proposed review of the highways winter service policy.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 That Cabinet notes the report.

2.2 That Cabinet notes that the Place Overview Committee has agreed to scrutinise any revised policy and operational plan, as well as progress in revising the policy and plan.

3.0 Opportunities and risks

3.1 This report 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 is 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 the draft revised policy.

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.

According to the national guidance, *Well Managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice*, Local authorities should identify a routine winter network that they will treat when necessary. In addition, they should define a minimum winter network in case of prolonged extreme weather. They should also make clear the point at which the local authority retreats to the minimum winter network. Most local authorities approach it differently, with the minimum winter network their primary network, and an additional, defined secondary network that they treat during prolonged periods of severe weather. Other local authorities, such as Shropshire Council have a defined minimum winter network as their primary network, with additional treatment taking place whenever resources allow. However, in common with many other local authorities Shropshire Council does not define this additional network.

The group heard that Shropshire Council's defined winter network constituted just 28% of the highways network in Shropshire. This places Shropshire at the lower end of a comparison of similar rural local authorities, as shown in table 1 below. Neighbouring Staffordshire, for example, treats a defined network almost twice the length of Shropshire's, despite its road network being just 20% larger. However other local authorities, such as Dorset and Cerdigion, treat a defined network that is smaller in both percentage and total length.

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.

Highways Authority	Network size (km)	Defined Route (km)	Defined Route %	Secondary Route %
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Shropshire	5,214	1,460	28	unspecified
Worcestershire	4,288	1,629	38	17
Herefordshire	3,352	972	29	unspecified
Staffordshire	6,366	2,737	43	unspecified
Cheshire East	2,922	1,081	37	Unspecified
Hampshire	9,032	2,348	26	30
Dorset	4,092	1,023	25	Unspecified
Devon	13,026	2,605	20	Unspecified
Wiltshire	4,838	Unspecified	Unspecified	Unspecified
Ceredigion	2,260	463	21	Unspecified
Cumbria	7,900	3,272	41	Unspecified

Table 1: Defined minimum network for winter service

In our survey of councillors, there was little, if any concern about the length of defined network. The councillors that mentioned it did so uncritically, accepting that the council was unable to treat the entire network. However there was considerably more concern about what constituted the defined network. More than one respondent gave examples of seemingly vital businesses or public amenities that were cut off from the defined network, with little understanding about how network was chosen.

In its meeting, group members heard that the defined network has been drafted in the 1990s and had not been comprehensively reviewed since. This could mean that the defined network now overlooks new business or housing developments, or may serve businesses or other facilities that no longer operate. It is also likely that the network does not take into account changing transport patterns, such as a significant drop in bus usage in the previous 30 years.

The group agreed that any revised winter service policy should include a review of the defined network. However rather than seek to increase the length of the network, the review should take a risk-based approach similar to recent reviews in local authorities such as Cheshire East. Before undertaking the review, it should consult on its proposals for determining risk when evaluating the network This consultation should include town and parish councils.

The group therefore recommends 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

Providing grit and grit bins in rural settlements, and alongside high-risk stretches of roads not on the defined network such as steep hills, is a cost-effective way to provide some winter service in remote areas or along little used stretched of road. 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, as can be seen in table 2 below:

Highways authority	Network size (km)	Grit bins
Shropshire	5,214	1,000
Worcestershire	4,288	1,320
Herefordshire	3,352	unspecified
Staffordshire	6,366	3,000
Cheshire East	2,922	unspecified
Hampshire	9,032	3,000
Dorset	4,092	0*
Devon	13,026	3,500
Wiltshire	4,838	1,600**
Ceredigion	2,260	600
Cumbria	7,900	10,000

Table 2: Winter service defined route length and grit bins supplied, by local authority

*two-tier authority. Grit bins are the responsibility of borough, town and parish councils. Unitary council charges to provide and fill bins

** charges town and parish councils to provide bins.

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 heard that although highways budgets had reduced in recent years, there was no official policy to restrict the number of new bins. However, it was noted that some councillors had found it very difficult to request a new grit bin via the *MyShropshire* portal. The group heard that in some other local authorities, for

example Dorset, the county council provided both strategic grit bins for high-risk stretches of road, paid for by the county council, as well as community bins in settlements and villages, which were paid for by the lower tier authority. Shropshire Council had not explored the opportunity to increase the number of bins in settlements and other communities by encouraging local town and parish councils to purchase them, and the group felt this might be a good way to both increase network coverage and to foster closer working between the unitary council and town and parish councils.

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 recommends 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. This had weakened community ties and resulted in farm managers who may not fully appreciate the impact of their farming on local infrastructure. 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 gully 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 gully cleansing as part of its routine work, even if the operation of that work featured in other operational plans.

The group therefore recommends 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. This included clearing footpaths, gritting roads in the town, village or settlement, gritting access to important facilities such as community centres and shops, and supporting vulnerable adults who may be unable to leave home.

By far the strongest criticism from town and parish councils concerned the lack of support from Shropshire Council in these efforts. Even modest requests, such as for bags of salt or tabards, were apparently ignored. The narrative however was not consistent, with some respondents mentioning a withdrawn snow warden scheme and other mentioning that no such formal scheme of community support existed.

The group heard that in a report to the Place Overview Committee in 2018, officers told the committee that they had planned a snow warden scheme to be in place by the end of 2019. This would support communities to support others by providing grit, snow clearing equipment, protective clothing and guidance in clearing snow and treating carriageways. Unfortunately, the council never initiated the scheme and it remains unplanned.

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. Officers suggested that the council's highways partners have significant experience in setting up and organising snow warden schemes, and may be interested in supporting Shropshire Council with its planned scheme.

The group therefore recommends 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. Issues included:

- customer service lines being closed during the Christmas period, despite severe weather and flooding
- farmers contracted to carry out local gritting not being paid for months
- requests for new grit bins via *MyShropshire* not being followed up and
- a centralised system of weather forecasting and detection failing to pick up highly localised freezing, resulting in unnecessary hazard that a more localised system might have addressed.

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.

It is beyond the remit of this group to specify an effective customer service function, however group agreed that customer services, either separate to or as part of existing customer services was an integral part of an effective winter service plan.

The group therefore recommends 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 respondents felt that they had not received adequate communications from Shropshire Council. Some respondents told the group that they received no indication whether an episode of severe weather would result in the council treating the defined network. Others said that they did not know which roads the council gritted during severe weather. In fact, Shropshire Council has published an interactive map of its defined network on its website. This map also includes locations of known and logged grit bins. The website also includes

information on clearing snow and treating ice, and Shropshire Council also provides real-time service updates through its Twitter feed.

The disconnect between the council's communications activities and the lack of knowledge about these activities in local communities suggests that Shropshire Council is not using the right media to communicate important messages. This is borne out by the responses from town and parish councils. Some respondents told the group that residents approached them for information during severe weather because they lacked an internet connection. Others pointed to a lack of printed information, either through leaflet to residents' home or on posters in shops and community centre. Respondents themselves told the group that they often lacked the information that residents sought from them.

The group understands that the internet provides a powerful medium to reach large numbers of people quickly, at a relatively low cost. However, it agrees that this cannot replace the benefit of close and regular communications through town and parish councils, as well as through community and third sector organisations. This additional communication needn't be onerous, as this report argues elsewhere that regular contact with local communities would be beneficial in creating significant supplementary capacity through snow wardens and other community minded groups who were willing to carry out additional snow clearance and carriageway treatments. Such councils and groups could also act as a conduit for information through their local communities.

The group therefore recommends 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 Place Overview Committee agreed this report in April 2021. It also agreed that it would scrutinise any revised policy and operational plan, as well as progress in revising the policy and plan.

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 – Highways and Transport
Local Member All
Appendices None