



**To/
Councillor Mark Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment
Enhancement & Infrastructure
Management
BY EMAIL**

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2021-22/2

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 13 July 2021. It is about Highways & Engineering and Infrastructure Repairs & Maintenance.

Dear Councillor Thomas,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 13 July

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session, which focussed on specific aspects of your wide-ranging cabinet portfolio, namely highways & engineering and infrastructure repairs & maintenance.

We wanted to gain a greater understanding of what these specific responsibilities entail, priorities, resources, performance measures, key headlines / achievements and progress against objectives, and overall assessment (including how we compare with others, challenges / risks) and impact / difference made.

We thank you and officers for attending the meeting and providing a written report on these responsibilities and the Council's work. Your report included reference to specific areas of service such as Public Lighting and Signage, Car Parks, Highways and Transport Network, Traffic Management Infrastructure / Assets, Highway Licencing and Enforcement, Highways Claims Defence, Winter Maintenance, Bridges & Structures, Street Works Co-ordination, Coastal Defence and Highway Drainage, Planned and Reactive Maintenance (carriageways and footways), and Routine Maintenance.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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Things you highlighted to the Committee:

- The 2021/22 budget for maintenance was £3.9m. An additional £1.4m had been allocated for the last four years following the Highways and Transportation Commissioning Review. This was the fourth of those four years. Further grant allocations had also been received from the Welsh Government, which has been helpful in tackling the backlog of work.
- The Council has a 5-year rolling programme and the current maintenance programme was for the period 2020-2025. The delivery of work meant that the programme may be completed 1 year ahead of schedule in 2024, to then start a new 5-year programme.
- A Drainage Review had been carried out in 2020/21 given the impact of climate change and increased heavy rainfall on the roads and highways infrastructure, looking at putting in extra resources into the service to respond to this. An extra gulley tanker has already been brought in to increase efforts to clear blocked drains.
- The service remained operational throughout the pandemic and changes were made to the programme in order to continue work, whilst also keeping both staff and the public safe. For example, avoidance of areas of high footfall (such as resurfacing of pavements) and bringing forward work away from properties to outlying areas such as the Loughor Bridge when traffic count was at a record low. More resurfacing works had been carried out than in the previous year.
- Amongst future challenges and opportunities, as well the need to ensure continuity of service against a backdrop of resource pressures, and the impact of climate change and flooding, you mentioned local ward boundary changes that will mean each inspection route / maintenance route will need to be reviewed to amend them to match, in order to keep single points of contact for the ward. The Patch programme will also need to be reviewed as logistics, funding and programme are influenced by the number of councillors and by ward.

The Committee asked questions in order to explore this work and provide challenge on actions and performance in relation to these areas of responsibility, as well as future thinking.

This letter reflects on what we learnt from the information presented, questions, and discussion. It shares the views of the Committee, and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues summarised below.

Budget / Resources

We discussed the budget pressures on highway assets and maintenance and reported backlog of over £70m of works on roads alone. We noted that the backlog figure is recalculated every 5 years, and if the additional funding received in recent years is maintained it is likely this backlog will remain stable and not continue to rise. Given challenges with the deteriorating condition of

our roads and pavements, faced with further budget / resources pressures, we asked whether sufficient resources and priority is being given to this area.

You stated that the figure for the backlog of works, although significant, was similar to other Councils. It reflected the spend that would be needed to bring every road into A1 condition, something which no Council will ever achieve, and was in effect aspirational. You assured us that this figure should not spell alarm in terms of any impending serious failure in the road network. The quality of roads varied across Swansea and were maintained on a priority basis. You told the Committee that the backlog figure has come down in recent years helped by extra funding, and you felt that the backlog was now likely to be lower than £70m. There was some debate amongst Committee Members as to whether the backlog has increased over recent years, not reduced, from previous discussions. The Committee asked you to clarify this and share with it the previous calculations for backlog, and if so how it has been improved, which you undertook to provide in writing.

Impact of Climate Change

The Council now has six corporate priorities, with the addition of 'Maintaining and Enhancing Swansea's Natural Resources and Biodiversity'. This will touch upon every Cabinet Member's work and will have some interface with what we do in terms of the built environment. Your report recognises increasing challenges on work due to climate change, and we asked you for specific examples.

We noted particular mention of increased flooding incidents and damage to infrastructure, and mention of the effect of increasing temperatures on tarmac, the impact of wetter / colder winters on highway surfaces, as well as air pollution. Reducing car / vehicle usage was another challenge in the face of climate change. On flooding, you were aware that the drainage network was aged with the cost of renewal prohibitive, and efforts continue to focus on keeping drains free flowing. We noted, however, that the flash flooding events that we are seeing more and more means the underlying ground cannot cope, or drain it away fast enough. That said, measures such as Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDs) to manage storm water locally, Soakaways, and natural measures (including more planted areas) that can divert or absorb rainfall and avoid run off, provide opportunity to mitigate flooding.

On highway drainage, we asked whether the Council had any powers or recourse to take action against landowners or households regarding overhanging trees and vegetation on private land that end up contributing to blocked gullies and drains along the public highway. It was disappointing to hear that the Council has no enforcement powers, unless posing an obstruction, given the impact on work and cost to the Council in terms of cleaning and clearing blockages.

We also asked for consideration to be given to the balance between planned and reactive gulley clearing as there are instances where the public report blockages but are not dealt with until the planned maintenance round. We, however, accepted that routine clearing would only be disrupted if there were significant flooding caused by a blocked drain. We noted the increase in resources with the addition of an extra gulley team last year, which now enables a standard cleanse at least once a year, with priority drains being looked at every six months, working ward by ward. Where possible, information on the Council website would be helpful to councillors and the public on the maintenance rota. Whilst gulleys may be cleared, the issue of blockage in distributor / carrier drains was also discussed and we understood that investigative work using cameras was carried out to identify and resolve problem drains.

Street Works Coordination

We asked about our relations with Utility Companies, or other companies, that have the right to carry out works on the highway, e.g. what process of follow up is in place on re-instatement works that they carry out, to ensure this is up to standard. We also asked how we ensure that these companies comply with legislative requirements (Chapter 8 Regulations) around the placing and removal of signage, lighting and barriers relating to works on the roads, to ensure that all street and road works are safe for both operatives and the public.

The Committee heard that there is a good working relationship, with regular meetings between representatives. We noted that except for emergency work, Statutory Undertakers must apply for permission from the Council for their works.

One of the issues we mentioned was around a lack of clarity to the road user about who is responsible for works. Often frustrations are taken out on the Council when it is a Statutory Undertaker actually carrying out the work, as there is on some occasions a lack of clear signage that informs the road user. This should be improved, even if it means doing more than statutory requirements, and any opportunities to raise this with the Highways Authority and Utilities Committee (HAUC) should be taken. We did learn that there was a colour scheme to differentiate, e.g. blue for water, red for electricity, and yellow for others, including Council works.

You stated that once works are complete there is an inspection regime to ensure works to make good the road surface meets standards, and where it does not they are called back to address this, and also there are sanctions in place where works overrun or furniture such as A-frames or signs are left on site. You encouraged councillors to report issues directly to you of any issues relating to such street works. We noted that there are a significant number of 'notices' each year from companies to carry out works and given the large number of excavations per year the Council only has the resources to check a

10% sample for quality and compliance. The Committee would find it helpful for more information on the powers that the Council has over companies carrying out such street works, including the ability to impose fines, with indication of how much has been collected by the Council in recent years.

Highway Maintenance

When re-surfacing works are carried out we would expect like-for-like reinstatement of highway features such as traffic calming measures e.g. a raised roundabout. We asked whether this is usually the case, as Committee members provided examples where this has not happened, without any explanation. It was clarified that whilst generally there is like-for-like reinstatement, in the case of a raised roundabout it is not always put back as it would require more work and resources, and more costs to maintain. However, any road safety issues can still be addressed if there are concerns.

Cycling Network

We are aware of the expansion of the 'active travel' network and routes across Swansea. We asked that where new 'shared use' paths are being developed, what safety measures are put in place to prevent cyclists from entering the public highway at speed and potentially putting themselves or others in danger. A Committee member raised with you the example of a new track in Gowerton where there have been some near misses, and may need measures introduced that require cyclists to dismount or slow down.

You talked about various measures that can be put into place but placed emphasis on the behaviour of users to use what are 'shared use' paths (not 'cycle' paths) responsibly with care for others. 'Share with Care' signs have been put up accordingly. We noted that there was little the Council can do, in terms of enforcement action if cyclists speed without regard for, and endanger, others.

Traffic Management / Speed Limits

We note that the new Welsh Government's legislative programme includes plans to reduce the national default speed limit from 30mph to 20mph on residential roads and busy pedestrian streets. We understand that public consultation is underway, and eight pilot areas identified across Wales (none in Swansea). We were interested in your response to these plans and possible impact this may have within Swansea, and in particular the financial implications as well as for enforcement. We asked whether there was any indication of funding that may be forthcoming from the Welsh Government.

You told the Committee that you were well aware of the proposal, ever since it was first mooted a few years ago, and the results of the pilot were eagerly awaited and officers would be meeting with Welsh Government officials to discuss the learning and implications. Whilst the safety benefits were obvious,

there was some concerns about the cost of introducing this, including speed controls / calming measures and clear signage etc. and no indication at this moment about national funding. You stated that the Council would have a firm view when more detail is known, hopefully in the coming months. There will need to be a discussion about which roads / streets would be included. We can foresee problems with driver behaviour and compliance particularly if adequate physical measures are not put in place, given the lack of ability to enforce 20mph zones.

Public Questions

Thank you dealing with questions which had been submitted by two members of the public, who were present to ask their questions.

The first of these concerned the safety of a crossing point following ongoing works to develop a shared use path on Mayals Road, where a pedestrian island had been removed as the road has been narrowed to allow for the widening of the path. You explained the rationale for the changes made at the crossing point and confirmed that a Stage 3 Road Safety Audit would be carried out following completion of the works to assess things, and should any problems be identified further action would be considered.

The second questioner asked a number of questions, which concerned highways service delivery and performance to improve support to local housebuilding, and sufficiency of resources to discharge statutory functions as well as capital works such as Council regeneration projects, and whether there was scope for further outsourcing of technical services to external consultants by Highways to help improve its service. You acknowledged that on some developments specific issues could arise, however did not agree that there was an overall problem with the service provided by the Highways Department and given the circumstances of the pandemic felt that the Department had coped extremely well. You stated that there was a generally good relationship between the Council and developers to address any issues. There was a discussion on the issue of resources, including the ability to fill qualified posts as well as difficulties around staffing work subject to variable demands. You confirmed that external resources (including outsourcing work) could be, and had been, used where required.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome comments on any of the issue raised within. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically consider and respond to the following:

- Budget / Resources – clarify whether the backlog figure has increased or decreased in recent years, share with us the previous calculations for backlog, and, if it shows to be the case, how it has been improved.
- Highway Drainage - placing information on the Council website on the maintenance rota for gulley clearing.
- Street Works Coordination – raising with appropriate representatives (e.g. Highways Authority and Utilities Committee) how they can improve visibility on site so that it is clear to the public who is responsible for the works and purpose / duration etc.
- Street Works Coordination – providing more information on the powers that the Council has over companies carrying out such street works, including the ability to impose fines, with indication of how much has been collected by the Council in recent years.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 9 September. We will then publish both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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