



To:
Councillor Andrew Stevens,
Cabinet Member for
Environment and Infrastructure

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Date
Dyddiad:

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Summary: This is a letter from the Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Infrastructure concerning the meeting held on 27 June 2023 and the discussion on road repairs. This letter does not require a response.

Dear Councillor Stevens,

On the 27 June, the Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel met to discuss road repairs. The Panel are grateful to the relevant officers for attending. We received an informative report from officers and were grateful for their time in putting this together and for answering our questions.

Officers informed us that Swansea has around 1100 kilometres of carriage way and around 1600 kilometres of footway. The current calculated backlog on the road network for carriageways is around £70m with a steady state backlog of £7-8m annually, the amount made available for maintenance falls short of this figure. The mechanism for calculating these figures was explained to us and we were also made aware that material costs have increased this figure compared to previous years.

The split of routine repairs and planned maintenance was also explained as was the scoring of planned maintenance for prioritisation. We were reassured by officers that the scoring system is robust and considers engineering, judgement, condition, accidents, the frequency of buses, access, vicinity to schools or hospitals, road classification and vehicles numbers. Officers reported that the scoring system is being reviewed due to a potential weighting toward carriageways over rural roads and that 2000 of Swansea's 6000 roads are on this list. They explained a backlog has been created due to winter damage. We asked further about this, and it was explained that damage is caused by marginal temperatures dropping then rising above freezing which has created a large amount of reputational work, much of which has required the Jet patcher which has a running backlog of around 100 jobs. We asked how many Jet patcher jobs are conducted weekly and were informed this is difficult to estimate and is dependent on a number of variables but roughly 3 / 4 jobs day.

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We felt that the name “Patch Programme” could be misleading to residents, we recommend changing this, officers agreed and are considering a change to something like Small Area Resurfacing Programme. It was reported that the Council receives 7000/8000 pothole reports annually with a statutory obligation to repairs those that meet the agreed intervention levels that have been agreed across Wales. In addition, the Council uses the Pothole Repair Pledge which focuses more on individual issues without the need for inspection. Officers highlighted the cost effectiveness of preventative work giving an extended life span to an existing road and the balance between providing preventive work or repairing wear and tear.

Several future challenges were raised including further marginal winters, carbon emissions from road resurfacing materials and road damage from traffic calming as this creates more wear and tear on the roads. We also raised the impact of electric vehicles as these on average are heavier and have potential to increase wear and tear. Officers informed us that the core resurfacing cost is around £600,000 a year and the core figure for the Patch Programme is around £700,000 annually. During the pandemic extra money was received allowing for three times the usual work to be carried out. This current year is the first year for some time that a Welsh Government Grant has not been received although additional funds from Council were provided.

We raised concern regarding sealing round the edges of potholes and the possibility of water ingress, shortening the lifespan of the filled hole. We were informed that much research was carried out to find the best material and the one currently used has a 96% success rate of permanency. We were also interested in whether water across rural roads is an area for concern and whether there is landowner responsibility to stop water from damaging highways. Officers informed us that enforcement action can be taken where water is directed but general seepage is difficult to enforce however working with the landowner can be successful.

We also asked questions around how road closures are managed for villages with a single point of access, it was explained that pothole material can be used in the wet and the pothole pledge means pre assessment is not required therefore pothole repairs cause minimal delay on narrow or single access roads. For larger works each road is considered on its own merit to find the best solution and if roads are closed, access is maintained for emergency services.

Discussion was carried out on Councillors having sight of the planned maintenance list however it was agreed by us and officers that Councillors should contact the team to ask about an individual road or ask for reassessment due to the daily changes to the list. We asked how Welsh Government split monies given for highways and were informed there is standing split using a distribution formula considering a number of factors like population, number of cars and usage. We asked for the classification/definition of a pothole and were told that there is all Wales intervention level of a pothole in general being 2 inches deep (with judgement allowed depending on the width) on a carriage way and 1 inch on a footway.

We asked about working with statutory undertakers and were informed that the Council does work well with most of the statutory undertakers with reasonable compliance to the new Roads and Street Works Act, although there are exceptions.

The biggest issue faced by the Council is the lack of signage and logo visibility from companies meaning the Council can be contacted in error. In addition, utility trenches can reduce the life expectancy of a road. We asked for an update on fibre optic cable laying and collaborating with undertakers whom the Council have less relationship with. We were informed there are standard processes in place with the biggest challenges coming from large companies conducting national roll outs. Regular meetings with undertakers are held to keep regular communication. There is also a period of time after completed works to raise issues with utility companies which the Council have utilised. Raising awareness of these issues will hopefully increase the standard of work over time.

We asked about road and footpath damage from localised building work and were informed that damage can be caused by vehicle parking which can be difficult to prove. Road survey assessments can help if they are carried out before developments to demonstrate deterioration, but smaller developments are harder to prove.

We requested information on capital and revenue budgets and how these are split. Officers explained that revenue allocation funds workforce, routine activities and pothole repairs and is separate from capital funding covering planned activity which has a base allocation plus additional funding from Council and Welsh Government grants when received. We were signposted to the Council website for the expenditure figures which has data up to the year 2021/22. We were also informed that budgets have balanced recently mainly due to unfilled staff vacancies.

We inquired if active travel is managed by the highways team and were informed that only maintenance is which can include litter picking and cutting back of vegetation. There are therefore ongoing discussions to calculate maintenance rates. Going forward this has been raised to ensure ongoing maintenance not just capital allocation is considered for future funding bids.

We noted that Swansea is not the only authority suffering with road damage and paid tribute to the highway's teams for their excellent work. As highways is such a topical issue with residents due to their visibility and usage by all it can make highways an important topic in scrutiny. We therefore appreciate the time from officers to attend.

Your Response

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the contents of this letter but in this instance, we require no formal written response.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Chris Holley

Convener, Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel

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