

SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on Monday, 7th November 2011 at 2.30pm in the Civic Offices, Telford

PRESENT: Councillors D. White (Chairman), V. Fletcher, G. Green, A. McClements, R. Sloan, C. Turley.

IN ATTENDANCE: Jonathan Rowe, Head of Environmental Services, Dave Hanley, Service Delivery Manager Environment and Open Space; Stuart Freeman, Service Delivery Manager - Highways and Transport; Dave Bell, Public Realm Manager; Chris Butler, Highways & Engineering Service Delivery Manager; Stephanie Jones, Scrutiny Group Specialist; Tracy Clarke, Scrutiny Officer.

SMB-11 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on the 13th September 2011 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

SMB-12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr. Miles Hosken

SMB-13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

SMB-14 HIGHWAYS ISSUES

The Scrutiny Management Board had previously agreed to review three items related to highways issues: winter maintenance, pothole repairs and the quality of repairs, and the condition of footpaths for wheelchair users.

Winter Maintenance

The Environment and Open Space Service Delivery Manager presented an overview of the report and recommendations on changes to the Winter Service which had been agreed by Cabinet on 22nd September 2011.

The context of the recommendations was the national shortage of salt stocks and the bad winter conditions in 2010/11 which had led to a review of the operation and effectiveness of the winter service.

The recommendations were that:

- Following a review of the road network for salt treatment, coverage would remain the same with the addition of the access routes to Harper Adams College. Benchmarking with the Midland Service Improvement Group (MSIG) of 19 authorities showed coverage in Telford & Wrekin was 41%

compared to an average of 39%. A clear policy was stringently maintained to mitigate the risk of challenge, but localised gritting was done where conditions justified and stocks were available.

- The existing Grit Bin Policy would remain but there would be close working with Parishes and community groups for local co-operative opportunities. Parishes were provided with the grit bin inventory and had the option to purchase additional bins if required for local sites. The Parish Council was responsible for the purchase and replenishment of the bins.
- The concentration of salt spread would be reduced from 15g per m² to 10g per m² for frost prevention and from 30g per m² to 20g per m² for snow prevention. Benchmarking with the MSIG showed that Telford & Wrekin was gritting at a higher rate than other Councils. The emergency services and PCT had been consulted on the reduced concentration levels which were within DfT and Highways Agency guidelines. Storage capacity had been increased over the previous 2 years from 1400 to 2700 tonnes to protect the network from shortages and distribution problems with road salt. Last winter grit had been mixed with salt (25% grit to 75% salt) to increase the spread rate, but the grit had blocked gullies and could be hazardous so would not be used again this winter.
- There would be continued improvements to communication and access to information with residents and businesses. Members had been texted the previous evening with an alert about gritting that evening.

The cost of winter maintenance had exceeded normal levels for the third consecutive year and there had been an overspend in 2010/11 of £228k. This had been funded from specific service reserves and the corporate contingency. There had not been as many turnouts, but double-gritting had been needed for snow events with meant more salt than average was used.

In response to members' questions, the following information was given:

- The base budget is set based on average winter conditions. The overspend was due to unusual adverse weather conditions, and the additional funding had been drawn from corporate contingencies.
- A grit bin costs £40 and three refills costs £100.
- There were 460 grit bins on the network and specific criteria were applied to the sites for the bins such as steep slopes or severe bends, and only on adopted roads. Grit was only provided for roads and not for footpaths as there was a cost issue and incidents of grit being used on footpaths should be reported. The Policy stipulates that the Council provides what is "reasonably practical" and the policy could be made available to scrutiny.
- A pilot scheme for volunteer Snow Wardens was being considered as part of the Co-operative Council. Models in other authorities were being reviewed for examples of good practice that could be developed. This would help free up TWS staff for snow clearance, but stocks would need to

be monitored. Members suggested that Health and Safety issues would need to be considered, and that concerns about possible litigation would need to be allayed to encourage people to volunteer. There were DfT guidelines so that if a volunteer had acted correctly, it was unlikely that any action would be taken in the event of an accident.

- The reduction in the concentration of salt spread per m² was within recommended DfT guidelines.
- The cost of gritting was approximately £800 p.a. for 1-1.5 miles. This would include 20-30 grits. There were around 1000 km of roads in the network.
- Parishes could be quoted a price for additional gritting so the cost could be compared with the cost of them buying and refilling their own grit bins but the Council's resources would need to be reviewed.
- The Grit Bin Policy had been circulated to Parish councils earlier in the year, but at members' suggestion, a reminder would be sent out.

Pothole repairs

A scrutiny suggestion had been made to review pothole repairs and the quality and durability of repairs. The Environment and Open Space Service Delivery Manager presented a report on the issue.

In addition to the information included in the report, the following information was highlighted:

- Potholes appear when the road surface breaks to expose the layers beneath. One factor was traffic, but the main cause of potholes was water ingress which freezes, thaws and causes cracking so potholes were mainly a winter problem. Potholes did not mean that there was a problem with the road construction.
- Potholes were assessed to determine whether a permanent or temporary fix was required. Where possible a permanent fix was done, but temporary repairs were carried out where substantial traffic management was required to provide a safe working environment to complete the permanent repair or where the road was scheduled for resurfacing or programmed patching work in the coming weeks or months. A temporary repair could last a number of weeks or months.
- The Pothole Buster machine was used to fix shallow potholes and completed around 20-30 seals a day. A larger area than the initial hole was excavated, filled with bitumen macadam and compacted using the Pothole Buster.
- It was important to ensure the seal between the old and new surfacing did not create a hazard for cyclists and motorbike riders. Bitumen sealant had been used to over band or surface seal joints, but a number of accidents had been caused by the lack of skid resistance of the sealant so that it was

no longer used. It had taken the industry a number of years to come up with a suitable solution, but alternative treatments which incorporate aggregates for skid resistance were now available. All treatments had to comply with DfT specifications. A cold applied resin treatment was currently being trialled, and a trial of a heat applied sealant was being planned.

- The quality of repair was key. Seals should be level with the road and long-lasting. Around 10,000 repairs were carried out per year. Random quality checks were carried out and all reports of sub-standard reinstatement were investigated. Repairs were guaranteed by the contractor for 12 months and faults were remedied at the contractor's expense. Members and the public should report any sub-standard work giving precise details of the location so the complaint could be investigated. When a pothole is inspected, the condition of the road was assessed to see whether further repairs were required to reduce the long term cost of returning to the road at a later date.

Following the presentation there was a discussion about members' concerns.

- Members were very concerned about the quality of repair achieved by the Pothole Buster and the fact that repairs could re-open within weeks or months. Members were informed that the method of repair depended on the depth and extent of the pothole, and traditional excavation and reinstatement was used for deeper holes. Each pothole was assessed to determine the best method of repair and the aim was to get it right first time. The Pothole Buster was good for shallow repairs and could carry out around 20-30 burns a day, although its productivity was limited and it was not suitable for potholes in confined spaces. Alternative methods were being explored to find the best methods for the borough. The cold applied resin treatment was being trialled with a view to extending the pilot into other areas. The heat applied sealant using "hot boxes" was being considered as an invest to save trial, and work would be done with the contractor to take this forward.
- Members agreed that a further report should be brought to scrutiny on the results of the hot box trial, and that there was a further piece of work that scrutiny could do to look at options being used by other authorities. This would be discussed further with officers.
- Members were concerned about the very poor public perception about pothole repairs and suggested that there needed to be better communication to improve awareness of the issues and the reasons why temporary repairs were made.
- As the majority of potholes were caused by water damage, members wanted to know what was being done to address the underlying cause of poor water drainage. This would be addressed as part of the highways capital programme which included the construction of roads. Highways engineering had been joined up with flood risk and surface water management as part of the restructure, so that these issues would be

addressed through an integrated approach.

- In response to questions about how potholes were prioritised for repair, members were informed that repairs were carried out either as part of a scheduled programme of maintenance or in response to reports. Holes were inspected, and defects categorised and prioritised for repair. There were three levels of response time: 24 hours for urgent repairs, and 5 or 20 days depending on the assessment. This could create a perception that potholes are taking a long time to be repaired for shallower holes.
- Feedback was not always given to people reporting potholes as it was not always required, but customers who had an enquiry logged on the CRM system would receive feedback.
- Members noted that the Council was only responsible for repairs on adopted roads, and were concerned that Members and residents may not know which roads are adopted and which are private. Members suggested a list of adopted roads in the borough is posted on the Members' Information Point and on the website. Information about who was responsible for un-adopted roads was not available.

Condition of footpaths for wheelchair users

A suggestion had been made to scrutiny to review the condition of footpaths for wheelchair and mobility impaired users as disrepair and the lack of dropped kerbs was a barrier to accessing services.

The Highways and Transport Service Delivery Manager presented the report on the condition of footpaths for wheelchair users. In addition to the information provided in the report, the following points were highlighted:

- The Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3) had been adopted by the Council in April 2011. The promotion of sustainable transport modes to support access to key services was a key objective, under which residents' concerns about the condition of footpaths and consistency of approach to dropped kerbs had been recognised as a barrier to accessing services and facilities.
- Funding was a key challenge to infrastructure development and maintenance. There were 2 blocks of funding under the LTP3 capital allocations: Integrated Transport (IT) block and maintenance. There has been a significant reduction in the IT block from £2,115k for 2010/11 to £880k for 2011/12. The current capital programme included £619k for footway maintenance and £40k for footway improvements (£30k for dropped kerb provision and £10k for new footway links). The majority of maintenance funding was spent on slurry sealing to repair the surface of footpaths which had a lifespan of 8-10 years. The £30k budget for dropped kerbs would cover around 20 new dropped kerbs. Regeneration schemes had provided opportunities to improve the strategic footway network, and members of the public and the Disability Forum had been consulted on the design.
- The Transport Asset Management Plan (TAMP) had identified the value of

Council assets, their current condition and what should be done in terms of whole life-cycle management. There were around 1400km of footways with highways' status in the borough with an estimated value of £110 million (12% of the total value of Council assets). The TAMP estimated the investment required to maintain the footways at £1m per year for the next 5 years, below the current allocation of £619k. The average design life of a footway was 25-30 years, but current levels of spend meant that footways in the borough could only be reconstructed every 50-60 years.

- Public satisfaction levels with the condition of footpaths was 50% (compared to 30% for carriageway conditions) and Telford & Wrekin scored well compared to other authorities on satisfaction with accessibility around the borough. Feedback from residents on slurry sealing had been that it was not always adequate, and reconstruction needed to be considered. However, the cost of slurry sealing was £1.50p per m² and the cost of construction was £23 per m². Consultation on the next capital programme would include consultation with the town and parish councils on the issue of slurry sealing.
- The Council had been asked to consider a target of 100% accessibility of footpaths for wheelchair users over 10 years for the LTP3, but this was not possible with the physical constraints (e.g. gradient in Ironbridge) in parts of the borough and with current resources.

Following the presentation, there was a discussion about members' concerns.

- Members wanted to know whether the number of requests for dropped kerbs exceeded what could be funded. Dropped kerbs had recently been installed on Wombridge Road, Bridgnorth Road, Madeley and King Street, Wellington. The number of requests can exceed the budget, but requests were accommodated wherever possible and the costs absorbed from elsewhere. It was acknowledged that dropped kerbs played a critical role in enabling people with mobility issues to access local services, and has benefits not only for the person, but can reduce the Council's care costs.
- Members had received complaints from residents and had observed poor quality slurry sealing which dripped over the edge of drains or pedestrians had walked over wet slurry. This could be taken up with the contractor to ensure works are properly supervised.
- Members wanted to know how accessible footways could be incorporated within the cost of new developments, including BSF. The capital programme would be developed with an holistic approach to dovetail with new developments and discussions were underway about this. Members agreed that development planning should come back to a future meeting for investigation.

Officers left the meeting, and members discussed the information they had read and heard on the three issues. On the basis of the evidence provided, members agreed a number of recommendations.

RECOMMENDED

- **That the Grit Bin Policy should include clear, consistent guidance for Town & Parish Councils about what the Council funds and what the Town & Parish councils are responsible for. The Policy should be communicated at the right time to enable Town and Parish Councils to make provision in their budget for grit bins.**
- **A clear role for Snow Wardens should be developed for each Town & Parish Council and members of the public should be made aware of who their local Snow Warden is and their role.**
- **The fact that grit in grit bins should be used on roads and not on footpaths must be publicised and communicated to the public.**
- **A reminder of the Winter Maintenance Policy should be sent to all Members at the beginning of winter so that they are aware of the Policy and able to give a consistent response to queries from residents.**
- **A list of adopted roads in the borough should be posted on the Members' Information Point so that members are aware of which roads the Council is responsible for when dealing with residents queries about potholes.**
- **Where possible, a list of who is responsible for un-adopted roads should be posted on the Members' Information Point so Members know who to refer queries to.**
- **Awareness should be raised with the public so they understand more about road repair work and why some pothole repairs are carried out on a temporary basis.**
- **There should be closer monitoring of the contractor to ensure the neatness of slurry sealing on footpaths and that the contractor supervises the work to ensure the public do not walk on wet slurry.**

SMB-15 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman drew members' attention to the fact that agreement for key decisions not on the Forward Plan to be taken by Cabinet must be sought from the relevant Scrutiny Committee Chairman. Report authors must ensure they have spoken to the relevant Scrutiny Chairman, and the Chairmen must assure themselves of the reasons for the urgency of the decision before requests are agreed.

It was noted that the next meeting would be on Monday, 5th December.

The meeting ended at 16.50pm

Chairman:

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Date:

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