

Minutes of the Highways and Environmental Services Select Committee

Monday, 27th November, 2023 at 6.00 pm
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Priory Road, Dudley

Present:

Councillor E Lawrence (Chair)
Councillor P Miller (Vice-Chair)
Councillors D Borley, K Denning, P Dobb, P Drake, I Kettle, J Martin and K Westwood.

Dudley MBC Officers:

N McGurk (Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery), S Hunt (Highways Group Manager) and K Taylor (Senior Democratic Services Officer).

Also in Attendance:

Councillor D Corfield (Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services)

7 Members of the Public.

19 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors K Casey and A Lees.

20 Appointment of Substitute Member

There were no substitute Members appointed for this meeting of the Committee.

21 **Declarations of Interest**

No member made a declaration of interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct.

22 **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 21st September, 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed.

23 **Public Forum**

Councillor C Barnett, on behalf of Quarry Bank residents, made representations to the Committee and presented two petitions in relation to safer roads and speed control measures on Thorns Road, Quarry Bank and restoring access to the public footpath located between Lynval Road and Thorns Road, Quarry Bank.

Councillor C Barnett stated that footpath at Lynval Road was a public right of way and therefore access should not be obstructed, and although residents had been advised of two further routes, these were considered unacceptable.

The petition in relation to Thorns Road, Quarry Bank, requested to make Thorns Road safe for pedestrians, residents and road users by taking urgent measures to prevent further deaths and incidents by installing working speed cameras and additional traffic calming measures.

The Committee were advised of the dangerous driving demonstrated by vehicles on a regular basis and that an existing pelican crossing allowed pedestrians only seven seconds to cross the road safely, and as there was no central island, this raised further safety concerns.

In responding to a question raised by Councillor I Kettle, it was reported that approximately 28,000 vehicles travelled along the Thorns Road each day. Councillor C Barnett also stated that further responses to questions raised to the Transport and Highway Services Department was also expected.

In responding to a question raised by Councillor K Denning in relation to what safety measures had been implemented by the West Midlands Police, Councillor C Barnett confirmed that the speed camera located on the road had not been in operation for a long time and that some speed testing of vehicles had been undertaken occasionally.

Councillor D Borley supported the comments made and urgent action needed particularly of the timings of the pelican crossing and referred to a pilot scheme that had been suggested by the Transport and Highway Services Department within that area. He also suggested that West Midlands Police be requested to undertake vehicle speed tests during evenings.

In referring to comments made, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services referred to a recent public meeting that he had attended where he assured those present of his commitment, and the deterrents needed to improve roads within the Borough. Reference was made to discussions held with Chief Superintendent Tagg from West Midlands Police in relation to two multi-agency vehicle operations, namely, Advance and Hercules, that had been implemented which could be utilised on Thorns Road. He then reiterated his commitment and support as Cabinet Member in making roads as safe as possible for users and pedestrians and shared his sincere condolences to those that had lost a relative or friend as a result of an accident, sharing his personal experience of such loss.

The Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery echoed comments made by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services and further emphasised that the safety of users and pedestrians was paramount. He accepted the two petitions presented to the Committee and undertook to provide a response and ensure that any outstanding responses as previously referred to were actioned. He also undertook to resolve the timings of the pelican crossing as a matter of urgency.

The Chair, on behalf of the Committee, thanked Councillor C Barnett and members of public for their attendance and comments made, and requested that responses to the petitions be shared with the Chair and Vice-Chair for information.

24 **The Environment Highways Group – Ways of Working / Work Programmes Presentation**

The Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery gave a detailed presentation to Members on the ways of working and work programmes by the Environment Highways Group over the past 12 months.

It was noted that the Highway functions were previously separated across three areas namely, Capital; Maintenance and Street Lighting with four separate Highway Managers covering individual areas and budgets divided across the network to fit the ways of working. Reference was made to the recent restructure within the Environment Directorate in which the Highways Group Manager had responsibility for all aspects of the maintenance and asset management of the Borough's highways maintenance and engineering and street lighting.

In order to identify medium and long term work programmes it was essential to fully understand all Highway assets, become performance driven and operationally efficient to enable an holistic medium and long term vision for the Dudley Borough. The service would also look to enhance through digital improvements helping inform annual programmes. Political support towards a sustainable approach to roads and improving real time communications was also needed.

Although there had been some improvement in Dudley with regard to potholes, this issue had also been recognised nationally, however, the outcomes of this approach would deliver visible and tangible differences for residents and users of the Highway and an operationally efficient workforce that would be digitally enhanced.

At this juncture, the Highways Group Manager provided an overview of the changes adopted compared to previous years including the introduction of the Road Hierarchy review categorising a highways importance to the Borough from 1-7, to help identify where focus is needed to maximise spend where the greater benefit could be made. A 5-6 year reconstruction programme to Classified and Unclassified Highways had also been developed based on the hierarchy review criteria.

It was noted that high quality materials were being utilised to extend the life of the highway / setting targets that were warrantied for 5 years. An annual programme of structural patching to areas in excess of 200m² based on the hierarchy review criteria had been developed in conjunction with reactive structural maintenance of individual or groups of highway defects to a high-quality specification to prevent repeat occurrences.

Reference was made to improvements completed in areas around the Borough, and although it was acknowledged that there were insufficient resources to improve all locations, more innovative ways of working was being explored to maximise resources and reduce Carbon footprint. Areas were continually reviewed on a risk-based approach, therefore feedback and reporting of issues by residents and Elected Members was welcomed and encouraged in order to target areas accordingly.

Photographs and statistical information in relation to the work undertaken within Highways was outlined and the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery commented positively on the vast improvement in engagement with residents and Elected Members.

Members were advised of the three-year Gully Zonal Mapping that had been implemented, and whilst it was acknowledged that the service would continue to respond to emergency works and repairs, the mapping allowed efficiencies through each zone. It was reported that 4431 Classified Roads; 1794 Critical Locations and 5063 Unclassified Zones had been completed to date during 2023/24. It was noted that work had been undertaken to address areas that had not been maintained previously in particular around dual carriageways, town centres and old quarters.

The Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery confirmed that a software programme would be introduced to monitor all aspects of gully emptying which would be used to develop work programmes based on the information received allowing for resources to be directed to the locations on a risk-based approach and reduce running costs and provide greater accountability of the service. This would also result in operational efficiencies allowing for resources to be redirected to other areas.

It was noted that a Lining Programme had been implemented in 2022/23 which resulted in all schools across Dudley being refreshed, 63 schools had school keep clears, double yellows and hatching completed with 90% of the Boroughs Zebra crossings refreshed. The 2023/24 programme focussed on relining areas including all pedestrian crossings, major junctions, islands and roundabouts and town centres.

An overview of the Street Lighting – Phase 2 LED Program was provided and it was confirmed that streets were re-designed, as required, to ensure appropriate lighting levels and electrical testing undertaken on all lighting that had been replaced by LEDs. It was noted that the LEDs were warranted for 10 years plus, and that a sign and bollard cleaning programme would also be undertaken on the various signs located throughout the Borough, and invisible signs removed if no longer needed.

It was acknowledged that although the communications and public perception had improved, there was further work to do, in particular ensuring connectivity between Elected Members and residents.

Following the presentation of the report, Members had the opportunity to ask questions make comments and responses were provided, where necessary, as follows:-

- a) The Chair commented positively on the presentation given and the improvements made within the Kingswinford area.
- b) Councillor I Kettle referred to the previous structure of the highways functions and queried how capital was divided across the network to fit the ways of working.

In responding, the Highways Group Manager referred to the West Midlands Combined Authority annual funding towards Highways Maintenance in Dudley which was used in conjunction with the capital and revenue budget allocated by the Local Authority. It was also confirmed that an additional £700,000 grant had been awarded to Dudley by the Department for Transport for maintaining and improving the highway network.

- c) In responding to a number of questions raised by Councillor I Kettle in relation to the Gully Program and identified zones, the Highways Group Manager confirmed that the areas had been identified and predominately categorised by the amount of gulley's within the Borough. It was emphasised that reactive maintenance continued in those areas at risk of high flooding and were addressed immediately or preventative works undertaken if available.

The Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery referred to the Neighbourhood Model approach which would be vital in implementing new ways of working to ensure better value in areas.

- d) Councillor D Borley referred to the lack of cleaning to verges in areas that could not be accessed due to vehicle parking and queried whether advanced warning could be given to ensure clear roads.

In responding, the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery confirmed that although there were currently no advance warnings given for street cleansing, further consideration would be given to digital applications that would allow the Local Authority to improve communications in future.

- e) In responding to a question raised by the Chair in relation to a road sweeping programme, the Highways Group Manager confirmed that road sweeping was included within the street cleaning programme with four large channel sweepers and five street sweeper vehicles currently in use.
- f) In responding to a further question raised by the Chair, the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery confirmed that all programmes were incorporated within the proposed Neighbourhood Model and whilst it was acknowledged that all areas could not be delivered, the model would help empower and improve communities dependent on need. It was noted that an event would be arranged in January, 2024 for Elected Members to meet with Town Managers.
- g) Reference was made to the long-term vision and whether this provided an opportunity for the Local Authority to work with Utility Companies to ensure a good quality of road repairs after carrying out street works. The Highways Group Manager confirmed that the meetings with Utility Companies usually occurred four times each year which included assessments of work programmes, and that notice of works proposed to classified and unclassified roads was provided 14 weeks prior. It was also confirmed that Utility Companies were now responsible in repairing roads that had deteriorated within five years of being completed.

- h) The Chair shared some examples of areas that had been left unsatisfactorily following work undertaken and sought clarification as to whether the work undertaken by contractors and utility providers were monitored by the Local Authority.

The Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery and Highways Group Manager acknowledged comments made and assured the Committee that the number of meetings with utility companies had increased and that repairs were being monitored accordingly.

- i) In referring to comments made in relation to the requirement for political support towards a sustainable approach to roads, the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery clarified that this was not directed towards any controlling party of the Local Authority but emphasised the need for cross-party support. He also shared his appreciation of the support given by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services.
- j) Councillor J Martin referred to comments made with regard to the move from a reactive service to committed long term plans and shared concerns that it had appeared that those that had frequently requested work to be completed was then actioned compared to requests that had been submitted in accordance with procedure.
- k) Councillor J Martin suggested that the success of the programmes would be determined by how it would be embedded and welcomed the proposed new stable way of working. The need to ensure that a right balance was maintained between medium and long term plans and short-term requests was emphasised.
- l) Reference was made to a number of estate roads and gulley's, in particular located on steep streets within the Brierley Hill Ward, that had not been maintained for some time due to accessibility and that a programmed maintenance schedule for all roads throughout the Borough would be beneficial for both Elected Members and residents to ensure that all areas were maintained accordingly.
- m) Councillor J Martin also referred to a large white sign located in Bank Street, Brierley Hill which had not been cleaned for some time and displayed some historic graffiti.

- n) Councillor J Martin queried whether winter road treatments were impacting road surfaces and whether there were any alternative options that could be utilised to prevent any further damage to existing roads.
- o) Reference was also made to the communication practices adopted by the refuse collection service and whether the same could be undertaken within Highways in order to promote programmed works.
- p) In responding to all queries raised by Councillor J Martin, the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery emphasised that works undertaken previously were not prioritised according to individual requests and welcomed and acknowledged the comments made in relation to maintenance in estate roads and gulley's that had not been undertaken. It was acknowledged that despite the large task ahead the service was now taking a methodical approach to ensure all areas had been programmed. Members were advised that there had not been a programme implemented with regard to sign cleaning and that further consideration would be given to this area ensuring the safety of employees and pedestrians was maintained.

It was further reiterated that the Neighbourhood Model would ensure engagement with communities in order to understand the priorities of each community.

With regard to communications, it was envisaged that a new digital way of working would greatly enhance processes and that despite the need for further improvement, there had been a significant change within a short period of time.

The Highways Group Manager referred to the current winter maintenance regime which included a fleet of gritters that were due to be replaced next year. It was expected that the latest vehicles contained innovative technology, which included being able to pre-programme gritters with information specific to each gritting route. This enabled salt to be spread onto the road automatically, taking into account any specific requirements of the highways network. This should minimise the level of salt used and generate savings in order to make it a more efficient service. It was also reported that rainwater exacerbated potholes causing further damage and not snow and ice.

- q) Members commented positively and expressed their appreciation on the vast improvements made within their respective ward areas.
- r) Councillor K Denning welcomed the presentation given, however requested that future presentations be produced in an accessible format.
- s) Councillor K Denning referred to repair works undertaken in Wolverhampton Street, Dudley, however there remained a deep pothole which was extremely dangerous to pedestrians and road users. He also suggested that all pedestrian crossings should be accessible and user friendly for all and not separate disabled crossings.
- t) Councillor K Denning commented positively on structural patching within areas and encouraged officers to communicate with utility companies the importance of minimising disruption and safeguarding public safety during and after programmed works.
- u) Councillor K Denning further suggested that road sweeping should be incorporated into programmes taking into account seasonal increases, in particular during the leaf fall period to ensure that roads and pavements were as safe as possible.
- v) Councillor K Denning also welcomed the replacement of street lighting to LEDs which would enable them to be more durable and reduce the likelihood of faults.
- w) In responding to all of the comments made by Councillor K Denning, the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery undertook to ensure all future presentations were in an accessible format. He again acknowledged and echoed the frustration surrounding defects to roads that had been repaired and assured the Committee that measures were available to penalise utility companies where road works failed to meet expected standards. Further Legislation was expected in 2024 to allow Local Authorities to inspect utility companies street works and assess the quality of their road repairs.

- x) In responding to further questions raised by Councillor K Denning, the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery confirmed that any monetary gain resulting from a penalty to the utility companies would be reallocated to Highways Assets and invested into the network.
- y) Councillor K Westwood queried whether the relining of unclassified roads had been adopted and referred specifically to the continuing parking issues around the Russells Halls Hospital and neighbouring streets. She also referred to a 'Welcome to Brockmoor Village' sign which had been removed and requested that this be re-installed.

The Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery and Highways Group Manager thanked all Members for their comments and undertook to investigate the specific cases raised during the meeting and again reassured the Committee that all the programmes presented today predominantly focused on the safety of pedestrians, residents and road users. Although the focus was for medium and long term plans, the department would continue to deliver a reactive service to requests.

The Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services commended the excellent presentation given and the exemplary work undertaken by the Team involved and achievements made. He also confirmed that the new street team scene was now operational and encouraged Members to work together with Area Managers.

The Chair thanked all those in attendance for the informative discussions undertaken during the meeting.

Resolved

That the information contained in the presentation submitted, and as reported at the meeting, on the ways of working and work programmes by the Environment Highways Group over the past 12 months, be noted.

It was noted that Dudley Transport Plan report due to be submitted to the January, 2024 would be deferred and Members was requested to e-mail the Chair with recommendations of topics, within the remit of the Select Committee, that they may wish to scrutinise for the remainder of the 2023/24 municipal year.

Resolved

That the Highways and Environmental Services Select Committee Progress Tracker and Future Business, as outlined in the report, be noted.

26 **Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8**

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

The meeting ended at 8.20pm

CHAIR