

Recovery Theme Plan Template

Recovery Theme Title: Infrastructure – Highways and Public Realm

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Introduction:

This paper is concerned with “recovery” for highways and public realm. Recovery for Highways can be seen in two phases. Phase 1 is short-term recovery, i.e. the need to resume “normal” highways maintenance activities. This is critical, as the longer we go without returning to “normal”, the harder (and more expensive) it will be to return the network back to the condition prior to the floods of February 2020.

Phase 2 is the need to establish a more sustainable model of maintaining the highways network to a standard that matches the expectation of our residents and Elected Members in the longer-term.

This report focusses largely on Phase 1: “short-term recovery”. Phase 2: “long-term recovery and sustainability” will be debated in greater detail during 2020/21, and will be discussed at future meetings of the Budget Board, SIG, etc. as part of the future budget-setting process.

Summary of Recovery Theme:

A succession of major storms in February had a significant impact on our highways infrastructure. The storms also tied up our highways and public realm teams for several weeks, as they were required to deal with the aftermath of those weather events.

Then came Covid-19, which has had a profound impact on our ability to undertake maintenance of our highways assets, and to deliver public realm functions. In fact, Covid restrictions have even prevented us from doing a full assessment of the storm damage in February. Nevertheless, we know that there has been damage to our drainage assets, so our current inability to address these is a major concern ahead of next autumn / winter, and is something we urgently need to address.

For public realm functions, the issue is largely that Covid put us significantly behind schedule in terms of the activities that normally take place during the spring and early summer. It has proved difficult to catch-up with such work, and we have

ended up with a backlog of work that has had an overall impact on the public realm. We are only now (late August 2020) getting to a position where the majority of our workforce is returning to work, and around 20% of our frontline Streetscene workforce have had to refrain from work completely since lockdown began.

The impact of 2020 has been even more significant for highways. Water is the main enemy of the roads, and the floods will have had a significant impact on the overall condition of the network. To compound that, due to Covid-19, virtually no highways maintenance has taken place since March, and getting much work done this summer/autumn is proving to be a challenge. To miss the usual window of opportunity to maintain and renew our roads, and then go straight back into another winter, is inevitably going to take its toll on the network. This lack of work doesn't just relate to surfacing and patching, but includes the lower key but equally fundamental elements of sweeping, ditch clearance and, to some extent, gully emptying. The recent thunderstorms have only added to this backlog with a lot of debris now evident in many locations.

Our reduced ability to maintain the network as normal this year will have implications for years to come. We cannot just return the network back to its previous condition by catching up later with the work we should have delivered during the past 6 months and during the rest of 2020. Once a road deteriorates into a poor condition, it can only be brought back to an acceptable standard at considerable cost.

In terms of major works that have not happened, we were only able to deliver 40 of the 54 planned surfacing schemes on the 2019/20 Capital Programme. Many of the remaining 14 schemes had been programmed in prior to Covid-19, but were subsequently postponed.

In addition to needing to deliver the remaining 14 priority schemes from 2019-20, we also have a Capital Programme for 2020/21 to deliver. We would normally be progressing well with that by this time of year. However, as noted above, very little has happened since the outbreak of Covid-19. We had hoped to put a micro asphalt programme together as part of the 2020/21 plan, but we have already lost the window of opportunity to undertake that work (i.e. the spring), so we will now look to include some additional roads to the priority list for re-surfacing instead.

Some contractors have returned to work to some extent, and we have been able to complete a few jobs that we were previously planned for March/April. Other work took place to get roads ready for our planned £700,000 Surface Dressing programme. However, we are still having issues with securing work from local contractors with most now trying to manage a backlog of work for a wide range of clients. This results in us being slotted in to suit their works programming and is therefore giving us less certainty as to what can be achieved. Progress is being made, and we have completed a few resurfacing and structures works in recent weeks, but we are not making the smooth progress that we would like. Although we are able to plan by measuring capital schemes up, delivering the work is still a

major challenge. The 'lockdown' is now easing, but things have been slow in terms of returning to normal levels of operation. With social distancing restrictions likely to be in place for the foreseeable future, it would appear that some operations may remain difficult for some time.

Key Objectives:

- Resuming “normal” highways maintenance activities
- Restoring highways to (or better than) the standard pre-February 2020 floods
- Re-establishing the statutory requirement to inspect the whole network, and thus regain the understanding of its current condition.
- Maintenance of public realm to expected standards.
- Delivery of Winter Maintenance, even if we see a 2nd second wave of Covid-19 this winter.

Key Milestones (include any decision points e.g. Cabinet):

1. Approval of recovery plan by Lead Member (achieved June 2020)
2. Discussion with SLT (18th June 2020)
3. Discussion and approval by Cabinet (Informal Cabinet – 6th July 2020)
4. Engagement with wider Members’ group (Group Leaders - 14th July 2020 and discussion about Capital Programme and salt bins at informal MAG meetings throughout July)
5. Communities Scrutiny Committee (3rd September 2020)

Risks:

1. That the network suffers irrevocable damage following the double-whammy of the February floods and the inability to undertake sufficient maintenance during 2020/21 due to Covid-19.
2. That the reputation of Council suffers significant damage, due to declining road conditions and declining standards of public realm standards.
3. That the Council faces an increased number of claims for damage that it is unable to defend, and that has a big financial, as well as reputational, impact.
4. That we are unable to deliver much of what we would normally achieve via our in-house teams before the inevitable constraints of Winter Maintenance restrict our capacity (e.g. when we grit during the night, those staff must rest during day and cannot deliver their substantive roles).

5. That an increased demand for public realm cleansing and grounds maintenance is not matched by our ability to deliver, due to limitations on our resources.
6. That the inevitable delay in our planned Ash Dieback project has a significant impact on our ability to tackle this issue in a timely manner. The plan was to have tree inspectors in place by 1st April in order to maximise the benefit of the Spring/Summer period, where visual inspection for Ash Dieback is much easier.
7. That the Council is unable to commit sufficient financial resources to enable the service to maintain the highways network in a sustainable manner in the long-term (this is Phase 2 of the recovery discussion, alluded to earlier).
8. That the Council is not able to fulfil its statutory duty regarding winter maintenance due to a 2nd wave of Covid-19 this winter. This is primarily because many of winter maintenance drivers are the same people who had to refrain from work during the 1st wave of Covid-19, with many in receipt of shielding letters from the NHS.

Opportunities/plans:

1. We are taking all necessary steps to try to deliver as much of the 2020/21 Capital Programme as possible. We are currently in regular dialogue with Surfacing and Minor Works Contractors to determine their availability and to see who is currently operating. At the same time, we are also working with procurement to establish the most expeditious way to appoint them. However, it should also be noted that utility companies and others are also taking the opportunity to clear backlogs, and this creates issues with planning works for all of us. The Streetworks team are doing their best to facilitate this effort and have been extremely busy as a result.
2. We developed a business case for a new approach to the provision of salt on non-gritted roads, with the aim of freeing up capacity within our in-house highways crews to undertake more highways maintenance work during the autumn. As highlighted earlier, this proposal was discussed (and supported) in various meetings with SLT, Informal Cabinet, Group Leaders and Informal MAGs. We are now in the process of implementing the proposal, and we have issued suitable communications to all members and the City, Town & Community Councils.
3. Review materials and processes used for highways maintenance, to explore new technologies and the potential for lower carbon options, in line with our corporate ambitions to become net carbon neutral.
4. Where resources allow, or where necessary to achieve best value for money in the medium-term, contractors are being used to deliver public realm works that we have fallen behind on.

5. We continue to look for opportunities to create additional wildflower areas within the public realm. Prior to reintroducing grass cutting in open spaces after lockdown, over 90 public realm areas were assessed for biodiversity potential. We identified 21 additional grassland sites which are now being managed in a different way (as a pilot), moving away from frequent mowing to create wildflower areas. The aim of this is to increase biodiversity.
6. Work with Conwy on a joint project re. Ash Dieback. We have recently appointed 2 tree inspectors (on 12-month secondments), and the Head of Service is in discussions with Conwy about establishing a joint project, with Conwy as the lead partner.

What does Success Look Like?

- The highways network is not only restored to the condition that existed prior to the February 2020 floods, but the condition of the network matches the expectation of our residents and Elected Members.
- “Salt-heaping” replaced by more efficient and environmentally-friendly model, using salt bins, whilst still maintaining this important service.
- Public realm standards return to “normal”, i.e. to standards that existed before Covid-19.
- Increased number of sites being managed for biodiversity.
- We develop/agree a Corporate Ash Dieback Action Plan.
- We are able to fulfil our statutory duty regarding winter maintenance, even if we suffer from a 2nd wave of Covid-19 this winter

Next Steps:

- Continue the work to secure the services of Surfacing and Minor Works Contractors to deliver the remaining schemes from 2019/20 and as much of the 2020/21 Capital Programme as possible in this financial year.
- Put forward options for the future highways funding model via the appropriate mechanisms in autumn 2020, e.g. Budget Board, SIG, etc.
- Formally establish a joint project board/team with Conwy to progress the Ash Dieback Project.
- Introduce (and document) additional measures to mitigate against the impact of a 2nd wave of Covid-19 on our ability to deliver Winter Maintenance.