

Report to	Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting	5 th September 2024
Lead Member / Officer	Councillor Barry Mellor: Lead Member for Transport and the Environment / Paul Jackson: Head of Highways and Environment
Report author	Mark Evans: Interim Highways Asset and Risk Manager
Title	Highways Grids and Gullies maintenance programme

1. What is the report about?

- 1.1. To examine the Council's policy for maintaining Countywide highway drainage along with how the work is prioritised and challenges relating to service delivery.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

- 2.1. To provide Members with an understanding of how our statutory duties under the Highways Act and Flood and Water Management Act are met in terms of managing surface water through our maintenance of the highway drainage network and critical flood risk culverts to ensure that the highways are well drained and therefore safe and properties are protected during times of storms. An explanation of pressures and shortfalls is also provided.

3. What are the Recommendations?

- 3.1. That the Committee consider the report and confirms that it is happy that the correct approach to highway drainage maintenance is being applied so that the best alignment between the risk to users and the available funding is being achieved.

4. Report details

- 4.1 Maintaining the roads is a Statutory Duty laid down by the Highways Act, 1980. In recent years, the importance of highway drainage has become more apparent, with

an increased frequency in flooding events and its impact on other highway infrastructure assets is also crucial in the prevention of formation of potholes and standing water, leading to an increased ice risk and therefore potentially compromising safety.

- 4.2 Denbighshire has over 25,000 recorded highway gullies (for the purpose of this report 'gullies' will be used to describe all highway drainage grids, but does not cover ditches) and over 30 critical culverts and watercourses. Critical culverts are deemed as those assets, that if not maintained, would result in flooding issues for a group of properties rather than individual premises. To ensure cleanliness of these assets, two gully tankers and a van with a jetting unit are utilised. The tankers are manned by two operators, with one tanker cleansing gullies in the North of the County (including Denbigh) and the other tanker cleansing the gullies in the South. The jetting van is currently operated by one operative and covers the entire county and is used for drainage investigation and follow up actions if required.
- 4.3 All gullies are maintained on a schedule, and are cleaned on a risk-based approach basis, i.e. where we consider there to be potential issues, some gullies are cleansed twice a year, and at locations where there are no historical issues with blockages, these are cleansed at upto three yearly intervals. At locations we consider to be at very high risk of flooding, we consider these to be 'hotspots' and these are checked when flood warning statements are issued by the MET office.
- 4.4 Historically schedules were recorded on paper, however, in the past 18 months this has transitioned to an online database system we have invested in and is known as GULLYSmart. This is a map-based software detailing all of the gully locations across Denbighshire and keeps a record of when each gully was cleansed. We know that the inventory is incomplete (for example, the team recently found an extra 11 gullies on one road when only 3 were recorded on the paper based system!!) as historic records are poor and assets become buried. The software has enabled the teams to add more gullies and log any issues with the performance of drainage networks, i.e. If there are any defects within the pipework. This has led to a number of small minor drainage work schemes being identified and the system is expected to identify further works as the crews continue to cover the County. Some Capital funding has been set aside to include these locations on the Capital works programme.

4.5 It is a challenge to maintain the scheduled cleansing of gullies due to a number of factors. One of the fundamental issues we have during the winter months is that quite often, only one tanker is operational due to gritting duties as the operatives are required to transfer to this activity. This greatly affects the amount of productivity at a time when water on the highway can pose the greatest risk due to the formation of ice. Furthermore, the teams are often called to ad-hoc reactive requirements from other highway teams and customer reports relating to maintenance of drains, therefore coming off the scheduled cleansing regime. A significant issue at Autumn relates to customer reports of blocked gullies, which actually relate to leaves and other detritus covering the gully lid and therefore causing flooding of the highway, this does not require the attendance of a tanker and its crew, photos of such issues would be invaluable to allow appropriate resources to be deployed and therefore improve efficiency.

Recent reductions in revenue budget have resulted in the withdrawal of the cleansing of rural ditches and a significant reduction in road sweeping. Both of these activities make a significant contribution to prevent debris entering the drainage system, creating blockages and increased standing water when ditches remain obstructed.

4.6 Denbighshire also struggles to clear gullies on Principal Roads due to traffic management requirements for safe working, Whilst Cyclic works are carried out in some parts of the County, this is a significant cost. In 2023 we undertook a full clearance of all gullies and ditches on the A525 between Denbigh and Ruthin and this was well received and very beneficial. Given recent cutbacks it is unlikely that this could be repeated elsewhere despite the need to do so.

4.7 It is anticipated that we will continue to build upon our drainage asset register, prioritising areas at risk of local flooding. We will continue to update the gully information and condition collection programmes. This will improve the performance of the assets and set the foundations in place for future programmes to prioritise maintenance effectively and efficiently. In time, we anticipate being able to share future works programmes with Members which already happens with planned resurfacing works (as an example).

4.8 The duty to maintain the highway is absolute and our approach to it is based upon our Code of Practice, however, recent reductions in both Capital and Revenue budgets means that this will need to be reviewed.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

- 5.1. “Investing in roads and bridges to maintain a viable, sustainable infrastructure” is an explicit commitment in the current Corporate Plan, and forms part of the Connected Communities Corporate Priority.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

- 6.1. There is no significant impact on any other services. The approach set out in this paper will be delivered within existing budgets.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

- 7.1. No decision is sought from this report, so no Well-Being Impact Assessment has been undertaken.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

- 8.1. The principles on which this approach is based have been discussed with Members on many occasions, such as annually, at each Member Area Group meetings and in the Highway workshop held in June 2024.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

- 9.1 The Council, along with all other councils, is facing significant financial constraints as set out within in Medium Term Financial Strategy and Plan which is reported regularly to Members. All departments are having to carefully plan how they deliver statutory and preventative services with reduced resources as Highways and Environmental Services have done within this report. In setting the budget for 2024/25 budget savings of £10.4m had to be found, it is not possible to make this level of savings without having an impact on service delivery which has clearly been set out within the report.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

10.1. The approach set out in this paper is specifically designed to manage risk, as per our duty under the Highways Act.

11. Power to make the decision

11.1. No decision is sought from this report.