

Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment & Inclusive Growth)

Statement: Highways Maintenance Strategy

For approval: 16 October 2024





Infrastructure, Investment & Inclusive Growth Scrutiny Board



Cllr Asghar Ali



Cllr Hannah Bithell (Chair)



Cllr Neil Buckley



Cllr Katie Dye



Cllr Sandy Lay



Cllr Sonia Leighton



Cllr Michael Millar



Cllr Matthew Robinson



Cllr Andrew Scopes



Cllr Mohammed Shahzad



Cllr Izaak Wilson

Highways Maintenance Strategy

Background

On [17 July 2024](#) the Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth) considered the Council's approach to highways maintenance, taking particular account of the challenges of a changing climate and the financial pressures facing the Council. It was agreed that a Scrutiny Statement would be provided to the Executive Member to summarise the recommendations of the Scrutiny Board ahead of further consideration of this matter by the Executive Board.

Attendees

- **Cllr Jonathan Pryor** (Executive Member for Economy, Transport & Sustainable Development)
- **Gary Bartlett** (Chief Officer, Highways & Transportation)
- **Oliver Priestley** (Head of Engineering and Infrastructure)
- **Simon Swift** (Executive Manager, Asset Management)
- **Tony Penniston** (Principal Engineer, Highways Asset Management)

Recommendation

The Executive Board and the Chief Officer for Transportation and Highways are asked to consider the conclusions and recommendations of the Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment & Inclusive Growth) as set out in this report. In line with the Scrutiny Board Procedure Rules, the Executive is asked to provide a response to the Scrutiny Board indicating what action (if any) it proposes to take and to publish its response.

Infrastructure, investment & Inclusive Growth Scrutiny Board Focusing on development and infrastructure functions and services to monitor progress in relation to transport and planning, regeneration and housing growth. The Board will also oversee economic growth functions and services to monitor progress towards being a strong and compassionate city, promoting opportunities for access to learning, skills and employment for all.

Key Conclusions and Recommendations

1

The Scrutiny Board recommends that the Executive Board endorses a future approach to highways maintenance that increases the proportion of first-time permanent patch repairs as opposed to temporary works. The Scrutiny Board requests that consideration be given to:

- a) The affordability and resource requirements of such an approach.
- b) How progress and outcomes delivered via this approach could be measured and reflected in performance monitoring processes.

2

The Scrutiny Board remains concerned about the consistency of the standard of surface reinstatements carried out by third parties. As part of the ongoing review of the process of pothole repairs, members recommend that consideration is given via the Chief Officer for Transportation & Highways to:

- a) How the local authority works with partners to ensure a 'right first time' approach to surface repairs.
- b) Whether specific changes to the current statutory code for reinstatement works should be recommended to Government to assist all local authorities in achieving this ambition.

3

The Chair of the Scrutiny Board will write to both the Minister for the Future of Roads and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to recommend:

- a) Longer term funding certainty for highways maintenance to enable local authorities to establish a long-term, preventative approach to road maintenance.
- b) Reducing the complexity of funding arrangements by consolidating short term funds for roads maintenance.
- c) Providing immediate certainty about the future of previously announced funds due to be allocated as part of the Network North settlement.

4

The Scrutiny Board recommends greater public communication about the approach to highways maintenance, including the increasingly complex challenges posed by climate change, financial pressures for the Council and the reasons why temporary repairs are used in particular locations. Members ask that consideration by the Chief Officer for Transportation and Highways be given to ways in which technology could improve public engagement in

5

Members are concerned that the inclusion of public complaints as a factor within the prioritisation hierarchy for planned maintenance works may inadvertently disadvantage some communities. Members request that this concern is considered by officers leading the ongoing review of the pothole repair process and the wider approach to road maintenance.

6

The Scrutiny Board supports the identification of artificial intelligence (AI) solutions and innovative permanent repair techniques, which could improve efficiency and deliver improved value for money.



Summary of Issues Considered by the Scrutiny Board

Recognition of the Challenge

Local roads are a vital part of the city's transport infrastructure. However, members of the Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth) acknowledge that the condition of the city's road network is declining and the backlog required to return the network to a good state of repair is increasing.

Members further recognise the complexity of the challenge in relation to highways maintenance, noting at their recent meeting:

- the impact of more frequent extreme weather brought about by climate change
- the increasing cost of repairs driven by external factors
- the scale of the network in Leeds
- the degradation of materials in an aging road network
- the context of significant and sustained financial pressure across all areas of local government.

In seeking to address the challenge of highways maintenance in the city, members of the Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth) welcome the current review of the pothole repair process and the wider Highway Maintenance Revitalisation Programme.

Permanent and Temporary Repairs

In July, members of the Scrutiny Board endorsed an approach which would increase the proportion of first-time permanent patch repairs as opposed to temporary works.

Members recognised there will always be a need to deliver urgent temporary repairs in order to ensure safety on the road network. However, the view of the Scrutiny Board was that delivering a higher proportion of first-time permanent repairs would reduce the need for repeat visits to repair damage. This has the potential to be more cost effective and would also address a familiar concern raised with councillors by members of the public.

The Scrutiny Board requests that officers consider the affordability of increasing the proportion of first-time permanent patch repairs as part of the ongoing review of the process of pothole repair, including identifying whether this would require a reallocation of existing resources or a provision of additional resources.

In order to assess the effectiveness of adopting such an approach, members further recommended that progress and outcomes should be reflected in performance monitoring processes.



Summary of Issues Considered by the Scrutiny Board

Inspection and Prioritisation of Repairs

Members explored the process of carrying out condition surveys of the road network. This included details about walked and driven safety inspections used to identify defects which might cause a danger or serious inconvenience to those using the highway.

At the request of members, officers also outlined the process for combining the outcome of road condition surveys and the availability of resources to produce a prioritised programme of road repairs across the network.

It was noted that public complaints can also be a factor in determining the prioritisation of repairs in situations where multiple locations would otherwise have equal priority. Members expressed some concern that an unintended consequence of this process might be to disadvantage communities that do not typically proactively engage with the Council. The Scrutiny Board therefore proposed that this concern is considered as part of the ongoing review of pothole repairs.

Members support the use of artificial intelligence solutions to improve the efficiency of inspections and welcome the current engagement with a national road innovation group where best practice and experience with new technologies can be shared.

Third Party Repairs

Members of the Scrutiny Board noted concerns raised by constituents regarding the quality of road surface repairs carried out by third parties such as utility companies. Members agreed that such companies should be held to account for the quality of their work in reinstating the road surface given the cost and public disruption incurred where repeat repairs are required.

Officers provided an overview of the requirements of the statutory code ([Reinstatement of Openings in the Highway](#)) mandated by the Department for Transport in relation to reinstatement works and advised the Scrutiny Board that there is no legal requirement for companies to go beyond the specifications set out in the code.

Officers further advised the Scrutiny Board on the way in which inspections of reinstatement works are carried out. Members agreed that due to the scale of street works carried out in the city it would not be possible to inspect every repair. However, members did suggest it would be beneficial to consider whether technological solutions could enable the public to report repairs of concern more easily.

Officers were asked to consider whether specific amendments to the current statutory code would enable the Council to hold external companies to a higher standard of repair in line with the aspiration to prioritise first time permanent repairs—and if so, recommended that this should be communicated to new Government ministers.



Summary of Issues Considered by the Scrutiny Board

Funding

Members considered the current funding arrangements for highways maintenance both in terms of capital and revenue funding.

Members concluded that a combination of inflationary pressures, cost increases and levels of national investment have not been sufficient to enable the Council to improve the road network to a good state of repair and to prevent the repairs backlog increasing. The outcome of this situation is managed decline across the road network.

Consideration was given to the significant long-term investment by Leeds City Council, which has been provided to support national funding. Given the sustained financial pressure facing the local authority, concern was raised about the feasibility of maintaining levels of local funding for highways maintenance and the potential implications for the network if that funding has to be reduced.

Members concluded that the complexity of responding to the challenge of maintaining the local road network is exacerbated by the nature of national funding, which is often provided on a short term basis through multiple funds.

While members welcomed efforts by officers to utilise such funding as and when it becomes available, it was agreed that a lack of certainty over funding arrangements prevents councils from developing a longer-term, more cost effective, preventative approach to highways maintenance.

Members further noted additional uncertainty around previously announced Network North funding allocations following the outcome of the recent general election.

It was agreed that the Chair of the Scrutiny Board will write to both the Minister for Future of Roads and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to recommend:

- Providing longer term funding certainty to local authorities to enable them to better establish a long-term, preventative approach to road maintenance.
- Reducing the complexity of funding arrangements by consolidating the number of short term funds for roads maintenance.
- Providing immediate certainty about the future of previously announced funds due to be allocated as part of a Network North settlement.



Summary of Issues Considered by the Scrutiny Board

Public Engagement

The Scrutiny Board recommends greater public transparency about the Council's approach to highways maintenance in order to improve perceptions about the decisions being made about the network. For example, being clear where temporary repairs are being used to address urgent safety concerns.

It was acknowledged that technological solutions maybe required in future to deliver such improvements, so the public can understand where and why specific works are taking place. Similarly, members were keen to explore whether such a solution could increase the ease through which members of the public can raise concerns about repairs.

It was also recommended that the ongoing review of the process of pothole repairs seeks to identify 'quick wins' with regards to both potholes and road markings, given the contribution of factors such as these to an overall public impression of the organisation. It was suggested that this could extend to a designated lining team to increase the maintenance of white lines across the city, especially on major routes where people from outside the city use the roads with regularity

Members suggested wider public engagement on matters such as the impact of increasingly extreme weather due to climate change and the financial pressures facing the Council could increase understanding of the complexity of the challenge of highways maintenance locally and nationally.

More information about Leeds City Council's Scrutiny Service, along with the activity and membership of individual Scrutiny Boards, can be found on the Council's [committee webpages](#).

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