

TITLE OF REPORT: OSC Review - roads and highways – highways
maintenance progress update

REPORT OF: Strategic Director, Communities and Environment

SUMMARY

The final report of the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee review of roads and highways was presented in June 2018. One outcome from the review was that the position on highway maintenance continued to be monitored, and this report provides an update on progress in that particular area.

Background

1. The final report of the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee review of roads and highways was presented in June 2018. A specific recommendation from the review was:
 - that the position on highway maintenance continues to be monitored, with further sessions for members arranged as appropriate;
2. This report provides an update on highway maintenance, in line with the above recommendation.

Current position

Highway defects

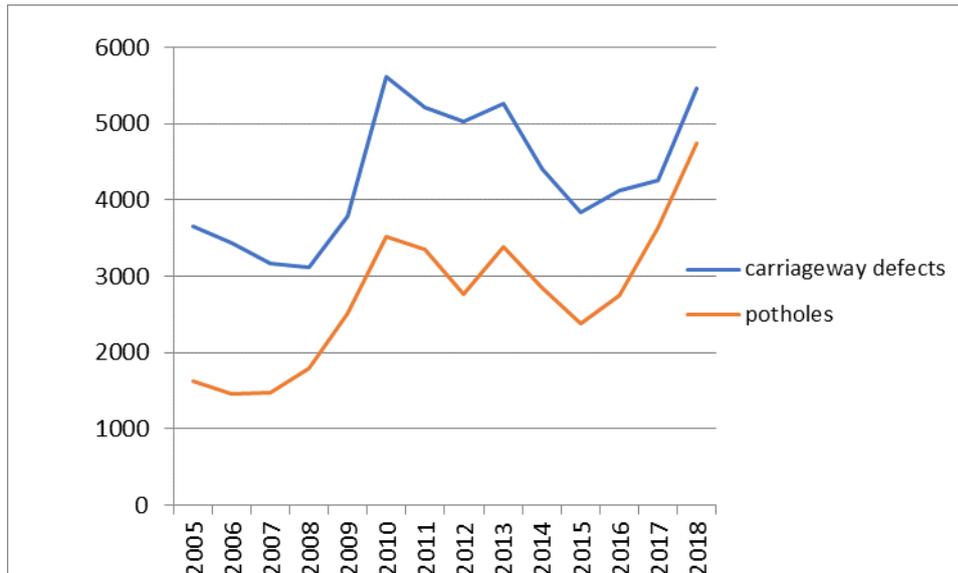
3. The number of defects in the second quarter of 2019 remains well below the position for 2018:

Highway defects*	Quarter 1	Quarter 2
2018	3947	5014
2019	3360	2973

*excludes observations, obstructions etc.

4. The number of defects identified in any one year depends on a number of factors, including the underlying condition of the highway and the prevailing weather (wetter and colder years see much higher levels of defects). Looking at longer term trends for carriageways (roads) and footways (pavements) suggests that over the longer term:
 - there is an upward trend in the number of carriageway defects;
 - the previous decline in the number of footway defects has been reversed. The reasons for the decline are difficult to understand, this period reflecting no major investment in this area. It is thought most likely to reflect the application of more stringent criteria for recording such defects in the face of reduce budgets.

Gateshead carriageway defects



Gateshead footway defects



Backlog of defects

7. The review of maintenance policy last November saw a change in repair times, particularly for low risk defects. Whereas previously there was a target to repair these within 40 working days, this has now been extended to a year. The aim of this is to allow a more efficient approach to planning such repairs. It does mean though that an accurate estimate of the current backlog is unlikely to be available until the new policy has been operational for at least one year.

Review of policy

8. The new risk-based policy for the identification of highway defects has now been implemented fully. It is too early to judge the effectiveness or otherwise of the new policy. This will be assessed in future reports.

Innovation

9. The Council is trialling a new approach to improving the condition of more minor roads. Known as 'micro asphalt' this uses a much thinner surface layer and more simple process than would be applied through conventional resurfacing works, and is estimated to reduce costs by more than half. It is not suitable for heavily trafficked roads but is being tried on residential estate roads with a view to assessing its suitability for a more extensive roll out.
10. An alternative approach to repairing potholes known as 'jet patching' has been demonstrated recently to Council officers. Its use in other parts of the country have seen major savings in cost in repairing potholes, and costings are to be sought to assess its applicability in Gateshead.

Other highway assets

11. Concerns remain around the condition a number of ageing concrete structures, and likely future maintenance costs associated with these. In some cases the costs of long-term maintenance may mean continued repair is no longer cost-effective. Further work is being done area to establish the position.
12. Council borrowing is being used to undertake replacement of older street lighting columns across the Borough and to continue the renewal of traffic signal equipment.

Future prospects

13. The main future risk relating to highway maintenance is the pressure on budgets. Estimates in the Council's Highway Asset Management Plan suggest a significant gap and with further pressures on budgets recently this is now likely to have increased further.
14. This is a national problem, with many local authorities in a similar position to Gateshead. Surveys suggest both increasing problems of repair of the road network, and decreasing public satisfaction with road condition at a national level. A recent House of Commons Transport Committee report highlighted funding as the key current issue for road maintenance.
15. The deteriorating position on funding means that additional emphasis needs to be given to the securing of additional sources of long-term funding. While efforts are being made to reduce costs wherever possible it is not envisaged any such savings will have a significant impact on overall funding needs.

Recommendations

16. That the update report on highway maintenance is noted, and that further updates are provided in due course.