

Meeting: Council
Date: 13 September 2023
From: Councillor P Thompson
To: Councillor Gillbe

Question:

Can the Executive Member give an update on this Council's plans for this autumn, 2023, to repair the many potholes in public roads in Bracknell Forest Borough Council area [which are of great concern to many residents] and report to Council, each year, before winter?

Answer:

Without doubt, the travelling public are contending with a national pothole problem.

Like all highway authorities nationally, the challenge in Bracknell Forest centres around an ageing road network which needs increased maintenance investment.

Whilst the generally difficult winters in the UK, combined with increasingly frequent severe weather events and ongoing traffic demands are all factors in the national pothole problem, there is no doubt that insufficient maintenance funding is at the core of this issue.

Council's receive annual grant funding for highway maintenance from central Government but this has broadly remained at a static level for many years (if not a decade) and the scale of this funding has simply not matched the demands of the ageing infrastructure. And of course, this Government grant is not provided solely for road maintenance, but also for meeting the needs of wider highway assets like street lighting, highway structures and drainage systems. Rising inflation has of course worsened this situation, with some construction materials having increased by over 35% in the past 18 months.

In practical terms, roads have a life-span beyond which they require resurfacing; but this process is expensive and there are many candidate roads. Even with the additional Council funding provided there is no alternative but to repair potholes in locations where our first choice would otherwise be to provide a whole new road surface. This is not unique to Bracknell Forest and all highway authorities face this reality.

But despite this challenge, the Council must be responsible. We must do all we can to maintain a safe highway network for our residents. This means managing the unavoidable pothole problem in a systematic, responsive and affordable way.

Our engineers continuously inspect and monitor the highways, necessarily making risk assessments to prioritise our resources within the limitations of our funding. Our highway inspectors patrol and identify potholes, but of course the public also play their part by reporting potholes too. There is no doubt, however, without an increase in Government funding this pothole challenge will be relentless.

Throughout the past winter and early spring (broadly October to April) the Council made 709 carriageway repairs, involving 1871 tonnes of road material.

Post winter (from May onwards) there has been a further push to stabilise network condition with 754 carriageway repairs alongside our annual road resurfacing programme – a combined total of 5798 tonnes of material.

Described in a different way, these collective carriageway works across the last 11 months would cover an area approximately the size of 15 full size football pitches.

Whilst the annual National Highways and Transport survey shows public satisfaction in Bracknell Forest in relation to '*condition of road surfaces*' as above the national average (ranked 10th overall out of the 145 Highway Authorities that take part) we must look to what more can be done. Whilst funding remains our overriding challenge, I continue to engage with our Highways and Transport Division on our future options and what we can do to maximise all efforts.

The capital programme is agreed each year by the Council's Executive at its March meeting annually, which sets aside funding for all forms of highway maintenance, including carriageway programmes to deal with matters such as potholes. Progress against this programme is captured in the Corporate Performance Report, presented to the Executive on a quarterly basis.

So, turning to the specific question regarding the actions being taken this Autumn to repair potholes, I believe I have demonstrated the broader and continuous work that is undertaken year-round to tackle the pothole challenge.

I am certainly committed to tackling the underlying pressures on highway maintenance funding, but I hope that Government will play its part too in recognising that grant funding for local authorities must now increase.

Notes:

Current 2023/24 financial year highway maintenance budgets:

DfT Highway Maintenance Grant (core element) £1.888m
DfT additional 'performance based' top-up for Highway Maintenance (BFC receive the highest band) £236k
DfT additional 'pothole fund' grant (an occasional hand-out which is sporadic) £377k
TOTAL DfT maintenance grants £2.501m (capital)

BFC capital contribution to Highway Maintenance £1.2m
BFC revenue budget for Reactive Highway Maintenance £2.4m
TOTAL BFC maintenance funding £3.6m (capital and revenue)

Funding directed towards Carriageway Maintenance (combined DfT and BFC) £3.209m