

REVIEW OF THE PARISH COUNCIL MINOR HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE SCHEME (THE LENGTHSMAN SCHEME)

Report By: Director of Environment

Wards Affected

Countywide

Purpose

To consider the performance of the Parish Council Highway Maintenance Scheme and to consider options for its future development.

Considerations

1. In May 2000 a pilot scheme was initiated to investigate the practicality of devolving minor highway maintenance duties to Parish Councils. At that time, six councils participated from an initial 27 that were invited to express interest. A report into the operation of the scheme was considered by the former Environment Monitoring and Review Committee on 6 March 2001. In 2001 the Cabinet Member (Environment) subsequently agreed to the extension of the pilot scheme to a further 15 parish councils (including parish groups) and these began in April 2002.
2. The scheme expanded again in April 2003 with the addition of a further 15 parishes when "pump priming" funds became available through the Local Public Service Agreement as part of Target 3 – Improving Road Safety. One other parish has agreed to join but with a start date in April 2004 and there are currently 5 more parish councils which have expressed a wish to join. A full list of participating parishes and parish groups is shown in Appendix 1.
3. Participating councils receive a grant of £150 per kilometre of road in the parish (excluding Principal 'A' class roads). When first joining, Parish Councils are provided with a stock of essential safety equipment (road signs etc) and must participate in training sessions on Health and Safety and Insurance requirements. Each Parish is expecting to employ a local contractor or contractors to provide a range of relatively straightforward highway maintenance functions including grass cutting, sign cleaning and visibility, drainage clearance and debris removal. For reasons of safety and consistency, Herefordshire Council does not delegate functions requiring significant operations within the carriageway. The scheme as currently operated is not, in general, appropriate for urban areas where many operations involve carriageway work or are likely to carry a significant risk of encountering statutory undertakers plant.
4. For comparison, Herefordshire Council will spend an average of £2,765 per km on works to non-principal roads in 2003/04. Once works to carriageway, footways, and lighting are excluded this drops to £494 per km. In participating parishes, these costs will be slightly lower but, as discussed below, are not reduced by the full value of the grant.

Further information on the subject of this report is available from Stephen Oates on 01432 260780

5. Feedback from participating councils has been very positive indeed, despite some initial misgivings about the associated administrative requirements. The Engineering and Transportation Service provides active assistance to parishes when advice is requested about reporting procedures and accountability. The Divisional Maintenance teams take regular reports of local problems which fall outside the scope of the Parish contractor and try to work with the parish councils to make best use of the joint resources.
6. In addition to the "Lengthsman Scheme" there has been a long-standing arrangement with many other Parish and Town Councils under which they are provided with an annual grant for amenity grass cutting. Details of the 38 participating councils are shown in Appendix 2. Any parish which joins the Lengthsman Scheme is automatically withdrawn from the amenity grass cutting grant to avoid duplication of grant for similar work.
7. It has proved very difficult to obtain objective performance information on the effectiveness of the Lengthsman Scheme. When conceived, it was envisaged that where parish councils received delegated funds for the specified minor maintenance functions, the works involved would replace and enhance the work previously undertaken by Herefordshire Council within those budget areas. In practice, this has proved to be untenable because the budget assumptions failed to allow for core maintenance costs which could not be disaggregated. An example would be the cost of grass cutting on verges where the Council has continued to carry out the basic 1 metre wide safety cut twice each year and the parishes have supplemented this with widespread amenity cutting. This is not at all a reflection on the quality of the work carried out by the Parish Councils but it does highlight a flaw in the original budget assumptions.
8. If the scheme is to continue, Herefordshire Council needs to consider how best to promote the local "ownership" of highway maintenance which has proved so effective at raising local standards without disproportionate delegation of budgets in ways which might adversely affect the standards of maintenance to non-participating parish councils.

Comparisons with Other Authorities

9. Herefordshire is not the only Highway Authority which has delegated some functions to parish councils. However, the funding in Herefordshire appears to be far in excess of comparable schemes. The payments to parish councils in Herefordshire currently range from £915 to £12,690 each year as shown in Appendix 1.
10. Shropshire County Council offers a very similar scheme to their parish councils on the basis of a grant of £300 to each parish.
11. Staffordshire County Council has a similar scheme with grant funding based on parish population, in a range from £400 for less than 1,000 inhabitants to £3,000 for more than 15,000.
12. In Dorset, payments are based on population and range from £400 for less than 1,000 inhabitants to £3,000 for more than 15,000.
13. Lancashire County Council operate a scheme for the county within a total budget of £20,000 for 2003/04. In general, parishes are expected to obtain funding through increased precepts or grants from external agencies.

14. Somerset County Council has recently started a Lengthsman Scheme based on partnership funding by the County, District and Parish Council each contributing £5,000, with an additional £5,000 expected from external work carried out by the Lengthsman contractor. It is understood that only one or two parish councils are so far involved.

Options for the Future

15. Discussions with participating parishes and the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils have indicated that there is a strong wish for the Lengthsman Scheme to continue. It has helped to raise the standards of local road maintenance in many rural areas and has provided a very powerful means of engaging with local communities to address local concerns. The issue that Herefordshire Council must address is how the scheme can be maintained and expanded within the financial resources available and in a form which ensures equity of treatment across the county?
16. In 2003/04, the total cost to the Council is estimated to be £144,450 of which £50,000 is provided through the LPSA pump-priming grant. So, to maintain the scheme at its current level in 2004/05, this Council would need to find an additional £50,000 from revenue to replace the pump priming grant. If the scheme were to expand up to the maximum potential for rural parishes, the total cost is likely to increase to £485,000.
17. This funding level is clearly far above any similar scheme that has been identified and, if expanded on this basis, could undermine the level of maintenance funding available for work in non-participating parish councils. After three years of the pilot scheme, it is appropriate for the basis of the scheme to be re-visited. Because an element of the work is additional to the basic maintenance standards provided by Herefordshire Council, it is reasonable to expect that Parish Councils should seek funding for this from their own communities or other agencies. The grant level of £150 per km should also be reconsidered.
18. The following package of measures is therefore suggested for 2004/05 and future years to support the expansion of the Parish Maintenance Initiative whilst recognising the need to apply more realistic levels of support. The suggestions would need to be discussed further with the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils (HALC) before adoption and, as proposed, would have an impact during the next financial year on the 6 initial members of the Lengthsman Pilot.
- New Parishes invited to join the scheme are offered initial funding at the rate of £100 per km of non-principal road for the first 2 years (67% of the pilot scheme), subject to a minimum total payment of £500.
 - After 3 years of participation in the scheme, the grant should not exceed £75 per km a year, subject to the £500 minimum payment. By that stage, parishes should be expected to be in a position to precept the balance or find alternative sources of funding.
 - For 2004/05 and future years, Herefordshire Council should continue to fund the scheme up to a maximum of £150,000, in effect replacing LPSA Pump Priming Grant from highway maintenance revenue funding. New parishes should be invited to join subject to this overall budget.

- From 2006/07 an indexed linked cost adjustment be applied each year based on the Council's revenue budget variation for highway maintenance.

19. For the future, it is important that stronger linkages are developed between the Council's own maintenance operations and the local communities. Part of this will be a change to a more holistic "Streetscene" approach to services in urban areas. In rural areas, it is envisaged that there will be regular liaison with parish councils and the development of locally focussed maintenance teams.

Risk Management

20. There is some risk to the Council, both financially and in operational safety/consistency, in delegating maintenance functions to Parish Councils. This is reflected in the scale of delegations offered and the measures put in place to assist Parish Councils with Health and Safety training, equipment and insurance advice. Experience so far indicates that these risks are being adequately managed.
21. Wider development of the scheme has increased the administrative resources required for monitoring and liaison which, so far, have been absorbed into existing budgets. Future management/administrative support requirements will be incorporated in a review of the staffing structure of the Engineering and Transportation Service.

Alternative Options

22. There are many possible ways of developing or reducing the Parish Highway Maintenance Initiative. Members are invited to suggest alternatives to the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation).

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Committee consider the proposals in this report and advise the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) of their views.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Report to Environment Monitoring and Review Committee 6 March 2001

PARISH COUNCILS IN THE LENGTHSMAN SCHEME 2003/2004

Parish	Year Joined	Maximum Grant £
Border Group	2001	9,390
Fownhope	2001	2,190
Hentland & Ballingham	2001	4,485
Longtown	2001	12,690
Orcop	2001	3,285
Wigmore	2001	7,185
Abbeydore & Bacton	2002	4,590
Brilley	2002	4,140
Dorstone	2002	5,400
Eaton Bishop	2002	1,650
Ewyas Harold	2002	4,245
Holme Lacy	2002	2,025
Kilpeck	2002	2,265
Kimbolton	2002	3,645
Leintwardine Group	2002	4,245
Little Birch	2002	1,155
Madley	2002	6,900
Monkland & Stretford	2002	975
Richards Castle	2002	3,525
Walford	2002	5,475
Weobley	2002	3,000
Aymestrey Parish	2003	3,195
Brimfield & LittleHereford	2003	4,065
Clehonger	2003	2,220
Clifford	2003	6,180
Hampton Bishop	2003	915
Kentchurch	2003	2,000
Kington	2003	2,325
Lea	2003	1,380
Linton	2003	4,800
Lower Bullingham	2003	1,875
Luston	2003	3,600
Orleton	2003	3,345
Peterchurch	2003	3,050
Upton Bishop	2003	2,775
Vowchurch & District	2003	9,210
Total cost for 2003/04		144,450
Cradley (from April 2004)		4,740

Further information on the subject of this report is available from Stephen Oates on 01432 260780

APPENDIX 2

DETAILS OF GRANTS TO PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS FOR AMENITY GRASS CUTTING

Ashperton Parish Council	£200.00
Avenbury Parish Council	£100.00
Bishops Frome Parish Council	£200.00
Breinton Parish Council	£150.00
Bridstow Parish Council	£200.00
Callow & Haywood Group Parish Council	£100.00
Colwall Parish Council	£500.00
Credenhill Parish Council	£200.00
Cusop Parish Council	£200.00
Dormington & Mordiford Group Parish Council	£200.00
Eaton Bishop Parish Council	£150.00
Goodrich & Welsh Bicknor Group Parish Council	£150.00
Hope Mansell Parish Council	£100.00
How Caple, Sollershope & Yatton Group Parish Council	£150.00
Kings Caple Parish Council	£150.00
Kingstone & Thruxton Group Parish Council	£200.00
Ledbury Town Council	£1,200.00
Llanwarne & District Group Parish Council	£200.00
Marden Parish Council	£200.00
Mathon Parish Council	£150.00
Moreton-on-Lugg Parish Council	£200.00
Much Birch Parish Council	£200.00
Much Cowarne Group Parish Council	£175.00
Much Dewchurch Parish Council	£200.00
Peterstow Parish Council	£200.00
Pyons Group Parish Council	£200.00
Ross-on-Wye Rural Parish Council	£200.00
Ross-on-Wye Town Council	£2,000.00
St Weonards Parish Council	£150.00
Stoke Lacy Parish Council	£200.00
Wellington Heath Parish Council	£150.00
Welsh Newton & Llanrothal Group Parish Council	£100.00
Weston Beggard Parish Council	£100.00
Whitchurch & Ganarew Group Parish Council	£200.00
Woolhope Parish Council	£150.00
Wyeside Group Parish Council	£150.00
Yarkhill Parish Council	£200.00
Yarpole Group Parish Council	£150.00

Further information on the subject of this report is available from Stephen Oates on 01432 260780