

HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE

Report By: Director of Environment

Wards Affected

County wide

Purpose

To consider the performance of the Highway Maintenance Service since the completion of the Best Value Inspection Review in 2002.

Reasons

In March 2002 a Best Value Inspection of Highway Maintenance concluded that the service was rated as Fair with uncertain prospects of improvement. A series of performance improvements have since been implemented to address the issues raised in the inspection. A review of performance was agreed as part of this Committee's programme for 2003/04.

Considerations

1. In March 2002 the Audit Commission carried out a Best Value Inspection of the Council's Highway Maintenance Service. A Best Value Review of the service had been completed in 2001 and an Improvement Plan produced to address the issues identified.
2. At the time of the inspection the condition of Herefordshire's highways was poor, reflecting the historical under-investment in maintenance inherited from the predecessor authority. That investment pattern had continued until 2001/2002 when additional capital funding was allocated as part of the Government's Local Transport Plan settlement. The settlement supported the Government's national transport targets which included the achievement of halting the deterioration in local road condition by 2004 and eliminating the maintenance backlog by 2010.
3. The Council's policies for Highway Maintenance are set out in the Highway Maintenance Plan. The Local Transport Plan 2001/02 – 2006/07 describes the strategy for managing the highway network and contains estimates of the maintenance funding requirements. When the LTP was published in July 2000, the backlog of highway maintenance was estimated to be £26 million, with an annual funding requirement of £14.1 million for a "standstill" position. To eliminate the backlog over 10 years would raise this to £16.7 million each year. These figures exclude bridge maintenance. In 2003/04, the highway maintenance budget is £11.3 million.
4. Among the recommendations of the Best Value Inspection were:
 - The development of an effective performance management and monitoring culture within the Service;
 - Links between the Highway Maintenance Plan and the Local Transport Plan;
 - Linking actions in the Improvement Plan to individual targets and monitoring of progress

- The use of consistent and recorded methods of prioritising work
 - Sharing good practice
 - Setting clear service standards and making these known to the public.
5. Substantial progress has been made since then in addressing these identified weaknesses, in particular:
- A new Highway Maintenance Plan published in 2003, setting out service standards, linkages to other Council policies and containing details of forthcoming maintenance schemes. The Plan will be republished later this year with details of the annual programme for 2004/05;
 - The Best Value Improvement Plan was revised to incorporate the recommendations of the Best Value Inspection and to include more details of targets;
 - The creation of the new Partnership for service delivery between the Council, Herefordshire Jarvis Services and Owen Williams. The Partnership agreements contain specific performance targets to drive continual improvement of the service. Performance is monitored through mechanisms set out in the agreements;
 - The Council has joined the Midlands Benchmarking Group (for highways and transportation) and the National Highway Maintenance Benchmarking Club;
 - Annual maintenance programmes targeted at defined improvements in highway condition, set out in the Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA);
 - A review of the structure of the Service (in progress) to introduce a “Streetscene” based approach to service delivery during 2004;
 - Publication of service information. For example, previous editions of Herefordshire Matters contained details of forthcoming roadworks, a new leaflet is being published in January 2004 outlining the Winter Gritting service and a leaflet with contact information and some service standards is due to be published in February 2004.
6. The key measure of progress is the condition of the county’s highways. The LPSA target is to achieve a 3% reduction by 2005 in the amount of the non-principal road network exceeding national intervention “thresholds”. This target is measured by visual condition surveys of the carriageways (coarse visual inspections “CVIs”) but monitoring has been disrupted by changes in the national methodology for undertaking these surveys since the target was set. The Government remains concerned about the relative inconsistency of this style of survey and has announced an intention to move to an automated system of surveying within the next few years (2004/05 for principal roads).
7. The strategy adopted for achievement of Herefordshire’s LPSA target has been to place greater emphasis on preventive maintenance of the non-principal roads at an early stage of deterioration, rather than concentrating maintenance resources on roads where deterioration is at an advanced state and intervention will be substantially more costly. This strategy is designed to maximise the use of maintenance resources across the county and to contain the backlog of “failed” roads. Although one consequence of the strategy is that some of the worst roads are left in a safe but relatively poor state, the significant benefit is that overall condition of the network should improve more rapidly to ensure that the LPSA target is met by 2004.

8. As explained above, the national Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for road condition have proved to be very poor comparators of performance over time, with the basis of calculation repeatedly changing. For 2002/03 and 2003/04 the BVPIs for road condition, based on CVI survey results, can be compared by recalculating the audited and agreed results for 2002/03. This is illustrated in the following table:

BV Indicator Ref	Description	2002/03 Published results	2002/03 Adjusted results to compare with 2003/04 surveys	2003/04 (Provisional)	Change
BV96	Condition of Principal Roads – percentage exceeding threshold	2.49%	2.49%	3.86%	+1.37%
BV97a	Condition of non-principal roads (classified) – percentage exceeding threshold	35.13%	74%	40%	-34%
BV97b	Condition of non-principal roads (unclassified) – percentage exceeding threshold	28.59%	42%	39%	-3%

9. These figures have to be viewed with considerable caution at this stage but do appear to confirm that the condition of the county's non-principal road network is improving, as required to achieve the LPSA target. The results are not yet directly related to the LPSA target, which relies on figures compiled under a former survey methodology. Special surveys were commissioned in 2003 to provide monitoring data for the LPSA and the outputs from these surveys are due in January. Further surveys of this type will be undertaken in October/November 2004 to provide the final results on which achievement of the LPSA target will be judged.
10. The decline in condition of the principal road network to 3.86% in 2003/04 is slightly worse than the target of 3% but is not unexpected given the diversion of resources to the non-principal network.
11. The maintenance programme for 2004/05 provides the last opportunity to achieve the LPSA target and it will have to be compiled with a strong focus on achievement of the target. Unfortunately, in the recent announcement of the LTP settlement for 2004/05 the Government rejected this Council's bid for exceptional maintenance funding towards the Roman Road Improvement scheme. As a result, some of the maintenance budget will have to be diverted to resourcing this scheme in 2004/05 and 2005/06 and this will constrain options for highway maintenance programmes in these years.

Financial Implications

Covered in the report above. Costs arising from the introduction of the new Highway

Maintenance Plan will be contained within the agreed maintenance budgets.

Risks

There are no specific risks associated with this report.

Alternative Options

There are no alternative options.

Recommendations

THAT the report be noted.

Background Papers

Best Value Inspection of Highways Maintenance in Herefordshire – Audit Commission March 2002