

Minutes of the meeting of the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee held in Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Wednesday 12 March 2025 at 10.00 am

Committee members present in person and voting: **Councillors: Frank Cornthwaite (Vice-Chairperson), Dave Davies, Elizabeth Foxton, Robert Highfield, Ed O'Driscoll (Chairperson), Rob Owens and Diana Toynbee**

Others in attendance:

E Bradford	Head of Highways and Traffic	Herefordshire Council
B Durkin	Cabinet Member Roads and Regulatory Services	Herefordshire Council
B Evans	Engineering Manager	Herefordshire Council
H Merricks-Murgatroyd	Democratic Services Officer	Herefordshire Council
A Rees-Glinos	Democratic Services Support Officer	Herefordshire Council
S Tompkins	Delivery Director - Infrastructure	Herefordshire Council
D Webb	Statutory Scrutiny Officer	Herefordshire Council

41. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Roger Phillips and Cllr Bruce Baker.

42. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Cllr Dave Davies was present as the named substitute for Cllr Roger Phillips, and Cllr Robert Highfield was present as the named substitute for Cllr Bruce Baker.

43. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

44. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

45. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Documents containing questions received from members of the public and the responses given, plus supplementary questions and their respective responses were published as a supplement to the published agenda and papers.

46. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions had been received from councillors.

47. HIGHWAYS WINTER MAINTENANCE

The committee considered a report on Highways Winter Maintenance.

The slides presented by the Head of Highways and Traffic are outlined below (in italics), with the principal points noted below.

A The Head of Highways and Traffic introduced the presentation and welcomed the opportunity to update the committee on Highways Winter Maintenance.

B The Head of Highways and Traffic presented:

Background

b.1 Clarifications were provided around what resources are available and what fleet and equipment is available.

Current Fleet

Routes, Salt and Decision Making

b.2 The county is split into three domains – North, South-East and South-West – due to the diverse geography for decision-making purposes.

b.3 There are cross-boundary agreements with surrounding counties including Powys, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Monmouthshire. Treatment is carried on to a suitable point and equally they will stray over into Herefordshire to do likewise.

b.4 There are two depots – Thorn and Kingsland – where salt storage facilities exist.

b.5 A contract exists with Metdesk for a four-year period who draw on data from county weather stations.

b.6 Decisions are also recorded through Vaisala to ensure that treatment is suitably reflected.

Routes

C The Engineering Manager presented:

Operations Model

c.1 The various stages of operation were outlined. A forecast is received from Metdesk which helps to inform what the teams do.

c.2 There are three decision-makers who are on a rota. It is decided what the treatment should be, the time of it, and the spread of salt.

c.3 Once a decision has been made, the supervisors get the information out to the drivers, loaders, depots, and mobilises all of the teams to start treatment.

c.4 At the end, data is recorded through Vaisala to reflect the appropriate decision-making throughout.

Forecasting – Metdesk

c.5 The forecasting carried out by Metdesk helps to inform the decisions made whether to treat the routes.

c.6 Monitoring is done 24/7 and the team monitors over night to ensure that there is no significant change in weather to help better inform treatment.

24 Hour Summary

Salt Spread Rates

2-5 Day Summary

c.7 The 2–5-day summary helps to provide a foresight on what is expected weather wise and when it will hit. It helps to provide the teams a bit more time to plan and prepare prior to potential treatment.

c.8 The 2-5 day summary also helps to prepare ahead to ensure that adequate resources are available for treatment.

Site Graphs

Camera Wall

c.9 It was clarified that there are seven weather stations, across the county, with cameras to enable better decision-making when it comes to treatment. At each of the stations, there are a number of sensors which get surface temperature, deep temperature, and air temperatures.

c.10 It was added that access is not limited only to Herefordshire, access is available to the A49 and other surrounding roads with National Highways. This is helpful to forecast what weather could be like in Herefordshire.

Vaisala Manager

c.11 It was noted that the council has a contract with Vaisala who manage the weather stations and ensure that they are correctly reading and recording and sending data correctly to Metdesk.

D The Head of Highways and Traffic presented:

Masternaut – Tracking Data

d.1 It was noted that each of the vehicles is fitted with Masternaut which track the vehicles in real time across the network and records what is going on at the time. This helps to ensure an audit record for claims and to understand better what is going on at the time.

d.2 The vehicles are limited to 30 mph while gritting to ensure that treatment is done correctly across the network.

Dashcams – Email Alarm Facility

d.3 Each of the gritters have dashcams fitted to enable better understanding of what the state of the network is.

d.4 The gritters also have an alarm facility to allow the driver to cut a segment of video out which emails that footage back to the supervisors.

The principal points of the subsequent discussion are summarised below:

1. The Chair thanked the officers for their presentation and thanked the team at Thorn Depot for making himself and fellow members welcome at their site visit.
2. The Delivery Director – Infrastructure praised the gritting rate of the network, adding that it is impressive in comparison to many other local authorities across the country.
3. The Chair noted that there had been a long period of time since there has been a review of the primary and secondary routes and there is a desire for a review to be undertaken.
4. In response to a question about how important officers think it is for a review of primary and secondary routes to be undertaken, the Head of Highways and Traffic commented it would be welcome, highlighting that it has been a long time since the network has been reviewed. It was noted that it would be a significant piece of work and would receive a range of different views as to what should and should not be gritted. It was added that the highways network does not fundamentally change significantly year-to-year, however, over a longer period of time there will be changes in terms of new developments and usage of the network.
5. In response to a question about engagement with town and parish councils around which routes need to be gritted, the Engineering Manager noted that the primary and secondary routes are mostly set. When it goes into footway treatments, then they are engaged with and a lengthsman is able to do some gritting themselves. The council does not generally consult on day-to-day activity as the route treatments with the gritters are mostly set. Calls for grit bins, additional salting, additional areas are considered as part of the programme.
6. In response to a question about a mechanism for getting feedback from town and parish councils, the Head of Highways and Traffic noted that there it isn't given the length of time since it was last reviewed. With a review of the routes, consultation would take place.
7. In response to a question about the policy on grit bins, the Engineering Manager confirmed that the council has a list of grit bins that are present around the county. With the Community Commissioning Model, parishes are allowed to purchase grit bins and put them onto the network and it is their responsibility to maintain them. The bins that the council own are managed and maintained by the council.
8. The Head of Highways and Traffic stated that approximately 5,000 grit bins are distributed throughout the council's network, strategically placed in areas deemed essential. When asked about the division of responsibility between the council and the parish council for filling these 5,000 grit bins, the Head of Highways and Traffic responded that he could obtain those specific details.
9. In response to a question about data from the last review and whether it could be compared to today's data, the Engineering Manager confirmed that the service has evolved since the last review and historical data is not available. However, the data that is available today is much more extensive and can be used.

10. The Cabinet Member Roads and Regulatory Services added that current efforts are built upon foundations laid in previous years, with incremental improvements made annually. He added that he would welcome a review of the routes.
11. In response to a question about whether the council has a plan to replace grit bins once they have become damaged, the Engineering Manager noted that the council is reliant on locals to inspect and identify bins that need repair/replacement.
12. In response to a question about the resilience and resourcing of the two-team system, the Head of Highways and Traffic underlined that there are the 15 primary routes which the two teams will look after and are on call during the day and during the night on alternate weeks through the season. Potential concerns that exist around the requirements on the teams can be fed back. As part of the next contract, providers will be asked to come up with their own plans on effective resourcing.
13. When asked if specific rat runs receive priority, the Head of Highways and Traffic pointed to paragraph 14 of the report, which references commuter routes. It was indicated that a review could identify potential adjustments to the network's usage, possibly designating these as gritting routes. However, implementing such changes would necessitate a substantial increase in resources.
14. The Chair noted that every time a route is gritted, the cost of one grit would be approximately £8,000. The detailed information from the weather service has meant that already over the last few months, on two occasions, the new information has meant that gritting was not required as the road surface temperature was being properly measured and it could be accurately predicted what was required meaning a significant saving to the council. It was also noted that conversely the new information from the weather service can also advise the teams to go out when they previously did not go out. On those occasions, it could help to save lives.
15. The Head of Highways and Traffic responded that potential communications on the benefits of the weather service would be beneficial as it would help ensure people to understand the messages and exactly how things work. It was noted that there is sometimes a misconception around the service that Metdesk provide in terms of monitoring and on-call support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It was restated that Metdesk provide highly detailed information several times a day drawing from the weather station information that is available.
16. The Chair added that it would be useful to have some figures on exactly how many times that the teams have not gone out when they previously have done for the current season, as part of any comms.
17. The Cabinet Member for Roads and Regulatory Services emphasized that utilizing the weather service is both a cost-efficient and secure method for providing Winter maintenance services. He endorsed the suggestion to distribute additional information through communications to enhance public understanding of the weather service's advantages.
18. When asked if Metdesk's role extends beyond just alerting about freezing temperatures, the Engineering Manager explained that during Winter, Metdesk's service also informs the council about flooding, rain, winds, and other weather conditions. Additionally, numerous weather warnings are received from the Met Office, emergency services, and the resilience team, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the situation.

19. The Chair commented that currently, there are very detailed 24-hour forecasts from Metdesk and after talking to the team at Thorn Depot, they felt that it would be beneficial to increase that to 36 hours. A 36-hour forecast would help give more opportunity to get shift patterns right and prepare more in advance in terms of manpower.
20. The Engineering Manager explained that adopting a 36-hour forecasting model would enhance planning capabilities, allowing the team to better schedule rest periods and allocate time for treating footpaths. Efforts are currently underway, including securing necessary approvals, to implement this shift to 36-hour forecasting.

The Chairperson thanked the officers for attending the meeting.

There was a short adjournment to enable committee members to consider potential recommendations. The meeting recommenced and the following resolutions were agreed by the committee.

Resolved:

That Herefordshire Council

- 1. Review and update the primary and secondary routes on the gritting network.**
- 2. Undertake an audit of the number and location of local authority-owned grit bins.**
- 3. Carry out comprehensive publicity to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of the commissioned professional weather services resulting from accurate forecasting.**

48. UPDATE ON RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer presented the update on recommendations made by the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee report.

The principal points of the subsequent discussion are summarised below:

1. The Statutory Scrutiny Officer presented a set of the recommendations that the committee made since July 2023. It was noted that work had begun to collate and share these recommendations since July 2024 where at that point there had been a change in staff members.
2. It was noted that there were two issues needed to be cleared up on: firstly, the understanding between the difference of actions and recommendations. Actions have therefore been kept away from recommendations. Secondly, it was ensured that a grip on responses to recommendations was made.
3. It was added that recommendations have properly been sent out to the relevant officers for response. It was noted that where the service had failed to comprehensively record that had been done.
4. As of July 2024, it was decided that recommendations lacking responses would be redistributed to officers for follow-up. All recommendations included in the

agenda papers have been forwarded to the officers, and the responses received so far are incorporated into those documents.

5. The Chair thanked the Democratic Services Officer for contributions to the process. It was noted that ensuring accountability and escalation is essential to obtain responses to recommendations. A suggestion was made to establish a procedure where officers are prompted for replies, and if no responses are forthcoming, the matter is escalated, with relevant officers, directors, and the committee Chair included in the communications sent to officers.
6. It was suggested that all scrutiny committees have a similar system for chasing after responses for recommendations.
7. The Statutory Scrutiny Officer responded that it would be helpful to consult the other scrutiny committees to enable the opportunity to pull together a more unified approach to the process on recommendations.
8. In response to a question about why a lot of financial details were left confidential and whether the council needs to provide clear justification as to why that information was left confidential, the Statutory Scrutiny Officer suggested that the portfolio holder is asked to account for that in the meeting and to ask whether they can provide any more detail as to why the commercial confidentiality requires them to disclose this information. Therefore, it was suggested that the questions are asked first before recommendations are made.

Resolved:

That Herefordshire Council:

1. **Ensures that the statutory scrutiny officer drafts a cross-scrutiny committee protocol, to ensure timely responses with faster escalation as required to outstanding recommendations.**

49. WORK PROGRAMME 2024/5

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer presented the draft work programme for the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee for the municipal year 2024/25.

The committee unanimously agreed the draft work programme for Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved that:

The committee agree the work programme for Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee contained in the work programme report attached as appendix 1.

50. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting is Tuesday 3 June 2025, 10:00 am.

The meeting ended at 12.04 pm

Chairperson