

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 9 th November 2021
Report Subject	Impact of the pandemic on prioritising highway schemes, gulley emptying, grass cutting, and flooding
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Streetscene & Transportation
Report Author	Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2021, a report was presented to the newly established Recovery Committee to review the Recovery Business Plan for the Streetscene and Transportation Portfolio.

The overall findings were that the Committee was assured by the Streetscene & Transportation Portfolio Recovery Business Plan; however, the Committee requested that the impact of the pandemic on prioritising highway schemes, gulley emptying, grass cutting and flooding should be referred to the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

This report provides an overview of the impact of the pandemic on the aforementioned frontline operational services following the report in August 2021 and in line with the Committee's recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee welcomes the report and supports the work undertaken by the Streetscene & Transportation portfolio to maintain key services during the pandemic.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE BACKGROUND
1.01	Council, at its Annual Meeting earlier in the year, appointed a new Recovery Committee to guide our second phase of recovery from the pandemic. As part of its role, the new Committee is required to refer risks and issues to the respective Overview and Scrutiny Committees to review in detail as part of their forward work programmes.

1.02	<p>In August 2021, a report was presented to the newly established Recovery Committee to review the Recovery Business Plan for the Streetscene and Transportation Portfolio.</p> <p>The overall findings were that the Committee was assured by the Streetscene & Transportation Portfolio Recovery Business Plan; however, the Committee requested that the impact of the pandemic on prioritising highway schemes, gulley emptying, grass cutting and flooding should be referred to the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>This report provides an overview of impact of the pandemic on the aforementioned frontline operational services following the report in August 2021 in line with the Committee's recommendations.</p>
1.03	<p>There is no doubt that the last 18 months has been an extremely challenging time for the Council and the entire authority has had to manage unprecedented levels of uncertainty, react to multiple and different pressures and maintain services that are critical to the residents of Flintshire.</p> <p>The COVID-19 pandemic has seen unprecedented restrictions placed upon individuals and organisations. These restrictions have significantly impacted on the operations undertaken and how these were carried out during this time.</p> <p>In Streetscene & Transportation, overall, the service has shown a good level of resilience, although it should be recognised that certain services have and will continue to experience significant disruption.</p> <p>The emergency situation as a result of the pandemic and Brexit is far from over and the following summary provides an overview of what continues to be a fluid and uncertain situation:</p>
1.04	<p><u>Prioritising Highways Schemes</u></p> <p>a) Impact on highway and infrastructure scheme development Due to the inability to obtain required traffic survey data and limitations associated with the advertisement and consultation of proposals for highway and infrastructure schemes, a number of projects were put on hold during the pandemic. From July 2020, the objective was to progress schemes where possible with the use of existing data and find alternative methods of conducting public consultation on Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs). Subsequently, we have revised the process for public consultation through the introduction of 'online' consultation events, which has negated the need to physically interact with large groups of people. The identification and progression of annual grant schemes are continuing as normal (pre-COVID levels).</p> <p>b) Impact on construction and supply chain for highway and infrastructure schemes (including the Council's Resurfacing Programme) The pandemic did have an impact on the highway revenue programme during 2020 as it reduced the availability of materials and resources from supply chains and contractors. However, we have continued to provide safety critical highway works, whilst adapting the way we worked to comply with COVID safety regulations.</p>

Some schemes during 2020 were postponed due to the availability of contractors and our own in-house teams and supply chain limitations, as well as the inability of contractors to adhere to social distancing requirements at the time. The lockdown prompted many contractors, suppliers, quarries and material manufacturers to temporarily close, and by the end of March 2020 most highways work was limited to essential safety work only. Some schemes from last year have had to be deferred to this year, and it may also result in some of this year's programme being carried over to the following year. Some proposed schemes were also located on key strategic or arterial routes, which provided access to the rainbow hospitals or food outlets and therefore were suspended in line with Department for Transport (DfT) and government guidelines.

With careful planning, the view from specialists in the highways sector was that some operations could, and should, continue. With reductions in road traffic, it was an opportune time for maintenance works to be carried out and, as restrictions were eased, some essential highway schemes were taken forward and approved for progression by EMRT. Since 4th May 2020, construction works went ahead where feasible and continued to be progressed as normal (as per pre-COVID levels), albeit in line with government guidelines in place at that time.

However, supply chain issues are continuing to hamper progress on some major infrastructure projects, which is resulting in delays to schemes that are largely funded by external grant schemes. A number of large infrastructure improvement projects are still in progress and continue to be monitored through the relevant Project Boards, but are experiencing delays. The development of some of these projects relies on regulatory approval to move forward, such as planning consent, drainage (SUDs) and environmental permitting. Each grant funded project is given a project team to control delivery within specified timescales. Additional partners (e.g. consultants; WRAP Cymru) have been engaged and are continuing to support us with the delivery of these key projects. Early discussions are also being held with funding award bodies regarding potential risks to grant funding not being expended within the specified timescales and potential carry forward of funding.

1.04

Grass Cutting and Grounds Maintenance

Grass cutting and grounds maintenance standards are set out in our Grass Cutting Policy. We also employ Streetscene Standards, which are reviewed typically every 3 years (the next review date due in November 2022).

We have a range of grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations in place, which vary from external contracted services on highway verges, roundabouts and central reservations, weed spraying, tenant gardens and school grounds to our own in-house service delivery for amenity areas and public open spaces, such as car parks, cemeteries, leisure centres, libraries, Council offices and housing estates, town centres, sheltered housing, bus stops and play areas and playing fields, nature conservation areas. We do not maintain private land or land owned by bodies other than the Council.

1.05	<p>Our own in-house grass cutting operations were impacted heavily during the Spring of 2020, due to the lack of available workforce owing to high sickness absence levels, self-isolation and deployment to other key services, such as waste and recycling operations; consequently, grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations were reduced or scaled back during this period.</p> <p>As a result, we started to observe increased growth in vegetation to unmanageable lengths, as well as a decrease in environmental cleanliness and increased customer complaints as the season progressed. As the restrictions were lifted, grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations were reintroduced in most areas of the County during the Summer of 2020; however, there was a backlog of work and operations were not fully resumed in some amenity areas.</p>
1.06	<p>Subsequently, the 2021 grass cutting season recommenced in March with all areas of the County receiving the full service provision, albeit with convoy vehicle working in place in order to maintain social distancing and crews working as “bubble” groups. The bubble working principle divided the grass cutting crews into independent teams or “bubbles” which can carry out a critical function without the need to interact with other colleagues. The purpose of doing this was to mitigate the risk of the whole service needing to self-isolate under the Test and Trace system and protect this critical frontline service.</p>
1.07	<p>The in-house service has performed well throughout the season and the measures put in place have ensured that grass cutting operations have continued uninterrupted throughout the season and in line with the current policy. Contracted grass cutting services have also performed well with highway verges maintained to the required policy standards.</p>
1.08	<p>Weed spraying across the county is normally provided through external contractors. Unfortunately, when the season commenced, the incumbent contractors notified us at short notice that they were unable to fulfil the contract this year, due to their own ongoing issues with the pandemic and resourcing. In response, we procured a second contractor, who although was ready to commence the weed spraying in July, subsequently let us down at short notice. Following this, we procured another, third contractor, who has had limited availability to deliver the weed spraying programme since August, which has meant that the programme has fallen behind. In recent weeks, we have been attempting to engage with a fourth contractor; however, this is also proving challenging with limited availability.</p>
1.09	<p><u>Gully Emptying</u></p> <p>In April 2020, the Welsh Government produced non-statutory guidance on the relative prioritisation of frontline environmental services. The guidance set out a comparative prioritisation guide for the collection service of different waste streams, to aid decision making where the impact of COVID-19 necessitated a reduction in service provision. According to the prioritisation list, gully emptying was given a medium priority and the guidance stipulated that priority should be given to roads/streets known to cause flooding problems.</p> <p>Notwithstanding the guidance issued, in Flintshire, gully emptying is considered to be a priority service and this was no different during the pandemic. Gully emptying continued to operate as normal in line with service standards.</p>

	<p>Similarly to other service areas, staff engaged in gully emptying operations were separated into independent teams or “bubbles” in order to carry out this critical function without the need to interact with other colleagues.</p> <p>The highway drainage system is designed to take water away from the road surface, but even with a well-maintained system, problems can arise during periods of heavy or prolonged rainfall.</p>
1.10	<p><u>Flooding</u></p> <p>The unprecedented levels of rainfall as a result of severe weather events over the last 12 months, which included five consecutive storms, caused extensive damage to the highway network. Following Storm Christoph in January 2021, a project team was set up jointly between Planning & Environment and Streetscene to oversee repair work in Sandycroft, Bretton & Broughton, Ffynnongroyw and Mold. Each area was assigned an officer as a project lead and a significant amount of work has been undertaken to remedy the damage caused over the winter period and following further subsequent heavy rainfall over the summer. This has included CCTV drain surveys, new pipework, jetting and removal of debris and silt, reconstruction of drains, ditch clearance.</p> <p>We have also been working closely with Welsh Water, Natural Resources Wales and Network Rail to ensure that the drainage systems that these bodies are collectively responsible for are fully maintained, free flowing and capable of operating at their maximum capacity. This work has been ongoing throughout the spring and summer where both Welsh Water and the Council have carried out extensive CCTV surveys and cleansing of all surface water and highways drainage infrastructure (sewers, highway gullies, road culverts) in and around the key areas affected earlier in the year. Other work has involved liaising with private landowners and reminding them of their responsibility to maintain drainage systems within their ownership.</p>
1.11	<p>Flood Prevention and Response – Organisational Capacity</p> <p>In September 2021, Cabinet approved proposals to enhance organisational capacity in flood risk management in response to pressing service demands and the expectations of meeting the aims and objectives of the newly adopted Council Plan and legislative duties.</p> <p>The Council has specific statutory responsibilities for flood risk management as the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) and this is an area where increased capacity is required to fulfil our duties, meet future anticipated demand, and be able to respond to extreme weather events as part of our emergency planning and prevention and response.</p> <p>Additional capacity in relation to flood prevention and response will strengthen the Council’s ability to support and protect communities and homeowners who suffer the effects and consequences of flooding, and support the organisation in fulfilling its new responsibility for approving sustainable surface water drainage in new development by operating as a SuDs Approving Body (SAB).</p> <p>Approval was given to increase the resource available to SAB and LLFA through two additional Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Officers.</p>

	In addition, approval was given for increased capacity, through an additional Streetscene Technical Officer, to progress the projects outlined in 1.10 above that are generating additional works and identifying larger capital funded schemes that will need to be developed and implemented to prevent flooding reoccurrence.
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2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
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2.01	The service has had to adapt to new ways of working during the pandemic, which has impacted resource levels e.g. increased requirement for agency staff, increase in PPE/hygiene measures, convoy vehicles. All additional costs due to the pandemic have been funded through the COVID hardship funding provided by the Welsh Government.
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2.02	The adverse weather conditions and damage caused after Storm Christoph in January 2021 has resulted in ongoing investigations, remediation and investment requirements for highway drainage infrastructure, which has been funded through WG hardship funding.
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2.03	<p>Approval was given by Cabinet in September 2021 to increase the organisational capacity for additional posts for flood prevention and response.</p> <p>The approved budget requirement for additional posts within Planning & Environment is estimated at £94,664 per annum to include on costs. This would be an annual recurring cost within the base budget.</p> <p>The approved budget requirement is for the additional technical role within Streetscene is estimated at £47,332 per annum to include on costs. Again, this would be an annual recurring cost within the base budget.</p>
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3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
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3.01	Any changes to service provision during the pandemic were progressed through the relevant Tactical Groups and EMRT for decision making and approval, and were tracked through daily Business Contingency Plans.
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4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
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4.01	The business contingency plans put in place during the pandemic were developed with wide consultation with officers within and across portfolios and trade unions. All decisions regarding operational service levels during the pandemic were made through EMRT and the various Tactical Working Groups that were set up.
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5.00	APPENDICES
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5.01	None
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6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	None
7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Katie Wilby, Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation) Telephone: 01352 704530 E-mail: katie.wilby@flintshire.gov.uk</p>
8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	None