

Via email to:
All City, Town, and Parish Councils

All enquiries email:
devolution@somerset.gov.uk

Date: 27 February 2024

Dear Colleagues

Highway Maintenance Devolution - Options for local enhancement to routine highways maintenance services

Further to letters issued last year by the Leader of the council I am pleased to outline the options available to localities to enhance the level of highway service in their area; providing contact details to express an interest in the various initiatives which will become available over the next few months.

Following extensive budget consultation and Scrutiny process, the Council's Executive Board heard concerns about the potential impact of options for savings in highway services and agreed that localities need time to develop arrangements for any enhanced local delivery.

The proposed highway savings were scaled back to around £200k which is a reduction of about 15% in terms of what we spend on grass cutting, gully emptying, hedge trimming and treating noxious weeds.

The saving will not come into force until April 2025 to give time for local agreements to be reached.

Our services

Somerset Council is responsible for maintaining around 6,700km of carriageway and 2,600km of walkable footways across Somerset. We have a broad responsibility to ensure the network is maintained and safe and we aim to make sure we undertake timely repairs in line with our published policies on inspecting and maintaining the highway.

You can access these here: www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/highway-safety-inspections/

We spend in excess of £30m capital per year on maintaining the structure of the highway, through planned programmes such as re-surfacing, patching and reconstruction, and through reactive repairs to safety defects such as potholes.

We also have programmes for repair and renewal of aging assets such as street lighting, traffic signals and maintaining, repairing, and strengthening structures such as bridges, culverts and retaining walls.

This type of work is usually funded through our capital grants from Government.

We also operate area highways offices and undertake routine planned maintenance to keep people safe on our networks, such as cutting the grass for improved visibility, the emptying of gullies to prevent flooding, jetting drains, treating noxious weeds, and ensuring any signs and lines related to highway safety, are legible.

We currently spend about £4.7m on this type of activity (excluding winter and emergency service, rights of way and highway lighting).

As these are 'services' rather than construction works, they are typically funded from Council Tax.

Some of this work is 'planned maintenance' and is scheduled in each year (such as grass cutting and gully emptying), and some of the work is undertaken reactively, in response to issues being identified by our inspectors or the public (such as blocked drains).

Planned maintenance (explained)

We operate a planned maintenance programme for cleaning highway surface water drains on all the roads we maintain. How often we do this depends on where they are (the classification of the road) and the relative risk of flooding.

- Gullies in flood susceptible areas will be cleaned every year
- Gullies in rural non-flood susceptible areas (outside a 30mph or 40mph speed limit) will be cleaned every two years
- Gullies in urban non-flood susceptible areas (inside a 30 or 40mph speed limit) will be cleaned every four years

Another planned maintenance activity is cutting certain areas of grass on the A and B roads which we do twice a year at agreed locations where long grass would otherwise cause safety issues such as lack of visibility of oncoming traffic.

The planned programme is reviewed and adjusted each year to respond to the changing nature of risk and flooding on the county's road network.

Reactive maintenance (explained)

In addition to our planned maintenance programmes, we also currently budget for reactive work which is where issues (such as blocked drains or overgrown hedges) are identified by our inspectors or reported to us by communities. Where defects or flooding are identified, outside the planned programmes, these will be dealt with as necessary.

Changes arising from the recent budget setting process

As part of our response to the financial emergency, the highways service plans to reduce our budget for reactive maintenance activity such as hedge trimming, gully emptying, drain jetting and treating noxious weeds.

The budget will reduce from April 2025. We will still undertake our planned programmes but will have less funding to react to issues as they arise.

Although please note that we will always address those issues which present an immediate safety hazard.

Changes to Highway Maintenance Services				
Highway Maintenance Activity	23/24	24/25	25/26	Status
Maintenance of structures such as bridges and retaining walls	✓	✓	✓	Continuing unchanged
Road and footpath patching, resurfacing and surface dressing	✓	✓	✓	Continuing unchanged
Repairing safety defects such as potholes.	✓	✓	✓	Continuing unchanged
Planned grass cutting programme	✓	✓	✓	Continuing unchanged
Planned gully emptying programme	✓	✓	✓	Continuing unchanged
Replenishment of grit bins when notified they are empty	✓	✓	✓	Continuing unchanged
Reactive response to blocked gullies, drains and ditches.	✓	✓	Reducing	Budget reducing from April 2025. Urgent safety-related issues will still be dealt with.
Reactive response to overgrown hedges	✓	✓	Reducing	
Reactive response to presence of noxious weeds	✓	✓	Reducing	
Local delivery options such as highway steward, self-delivery, and parish price list.	Not available	Available from summer 2024	✓	Aiming for as wide a take-up as possible by 25/26.

We would like to work with our City, Town, and Parish Councils during the coming few months to get ready for this change in our services and enable you to consider providing an enhanced level of service in your locality, either through undertaking or ordering certain agreed types of works yourselves, or through buying-back an agreed level of service.

Initiatives Available

We are putting in place a range of measures which will enable enhanced local delivery and would like to establish as many local arrangements as possible prior to budgets reducing in 25/26.

Highways Steward

This is a skilled operative in a branded vehicle, who visits parishes and towns to a defined works programme, with priorities determined by the City, Town and Parish but is also empowered to undertake ad-hoc works when identified.

They would not undertake statutory safety related work such as repairing potholes or dealing with damaged regulatory signs etc. which would still be undertaken by Somerset Council, however they will be able to identify this type of issue and ensure action is taken through the appropriate channels.

They would be able to undertake activity such as verge maintenance, highway surface water drainage maintenance, weed removal, sign cleaning and cutting back vegetation.

A Highways Steward can be supplied by the Council's highways contractor Kier Transportation subject to the locality confirming funding to cover the cost annually.

A single Highways Steward with a vehicle, all tools and equipment, costs £50,000 per annum.

There is potential for local councils across Somerset to buy into this service, which would bring the additional benefit of close links with the highways service and would address concerns about taking on health and safety and insurance obligations.

There is flexibility in how the service is commissioned; no minimum number of Stewards, and contracts can start from April 1st or at any time during the year.

The minimum contract length is one year, and each Steward needs to be fully funded to work in a workable geographic area.

It is possible for a parish to 'buy' one whole Steward for their individual parish, or to pool resources with a local cluster of parishes within an LCN area, or consider a full time or a half time Steward for their parish or cluster, sharing the other half with a neighbouring parish cluster or LCN area.

If you would like to register your interest in the Highways Steward scheme, please contact devolution@somerset.gov.uk placing '**Highways Steward**' in the subject line of your email. This will allow Somerset Council to sensibly gauge and co-ordinate interest across the county.

Local 'self-delivery'

A similar yet alternative scope of services to the Highways Steward scheme could be 'self-delivered' by localities, either through local suppliers commissioned by a Parish, or by Parish collaboration, or through a volunteer network.

Activities could include verge maintenance, drainage maintenance, weed removal, sign cleaning, vegetation clearance, tree and hedge cutting, minor repairs to non-regulatory signs etc.

Somerset Council is preparing a training package which will be available in the summer and enable people such as volunteers or locally skilled people to undertake agreed types of work safely in the vicinity of the highway with appropriate risk assessment.

People undertaking the work would need the correct insurance and Somerset Council will be able to provide advice on risk assessment, together with any permissions, licenses, traffic orders or temporary traffic signals needed.

If you'd like to learn more about this training, contact devolution@somerset.gov.uk placing **'Training'** in the subject line of your email.

Parish 'price list'

We are enabling City, Town, and Parish Councils to purchase highway maintenance services direct from our contractor Kier.

Our contractor is preparing a parish price list and an ordering process for this. The new Kier contract commences on 1 April 2024.

Please be patient as it will take a couple of months to mobilise and set up the relevant processes for the parish price list. We currently envisage the price list and ordering process being available from Summer 2024, and services can commence shortly after this.

If you would like to express an interest in buying services from the parish price list, then please contact devolution@somerset.gov.uk placing **'Price List'** in the subject line of your email.

‘Buying back’

There may be opportunities in the next City, Town and Parish precept round to raise funds and ‘buy back’ a level of service for a particular locality.

At present our budgets and programmes are planned on a countywide and area basis, so we recommend that localities wishing to buy back a level of service are better placed to do so in clusters.

It may be difficult for the Council to agree to a certain level of service for an isolated parish in a cost-effective way, due to the nature of how works are ordered, planned, and delivered.

We therefore recommend that parishes work together through their Local Community Networks (LCNs), preferably by setting up highways sub-groups, to discuss and agree any enhanced service delivery with our highway officers, (who can attend those sub-groups).

We have worked closely with Parish Councils through the Exmoor Pilot scheme to establish the value that highways sub-groups can have, and at the time of writing seven other LCNs have agreed to form such a group.

To ensure enhanced levels of service continue in your localities - over and above the basic offer – we will need our local Parishes to step forward and take on these tasks.

To assist you in your decision-making, we’ve set up dedicated pages on our website. Please take the time to explore the resources. Bookmark the link, and don’t forget to revisit it, as these pages are frequently updated.

You’ll find the information here: www.somerset.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/city-town-and-parish-councils/.

Finally, please be assured that Somerset Council will remain responsible for the ownership and safe operation and maintenance of the highway network in your locality. We will continue to discharge our duty of care within available funding levels and in accordance with our published policies.

Reporting highway issues

If you spot a specific highways risk that you want to report then the quickest way to report issues like this is through the 'report it' function on the Councils website. This enables operatives on the ground to be notified quickly and efficiently, and you can track the progress of reported issues.

The function is accessed here: www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/report-a-problem-on-the-road/

Yours sincerely



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