Case Study: Well-managed Highway Infrastructure – A practical application

Routine Enquiries – A carriageway pothole

The current approach

The current Code of Practice, Well Maintained Highways, prescribes that we use locally set intervention levels with respect to carriageway and footway defects in Kent those intervention levels are 50mm depth for carriageway potholes and 20mm depth for footway potholes.

For example, a highway steward identifies 8 potholes over a 20m stretch of a road.

Assuming that the location is not a pedestrian crossing point, those potholes exceed 50mm deep, an emergency order will be raised regardless of the location or usage of that road. If the potholes are 40mm deep and likely to deteriorate then a 7 day or 28 day order will be raised for the repair. If the potholes are 20mm deep, they will either be assessed as "intervention level not met" and then no further action would be taken until the next highway inspection or repairs will be incorporated into a longer term scheme.

The new approach

The new Code of Practice, Well-managed Highway Infrastructure removes the prescriptive service standards. This does not mean the County Council cannot continue to use them as the basis for inspections and repairs, but it does give greater flexibility.

Consider the previous example, a highway steward identifies 8 potholes over a 20m stretch of a road. The removal of prescriptive standards mean that the highway steward can now consider the context, the risk posed by the potholes and make an informed judgement about the timescale and nature of repairs.

If the potholes are 35mm deep, in the wheel track and the road is a high trafficked, 50mph road, a 7 day repair could be deemed necessary on the basis that the volume and speed of traffic means that there is a greater risk to safety.

Equally, if the potholes are 55mm deep but at the edge of a minor road used by farm traffic and a handful of vehicles, the risk is considerably lower and therefore temporary signs warning of the hazard and a 90 day repair could be deemed appropriate.

In summary, there are no material impacts on the volume or cost of pothole repairs, just a greater emphasis on the assessment of risk.

So, how and when would the Code of Practice have implications for service standards?

The Code of Practice promotes an integrated, asset management based approach to highway maintenance i.e. we need to consider and balance the needs of all asset groups.

In the context of the risk-based approach, this means that if we are not meeting with our statutory obligations or are at risk of failing to meet with our statutory obligations due to under investment, then we need to consider how this is overcome. There are several options that would be considered:

- Additional investment from a new source;
- A change of approach e.g. taking a more cost effective, planned approach so that more can be done with the existing budget; - one Highway Authority has made a conscious decision to maintain some roads to a lower standard and sign them accordingly
- A reduction in one service to fund the enhancement of another service

Currently no changes to service standards are proposed however, prior to any changes being made, a full evaluation of all the options would need to be undertaken and any notable changes would be subject to engagement, consultation and approval in accordance with the County Council's constitution.