

Select Committee on the Environment - 29th January 2007

Report of the Director of the Urban Environment

Gully Cleaning Service

Purpose of Report

1. To inform the Committee of the Council's responsibilities in respect of cleaning and maintaining its highway gullies.
2. To outline the Council's resource capacity in the delivery of the service.

Background

3. The Council has a total of 967 km of highway in the Borough and is responsible for maintaining its adequate drainage. For the purpose of its gully cleaning programme, highways are categorised into primary and secondary routes, primary being those which have been identified from historical data as receiving the highest amount of silt, thus requiring a higher frequency of cleanse.
4. There are approximately 36,356 highway gullies in the Borough, 5,893 on primary routes and 30,463 on secondary routes. The figure however continues to grow on a yearly basis as a result of new building developments and highway adoptions.
5. Gully cleaning is vital in securing improved safety for users of the highway and is an essential part of the Council's maintenance programme, as free flowing gullies ensure that water is adequately removed from the surface of the highway. This is particularly important during the winter months as blocked gullies allow water to flow across the carriageway, removing salt and increasing the likelihood of freezing conditions.
6. Insufficient resources to deliver an adequate programme of maintenance has been identified by the Council as one of its Strategic Monitored Risks, as failure to undertake adequate levels of gully cleaning leaves the Council open to litigation should an accident occur.

Levels of Service Provision

7. The gully cleansing service has been subject to significant change over a number of years as a result of budgetary reductions and has seen its resources reduced from 7 Gully Machines delivering the service in the late 1970s to 1 Council owned machine in 2005/6.

8. The service endeavours to operate to programmes of planned maintenance work. However, these are regularly disrupted as a result of reactive works identified by members of the public and highway inspections. This shift from planned to reactive works has resulted in our work programmes being compromised.

Extreme Weather Conditions

9. Historically, seasonal variations often impact on the condition of the highway surface. Levels of mechanical sweeping activity impact on the amount of detritus washed into the highway drainage system. Likewise, winter gritting operations, chemical control of weed growth and autumn leaf fall can impact on gullies becoming blocked in a very short period of time. Although mechanical sweeping operations target known hot spot areas, external factors are increasingly impacting on the capacity of gullies in the Borough to adequately remove water.

These can be detailed as follows:

- **Flash Floods** – Experienced all year round, the periods of heavy rainfall put significant pressure on the highway drainage system. Gullies are unable to sufficiently remove the quantity of water due to the drainage system becoming full. Although the water will slowly drain away, the Council receives many enquiries from members of the public believing gullies to be blocked.

The gradual change in weather conditions has also seen an increase in the occurrence of remedial works to 'blown' carriageways where Severn Trent Water Sewers are full to capacity and as a result the carriageway erupts resulting in remedial works by the Highway Authority. In such cases, the annual cost to the Authority for such works can exceed £100k, none of which is refundable under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, consequential damage legislation.

- **New Building Developments** – Through the building of new housing estates and areas of hard standing, natural areas of drainage are increasingly being removed. In particular, the Borough has seen a significant increase in the number of block paved and tarmac drives on residential properties, removing former areas of natural drainage and putting greater pressure on the highway drainage system to remove excess water.

Additional Service Pressures

10. These can be detailed as follows:

- **Theft of Iron Work** – Due to recent increases in the price of scrap metal, the service has experienced an increase in the number of grid and manhole covers being stolen and requiring replacement. In particular, over 100 plus covers have been stolen so far this year, adding greater strain on the maintenance budget.
- **Investment for Flood Relief Schemes** – There are a number of areas across the Borough where existing highway drainage is inadequate to

prevent flooding to properties in periods of very heavy rainfall. Examples include County Lane, Stourbridge, Vicarage Road and Dobbins Oak Road. These areas require significant investment to improve drainage relief, with insufficient capacity in the existing budget to accommodate requirements.

- **Traffic Management** – With the emergence of new traffic management regulations, work on a number of primary routes must consider safe working measures through the application of traffic management controls. In particular, roads such as the Dudley Southern Bypass require lane closures to ensure safe working areas, impacting on both levels of productivity and cost. Cleaning arrangements outside of normal peak traffic hours have also been introduced on other busy routes in the Borough, aimed at reducing disruption to road users and level of risk to cleansing staff. Furthermore, the service must also consider the impact of parked cars in residential areas which often result in call back arrangements.
- **Double Manned Working Arrangements** – The service is currently delivered as a single manned operation. However, this type of operation is being phased out across the Country in recognition of the many risks associated with lone working, safe working on the highway and the safe use of mechanical equipment. Whilst this will have a positive impact on the number of gullies cleaned each day, which can range from 50 to 100 dependent upon their condition, the additional resource costs will have to be met from the current service budget.

Service Budgetary Provision

11. The 2006/7 budget for maintenance of the Councils highway drainage system is detailed below:

Gully Cleansing (Primary and Secondary Routes) (includes £50k growth money for 2006/7)	£142,100
Repairs to Existing/Replacement of Ironwork	£ 43,500
Provision of New Gullies	£ 8,400
De-silting of Highway Drains	£ 2,500
Total	£196,500

12. In order to readdress concerns over the Council's resource capacity to deliver an adequate maintenance and gully cleansing service, the Division submitted budget growth proposals in 2005. The proposals were based on delivering a minimum yearly cleanse of all gullies in the Borough. Although £50,000 growth was approved, the sum has primarily been used to target the condition of the Borough's primary routes, due to a lack of investment in regular cleaning over recent years and has enabled de-silting and digging out works on blocked gullies, in addition to programmed cleansing works. It is equally important to note that it can take 2-3 minutes to clean a free flowing gully compared to 1-2 hours for one that is blocked.
13. The funding has enabled the appointment of an approved contractor, 'Shropshire Road Sweepers', to undertake part of this work directly for the Authority in accordance with tendered schedule of rates. However, to ensure that the growth provision is of long- term benefit to the service and the condition of highway

gullies, the funding will be used in 2007 to finance the purchase and yearly operating costs of an additional gully tanker. The new vehicle will supplement the existing tanker and, with increased storage capacity and jetting facility, will enable an increased number of gullies in the Borough to be cleansed on a yearly basis.

14. Although the arrangements will provide for an improved service, the funding remains insufficient to provide for a minimum yearly cleanse of all gullies in the Borough, with the service continuing to balance reactive and remedial works with a programmed cleaning regime.

The Way Forward

15. In order to improve the condition of the highway drainage system, a cyclical programme of maintenance must be re-established aimed at cleaning all gullies in the Borough to a minimum yearly frequency, with sufficient capacity to cleanse identified hot spot areas 2-3 times per year as required. Unfortunately, the present budget is insufficient to achieve this target as it is anticipated that an additional £136k will be required. As a result, gullies become blocked, often requiring additional cleaning time, thus impacting on the programme itself. Furthermore, reactive works often result in the existing tanker travelling to different parts of the Borough, impacting on the number of gullies cleaned per day.
16. The introduction of the new tanker in 2007 will increase the capacity of gullies cleaned per day and will supplement the existing tanker, providing additional resource. This will enable a greater emphasis to be put on the programme, but still provide a degree of flexibility for reactive works.
17. As part of new Government legislation, all of the Council's Highway Assets must, in future, be detailed. This exercise has already commenced and it is envisaged that this will provide improved information on existing records of gullies and drainage in the Borough.

Finance

18. The 2006/07 budget for highway drainage maintenance and gully cleaning is £196,500, which provides for the operation and management of the service inclusive of vehicles, equipment and sub contractor costs. Item 11 of this report details a breakdown of the budget per activity.

Law

19. The provisions relating to works on the highway are contained in the Highways Act 1980.

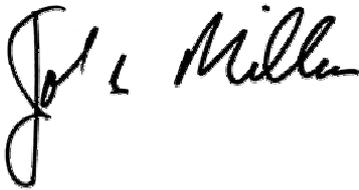
Equality Impact

20. This report takes into account and acknowledges the Council's policy in respect of equality and diversity in the delivery of the service and recruitment of highways personnel.

Recommendation

21. It is recommended:-

- That the Committee note the contents of this report and work undertaken by the Street Maintenance Section in respect of managing the highway drainage maintenance budget.
- That the Committee note the internal and external factors that are adding greater pressure on the capacity of the existing budget to deliver an adequate cleaning and highway drainage maintenance programme.
- That the Committee note the 2006/07 budget growth of £50k for gully cleansing, the purchase of a new gully tanker and the measures being introduced to improve the service.



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Background documents used in the preparation of this report:-

Budget Growth Proposals Documentation File 2005/6 and 2006/7

Street Maintenance Budget Profile 2006/7

Gully Cleansing Service File