

Axminster Division Report April 2024

As we move towards spring and summer, it seems that our traditional four seasons are now more like the Northern Territory of Australia with just two, the wet from November to April and the dry, May to October.

Unfortunately, our wet season seems to be far longer than the dry one, having a detrimental impact on the Devon Highways network, particularly in rural areas where the potholes are all too obvious to see, appearing on what are effectively former cart tracks with tarmac on the top. In urban areas, most roads are purpose built with proper foundations that are generally more robust.

This state of the public highway is by some distance the item that features most in conversations and correspondence with constituents and below is a more detailed report on how this last winter has gone for DCC Highways who are trying to keep up with rising demand, combined with limited human and financial resources.

Winter 2023/24 Highways update

DCC has established a 'Planned and Reactive Maintenance: Potholes and Drainage Task Group' first reporting in March 2019 and an updated Performance Dashboard Report has now been produced to Councillors.

As is typical for the winter period, DCC Highways the Service has recorded a gradual increase in the number of publicly reported pothole defects (PIPs) since November, mainly via the 'Report a Problem web site. A team of Highway Safety Inspectors undertake assessments, using extended weekday and weekend working where resource allows. The Main contractor called Milestone are currently in the process of recruiting three additional permanent inspectors to assist in driving further efficiencies and timely inspections.

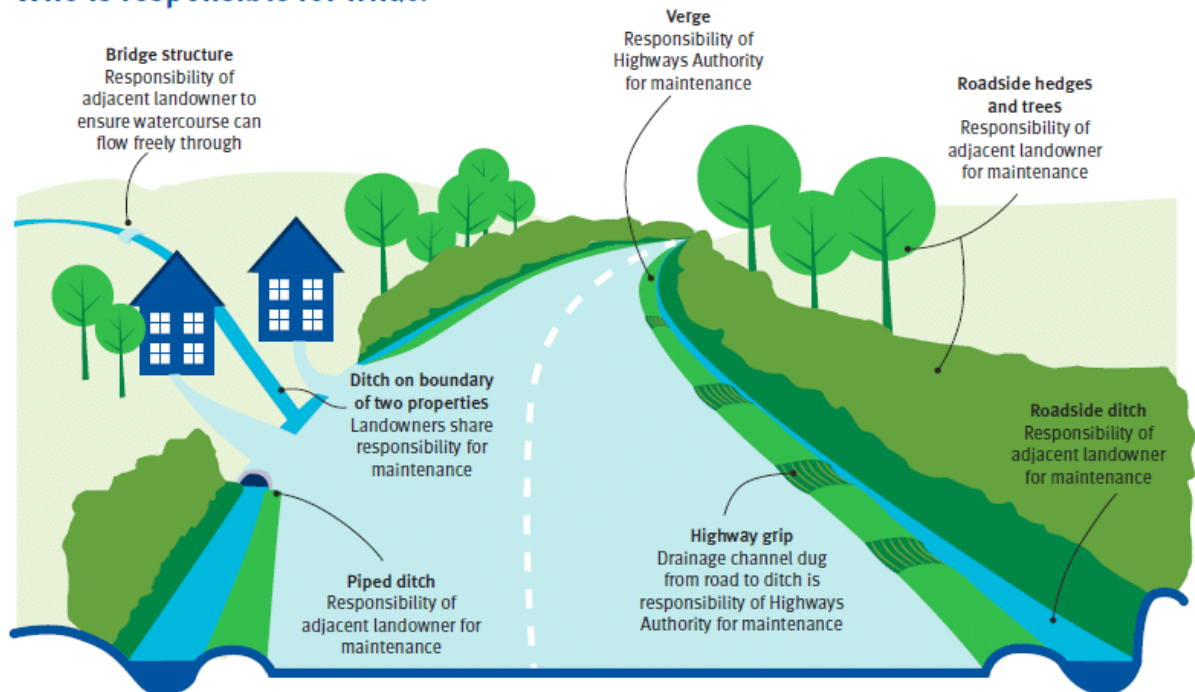
There have been more pothole defects this financial year than 2022/23. Whilst a further 12 months of network deterioration has occurred, the impacts on network condition of the relatively early and harsh freeze/thaw cycles experienced during last winter (2022/23) were felt deep into the summer months of 2023, added to by a number of severe storms and torrential rainfall.

Additional in year Government funding of £7.5 million is enabling more reactive, short notice and planned works, including minor hand patching and dragon patching will be delivered on the minor network in Devon as a result of it.

While there have been challenges around plant breakdowns and availability relating to gully cleaning, it is anticipated the programme to clean 150,630 gully assets will be completed on time for the current financial year. The additional high pressure jetting resource is currently resolving approximately 800 recorded issues per month, effectively maintaining pace with the number of issues reported during the flooding

events experienced over the 2023/24 winter period. The Service continues to trial a different approach to cleaning both urban gullies and gullies that require multiple cleans per year.

Who is responsible for what?



Special Educational Needs Deficit (SEND)

After a protracted and very difficult period of negotiation, a high-level agreement has been signed between Devon County Council and the Government, which will see an extra £95 million of national funds set aside to reduce the deficit on special needs education.

The cumulative spending on education for children with special needs and disabilities (SEND) over the past 10 years is set to create a deficit of £163 million by the end of this financial year.

In common with many councils across the country, DCC had been negotiating with the Government for extra funding for special needs education under the so-called Safety Valve programme.

£10 million has been set aside in 2023/24 to help bring down the deficit.

The new agreement will see the Government contribute £38 million by the end of March with the remaining cash being spread out over the following eight years.

We will contribute a further £5 million a year from its revenue budget and £20 million from reserves to bring the deficit back into balance by the end of the agreement.

It is recognised that DCC must improve its service to children needing help in this area and is committed to doing this, as well as managing its finances most effectively, keeping the Council on a long-term sustainable basis

Locality Budgets

Devon County Councillors have a small amount of money each year called a Locality Budget to support projects in their Division with small grants, where demand invariably outstrips supply.

The fund opens up again in mid-April and budget for 2024/25 is £8,000 per Councillor. Further details of qualifying projects and an online application form can be found at <https://www.devon.gov.uk/democracy/councillors-nav/locality-budgets/>

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