

Government Funding to Repair Extreme Winter Weather Damage to Somerset's Roads

Public Statement

In the budget statement made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 24th March 2010, £100 million of funding was announced to help local highway authorities to repair the damage to their roads caused by the extreme weather experienced during the winter of 2009-10. The Department for Transport (DfT) was responsible for distributing the money and pointed out that the funding was exceptional, in recognition of what was one of the most severe winters for 30 years. The money was distributed according to road length which meant that Somerset's share was the sum of £1,975,700, which was paid to the Council as a special revenue grant. The grant was made subject to certain conditions, chiefly that it was solely for the purpose of repairs to Somerset's roads and that the repairs were required as a result of damage resulting from, or worsened by, the 2009-10 winter weather. Somerset County Council shared the desire of DfT that the funding should be used for permanent repairs that maximise the benefits to road users over the longer term.

It was clear from the outset that many of Somerset's roads had been affected by pot-holes and other defects following the severe winter in 2010, with more than double the pot-holes that would be expected in a typical year. This damage was county wide on all road classes which if left untreated would result in significant increased future costs in maintenance and defect repairs. The funding from the Department for Transport was extremely welcome in order to effectively target and repair this additional damage. Simply repairing the existing pot-holes would not have fulfilled the aims of the funding so the decision was taken at an early stage to take a more expansive view of the repairs and try and address the underlying cause in each of the sites. This in many cases would mean the removal and replacement of larger sections of road than would be done under a regular patching programme.

A variety of methodologies were used to identify which sections of road would be the most appropriate recipients of this extra funding. This led to three different approaches to addressing the winter damage to the highways network being developed.

1. The primary source of data was available from the County Council's Confirm electronic highways asset management system. Confirm has been in place for several years in Somerset and now has a comprehensive historic record of highway defect locations within the county. This data has been acquired from the planned and reactive highway inspections. Through these inspections pot-holes and other safety defects are located and entered onto the system via Graphical Information System (GIS) enabled hand held computers, by the highway inspectors with the locations fixed by Global Positioning System (GPS). This enabled the targeting of sections of road in the worst current condition that had the highest number of safety defects over the last year. The highways asset management system enabled a precise targeting to

address particularly poor sections of carriageway to achieve an outcome that matched the intention for the provision of this additional funding.

The local Area Highways inspectors carried out a comprehensive physical inspection programme of the sites identified by the above process in order to verify the appropriateness, design the type of treatment and prioritise the sites by effectiveness of the work. This resulted with the majority of the funding being used on 300 schemes varying in length between 10 metres and 5 kilometres long where structural patching, overlay or resurfacing was required to ensure that the treated sections of road would be less vulnerable to potholes and other defects forming.

2. The second approach was to use a portion of the funds for “multiple safety defect repair” patching which was aimed at sections of road where tight groups of pot-holes had occurred, but where the site was too small to be appropriate for more substantial resurfacing of the road. It was clear from our county wide inspections conducted earlier in the project that there were concentrated areas of safety defects limited to small sections of the highway that could be dealt with in one large patch rather than a scattering of smaller, less effective patches.
3. The remainder of the funding was used in the third approach which was to increase the programme of ‘jet patching’ carried out by specialist machines which mix bitumen emulsion and aggregate and spray the material into pot-holes and defective areas using compressed air. This seals the surface of the road, preventing further deterioration, as shallow potholes and defects are filled. The advantage that this process offered was to expedite the repairs to the fabric of the damaged road surface and thereby avoid further damage over the coming winter. Being able to treat large areas of road quickly was especially important in Somerset where there is a large rural network which is particularly suitable for this type of treatment.

The planned repair of the highway network using the three approaches above will remove the need for the reactive repairs in the future avoiding unexpected disruption to traffic and delivering best value in network improvement.

Working with our maintenance contractor Atkins, who provided support to the project, we will have completed all schemes before the end of the current financial year as per the conditions of the funding.

Somerset County Council wishes to express its appreciation of the assistance the additional Government funding has provided in dealing with the effects of the winter of 2009-10 on its highway network and the benefit it has given to the residents, businesses and visitors to the county.