

Government Funding to Repair Extreme Winter Weather Damage to Somerset's Roads – 2011/12

In the budget statement made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 23rd March 2011, £200 million of funding was announced to help local highway authorities repair the damage to their roads caused by the extreme cold weather during the winter of 2010-11.

The Department for Transport (DfT) was responsible for distributing the funding and highlighted that the grant was in recognition of one of the most severe winters for 30 years, and which itself followed an unusually harsh winter in the previous year. The funding was distributed nationally according to road length which meant that Somerset's share was the sum of £5,056,641 paid to the council as a special revenue grant. This grant was one of the highest amounts allocated to a highways authority in the UK, reflecting the extent of the highway network managed by Somerset County Council (SCC).

Somerset County Council had received a grant from the DfT of £1,975,700 in the previous financial year for the same purpose; the repair of winter damage to the highway. The substantially greater value of the grant in 2011 has allowed for the expansion and development of the methodology and scale of works being commenced in this financial year.

Somerset County Council shared the view of the DfT that the funding should be used for permanent repairs that maximise the benefits to road users over the longer term. It was clear that many of Somerset's roads had been affected by potholes and other defects following the severe winter in 2010-11. This damage was county wide on all road classes and if left untreated would result in significant increased future costs in maintenance and defect repairs.

The view of Somerset County Council was that we should seek to build on the work carried out in the previous DfT funded programme and continue to address areas of carriageway that were historically prone to outbreaks of potholes and other defects after cold weather events. This approach required a comprehensive assessment of the network and an in-depth knowledge of the condition and history of the carriageway asset.

The primary source of data was available from Confirm, Somerset County Council's 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 planned and reactive highway inspections. Through these inspections potholes 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.

Four separate approaches were used to address the winter damage to the Highway Network based on the knowledge in Somerset County Council's possession:

1. The highways asset management system enabled precise targeting to address particularly poor sections of carriageway. The local Area Highways Superintendants carried out a comprehensive physical inspection programme

of the sites identified by the above process in order to verify the appropriateness, and to design the type of treatment and prioritise the sites by effectiveness of the work. This resulted in the majority of the funding from the DfT being allocated to schemes where structural overlay or resurfacing was required. These schemes were of a substantial scale and were intended to take out whole sections of defective carriageway that would have been vulnerable to further damage during winter. The scale of schemes reflects the greater flexibility and impact on the network allowed by the increased funding in this financial year.

2. The second approach used was to repeat the successful “multiple safety defect repair” patching programme developed in the previous financial year. This programme was aimed at sections of C and D class roads where localised groups of potholes and other defects 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 that there were concentrated areas of safety defects and potholes limited to small sections of the highway that could be dealt with in one large patch rather than a scattering of smaller, less effective treatment that would form a patchwork of repairs without addressing the underlying problems.
3. The third approach was to develop and implement a “main road” patching programme. This was a new approach for 2011 that was in a similar vein to the successful multiple defect patching programme. Inspections are conducted routinely throughout the County along priority A and B class roads; our inspectors were now to note any areas of existing dense patching, surface loss or other damage to the highway. If these areas warranted pre-emptive intervention it would be patched under the dedicated patching budget. This has proved a success since its inception and has led to additional funding being allocated to meet demand. It is particularly suitable in sites where resurfacing would be inappropriate due the localised nature of the defect, and where a larger patch would be more effective than the individual repair of smaller defects.
4. The final approach was to carry out general patching of highway defects identified through routine methodology. These defects would not necessarily be safety defects.

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

It should be noted that although the majority of schemes that form this programme will be completed in the current year some schemes will be rolled into the next financial year. This is due to the high volume of works being completed this year.

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 2010-11 on its highway network and the benefit it has given to the residents, businesses and visitors to the county.