Transport, Infrastructure and Housing Scrutiny Panel

DATE 10/11/2026

REPORT OF Paul Evans Assistant Director Infrastructure

SUBJECT Highway Maintenance Policy

STATUS Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

This report supports the Council's aims by promoting safe, resilient and well-maintained highways that enable residents, businesses and visitors to travel safely and reliably. It contributes to place-based outcomes by supporting network condition, accessibility, customer confidence and effective use of public resources. The report also supports environmental and financial aims by highlighting the importance of planned preventative maintenance, durable repairs, improved data, value for money and reduced repeat investigations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides the Transport, Infrastructure and Housing Scrutiny Panel with an update on the Highway Maintenance Policy and the actions being taken to improve the condition and resilience of North East Lincolnshire's highway network. It reflects on the increased demand experienced during winter 2025/26, the Council's response and the subsequent increase in repair activity.

The report also outlines the role of preventative maintenance, improved communications and emerging technology in supporting a more proactive, longer-term approach to highway maintenance.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

The Scrutiny Panel is invited to consider:

- The impact of the severe winter conditions experienced during 2025/26 and the operational response
- The Council's risk-based approach to highway inspection, defect assessment and repair prioritisation

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

1.1 Highway Inspection and Maintenance Policy

North East Lincolnshire Council has a statutory duty under Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980 to maintain highways that are maintainable at public expense. NELC is responsible for approximately 386 miles of adopted roads and 479 miles of adopted footways. Potholes and carriageway defects are managed through routine inspections, public reporting, dynamic risk assessment and prioritised repair activity.

The Council must demonstrate that appropriate inspection arrangements are in place, defects are assessed and prioritised, and repairs are completed within reasonable timescales to support its statutory defence under Section 58 of the Highways Act 1980.

The Council operates a risk-based approach to highway inspection and maintenance in line with the recommendations from the national guidance 'Well-Managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice'. The existing policy provides the framework for the inspection and maintenance of roads, footways and cycle routes. It also recognises that the level of risk associated with any highway defect is modelled by the location, characteristics, and the way that part of the network is used.

Safety inspections are intended to identify defects which may create danger or a serious inconvenience to users of the highway. When a defect meets or exceeds the Council's criteria for investigation, a dynamic risk assessment is undertaken by the Highway Inspector. This considers both the likelihood of an accident occurring as well as the potential consequences of an accident occurring. This assessment then determines the appropriate priority and response to repairs.

Consideration is given to the position of a defect in relation to highway users, this includes vulnerable road users. The policy adopted by the Council identifies the location of a defect, relative to the position of users. This includes within traffic lanes, wheel tracks and pedestrian route, when determining the priority for treatment. The assessment of a highway defect is not based solely upon its dimensions, but also upon its location, extent and the risk it presents to those using that section of the highway.

This applies to cyclists, where the nature and position of a carriageway defect may present a different level of risk than for a motor vehicle. Cycle routes which form part of the carriageway are included within the road safety inspections, where defects are assessed through a risk-based approach, consistent with cycle use. Separate and shared cycle routes are incorporated within the corresponding footway inspection arrangements, while remote cycle routes are inspected by cycle or on foot as appropriate.

The topic raised at the previous panel by Members regarding defects such as tramlining and longitudinal surface irregularities is recognised. Despite individual defects varying in their characteristics, the Council's risk-based approach allows inspectors to consider the extent and location of surface defects as well as their relationship to highway users when determining the appropriate response. This therefore extends the assessment beyond pothole depth alone and enables the potential consequences associated with a defect to be considered in circumstances.

The Highway Inspection and Maintenance Policy establishes a series of response priorities following risk assessment. Higher-risk defects which score between 15-25 are categorised for a response within 24 hours. Category 2 defects are prioritised according to their assessed risk. Response periods range from three weeks for higher to medium risks, to six weeks or three months for lower-risk defects. Furthermore, the lowest assessed risks may be reviewed at subsequent inspections.

1.2 Winter 2025/26 Performance and Historical Comparison

The winter period of 2025/26 resulted in a significant increase in pothole activity across North East Lincolnshire. Between December 2025 and February 2026, 518 pothole repairs were programmed following routine highway inspections, representing a 134% increase compared with the equivalent period in the previous year.

Customer reporting also increased during this period. Reports relating specifically to potholes increased by more than 900% compared with the equivalent period in the previous year, while reports relating to carriageway defects increased by more than 1,000%. This demonstrates the exceptional level of demand experienced by the service during the winter period.

The increase in activity coincided with particularly challenging weather conditions. During the same winter period, rainfall was reported at more than 134% of the 1991–2020 long-term average, compared with 89% of the long-term average during the previous winter. The period also included freezing temperatures, snowfall and persistent heavy rainfall during the early part of 2026, this can lead to increased formation of highway defects.

The combination of increased repair activity, significantly higher levels of customer reporting and the weather experienced during the period provides important context for the pressures placed on the highway network and maintenance service during winter 2025/26. In response to those pressures, operational capacity was increased through the deployment of additional resources and contractor support, while repairs continued to be prioritised through the Council's established risk-based assessment process.

1.3 Current Condition of the Highway Network and Repair Targets

The increase in pothole activity experienced during winter 2025/26 should be considered alongside the wider condition and management of the highway network. As outlined above, the period saw exceptional increases in pothole repairs and customer reporting alongside particularly challenging weather conditions. This provides important context when assessing whether the increase represented a longer-term deterioration in overall network condition or an exceptional period of winter-related pressure.

The Council continues to consider pothole activity as part of the wider picture of highway condition, rather than using the number of potholes identified or repaired as a standalone measure of network performance. Recent discussions on future performance monitoring have similarly considered greater emphasis on overall carriageway condition, supported by appropriate commentary and annual pothole information.

This approach provides a broader assessment of highway performance by considering the underlying condition of the network alongside reactive maintenance activity. It also recognises that the number of potholes repaired can fluctuate considerably because of external factors, including the severe weather conditions experienced during winter 2025/26.

The latest available highway condition data published by the Department for Transport demonstrates that 2% of local A road network, 4% of the B and C road network and 22% of the unclassified road network in North East Lincolnshire's require maintenance consideration. The corresponding national averages are 4%, 6% and 16%, respectively. The reported local proportions are therefore below the national averages for A roads and B and C roads, but above the national average for unclassified roads. These figures provide wider context for considering pothole activity alongside the Council's longer-term highway asset management priorities.

Through the financial year for 2026/27 an anticipated 1014 pothole repairs were targeted to be repaired, which ties in with an anticipated 5000 potholes to be repaired over the next 5 years. Through April to September 2026, 719 pothole repairs were completed, this demonstrates a 200 % increase in repairs completed compared with 358 repairs during the same period of the previous year.

Repair activity during 2026/27 is currently running at a higher rate than the previous financial year. A total of 933 pothole and associated carriageway defect repairs were completed during 2025/26, compared with 719 repairs already completed between April and September 2026. While this represents only the first six months of the current financial year, the figures provide a positive indication that the service is increasing its output and undertaking more work to address potholes and carriageway defects across North East Lincolnshire.

1.4 Communications

Alongside the operational response to pothole management, a key focus of the project has been improving communication with residents about highway maintenance and increasing understanding of how the Council manages potholes and prepares the network for winter.

A dedicated six-week winter communications campaign has been developed to provide clearer and more proactive information on highway maintenance. The campaign covers winter preparation, how potholes form, how defects are reported and assessed, the role of highway inspection and maintenance teams, preventative maintenance activity, and winter operations.

The campaign also seeks to address common misconceptions around pothole management, including why some defects are repaired before others, how risk-based assessments are undertaken and why not every reported defect requires immediate repair. Residents are encouraged to report highway issues through the available reporting routes, with communications explaining the role that public reporting plays alongside routine highway inspections.

The communications activity also places greater emphasis on preventative highway maintenance, helping to demonstrate that maintaining the network extends beyond reactive pothole repairs. Campaign material highlights treatments including crack sealing, surface dressing, rejuvenation treatments and resurfacing, alongside wider investment and innovation activity intended to support the resilience of the network.

Development of the winter communications package has been completed, and the

campaign is currently being rolled out. The programme includes supporting digital and social media material, educational content, information on reporting potholes, footage of highway maintenance activity and content explaining winter preparation and operations.

The formal campaign is scheduled to reach its final week during week commencing 9 November 2026. However, discussions with the Communications service have identified the importance of maintaining more proactive highways communications beyond the campaign, ensuring that residents continue to receive information on highway works, projects and maintenance activity.

As the campaign remains in delivery, a complete assessment of its effectiveness is not yet available. The initial focus has been on delivering accessible information that supports public understanding of pothole formation, highway maintenance, defect prioritisation and winter preparation. The original campaign objectives include increasing awareness of winter preparation, improving confidence in the reporting process, demonstrating investment and preventative activity, and providing regular evidence of highway maintenance progress.

The initial focus has been to provide clear and accessible information to improve understanding of how potholes form, the Council's approach to highway maintenance, defect prioritisation and winter preparation. The longer-term impact of the approach to communications will be considered through ongoing service management. This includes monitoring customer report trends and feedback received by the service. An increase in customer reports, may suggest an improved awareness of the routes to reporting as well as understanding of the Council's approach to defect management. This would also provide an indication of greater resident engagement rather than representing deterioration through highway condition.

1.5 Highway Maintenance Innovation

The Council is exploring opportunities to use innovation and new technology to support the management and maintenance of the highway network. This includes consideration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, innovative machinery and new approaches to network assessment, defect identification and maintenance planning.

The use of AI technology is also being incorporated into the Council's wider winter communications activity, which identifies its potential role in supporting road inspections and asset management. This forms part of a broader approach to improving how information about highway condition is gathered and used alongside existing inspection and maintenance arrangements.

Wider Highway Maintenance Innovation activity is assessing machinery-led approaches through practical trials. The intention is to ensure that potential innovations are assessed on their evidence before decisions are made about wider adoption, including consideration of their suitability, costs and operational constraints. The workstream also aims to address new approaches to preventative methods through material trials aiming to extend the life of the highway focusing on prevention of formation of defects opposed to taking a reactive approach to repairs. Further detail on the machinery trials and their assessment is provided separately through the

Highway Maintenance Innovation scrutiny report.

2. RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES AND EQUALITY ISSUES

Risks associated with highway maintenance include continued deterioration of the network due to weather conditions, increasing customer demand, resource pressures, and the financial impact of reactive repairs. There is also a reputational risk where expectations regarding repair timescales are not fully understood.

Opportunities exist to continue improving highway resilience through planned preventative maintenance, innovation, improved data utilisation, and the ongoing development of condition monitoring technologies. Alongside this is the opportunity for additional service transparency with residents using borough wide communications.

There are no identified adverse equality impacts arising from this report. It remains important that accessible reporting routes are maintained for residents who are digitally excluded or require assistance accessing online services.

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

There are potential positive and negative reputational implications for the Council arising from this report. Positive implications include demonstrating a clear, risk-based approach to highway safety, providing greater transparency on network condition and winter performance, and communicating proactively with residents about how defects are reported, assessed and prioritised.

Negative implications may arise where residents experience repeat defects or delays, or where a reported defect does not meet the intervention criteria and the reasons for this are not clearly understood. These issues may result in increased enquiries, complaints and reduced confidence in the service.

A six-week communications campaign has been developed with the Council's Communications service, using the Council website, social media, educational content and operational footage. Proactive highways communications will continue beyond the formal campaign to provide regular information on maintenance activity, investment and winter operations.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Highway maintenance activities are funded through a combination of revenue budgets, capital investment, highways capital programme allocations and external funding where available. Continued investment in planned maintenance aims to reduce future reactive repair requirements and improve long-term value for money.

The 2025/26 highways capital programme had a value of approximately £5.94 million, supporting a range of highway improvement and maintenance activities across the borough.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct implications arising from the recommendations of this report. However, the maintenance of safe highways, footways and crossing points supports safer journeys for children, young people and families travelling throughout the borough.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURE RECOVERY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Highway Maintenance has climate change, nature recovery and environmental implications. Planned resurfacing, durable repairs and preventative maintenance can reduce the need for repeated reactive visits, which may lower vehicle movements, traffic disruption, material use, waste, and associated carbon emissions.

Using longer-lasting repair methods, improving repair quality, and prioritising planned maintenance can help extend the life of the highway asset and reduce the environmental impact associated with repeated short-term repairs. Where appropriate, techniques that reuse existing materials, reduce waste, or improve repair durability should be considered as part of future options appraisal, provided they are safe, affordable, and suitable for local highway conditions.

Emerging technologies such as AI-based road condition monitoring, predictive maintenance, thermal repair techniques, and advanced materials may also support environmental outcomes by helping the Council identify deterioration earlier, target investment more accurately and avoid unnecessary repeat interventions. Any future adoption should consider whole-life cost, carbon impact, operational feasibility, and value for money.

The report does not propose any direct change that would adversely affect nature recovery or the local environment. However, future planned maintenance, resurfacing programmes and innovation pilots should continue to consider environmental impacts, opportunities to minimise waste and carbon emissions, and alignment with the Council's wider climate and environmental commitments.

PUBLIC HEALTH, HEALTH INEQUALITIES AND MARMOT IMPLICATIONS

There are no identified direct public health or health inequality implications arising from this report. Maintaining safe and serviceable roads, footways and cycle routes supports access to employment, education, healthcare and community services. A risk-based approach that considers vulnerable road users, pedestrians and cyclists also supports safer active travel. Accessible non-digital reporting routes should continue to be available to avoid disadvantaging residents who are digitally excluded.

8. MONITORING COMMENTS

In the opinion of the author, this report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result, no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal

Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

9. WARD IMPLICATIONS

All wards.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Highways Act 1980, including Section 41 duty to maintain highways maintainable at public expense and Section 58 statutory defence.
- Highway Inspection and Maintenance Policy
- Well-Managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice
- Transport Infrastructure and Housing Scrutiny Panel (September) Pothole Resilience and Communications Report
- Department for Transport Road Condition Data
- NELC customer reporting information, including MyNELincs Roads, Footpaths and Cycleways reporting arrangements.
- Sector research and publications on artificial intelligence road condition monitoring, predictive maintenance, self-healing asphalt, robotic or automated crack repair, infrared and thermal repair techniques, and durable repair methods.
- NELC Highways Capital Programme information, including planned resurfacing and surface treatment schemes.

11. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

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