

# LOBBYING COUNTY COUNCILS ON HIGHWAYS MAINTENANCE

**READERS** will be aware that the BMF has several specialist forums that meet (at least) twice a year to consider and discuss topics relevant to a particular category of materials or products. One such is the Civils and Infrastructure Forum that is chaired by Nick Boyle of Frazer.

At this Forum's last meeting, participants expressed concern at the state of highways maintenance that is the responsibility of County Councils in England. This article describes the problem and what the BMF is doing.

### FUNDING

Forum members believe that allocated funding has failed to keep pace with a growing backlog of works, and local authorities doubtless face hard choices when taking proactive or reactive steps.

We acknowledge that local government has received less block grant from Whitehall,

over several years, with consequences for service provision. Such cuts - coupled with inflationary pressures within existing contracts & current budgets and competing political & financial priorities in local authorities - make it very difficult for elected councillors to balance competing needs against available financial and other resources.



Highways maintenance and drainage programmes are seen as 'cinderellas' when it comes to budget allocation - because adult social care, education and children's services understandably account for the lion's share as they are statutory services that must be provided.

At the last General Election, the BMF warned national politicians of the disrepair of some of the nation's infrastructure. Many well-documented locations have suffered repeated flooding

in recent years. Governments of all colours are prone to switch funds to meet urgent priorities - or to boost day-to-day costs of public services - to the detriment of long-term capital expenditure. The construction industry continues to highlight the chronic under-investment in (for example) water & waste-water infrastructure and flood defences.

### MAINTENANCE

As we endure Autumn's high winds & heavy rain, the most pressing issues that Forum members anticipate are:

- Accumulated surface water that poses a safety risk to road users (especially commercial vehicles) or causes traffic congestion on the strategic and major road networks
- Heavy traffic flows that (over time) affect the hydraulic or structural performance of roads and their design life - not forgetting electric vehicles are heavier than petrol & diesel models
- Standing, stagnant water that does

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not drain away due to blockages from (among others) leaves, weeds or litter thrown from vehicles that leads to flooding or pollution nuisance

Traffic disruption (and stop-start driving) exacerbates abrasion of tyres, brakes or road paint that produce particles washed into gullies & drains which (if not cleaned regularly) can end up in watercourses. This road run-off leads to (a) concentrations of pollution harmful to plants or wildlife or (b) sediment that collects as a build-up of soil and other deposits that causes flooding.

Forum members recognise that highways maintenance is not straightforward and involves factors requiring careful consideration. For example:

- Inspecting and evaluating the type, location & condition of current assets
- Deciding which routes to spend limited funds on and prioritising strategic, trunk & local roads
- Determining where the greatest need is - and whether to carry out emergency repairs or undertake more substantial &

costly engineering improvements

- Monitoring and forecasting current & future traffic levels - and estimating which roads will see the greatest increase in vehicle movements
- Investing in local authority fleets of road sweepers, gully suckers and jet vac whale tankers
- Assessing flood risk and tracking rainfall patterns - especially at known trouble spots
- Responding to concerns raised with elected councillors or MPs by residents & businesses

### INFORMATION

The Civils & Infrastructure Forum agreed to approach a handful of English County Councils to ask about their strategy for planned & emergency highways' maintenance - notably to clean gullies, improve drainage and avoid flooding for their residents & businesses.

The frequency & ferocity of bad weather (especially named storms) and the likely impact prompted us to ask Derbyshire,

Worcestershire, Somerset and Sheffield Councils for information to help us understand their priorities and strategy. We explained that BMF members are in day-to-day contact with public & private sector clients who express concern at maintenance levels - and how difficult it could be for local authorities over the next 3-5 years.

### NEXT STEPS

In our approaches to these local authorities, the BMF 'ask' is for Cabinet Members and County Councillors to resist temptation to cut existing budgets – and, if at all possible, to review allocations and increase spending on highways maintenance - especially during these harsh autumn & winter months.

**In addition to Nick Boyle, Chris Woollard (Keyline) and Ian Hamilton (Bradforbs) are the Forum Vice Chairs - with Chris Heeks of the BMF as the organiser. If you wish to participate in future Forums, please contact [chris.heeks@bmf.org.uk](mailto:chris.heeks@bmf.org.uk) and we shall be pleased to welcome you next time.**