

**COMMUNITIES AND TRANSPORT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, SCRUTINY
REVIEW PANEL FINAL REPORT**

**STOCKPORT'S COMMUNAL CORRIDORS: SECURING THE SAFETY,
CLEANLINESS AND BIODIVERSITY**

Objective

To better understand the current process and service efficacy delivered to residents, and identify options for improvements to that service and betterment of the community environment.

Scrutiny Review Panel Members: Cllr. Matt Wynne (Chair), Cllr. Rachel Wise, Cllr. Tom Morrison, Cllr. Helen Hibbert.

Clerk: Jackie Kramer

1. CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The above title may come across as abstract to the naked eye, but it was chosen by Members to cover a broad area of increasing policy concern to the public by the Communities & Transport Scrutiny Committee for review. We believe the topic choice sits within a critical area of service delivery for the Local Authority and this municipal year was a fitting time to explore it.
- 1.2 The Panel determined to review two specific areas for review. Put simply, gully cleaning and how the Council interacts with volunteer groups to understand how we can enhance urban greenspaces, our 'communal corridors' such as the many alleyways thousands of Stopfordians share and back on to as well as the wider public realm. All forming or could potentially form the Stockport 'green lung'.
- 1.3 The two elements were:
 - The current process and protocol around cleaning our gullies, recognising that resident perception is that gullies are not cleaned as regularly as previous, and this is more apparent following weather events with increased levels of pooling water on our streets and roads.
 - The improvements which can be made, when communities come together to, not just clean, but beautify our environment for the enjoyment of all.
- 1.4 We believe that both are relevant and required, although accepting that the secondary aspect must follow the effective delivery of service around #1.
- 1.5 Residents on the streets they live and the roads they use, expect unblocked gullies and grids, particularly in areas where concerns about flash flooding grows. Residents expect them to be unblocked to ensure rainwater drains away through our existing drainage system network to prevent damage to private property and doesn't inconvenience when on the move. Residents expect this in the same way as a core

service like they expect their bins to be collected to ensure refuse doesn't pose a public health hazard. This has been a long-standing deal that has come under threat in the last decade thanks to the stripping away of our revenue budget year after year and amongst many other factors we considered. We owed a duty to see how things are operating day-to-day and how the Local Authority is performing, specifically the Highways Department and TLC (SMBC's public works company), on this key area of service delivery and how it communicates with residents about it.

1.6 That's what we set out to do.

1.7 We also heard from members of the public at the Town Hall about their valuable work in the community, contributing towards the enhancement of greenspaces and their experience of working in the public realm and interactions with the Local Authority on projects.

1.8 Thank you to colleagues, Officers and members of the public who shown great interest in this area of work and have helped develop these recommendations. We hope this report provides a welcome review of this critical area of policy concern and the recommendations are adopted as soon as possible.

Councillor Matt Wynne

Chair of the Scrutiny Review Panel

Vice-Chair, Communities & Transport Scrutiny Committee

2. THE LOCAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The importance of the public realm is increasingly being recognised and the review will focus on examining the work undertaken by the Council, the importance of local resident and business contributions to improving the local environment and how these can be facilitated.
- 2.2 The areas of adopted highway are used by pedestrians, cyclists and moving traffic but also support local parking provision, servicing of businesses and businesses may use part of it for outdoor seating or displaying goods. In addition, the utilities utilise the subsurface for their cables and pipes.
- 2.3 There are a significant number of alleyways both adopted and unadopted which may contain utilities and also provide access for bin collections, rear yard access, parking etc.
- 2.4 There is increasing interest and understanding of the importance of the need for the urban environment to support biodiversity both in the public realm and adjacent gardens and greenspace. Particularly for those residents who do not have good access to designated public parks and cannot access rural areas with ease.
- 2.5 Street trees are a key component of the public realm and help provide shade and drainage opportunities increasing the highway's resilience but also supporting biodiversity. Sustainable urban drainage concepts are encouraging the creation of rain gardens and tree pits in or adjacent to the highway.

3. SCOPE OF REVIEW

- 3.1 The importance of the public realm is increasingly being recognised, particularly 'post-COVID' and also the recognition of the effects Climate Change are having on our environment amongst other factors. and the review focused on examining the work undertaken by the Council, the importance of local resident and business contributions to improving the local environment and how these could be facilitated.
- 3.2 The first meeting of the Scrutiny review on 5 October 2023 agreed the terms of reference for the scrutiny review and the topics it wished to focus on:
- 3.3 It was agreed that the Scrutiny Review on securing the safety, cleanliness and biodiversity of our streets and passageways focused on.
- 3.4 Understanding the issues affecting the safety, cleanliness and biodiversity of our streets and passageways, with a particular focus on gully cleansing.
- 3.5 Reviewing the work already being undertaken by key stakeholders, and
- 3.6 Identifying opportunities to support residents, groups and businesses improve their local environment.

4. METHODOLOGY

- 4.1 The Scrutiny Review was chaired by Councillor Matt Wynne and the following Councillors were also on the review panel – Councillors Helen Hibbert, Tom

Morrison and Rachel Wise

- 4.2 The panel was supported by Jacqueline Kramer as Secretary and Sue Stevenson-Head of Highways and Transportation, Andrew Suggett- Team Manager Network Asset Maintenance and Jane Bardsley providing technical information.
- 4.3 The panel met on several occasions and considered two key elements as part of the review, highway drainage gully emptying and the potential to green alleyways.
- 4.4 The highway drainage gully emptying sessions focussed on receiving data and information from officers and reviewing and exploring that information.
- 4.5 The potential for greening alleyways was explored as a discussion with several key stakeholders attending the panel to give their views and experience.

Dates of meetings:

5/10/23 - Scoping session

5/12/23 - Street cleansing, drainage, gullies and grids

10/1/24 - Alleyway greening

7/2/24 - Wrap up and pre-report meeting (informal)

Street cleanliness, drainage, grids and gullies

- 4.6 It was agreed that first element of this review would focus on issues affecting street cleanliness, drainage, grids and gullies. Members agreed that optimising street cleansing should be an important focus of this review and the key aspects would include frequency, efficiency, a review of existing contracts and associated costs.
- 4.7 Another key aim of this part of the review should be to achieve a cohesive approach, ensuring all parties worked together effectively to meet the expectations of residents.
- 4.8 Along with the financial challenges related to street cleansing, drainage, grids and gullies, Members agreed to consider the logistical challenges involved and to determine how those could be removed or alleviated.
- 4.9 The issue of future-proofing the Council's current procedures was considered, particularly in terms of how climate change might affect the service in the future.
- 4.10 Members agreed that a review of best practice, including technical processes, at other councils along with consideration of a best-practise case study would be useful to determine whether the Council can take inspiration from elsewhere.
- 4.11 It was agreed that officers would circulate the following documentation in advance of the next meeting:-
 - Current policies and procedures related to street cleansing, drainage, grids and gullies including a look at the end-to-end process.
 - A report on financial challenges related to street cleansing, along with further information about the service's readiness for challenges related to climate change.

- Information about which parts of the service were responsible for which areas of street- cleansing with a particular focus on the relationship between the council and the Totally Local Company (TLC)

Public realm greening

4.12 The second element of the review would focus on greening with the key objective potentially being the development of a guide or toolkit for residents, voluntary groups and stakeholders. Representatives of groups involved in green-space projects such as Groundwork Greater Manchester could be invited to future meetings of the review to share their achievements, along with their knowledge and expertise. It was suggested that the scope of the review could be widened to include local stakeholders such as schools and local businesses.

5. EVIDENCE AND KEY POINTS

GULLY CLEANSING/STREET CLEANSING

A. Operational Plan

- 5.1 The Highways gully operational plan statement from 2021 was provided as part of the documents reviewed. The current operational plan was initiated in 2022.
- 5.2 Stockport Council also undertakes planned maintenance works. These works are often determined when cyclical maintenance has identified a drainage defect. Contractors carrying out the cleaning will report back (via Gully Smart or WinCan report from CCTV survey) defects on the drainage system. Defects include damaged gully lids and frames, defective pipes, damage to brickwork and gully pots. Priority will be given based on the risk assigned to the defect. The Council is undertaking a borough-wide gully cover replacement programme where access issues or defects have been reported. With the expectation that this proactive approach will result in a reduction of failed cleansing visits in the long term.
- 5.3 The current operational plan for gully cleansing was initiated in 2022 and the gullies cleaned are prioritised and split into 3 categories, which determines the frequency of cleaning.
- 5.4 There are two gully wagons currently, working on a proactive, or planned, basis to the prioritisation below, and this work is carried out by TLC.

Priority 1 - 1% of roads cleaned every 6 months

Priority 2 - 2% of roads cleaned annually

Priority 3 - 27% of roads cleaned every 2 years

Priority 4 - 70% of roads cleaned every 3 years

The above split is based on roads, the number of gullies on each road is not included in this data.

- 5.5 The council will also respond to priority gully cleansing requests from councillors, members of the public and businesses and external resource is used to attend to the

reactive work required. However, the monitoring work undertaken by council staff and their contractors should reduce the number of requests that are received as the system becomes more embedded.

- 5.6 The borough-wide gully grate/frame replacement programme should also assist in reducing this issue. Members of the public can inform the council of a blocked gully on the council's website using the on-line form. The public provide information about the location as well as the impact on the highway or if there's visible damage. Enquiries are logged via CONFIRM and a council officer will then carry out a site assessment to determine whether a cleanse is required.
- 5.7 The operational teams carry out routine cleansing of gullies in ward areas across the borough but will divert resources to reactive work if needed. As crews undertake maintenance, information is captured and added to Gully Smart so engineers have records of the works being undertaken. In order to ensure that the routine cleansing system is effective (using available resources), reactive gully cleansing requests must be prioritised.
- 5.8 Officers will carry out site visits to all reports of blocked gullies at their own discretion. In most cases, officers are advised to carry out inspections shortly after periods of substantial/heavy rainfall - this helps assess if the gully is actually blocked and holding water or simply down to capacity of the drainage system/surface water flooding. There will be periods following heavy rainfall when the main drainage system is at full capacity and this will not allow surface water to drain into the highway gullies. This will be considered in the reactive reporting process.
- 5.9 In order that the council can focus on urgent issues, prioritise effectively and maximise the time spent on the routine gully cleansing programme the Council will investigate reactive gully reports that relate to the following:-
 - a. Where cars are having to drive on the opposite side of the road due to a blocked gully
 - b. Where pedestrians are having to walk off the pavement into the road due to a blocked gully
 - c. Where the road is not passable due to blocked gullies
 - d. Where surface water from the highway is entering business premises
 - e. Where surface water from the highway is entering private property
 - f. Where there is a build-up of surface water at a bus stop Where there is a build-up of surface water at pedestrian crossings
- 5.10 Other reports of significant flooding will be considered and prioritised using available resources. All other issues will be picked up by our routine cleansing activity.
- 5.11 There are specific issues relating to the maintenance of gullies such as parked cars preventing the cleansing from taking place. The council undertakes a planned approach to cleaning gullies where vehicles are parked over the drainage assets. Times and dates are agreed with the contractor regarding when the gully cleansing will take place. Nearer the planned maintenance date, letters are sent to local residents reminding them of the cleansing activities and to park their car away from the planned works. Advisory signs are also attached to lamp columns reminding drivers not to park along the section of road during the specified date/time when the cleansing activities are due to take place.

- 5.12 The street cleansing programme stops during the year and moves to leaf clearance depending on when the leaf shedding starts.
- 5.13 For municipal year 23 / 24 ad hoc resource delivered via the highway services framework, (i.e. Sapphire and Cox) 9 work packages each consisting of, on average 70 assets, which could be gullies, drains or access chambers. As such, approx 600 assets were cleaned reactively.
- 5.14 The lack of historical data made determining this priority challenging when this programme was being designed. As such a risk-based approach has been used, focused on the areas of highest risk to make the best use of limited resources. However, it should be noted that the original categorisation appears to have been made based on a number of factors although targeted data was not available.
- 5.15 The information provided suggests that improved systems providing data are available, although it was noted that reports from these various systems was not available during the review.

B. Performance Metrics

- 5.16 The provision of data to understand how effective this programme is was limited. The table below is one of the performance dashboards available via Tableau and presented to scrutiny. However, it is difficult to understand what this measure represents, although we understand this is a strategic performance measure around general highway condition.
- 5.17 Additionally the presentation of Borough-wide data can obscure areas of lower performance and where more targeted activity is needed.

Selected Performance Measures Indicator Name
[All]

Indicator Name	Good Perf.	2yr Prev (YE)	Previous Year End	Latest Value	Forecast Latest	Target Latest		
PHT 5.1: Street Cleanliness	High (Council)	Null	99.98	99.99 (30/09/2023)	99	99	G	→
PHT 5.2: Quality of greenspace	High (Council)	Null	Null	97.42 (31/03/2023)	Null	N/A	N/A	○
PHT 5.3: Total number of formal interventions issued to address matters of environmental crime, nuisance and	(Council)	Null	Null	159 (30/09/2023)	Null	N/A	N/A	○

i Version 2.0 (developed 06.07.2020) produced by Business Intelligence

- 5.18 However, during the review additional information was made available, as noted below:

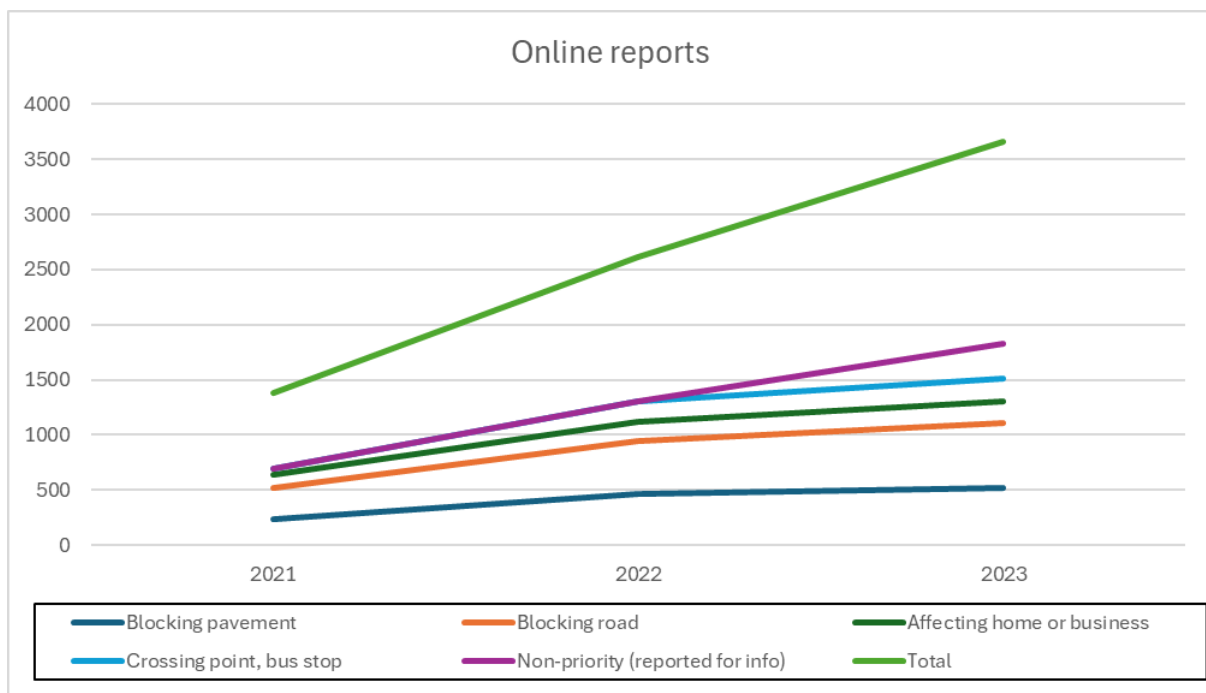
Gullies in the Borough	72,000
Gullies cleaned per day	Up to 120
Gullies cleaned so far	65%
Gullies cleaned annually	92 - 94%
Capital planned work £	£305k - £250k capital and £55k revenue
Routine gully cleaning (TLC)	£220k

Ad-hoc or reactive gully cleaning	Not available
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5.19 Detailed reports were not available and data was provided ad-hoc when requested.

5.20 On-line form reports on gully cleansing

	2021	2022	2023
Blocking pavement	239	461	516
Blocking road	286	488	590
Affecting home or business	112	167	195
Crossing point, bus stop	55	190	214
Non-priority (reported for info)		2	315
Not registered with category / internal reporting	2042	82	112



5.21 We must consider that a volume of reports were made prior to the form being developed which were not categorised and as such, the data we have is incomplete. However, we can see a marked increase in reports from 2022 when the new report and the current programme initiated and suggests a worsening position.

5.22 We should note, as per section 1, that approx 600 assets were cleaned reactively during 23/24 which is significantly less than the 1515 listed above from the prioritised categories. It is possible, based on the discussions that the remainder

were covered within the routine maintenance programme and with some sites targeted as part of larger scale capital improvement work.

PUBLIC REALM GREENING

A. Greening Alleyways

5.23 The following matters were discussed: -

- a. Public interest in greening adopted alleyways and current process / arrangements
- b. The development of a policy & guidance for the public based on experience of pilot schemes to date (short version say 5 pages)
- c. Planting on alleyways, public safety and access issues for underground services and reactive repairs
- d. Weight and size restrictions on planters etc is required as they need to be moved when required.
- e. Clarity on responsibilities
- f. The need to provide clear information for residents on what is required.
- g. Public interest in maintaining other greenspaces.
- h. The need to provide clear information for community groups on what is required, accepting there may be a different approach to adopted alleyways. Work ongoing with 90 plus 'friends of' groups. Volunteers working under Councils liability insurance.
- i. Greenspace working with communities on unadopted path clear ups via Neighbourhood Officers
- j. Possibilities with community gardens
- k. Working with Cheshire Wildlife Trust on biodiversity in urban spaces & nature reserves
- l. Guidance needed for alleyway greening and setting up community groups.
- m. Understanding how Groundworks GM work within the public realm in Stockport day-to-day and their challenges
- n. Greenspace forum
- o. Friends of Railway stations
- p. Stockport local – volunteering

5.24 Community groups invited to the meeting to provide their experiences – Reddish Community together, Friends of Reddish Vale Country Park, Friends of Ladybrook Valley, Groundworks.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 It is clear that there is a desire to improve the delivery of street cleansing services for residents and that there is a recognition of the importance of this in the delivery of basic foundational council services.

6.2 It is noted that the council is only partway through a 3 year plan, (started in 2022) to

introduce agreed frequency to gully cleaning based on priority and need, and as such assessing the efficacy of the current approach partway through this has to be taken into consideration.

- 6.3 Throughout the review, the panel were advised that the effectiveness of this programme could not be determined until the full 3-year cycle was complete. Given how the original designation of priority areas was made, our inability to assess the programme mid-term, the increase in resident reports, and the lack of performance data, there is a concern that this programme will deliver the desired outcome.

RECOMENDATION 1 - Define and develop performance measures to improve understanding and visibility of street cleansing programme

- 6.4 Performance metrics which are published externally should have the ability to be understood by Stockport residents and allow a reasonable person to easily understand how the Council is performing when it comes to street cleanliness.
- 6.5 They should be transparent and indicate where action can be taken to drive improvement. Current metrics are limited and it is difficult to understand the effectiveness of the current performance, either at Borough level or area and ward level.
- 6.6 The performance information given during the review was difficult to understand. No detailed reports were available and it was acknowledged that improved reporting is already planned. When some specific information was requested by the panel, it was clear that the information was currently unavailable in an easily accessible format, or there had been no previous reason for that information to be produced. As such, it is possible that the conclusions drawn during this review present a more negative picture than is currently the case. However, the fact is that 'we don't know' if the current processes will deliver the service residents expect, and improved data provision should be treated as a priority. Currently available performance suggests there will be a backlog of issues at the end of this 3-year programme. We have no understanding of the planned approach at that time.
- 6.7 Throughout the review, the panel were advised that the effectiveness of this programme could not be determined until the full 3-year cycle was complete. Given how the original designation of priority areas was made, our inability to assess the programme mid-term, the increase in resident reports, and the lack of performance data, there is a concern at the continuation of this programme as is.

Current utilisation of resource

- 6.8 The intention of this programme is stated to be the clearance of all gullies within the 3-year period, as a way to re-set the programme, whilst prioritising and responding to reactive reports.
- 6.9 It has been difficult to identify if the current utilisation of resource is providing the best outcome, which could be due to the lack of data for the reactive and planned works. The use of productivity measures and and understand of the cost per job, would provide a way to identify if resource is being used effectively.

RECOMENDATION 2 - Addressing the root cause of blockage by collaborative working

- 6.10 Blocked gullies can be caused or exacerbated by a number of factors. Litter, detritus, vegetation, leaves, and worsening weather conditions can increase the rate of blockage across our Borough. Parked vehicles blocking gullies can disrupt service delivery.
- 6.11 As such, a review of current cross-department working, including with external partners such as Stockport Homes, could be an option for consideration to improve co- ordination across the council.

Resident communication

- 6.12 The council would like to improve the level of communication to residents, to make residents more aware of the action the council are taking to address what is a major concern. However, it was noted that resource to improve the section on the website is limited but is a known area for improvement.

Furthermore:

- 6.13 All Members (through the Cabinet Member and Head of Highways Department) should be updated and informed as soon as possible about the key findings and outcomes of the three-year gully cleansing programme in a simple format, enabling them to share that information with residents in their wards and plan for new programme going forward. This will allow Members to take up any issues either within a public forum or in a Ward Highways meeting setting.
- 6.14 Provide a much improved explanation of the gully cleansing process and programme on the Council website and the resource the LA has to address it. This should be user-friendly, in simple format, utilising graphics terms to supplement the list of streets in the programme.
- 6.15 Gully cleansing on routes where parked cars are restricting access and individual flooding sites to be discussed in ward briefings when appropriate so Members and residents can assist in better messaging and communication.

RECOMMENDATION 3 - The following recommendations emerged from the discussion with officers and local volunteers on urban greening projects.

- 6.16 There should be a named point of contact within the Council for Members, residents, volunteers and those involved in environmental groups. This would serve to improve relationships between volunteers, groups, and the Council
- 6.17 Introduction of Guidance displayed on the public website produced for volunteer groups who are interested in community greenspace projects. This guide will be colourful, interactive, user friendly, showing best practice, case studies and in simple language demonstrating ways to 'get on' with volunteer activities within the public realm and where help and support is. This should come to all Area Committees for consideration upon final draft.

- 6.18 A universal guidance document on the creation of agreements between groups and the Council should be developed and made available to the public. Issues to cover include advice on the position for adopted / unadopted passageways, those with vehicle access rights, gated alleys and also consider location of utility services, the width for access to maintain the surface / structure, the weight of any planters / structures to enable repairs and ensuring the Council had access to clean, weed spray etc. This should come to all Area Committees for discussion and consideration upon final draft.
- 6.19 Consideration of a reduction of mowing some grassed areas to encourage biodiversity and wildflower growth, where this is considered to be appropriate.
- 6.20 Consider options to allow the use of public buildings and community centres for meetings of more Volunteer groups.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Jacqueline Kramer on 0161 474 2978 or by email on jacqueline.kramer@stockport.gov.uk