Agenda Item No: 7

Prioritisation of the Highways Capital Programme

To:	Highways and Transport Committee
Meeting Date:	2 December 2025
From:	Executive Director of Place and Sustainability
Electoral division(s):	All
Key decision:	No

Executive Summary:

This report sets out the processes by which planned highway capital maintenance and improvement work will be prioritised for inclusion and delivery in the capital programme.

Such schemes are funded by grants made to the Council by the Department for Transport and any additional capital investment that the Council decides to contribute towards highways maintenance. In 2024/25, and 2025/26 there has been an additional £20m allocated for planned maintenance for highways.

It is proposed that the prioritisation process set out in this report is used for the formulation of the capital maintenance and improvement delivery programme from year 2026-27 onwards.

This process was used to prioritise the 2025-26 programme, and this paper includes suggested improvements from this first round of use.

Recommendations:

The Committee is recommended to:

a) Approve the processes and scoring systems for the prioritisation of planned capital maintenance schemes from the 26/27 financial year onwards, as set out in this report and Appendices 1 to 4; and

b) Delegate Authority to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Highways and Transport Committee, to make changes to the scoring criteria as set out in the appendices to this report.

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1. Creating a greener, fairer, and more caring Cambridgeshire

1.1 Ambition 1: Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2045, and our communities and natural environment are supported to adapt and thrive as the climate changes.

The proposed prioritisation processes is based on taking an asset management approach for maintaining the highway. This approach is based upon preventative maintenance treatments being applied to highways at the appropriate points in the lifecycle. Such preventative maintenance minimises the need for deeper, more expensive treatments to be applied at later dates.

It is these deeper treatments that are the most environmentally harmful since they require greater use of materials (including virgin aggregates) and associated transport. These carbon emissions are exacerbated by road users having to travel further via diversion routes and having to wait at traffic control, such as traffic signals.

Given the above, the over-arching principles that inform these processes are a key factor in minimising the environmental effects and carbon footprint of the highway's maintenance service.

Furthermore, the Council is continuing to explore ways to decarbonise the delivery of planned capital maintenance works (e.g. using recycled highway materials and sustainable methods of construction).

1.2 Ambition 2: Travel across the county is safer and more environmentally sustainable.
The proposed processes consider objective condition data, promoting public transport routes and other factors, including accident statistics. The provision and maintenance of a safe highway network is a key objective of this report and the wider highways maintenance service.

1.3 Ambition 3: Health inequalities are reduced.

By promoting schemes where Active Travel provision may be improved, and improving access to public transport links, the Council can help create an environment that gives people the opportunity to be as healthy as they can be.

1.4 Ambition 6: Places and communities prosper because they have a resilient and inclusive economy, access to good quality public services and social justice is prioritised.

A properly maintained highway network is a key enabler for the transport of goods and passengers across the county and beyond. This is fundamental to the county developing and retaining a resilient economy.

2. Background

2.1 The 2025/26 Highways Capital Maintenance and Improvement programme approved in March 2025, was prioritised using an enhanced, data-led process, based upon weighted scoring of a range of factors relevant to each asset type. Potential schemes were all scored against these factors to produce ‘long lists’, which were subsequently shortlisted to inform the agreed programme.

2.2 This prioritisation process gives greater transparency in relation to the prioritisation for the capital programme. The process ensures alignment of the Council’s capital programme with asset management principles, which is a key factor in obtaining maximum capital funding from the Department for Transport.

2.3 The process also ensures that programmes demonstrably align with the Council’s vision, strategic framework, and approved highways asset management policies. The scoring mechanisms reflect these policies and produce programmes of work that are appropriate for the long-term stewardship of the highway network for which the Council is responsible.

2.4 This paper presents the prioritisation process for 2026/27, which builds on that used for 2025/26.

3. Main Issues

3.1 The prioritisation processes set out in this report are proposed to be applicable to capital funded highways maintenance and improvement schemes. Such schemes include the following[1]:

- Carriageway Preventative
- Carriageway Structural
- Carriageway Reconstruction
- Preventative & Structural foot & cycleway maintenance
- Signals
- Structures
- Drainage projects (not including gully emptying)
- Rights of Way
- Safety fencing

3.2 It is not the intention that these processes be applied to revenue funded maintenance activities, which include reactive, routine, and cyclical activities, such as pothole repairs, grass cutting, and gully emptying for the following reasons:

- Pothole repairs and similar maintenance activities are assessed as issues arise. The budget is spent throughout the year, and repairs are prioritised based on risk categories as set out in the Highway Operational Standards.
- Grass cutting is programmed as a countywide programme of work, and as a result would not be suited to a prioritisation process (i.e. all grass will be cut twice a year in accordance with the service standards set out in the Highway Operational Standards).
- Weedkilling is programmed as a countywide programme of work with 2 sprays per year being undertaken across the county.
- Gully emptying is programmed as a countywide programme of work, and as a result would not be suited to a prioritisation process, (i.e. 100% of the known gully network is emptied / cleansed every two years). However, the Council aims to move to a more risk-

[1] The approach is not applicable to A14 de trunk funding for improvements required for the A1307, reactive patching, locally determined minor capital schemes, and network surveys.

based and asset management led approach once its whole gully network is mapped.

3.4 For many asset types, several different treatments are likely to be possible. For instance, issues identified with a carriageway might be best addressed via a preventative surface treatment, such as surface dressing or slurry sealing, or might require a deeper treatment, such as resurfacing or reconstruction.

3.5 It is therefore important that the prioritisation processes ultimately assess potential schemes against the most suitable interventions. It is proposed to have some pass / fail condition criteria included in the scoring systems, based upon the condition of the asset. The following table provides a summary of how each road is assessed using a 0-100+ grading system which is based on the condition of the asset.

Road condition data banding		
Category (RCI)	**Description**	***Potential* maintenance treatment options**
Green (0 to 39)	Defect free	Pavement is not considered for maintenance
Low Amber (>=40 to 79)	Minor wear or early signs of deterioration	Light maintenance (e.g. local patching, surface dressing, retexturing).
High Amber (>=80- to 99)	Serviceable but showing noticeable defects	Preventative or light rehabilitative treatments (e.g. micro asphalt, thin inlay, overlay, large-scale patching, crack sealing, only surface dressing if surface is suitable and binder is intact)
Red (>=100)	Structural or severe surface impairment	Rehabilitative maintenance, perhaps full carriageway. (e.g. resurfacing, large scale patching, edge haunching, in-situ recycling, reconstruction)

Note: *Road Condition Indicator (RCI) is a weighted score derived from SCANNER road condition survey data, combining four key measurements: rutting, texture, cracking, and ride quality. Each parameter is weighted to reflect its impact on overall condition. Lower RCI values indicate good condition, while higher values reflect increasing deterioration and structural need.*

3.6 For example:

- A potential carriageway scheme might fail the condition criterion for structural repair if its average condition were not sufficiently bad based on the most recent asset data available (Low Amber or Green in above table). The asset condition data would be reviewed yearly to assess if this remained the case.
- It is proposed that for carriageway schemes on all classes of road, where our existing asset condition data shows that the mean RCI is 75 or above, then this will be considered for inclusion in the prioritisation process for structural repair.
- In urban areas (roads with a 40mph speed limit or below) the threshold for roads to be

included in the prioritisation process for structural repair drops to a mean RCI of 50 or above.
- These potential schemes would then be validated for suitability for either structural maintenance or where applicable, considered for less intrusive, or preventative treatments and would be prioritised accordingly thereafter following a site evaluation.

3.7 In the prioritisation document all criteria will be scored out of 5, with some double weighted. Weighting reflects the importance of the criterion to the asset. For example, footways that provide access to public transport services are double weighted to reflect their alignment with the authority's strategic framework ambitions.

3.8 Whilst the resultant scores for each potential scheme will be the primary arbiter for those that are included in the capital programme, special circumstances are considered in terms of network availability and co-ordination with other works. For instance, it might be that a scheme is promoted to year 1 of a programme, because there is alignment with another project which would enable both to be delivered together. Similarly, a scheme may not be progressed if there are other known works planned for that area soon such as utility or improvement projects.

3.9 Several lessons were learnt from usage of this tool in the 25-26 process. Generally, the prioritisation process worked successfully. The key lessons learnt from the 2025-26 prioritisation process were
- Setting the threshold for inclusion of all potential carriageway schemes at too low a threshold produced over 6,000 potential sites for treatment. This was an unmanageable number of potential schemes especially when reviewed, and those at the lower end were routinely being identified as patching locations and not schemes due to the extents of the defects on site.
- Several criteria selected were applicable to every proposed scheme, for example under the Rights of Way, (ROW), scoring template, the criteria 'Meets ROW Improvement Plan objectives', was scored yes for every scheme, this therefore didn't add value to the prioritisation process

3.10 Changes proposed to the current process.

Asset Area	Proposed Change(s)
Carriageway Structural	• We have changed how we collect road condition data. This requires the % area in poor condition to alter to a new attribute for every location based upon a minimum average RCI (Road Condition Index). • Therefore, we will remove visual assessment criteria for condition and urgency and replace with mean RCI and RCI deterioration rate over the last 5 years to provide a more objective condition score. • We will amend the Active Travel criteria to reflect the new adopted hierarchy.
Carriageway Reconstruction	• We have changed how we collect road condition data. This requires the % area in poor condition to alter to a new attribute for every location

	based upon a minimum average RCI (Road Condition Index). • Therefore, we will remove visual assessment criteria for condition and urgency and replace with mean RCI and RCI deterioration rate over the last 5 years to provide a more objective condition score. • We will amend the Active Travel criteria to reflect the new adopted hierarchy.
Carriageway preventative	• We will amend the Active Travel criteria to reflect the new adopted hierarchy.
Footway Structural	• We will amend the Active Travel criteria to reflect the new adopted hierarchy.
Footway preventative	• We will amend the Active Travel criteria to reflect the new adopted hierarchy. • Remove the criteria 'Alignments with Asset Management Plan' as all potential schemes score the same
ROW	• We will remove 'Local Access Forum supported scheme' and 'Meets Asset Management / Right of Way Improvement Plan requirements' as all potential schemes score the same

3.11 This approach generated a considerable number of schemes for officers to sift and score from the initial condition thresholds identified in 3.5 above in the last round.

3.12 For context, in the 24-25 process, there were over 6,000 discreet carriageway schemes to consider and sift initially, it is not anticipated that the number will be as high for this round. Appendix 1 provides a visualisation of how schemes are sifted by officers, and how they may be dealt with depending on whether they qualify as a scheme or are more suitable for more minor repairs.

3.13 The detailed scoring criteria and weightings for each asset type and treatment are set out in Appendix 2 of this report. Appendix 3 shows a worked example for carriageway structural schemes from the 25-26 programme.

3.14 Key next steps will include:

- If this prioritisation process is approved, it is proposed that this process be used to develop a three year forward capital maintenance programme. This will include a fully developed and funded programme for year one and an indicative programme for the following two years.
- This would be presented to the Highways and Transport Committee for approval in March 2026.
- Final approval of future year's programmes will be key decisions, which will be presented to this committee for review and approval each year.
- This will ensure further forward visibility of schemes and allow a multi-year planned approach to delivery, allowing investigation and design activities to start earlier to enable delivery much sooner in the financial year.
- In the period from January to March 2026, officers will engage with Members to make

them aware of what work has been prioritised in their area and commence planning and design work on the 2026-27 programme to ensure work is able to start as early as possible in the new budget year.
- The process will be presented to all Members in January 2026.
- A briefing session is planned for all town and parish Councils.

4. Alternative Options Considered

4.1 Revert to the previous approach where the development of such programmes relies upon officers' engineering judgement and knowledge of the network, which is less transparent than the proposed approach.

4.2 An alternative method for formulating programmes is to prioritise using condition data only and treat carriageways and other highways assets on a "worst first" basis. This is the antithesis of the asset management approach, where treatments are applied at the correct points in the lifecycles of assets. The adoption of a "worst first" approach has been disregarded because:

- It does not represent value for money in terms of whole life cost and would lead to unsustainable deterioration of the county's highways.
- Adoption of the "worst first" approach would inevitably lead to risks to highway users from an increase in potholes and other defects. These defects would require reactive treatments that are funded from revenue budgets.
- The adoption of "worst first" principles would place unsustainable strain upon revenue budgets and create increased demand on the highway's maintenance service from residents, communities, and the travelling public.

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1 The proposed prioritisation processes provide a transparent method for the formulation of highways maintenance capital programmes of schemes.

5.2 The resultant programmes will represent the best use of the funding available for such works and will demonstrably accord with the Council's highway asset management policies and wider strategic ambitions.

6. Significant Implications

6.1 Finance Implications

This report proposes a methodology on how best to allocate funding for non-reactive capitally funded maintenance work. This approach will be used to produce proposed programmes of work which will be presented to a future meeting of the Highways and Transport Committee as a key decision to review and approve.

6.2 Legal Implications

Funding provision for the maintenance of and improvements to the public highway will have significant positive implications for user safety and the statutory health and safety requirements the authority is required to uphold. This process enables the Council to prioritise investment where it is needed most based on the agreed scoring criteria by asset.

6.3 Risk Implications

This is a process for prioritising and identify projects for delivery. Once projects are identified and approved, they will be managed via the standard quality assurance processes that the authority has in place.

6.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

These processes will ensure that programmes are developed in accordance with approved Council policy, specifically the agreed asset management approach. Any key changes to the asset management approach are subject to updated Equality Impact Assessments.

The asset management approach sets out that highway repairs and treatments may be prioritised where those with protected characteristics might be adversely impacted.

These processes contribute to the provision of an inclusive highway network.

6.5 Climate Change and Environment Implications (Key decisions only)

The prioritisation regime has been developed with carbon reduction in mind, promoting carbon reducing processes and methods above other more traditional methods, which are incorporated into the delivery of the capital highway maintenance programme, and further by prioritising Public Transport and Active Travel routes.

Paragraph 1.1 above highlights key environmental improvements that the implementation of this Policy will include.

7. Source Documents

7.1 [Highways Operational Standards]