

Review of Highways Maintenance

Report of the Environment, Transport, Communities
& Citizenship Scrutiny Sub-committee

April 2012



Introduction

- 1.1 Roads are one of those parts of the borough's infrastructure that we only notice when there are problems – no-one emails their ward councillor to comment on how smooth the road is but we all notice potholes, or road works that appear unnecessary or go on for weeks, with apparently slow progress.
- 1.2 The council will be procuring its new highways maintenance contract over the next few months, with the contract to run from April 2013. The sub-committee chose this topic in order to provide a ward member perspective that the cabinet member and the group of officers working on the contract could take into account when designing the specifications of the new contract.
- 1.3 Members of the sub-committee spent some time talking about their experience as ward members – most councillors receive complaints about roads, and many of us have had frustrated residents complaining about large schemes of work that cause disruption to people's daily routines. We drew on best practice advice in the 2011 Audit Commission report "Going the Distance" and the Department for Transport's December 2011 interim report from their Highways Management Efficiency Programme and we spoke extensively with our own officers, in particular, Mick Lucas, Public Realm Asset Manager, who the sub-committee would like to thank for his time and effort.
- 1.4 Three areas of thought emerged from our work: the quality of public information; contract monitoring – getting the key performance indicators right; and striking the right balance between planned and reactive maintenance. All this is of course set in the context of hugely constrained public finances – the sub-committee was realistic about the fact that highways maintenance will inevitably struggle for investment, given the other demands on the council's capital budgets.

Public information

- 2.1 This struck the sub-committee as a relatively easy area for improvement. The most visible channels of information are signage at road works, the street works register on the council's website, and the letters that are put through local residents' doors when a scheme is about to take place. In all three cases it is not clear enough who is trying to communicate what, and to whom, and this seemed a missed opportunity to improve understanding of why work is being done, which may contribute to public satisfaction. The site signage and the street works register often include technical language or code that is incomprehensible to the non-engineer and would not assist a member of the public trying to find out why a road on their route to work was being dug up. The below example is typical of the quality of information on the register. We are aware that this information is provided by a range of authorities and utility companies directly to the register, so it will require some reworking of processes to improve it.

Street Name	QUEENS ROAD
Location	O/S 223-225 IN C/W
Start Date	2012-03-27
Estimated Completion Date	2012-04-10
Organisation Name	London
Work Type	EToN 4: Immediate - Emergency
Work Status	In Progress
Work Reference	W108477489-02028
Map	View Works

RECOMMENDATION:

1. That a review is undertaken of the information provided on the street works register to make entries comprehensible and timely.
- 2.2 Signs at sites where road works are taking place can also be improved. We noted that some organisations are much bolder about asserting their brand, e.g. "Thames Water - we are working to improve our water network".

RECOMMENDATION:

2. That the council refreshes its signage for all road works undertaken on behalf of the council.
3. That organisations are encouraged to remove road signage as soon as work is complete.
- 2.3 Letters about traffic management schemes would benefit from being reviewed. Letters are typically hand delivered to residents whose roads are affected by a scheme, and we heard mixed reports on the quality of these letters.

RECOMMENDATION:

4. That the new contract requires a high quality of communication, with appropriate sign-off within the public realm division. This should provide public contact points and any variables that are known from the outset of the works, e.g. if the completion of the work requires dry weather.
- 2.4 Given the context of dwindling public finances, we also think it is important to be realistic about reactive repairs, most typically potholes. Officers explained to the sub-committee that on receiving a report of a pothole, highways inspectors assess them against a threshold, and we currently do not feed back to residents whether the threshold has been met. We do not suggest an expensive administrative system but we recommend that this area is reviewed so that there is clear information on the council's website as to the thresholds for repair. We saw an example on Gloucestershire County

Council's website, for example, which explains that potholes must be the depth of a golf ball and the size of a large dinner plate.

RECOMMENDATION:

5. That the council's website is reviewed so that there is clear information on it as to the thresholds for repair.

Contract monitoring and Key Performance Indicators

- 3.1 It was not evident to us that the current contract has been sufficiently tough when schemes go badly. We are aware that the officer team preparing the specification is working on a new set of key performance indicators (KPIs) based on the experience of monitoring the previous contract. We would emphasise the need for the new set of KPIs to measure the quality of the work, communication with residents, and to capture and penalise poor performance.