



Condition of Highways and Drainage

A report of the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny
Committee – November 2007

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SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**



SUMMARY

The Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee has conducted an investigation into the way that the council manages the condition of its highways and drainage. The purpose of the investigation was to consider the allocation of resources for repairs and maintenance, customer service standards and insurance related issues.

My committee took evidence from Cllr Colin Hall to gain a corporate perspective. This was then supplemented with evidence from the managers responsible for highways, drainage and insurance.

It was acknowledged that councillors have the opportunity to feed into the process whereby roads were assessed and works prioritised. This is an ongoing process and members can have input throughout the year. The committee found that the council should undertake a full assessment of the condition of the drainage system, that it should adopt a pro-active stance in dealing with any materials left on the highway (after works have been completed) and that some changes be made to how insurance information is recorded. The detailed recommendations from the committee follow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. With reference to equipment left on the highway after work has been completed, that the Council adopt a proactive stance and use its legal powers (to maximum effect) to enforce removal of any remaining spoil and equipment; and in relation:
 - that this problem be dealt with as fly-tipping and the risks and costs of treating it in this way considered
 - to note the powers that are coming through the new Streetworks Act and to highlight the likelihood that the level of some fines which local authorities could impose will be too low
 - to note that the Council should be informed of when works were due to start and finish in advance and that contractors are obliged to notify the authority of problems between times
 - to note that although enforcement would be against utility companies, the issue of offending contractors being on the Council's approved list has been raised.
2. That there is a systematic assessment of the condition of the drainage system
3. That ward councillors be supplied with a schedule of the gully cleansing programme.
4. That insurance information is recorded by carriageway and footway separately
5. That there is a clear policy to deal with streets blocked by vehicle parking, to ensure that gullies can be cleaned/cleared
6. That any backlog in gully clearance is monitored and prioritised and that ward councillors are advised of any backlog and priority list.

BACKGROUND

1. At its meeting in November the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a scrutiny investigation into the condition of highways and drainage. The purpose of the investigation was to consider:

- ✚ Allocation of resources for repairs and maintenance, how work is prioritised and how works by utilities companies are synchronised
- ✚ How planned works are communicated with residents
- ✚ The balance between reactive and preventative maintenance, including details of the gully cleaning programme
- ✚ The level and nature of complaints received
- ✚ The number and cost of highways/drainage related insurance claims against the Council.

Improvements to the allocation of resources and prioritisation of works on the highways could improve service performance, increase value for money and provide residents with a better service.

2. The committee heard evidence from Councillor Colin Hall (Executive Councillor for Environment), Tom Jeffrey (Strategic Director Environment and Leisure) Mark Dalzell (Head of Parks, Highways and Streetcare), Steve Shew (Head of Highways and Streetcare), Gerry McLaughlin (Principal Highways Engineer) and Ray Chitty (Insurance Manager).
3. This evidence was supplemented with desktop research provided in advance of the meeting.

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES (HIGHWAYS)

Sutton's Highways Service has a statutory duty (under s41 of the Highways Act 1980) to maintain the highway in a safe condition for all users. This is undertaken in two ways – Planned and reactive maintenance. The committee was concerned that too much money was spent on reactive maintenance. After hearing evidence on highways claims (as an indicator of condition) and the cost involved in major reconstruction works, the committee was satisfied that Sutton's prioritisation is correct.

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES (DRAINAGE)

The committee found that the current budget of £50,000 per annum is sufficient to manage soakaway cleaning. The Council has responsibility for the connections from the roads/gulleys to the soakaway. Using a phased programme of works across the borough there appears to be adequate resources in place, but it was felt that not enough is known about the condition of the 20,000 drains in the borough.

SYNCHRONISATION OF WORKS

The committee found that there are adequate processes in place to synchronise works (where possible) with the utilities companies. It was noted that this is only possible for planned works.

HIGHWAYS INSURANCE CLAIMS

The committee found that the generally low level of claims is an indication that the Council has a good inspection and maintenance regime. The current reporting arrangements do not allow for an analysis of how many claims relate to the carriageway or the footways.

KEY FINDINGS

Dealing with equipment/spoil left on the carriageway after works have completed

The committee found that there have been problems with equipment (such as cones) being left on the highway after works have been completed. It was acknowledged that the Council uses its powers and is undertaking a rigorous inspection regime. However, the committee recommends that a more proactive stance is taken and that the Council considers treating offending equipment as fly tipping. The committee supports the Council's efforts to ensure the level of fines under the new Streetworks Act are sufficient as a proper deterrent.

Planned maintenance of carriageways and highways

The committee acknowledge the opportunities for member's local knowledge to inform the planned maintenance programme by working with officers who compile the list. The committee agreed that members should be provided with more information on the scoring system used to prioritise maintenance and that they are sent a reminder of the process a few months prior to the lists being presented to committee.


Undertaking a systematic assessment of drainage condition

The committee recognises the move from a reactive service to a phased programme will help maintain the drains in the borough. The committee found that not enough is known about the condition of the 20,000 drains in the borough and recommends that a systematic assessment of their condition is undertaken so that the Council can better predict potential problem areas. The committee also asks that members are provided with the gully cleaning schedule.

Changes to the recording of insurance information

The committee recognised the good performance in relation to highway and footway related insurance claims, acknowledging the reasons for a higher number of claims in more densely populated areas. The issue of the Council "self-insuring" has been raised as a result of a previous scrutiny investigation. For ease of future analysis of insurance claims the committee recommends that a distinction is made in the recording of claims that originate to carriageways and footways.

EVIDENCE SOURCES

 Scrutiny Overview Committee briefing papers and minutes, 9th October and 27th November

Further information

Please contact the Policy & Partnerships Team, Civic Offices, Sutton
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