
Meeting: Sustainable Communities O&SC

Date: 26 January, 2009

Subject: Highways customer process

Report of: Director of Sustainable Communities

Summary: This report provides a briefing on the highways contract and customer service provision.

Contact Officer: Basil Jackson, Assistant Director for Highways & Transport

Public/Exempt: Public

Wards Affected: All

Function of: Executive/Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The Council priorities affected by this paper are:

- creating safer communities;

Financial:

Service response standards are agreed within the highways managing agent contract (i.e. 10 working days). If Members require more stringent response standards then this will incur a cost.

Legal:

The Highways Act 1980 requires highway authorities to keep public highways open and remove obstructions which may affect the use and safety of the highway. The Authority uses customer requests to aid its understanding of the condition of the highway network in order to help meet this statutory obligation.

A large managing agent contract (MAC) dictates how our highway works are delivered. However, being a £20 million pa contract, it is of strategic importance to both CBC and our provider Amey LG. As such, the parties have (where possible) preferred to move issues forward in partnership.

Risk Management:

Any significant changes to response standards could increase the amount of contact we are required to have with the public (e.g. introducing customer call backs). Such impacts would need to be properly understood and resourced prior to changes taking place.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

None

Equalities/Human Rights:

None

Community Safety:

Creating an attractive and accessible public realm has a part to play in getting people out and about, especially the more vulnerable members of the community who might experience isolation. Utilising customer feedback is an essential part of developing an accessible public realm.

Sustainability:

The effective maintenance of our highway network is a key part of accommodating Central Bedfordshire's growth agenda and ensuring that we are "open for business".

RECOMMENDATION(S):

1. The Committee is asked to note and comment on the report.

Background

1. In the mid 1990s the former Bedfordshire County Council outsourced its highway services to separate providers responsible for consultancy services and works services respectively. In addition, many client functions across the authority including customer services were also outsourced. At the time, outsourcing to private sector partners did realise some benefits such as greater resource flexibility. However in highways, because two partner organisations were involved, it also led to a number of difficulties such as customer confusion as to who was actually delivering the service and a certain blame culture became evident between the two partners.
2. To resolve the majority of the above issues, in 2004/05 the former Bedfordshire County Council tendered and awarded a new contract to employ a single service provider. This resulted in the present contract establishing a partnership with Amey Local Government (Amey LG) that commenced on 1st October 2005 covering the delivery of all highway services. The type of contract that was adopted is known as a Managing Agent Contract (MAC). In a MAC the client (CBC) is responsible for setting budgets and service objectives; the contractor is responsible for delivery of the service. This type of contract, used on certain parts of the motorway and trunk road network, was one of the first to be used in local government and has won a number of awards.
3. The highways contract deals with all forms of road repair, from the maintenance of bridges, to highway grass cutting and salting the roads in winter. It also deals with improvement schemes from new lengths of footway to the Leighton Linlade 20mph zone.
4. CBC manages the contract through performance indicators, which are set annually by the Network Board so that Amey is incentivised to align its performance to the Council's objectives. The Network Board consists of the Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities, the Director of Sustainable Communities, the Assistant Director for Highways and Transport and one other senior highway officer from CBC, plus three senior managers from Amey, all working together to direct the contract.

5. Within CBC there is a small team of four CBC staff who oversee the highways contract, its finance and performance. All other staff engaged in works on the highway are employed by, or through Amey Local Government. This means that Amey carry out many of the services a client would usually provide in-house, such as developing the annual programme of works. This includes consultation with members, parish / town councils and the public. After consultation is complete, the Executive will approve the final programme. In this way Amey are fully responsible for what takes place on the ground and so accountability is clear.

How is the highway service presently set up to deal with customer enquiries?

6. For all customers, the first point of contact for highway issues within Central Bedfordshire Council is, and should be, the highway helpdesk; which is staffed by CBC employees. This has been set up to make it easy for people to report faults by telephone on 0300 300 8049, or by email to highways@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk. The helpdesk staff have been specifically trained in how to deal with highway enquiries. All enquiries are logged and customers are given a unique reference number. To follow the progress of their issue customers need to either call back and quote the number or check on-line by entering the number and their postcode. This system has been established as being the most cost effective way to properly manage the large volume of highway issues and requests we receive each week (approximately 500 pw) and officers continually stress the importance of using the above mechanisms when speaking to members, parishes and the general public.
7. Issues reported to the highway helpdesk are responded to within agreed timescales;
 - Potholes, surface defects, kerbing, general highway faults - 5 working days
 - Street lighting faults - 10 working days
 - All requests for new additions to the highway, e.g.: signs, lines or zebra crossings - 20 working days
8. Ward members, together with town / parish councils receive a weekly report of all highway service requests within their area along with the latest status of those requests. Officers are refining this report as there is room for improvement in how the information is presented.
9. It should be noted that choosing to use alternative mechanisms slows down our response times and makes it difficult to monitor our performance. It should also be noted that other ways of working could require additional staff resources - which would require additional funding.
10. When highway issues are received by letter they are logged and passed to Amey for reply. Amey is currently contracted to reply to correspondence within 10 working days. So for the majority of people reporting a highway maintenance issue using the highway helpdesk enables a quicker response to be given (i.e. within 5 working days).
11. To work more closely with members and local communities, Amey have established Area Teams (each comprising an Area Steward and an Area Technician) so that parish / town councils and ward members have direct contact with professionals who can react quickly to service requests. The Area Teams are allocated funding by CBC to deal with local highways issues and are tasked to liaise with elected members and parish / town councils. Contact details for the area teams have previously been sent to members and are attached in Appendix A of this paper.

12. One of the major challenges at the start of the Managing Agent Contract (MAC) was to gain the confidence of service users. We have seen significant success over the last four years as illustrated in the map shown in Appendix B that shows town and parish council satisfaction levels for 2005/06 and 2008/09 in a red, amber, green format. The 2005/6 results show perceptions for the period prior to the MAC commencing in October 2005. The latest survey shows that far more communities are satisfied with the Council's highway service and we hope to achieve further improvements in satisfaction in future years.
13. Each town / parish council has nominated a Highway Representative providing a dedicated link with the Amey area teams, who are in regular contact with each other throughout the year. Each Highway Representative has been offered training on the Council's priorities and has been issued with a manual to assist them in identifying the correct response to problems and reporting issues. In addition they are consulted annually on Parish Partnership Funded schemes and when the five-year programme is being developed. This link provides a close relationship for understanding and responding to community needs.
14. The majority of issues can be dealt with through the processes described above. It is important to use the formal mechanisms for requesting a service as our systems are set up to enable those closest to local area (i.e. area teams) deliver the necessary solutions. However, when issues need to be escalated, the following escalation process has been established:
 1. Contact your local Area Team - if that fails then;
 2. Contact your local District Manager - if that fails then;
 3. Contact the Watchman-in-Chief on 0845 3656 139 - if that fails then;
 4. Contact the Assistant Director, Highways & Transport.

Proposed Customer Contact Improvements

15. Officers recognise the need to:
 - Reduce the number of customer contact points
 - Encourage greater use of online customer self –service reporting
16. To achieve this the issues that have currently been identified for improvement are:
 - There has been a tendency for engineers, when responding to helpdesk enquiries, to write in jargon or abbreviations that the public struggle to decipher.
 - Introducing PIs into the customer feedback process to enable robust monitoring and auditing, and building these PIs into the contract management process.
17. In order to address the above issues, the following actions have been identified for implementation:
 - (a) Work is underway to improve the quality of information provided by the Area Teams in response to customer enquiries via the helpdesk. This includes training in Plain English and the provision of “standard responses” for engineers to pick from as appropriate.

- (b) Bedfordshire Highways undertake a monthly analysis of enquiry data to ascertain the percentage of queries that have been successfully closed down (Green), are currently under review (Amber) or have not received a response (Red). These are measured by means of a formal Partnership Performance Indicator (PPI). The format of this indicator, and its associated target, will be reviewed for 2010/11 to ensure that performance is directed to fully achieving the Council's objectives.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Central Bedfordshire Highway Area Map

Appendix B – Bedfordshire Town and Parish Council Highway Maintenance Annual Survey Results

Appendix C – Facts and figures about CBC's highway asset