



Briefing 12/24 May 2012

'Prevention and a better cure' – Final report from the Potholes Review

To: All contacts in England

For information: all contacts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

Key issues

Final report from the Potholes Group as part of the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme

3 main themes identified – prevention is better than cure; focus on right first time; clarity for the public.

17 recommendations noted

1. Introduction

Norman Baker, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, launched a review into potholes as part of the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme. A progress report was issued in December and this is the final report from the Review.

APSE was a member of the Project Board and was represented by Dave Mazurke, Group Manager – Streetscene at Bradford City Council.

The report highlights the £3 billion allocated from government to local highway authorities for road maintenance over the next 4 years and the £200 million allocated 12 months ago to address the effects of severe weather. It also recognises the range of issues impacting on the ability of local authorities to adequately maintain the network. These include the obvious topics such as harsh winter weather, the range of different designs and standards used as the network has developed over many years, varying investment levels as well as issues such as standing water and inadequate drainage, the ingress of water and the freeze-thaw cycle.

The report can be found here <http://www.dft.gov.uk/publications/pothole-review>

2. Key Findings

There are three key messages in the Review:

- Prevention is better than cure – intervening at the right time will reduce the amount of potholes forming and prevent bigger problems later.
- Right first time – do it once and get it right, rather than face continuous bills. Guidance, knowledge and workmanship are the enablers to this.
- Clarity for the public – local highway authorities need to communicate to the public what is being done and how it is being done.

The Review calls for a more robust evidence base to inform funding decisions at all levels. Recommendations are made for guidance on calculating the economic benefits of highway maintenance and the value of providing greater long term certainty to the funding of highway maintenance by both central and local government. A recommendation for a specific quality scheme to be introduced by the sector, for the sector, is also included.

The review refers to the Audit Commission Report 'Going the Distance' which recommended adopting the principles of asset management when making investment decisions. The Review claims that these principles have not been adopted by all authorities even though the benefits are widely understood and it notes that the Department is spreading best practice with regard to asset management including through HMEP..

3. Summary of Recommendations

The recommendations made in the Review are grouped into three themes. Within each theme the recommendations are listed in priority order rather than the order in which they appear in the Review.

Theme: Prevention is better than cure

Economic Benefits of Highway Maintenance Recommendation 4

To evaluate and justify the need for investment in maintenance of the local highway network, the Department for Transport should work in conjunction with local highway authorities to develop advice on determining economic costs and benefits.

Commitment of Highway Maintenance Budgets Recommendation 5

The Government should commit to establishing budgets for highway maintenance for the full four years of Comprehensive Spending Review periods. This will provide greater budget certainty for the highway sector. Local highway authorities should ensure their funding for highways maintenance is aligned to this time period.

Prevention is Better than Cure Recommendation 6

Local highway authorities should adopt the principle that 'prevention is better than cure' in determining the balance between structural, preventative and reactive maintenance activities in order to improve the resilience of the highway network and minimise the occurrence of potholes in the future.

Informed Choices Recommendation 7

Local highway authorities should ensure that appropriate competencies are available to make the right choices when designing and specifying techniques and materials for the maintenance and repair of highways. These competencies can be secured through training, collaboration with neighbouring authorities or external advice.

Guidance on Materials Recommendation 8

Comprehensive guidance should be made available in the design, specification and installation of materials for the maintenance and repair of highways, to ensure the use of appropriate materials for the right site. This guidance should be produced by the sector for the sector.

Co-ordinating Street Works Recommendation 15

All parties undertaking works on the highway should share and co-ordinate short and long term programmes of work for up to four years in advance, based on good asset management practice.

Minimising Highway Openings Recommendation 16

All parties involved in reinstatements must consider the need to minimise long term damage from the installation, renewal, maintenance and repair of utility and highway apparatus through alternative

and innovative ways of working. Trenchless technology should be considered as part of this decision making process.

Theme: Right First Time

Quality of Repairs and Reinstatements Recommendation 14

To drive up standards, a quality scheme similar to a National Highway Sector Scheme should be developed by the sector to cover all aspects of manual surfacing operations, including pothole repairs and reinstatements, and its use specified by local highway authorities and utility companies.

Guidance on Repair Techniques Recommendation 13

Local highway authorities should consider the guidance provided in the ADEPT report Potholes and Repair Techniques for Local Highways and adopt as appropriate to their local circumstances.

Inspection and Training Recommendation 11

Local highway authorities should utilise inspection manuals to support implementation of their inspection policies. They should also ensure that highway inspectors are trained, qualified and competent in the identification and assessment of defects, including potholes, through a scheme accredited by the Highway Inspectors Board.

Technology Recommendation 12

Local highway authorities should consider using proven technology and systems for the effective identification and management of potholes.

Research and Innovation Recommendation 17

The sector will benefit from supporting, co-ordinating, contributing and disseminating research on all aspects of pothole operations. Innovation from such research may continue to provide opportunities for improvement of pothole management and operations.

Theme: Clarity

Public Communications Recommendation 3

Local highway authorities should have an effective public communications process that provides clarity and transparency in their policy and approach to repairing potholes. This should include a published policy and details of its implementation, including the prevention, identification, reporting, tracking and repair of potholes.

Public Opinion Surveys Recommendation 2

Local highway authorities should monitor public satisfaction with road, footway and cycleway condition and repair annually through the National Highways and Transport Public Satisfaction Survey or their own surveys. The findings can be used to benchmark performance and taken into consideration in local highway maintenance policies.

Permanent Repairs Policy Recommendation 10

Local highway authorities should adopt permanent repairs as the first choice. Temporary repairs should only be used where safety cannot be managed using alternative approaches and in emergency circumstances.

Definition of Potholes Recommendation 9

To provide clarity, local highway authorities should adopt dimensional definitions for potholes based on best practice as part of their maintenance policy. Response times and treatment of potholes should be based on local needs, consideration of all highway users, and an assessment of risk.

Strengthen Well-maintained Highways Recommendation 1

Well-maintained Highways should be revised and strengthened to include all recommendations of this Review which are relevant to local highway authorities.

4. Comment

APSE welcomes the work of the group as a specific response to a significant problem and its part within the wider Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme and APSE was happy to make a contribution.

The report notes that 'The local highway network has evolved over a very long period of time and therefore much of it was not designed or constructed to the standards that would be expected of a newly constructed highway today.' This is a pointer towards the main message within the report namely to ensure the continued move to an asset management approach and away from a 'worst first' approach. The fact that network problems have developed over many years, often as a result of inadequate investment, means that solutions will take a significant period of time to come about. If this is to be the aim, namely a highways network in a condition where it can be managed on a proactive basis without the need to firefight by constantly dealing with recurring potholes, it will need substantial effort, resource, dedication and certainly a lot more money than is currently being allocated.

The report rightly notes the value of the network to the wider economy and the problems and costs of it being in poor condition. However the picture painted is not a depressing one. The Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme is making progress, producing a number of helpful tools with more on the way and stimulating many in the sector to take a long look at what they do, how they do it and how the sector can learn from within. The Review has helped to highlight the value of the network to the wider economy. Compensation and insurance claims, a perennial problem for the sector, are in decline, a fact backed up by data from APSE Performance Networks returns over recent years another good sign for the sector. Furthermore the added costs to the public of extra accidents, damage to vehicles and traffic delays which result from a network in poor condition are highlighted and are all issues which are being addressed within the sector.

Nonetheless there is an exercise to be undertaken in managing expectations. The network will not be turned around in a short period of time and there will always be unexpected floods and snow/ice conditions to deal with as well as the problem of available resources not meeting demand. Such a communications exercise will be a long term one but will help the general public to appreciate the scale of the problem and how long the solution will take. The range of issues to be addressed is a long one and the report notes what some might consider minor issues such as the fact that surfaces in poor condition or with poor repairs, are not aesthetically pleasing. All issues need to be tackled as part of a concerted campaign to promote the importance of maintaining the network whilst ensuring realistic objectives remain.

Resources are likely to remain a problem in the long term so addressing potholes in a way which manages the solution over a similar timescale is a sensible approach. Government continues to allocate resources to major projects such as HS2, airport capacity, the Mersey crossing and Northern Rail Hub, all of which can be easily justified. However ongoing maintenance and improvement of the local highway network is a fundamental issue and one which will continue to have an impact if deterioration continues. There is a need for the sector's representative bodies to lobby at a national and regional level for continued investment, and this report should be applauded in that regard,

whilst those working within councils do the same at the local level, ensuring that elected members and senior officers recognise the day to day value of such investment in the network.

The promotion of asset management techniques, which runs through this paper, is the appropriate approach whether there are limited funds or not, even though there will always be pressure from some to react to the biggest potholes first. Pressure will continue to be put on officers by some members and senior officers who are ill informed about the benefits of an asset management approach. As such there remains a job for highways engineers to ensure senior officers and members are informed about the benefits of a move away from 'worst first' to the point where they can resist public pressure and make an effective argument for such a policy.

There is a role for local authorities, the DfT, representative bodies, private contractors, materials suppliers and all involved in the sector to challenge existing thinking, be innovative and publicise what they are doing.

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