

Stockton Borough Council



Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Communications Plan



Foreword

The highway infrastructure asset is the most valuable asset owned by the Council and vital for local economic prosperity, social and environment well-being of the area, contributing towards local and regional economic growth and resident's quality of life. The significant levels of funding necessary for the management of this asset are under continuous scrutiny, with increasing pressure for transparency, accountability and maximising efficiencies for the limited resources that are available.

This Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Communications Plan summarises how as a Local Authority we will proactively engage with customers to understand their needs and expectations, to determine and help shape the service that we provide. This approach will assist us in providing a network that enables Stockton to thrive and support the Councils vision of being a Borough that is more confident, more vibrant and more successful than ever before.

If you have any questions or comments about this plan or highways infrastructure asset management in general please contact us via email at egds@stockton.gov.uk



Councillor Mike Smith

Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Good highway infrastructure is a vital part of Stockton and essential for the Borough's economic progress and future prosperity and this plan aims to raise awareness and understanding of the Council's highway asset management outcomes. Effective and efficient management of Highway Assets is a key factor in the ability of the Council to deliver its services and plays an essential role in supporting growth and attracting increased investment.

As set out in Stockton Borough Council's Business Unit Plan for the Communications Service the vision is to be a vital and trusted team which sits at the heart of the organisation, providing excellent service which:

- Combines all communication activities.
- Media and external stakeholders respect as the trusted 'first port of call' for any information about the Council and the Borough.
- Generates new and exciting ways to enthuse the public, staff and Members to bring about a wave of involvement and engagement with what the Council does.
- Carries out sensitive, appropriate and worthwhile communication.
- Is clear about who we are and what we are about as an organisation and place, and acts as an ambassador, promoter and champion of the brand.

There are a number of other key documents and plans for our Service Area which guide what services we deliver and how we deliver them. These documents include the Highway Infrastructure Asset Management Policy/Strategy, Street Lighting Policy and Rights of Way Improvement Plan. To view these documents in full visit the Borough's website at www.stockton.gov.uk

1.2 The National Picture

Managing the highway infrastructure is now more challenging for local Councils than ever before, as we have to manage an ageing network with ever increasing public expectations for safe, reliable and comfortable travel. At the same time resources are reducing, with less funding available and increased pressure from other service areas.

Highways are increasingly at risk from wear and tear, increasing traffic and severe weather which regularly results in visible defects like potholes, damaged road signs, defective street lights. These defects are seen and felt by all and often result in negative media coverage for the Authority. It is clear that action must be taken to make best use of any available funding and to ensure that we communicate to stakeholders that we will continually strive to provide the best possible highway asset management service by utilising our resources in the most efficient and cost effective manner.

1.3 Highways Asset Management in Stockton

The highway infrastructure asset is the most valuable asset owned by the Council and vital for the local economy and the residents' quality of life. Keeping Stockton moving is one of our key priorities as a good quality highway infrastructure is essential for Stockton's economic prospects, infrastructure and quality of life. Ease of safe travel is always high on peoples agenda and the general increase in vehicles on the road, together with a large number of utility works, have a large impact on our residents, business and the general public.

We aim to fulfil our statutory duty under Section 41 of the Highway Act to maintain the highway infrastructure and take such care to secure that the highway is not dangerous to traffic (Section 58). Stockton Borough Council are responsible for the maintenance of in excess of 800km of highway network, approximately 28,000 street lights, in excess of 400 structures, 49,000 gullies, 200km of public rights of way and almost 2000 illuminated signs.

Our services cover a broad range of functions that have a direct impact on residents, businesses and the public, including:

- Provision of a Winter Service.
- Maintaining and improving the public highway (roads, pavements, structures, street lighting and public rights of way) through a data/evidence led approach.
- Co-ordinating and monitoring all local road works, road closures and major events on the highway.
- Managing Council contractors working on the highway.
- Setting associated transport infrastructure policy.
- Managing and maintaining highway records.
- Issuing temporary licences to facilitate works on the highway.

Asset management of the highway infrastructure is accepted as a key factor in enabling the Council to deliver its services and corporate objectives in an efficient and effective manner. It allows the management of highway infrastructure assets through long-term planning. It also supports the case for funding and ensures better communications with customers and stakeholders, giving them a greater understanding of the contribution highway infrastructure assets make to economic growth and the needs of the local community.

As with many other local authorities, Stockton Council faces significant financial pressures. However, people continue to have an expectation that journeys should be reliable and with all residents using the network, it means that people's satisfaction with it is closely linked to the Councils reputation as a whole. It is therefore imperative that Councillors, customers, partners and other risk management stakeholders value and feel engaged in the work that we do to maintain and improve the network, but also understand the financial challenges that we face.

1.4 Engagement

Officers will work with the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport and the corporate communications team to proactively engage with our customers to understand their needs and expectations, to determine and help shape the service that we provide.

To ensure that people are actively engaged we need to be open and honest about the decision making process, providing information at the right time and in the right format to suit the customer. We want to get regular and meaningful feedback from residents and stakeholders to help inform and evolve the way we deliver services for the future.

We work with a broad range of customers and partners as we develop and deliver services. They include:

- Residents
- Visitors
- Ward Councillors
- Town and Parish Councillors
- Businesses
- Transport Operators
- Consultants and Contractors
- Stakeholder and Community Groups
- Neighbouring highway authorities
- Emergency Services
- Central Government and their agencies
- Statutory undertakers
- Local road users
- MP's
- Community Groups
- Schools

2.0 Aim

To provide a highway network that enables Stockton to thrive and support the Councils overarching vision through Economic Regeneration and Transport:

“of an economically prosperous borough that is dynamic, exciting and inviting with infrastructure to support the development of business start-ups, business growth, new jobs and skills.”

3.0 Objectives

There are a number of objectives that the Council are committed to delivering in order to ensure we have a high profile communications plan that is informed by gaining views from key stakeholders, which we will incorporate in to our services, to ensure we deliver to the highest standards utilising the principals of asset management. The objectives are as follows:

- To support the corporate vision for the Borough, enhancing the reputation of the Council as a community leader.
- To gain political commitment and Senior Officers support for effective and efficient asset management.
- To inform people how we spend their money efficiently on maintaining and improving the highways infrastructure, using the most appropriate interventions.
- To keep Stockton moving, good roads are essential for Stockton's economy prospects, infrastructure and quality of life.
- To engage and listen to people's concerns about the network and feedback our progress on a regular and timely basis, demonstrating that their views do matter and do make a difference.
- To share the positive work being undertaken to maintain and improve the Borough's highway infrastructure via the various different medians.
- Communicate with businesses, partners, community groups and other organisations, in addition to residents.
- Understand our audiences and use appropriate, targeted, accessible communications methods to engage with all residents, partners and organisations.
- Improving safety for all road users.

4.0 Communication Medians

Communication should always be viewed as a two way process and any communication medians used should strive to encourage this two way communication between the Council and its' customers. Any communication medians used should increase peoples understanding of the work that we do to maintain and improve the highway network and where possible should gather feedback on stakeholder's views on the performance of the highway network.

It is imperative that all outgoing communications should be timely, positive, informative and accessible whilst incoming communications are assigned to the correct person and, where appropriate, responded to within relevant deadlines. To achieve this tailored communications tools need to be used to inform the different target audiences.

4.1 Local Media

- **Press releases and media relations** – regular press releases should be written and published. This will be essential to keep a consistent flow of accurate information in the media, including relevant specialist publications, ensuring that all audiences are kept up to date.
- **Media briefings** – media are briefed and kept up to date on key schemes. This should ensure a co-operative relationship that fosters understanding between the media and the Council and will help form a positive partnership to alleviate any negative coverage.
- **TV and radio interviews** – regular contact should be made wherever possible to arrange interviews, features and debates.
- **Parish newsletters and other community publications** – offer another alternative method to reach communities, particularly those within rural parts of the Borough.

4.2 Digital Media

- **Social media** – can be a good method of communicating, engaging and educating people. They also provide a platform for users to comment on the services being provided
- **Stockton Council website** – imperative that the website is kept up to date with relevant information. Annual reports and forward work programme to be published on the website at the appropriate times. Quarterly reviews of the website will be undertaken to ensure that the information. The website should also have the facility for users to report problems on the highway network or to submit compliments and complaints.

4.3 Face to Face/Telephone

- **Staff briefings** – ensure Contact Centre staff are briefed in order to deal / signpost any calls regarding the condition of the highway network.
- **Cabinet member briefings** – keeping Cabinet Member up to date, especially in relation to schemes that may be disruptive.
- **Letter Drops** – households and businesses affected by highway infrastructure schemes will be notified in advance and the information provided will contain contact details where additional information can be obtained
- **Scheme Feedback** – following highway infrastructure schemes where appropriate we will ascertain views of residents via feedback surveys.

4.4 Marketing Materials

- **National Highways and Transportation Public Opinion Survey (NHT Survey)** – will enable us to be measured on an annual basis in terms how our services compare on a national level.

5.0 Evaluation

The effectiveness of the Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Communication Plan will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it is achieving, or making progress towards the objectives detailed in section 3 of the plan. Importantly, activity will need to be checked to make sure it remains relevant and responsive to the changing needs of the residents and other users of our services.

Public perception of the Council performance is influenced by a number of factors, not least by personal experiences and media coverage. The outcome of the NHT survey is generally determined as a good indicator of what local people think of the service. Therefore we will use overall levels of satisfaction and specific comments relating to our services from the survey, together with feedback on individual schemes and initiatives, to shape the way we deliver it moving forward.

This plan is a flexible working document, capable of incorporating new elements at any stage and will also be reviewed on an annual basis and agreed/signed off at appropriate Cabinet Member briefings.

The attached action plan (Appendix 1) includes the targets for the year ahead, with timescales and desired outcomes. This demonstrates how the Communications Plan will be moved forward in a practical way. It will be reviewed on a quarterly basis and changes published on the Council website.

APPENDIX 1

HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE ASSET MANAGEMENT

COMMUNICATIONS ACTION PLAN 2018/19

| Reference | Action | Desired outcome | When | Owner | Progress/Comment |
|---|--|--|-------------------------------|---------------|--|
| 1. Promoting our services and improved media relations | | | | | |
| 1.1 | At least one positive infrastructure press release put forward for inclusion in the four annual editions of Stockton News. | Customers are better informed about what we do and the perception becomes more positive re our services. | March 2018 – April 2019 | Ian Raine | Check that an article is submitted for each quarterly edition prior to deadline. |
| 2. Promoting our services and improved media relations | | | | | |
| 2.1 | Weekly roadwork's/event report is published to all risk management stakeholders and press. | Customers are better informed and their perceptions become more positive, reducing enquiries and complaints. | April 2018 – issued weekly. | Kevin Ellison | Review any feedback received. |
| 2.2 | Review the use of travel updates (website information, social media) to inform residents of road works and potential disruption. | Customers are better informed and can make travel choices. | Review complete October 2017. | Kevin Ellison | Liaison with the appropriate officers from the Communications Team. |
| 3. Website | | | | | |
| 3.1 | All Highways / Transport web pages are reviewed on a regular basis. | Review and update appropriate web pages on a quarterly basis. | Ongoing | Jim Fiskien | Liaison with appropriate Officers. |

| 4. Direct Contact with Residents | | | | | |
|---|--|---|------------|-------------|--|
| 4.1 | Customer-facing staff in the team undertake customer service training. | Workforce customer skillset improved. | April 2019 | Steve Dodds | Requires appropriate training to be available. |
| 4.2 | Consider the use of workshops with residents, Members, PC/TC's. | Face to face engagement leads to better understanding and improved relationships. | April 2019 | Steve Dodds | To commence start of 2018/19. |
| 5. Written Communication | | | | | |
| 5.1 | Review the current communications process prior/post maintenance scheme. | Ensure improvements are implemented where highlighted and achieve continuous improvement. | April 2019 | Steve Dodds | Undertaken for term maintenance and internal maintenance schemes. |
| 5.2 | Evaluate results of the annual NHT survey. | Where areas are below national standard ensure an improvement plan is formulated and implemented. | March 2019 | Jim Fiskén | Areas for improvement from the 2017 NHT survey to be incorporated in to the process for 2018/19 programme. |