



SCRUTINY FORUM

Report of the

HIGHWAYS SCRUTINY PANEL

into

**THE PUBLIC RELATIONS
STRATEGY OF KIRKLEES
HIGHWAYS SERVICES**

1 February 2000

HIGHWAYS SCRUTINY PANEL

MEMBERS:	Councillor Ken Smith (Chair) Councillor Lawrence Conlon Councillor Martyn Bolt Councillor Robert Iredale
LEAD OFFICER:	Mr Adam Wilkinson (Head of Estates and Property Services)
COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATOR:	Julie McDowell (Tel. 01484 221711)

The Panel held meetings on 9 November 1999, 30 November 1999, 4 January 2000 and 31 January 2000.

The Panel received documentary submissions from Kirklees Highways Service. At all "meetings" it benefited from the presence of the Head of Highways Services, **Richard Otter** and Officers of Highways Services as required by the Panel. Helpful information was provided by **Nigel Broadbent** of Financial Services and **Terry Brown** of Highways Service. The Chair of the Highways and Transportation Service Management Board, **Councillor Peter Sykes**, attended two meetings.

This report was prepared as part of the standing work programme of the Panel. The Terms of Reference were:

"To scrutinise the Highways Service Public Relations Strategy - Current position and future developments."

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Panel started work in the autumn of 1999, with a Councillor membership which had little recent direct experience of the Highways and Transportation Committee or Service Management Board. We saw this as an advantage to our considerations since we were free of the type of preconceptions which Service Committee Members often accumulate, being left with the same sort of views as the general public has, based on similar information available to the general public. On the other hand, it meant that we had to spend a great deal of time considering a large amount of basic information in order to gain a good overall "feel" of activities of the Service. At times we felt overawed by the amount of information we considered and had to be particularly watchful of being distracted into areas which, though interesting and important, had to be peripheral to our initial studies.
- 1.2 The Panel did not start with any directive to consider particular areas of service, rather looked into all areas then focused on parts which we felt both merited consideration and may be productive within the shorter (municipal year) timescale we worked with for this first year of the Council scrutiny system.

- 1.3 This process, which had analysis of a large amount of information of both overview and detailed type, led quickly to a recognition that there seemed to be a disparity between what we felt to be the public perception of our Highways Service and many of the performance targets achieved by the Service.
- 1.4 The responsibility for planning, constructing and maintaining our roads and footways means that this Service has a direct affect on every resident of Kirklees every day. Perceptions of the Service are therefore a crucially important factor in determining perceptions of the Council as a whole. The Council cannot afford to have a service with such a constant and intimate contact with the public either underperforming or appearing to underperform. Any view of poor Council service which can lend itself to a generalisation of the image of the Council as a whole will have detrimental effect on Council activities on macro and micro levels. The effects of poor image can range from the disabled pensioner who doesn't have enough confidence in the Council to seek home help from it right through to the major company which may not expand within our area if it hasn't got a view of an effective Council as a partner.

2. **PERCEPTIONS**

- 2.1 We regularly see comments in the local newspapers which are derogatory about the condition of our roads. The line often taken by Kirklees residents writing to local newspapers suggests our road services are poor in comparison to other authority areas both nearby and distant.
- 2.2 The Council's Telephone Customer Care Survey of February 1999 placed three Highways issues in the top four "important issues or problems that the Council should be concerned about":

35% Roads in bad sate of repair

(15% *Schools/educational improvements*)

8% Traffic control/reduction/calming/congestion/safety

8% Paths in a bad state of repair

- 2.3 When we considered performance indicators and comparators, especially those with other Council areas, we found there to be a national deficit of objective and reliable figures. Systems are currently being developed to improve this situation nationally and the Panel is spending some time in pursuing this issue separately.

3. **FACTS**

- 3.1 A report to the Highways and Transportation Service Management Board of 2 December 1999 gave some "Performance Review" figures in a format to be routinely monitored by that Board.

Figures included:

Footway trips removed within 24 hours	99%
Dangerous potholes reported by the public repaired within 24 hours	96%
Direct works done well enough to not need repeat visit	99%
Schemes completed within published programme time	94%
Street lights repaired within 7 days	83%
Street lights not working	1%

This selection of figures in some of the areas thought to be a concern to the public show quite commendably high performance.

The "Ross" scheme for the public reporting potholes, with the aim of effecting repair within 24 hours, is remarkable both for its success and for the lack of public awareness of its success.

3.2 The main multi-storey car park of Huddersfield had to be closed for significant repairs about one year ago. Lack of certainty about the feasibility of safe repair led to local newspaper stories giving different likely outcomes of the problem, originally declared as a lost cause with no possibility of repair or replacement, finally moving to a successful repair and full recovery of the facility. It would seem that (quite apart from issues about the handling of the technical issue), the Council's handling of reports to the public had some lack of thought and foresight.

3.3 The Panel believes there is a local public perception that the Council does not spend enough on its highways. Sometimes this is expressed as the Council spending money on "service X" when it should be repairing roads or footways with this money.

In fact, Kirklees current spending is around 13% about the average spending of all Metropolitan Councils on Highways Services. Although Kirklees has the second lowest "Standard Spending Assessment" level in West Yorkshire for these services, it is the highest spender per head of population.

(These facts do not, of course, deal with the related issue of whether the priorities for service delivery are correct or being properly determined. This is a matter subject to separate scrutiny by this Panel).

3.4 The Head of the Highways Service agrees that his Department has been lacking in a full approach to public relations. The broad subject is on the agenda of his Management Team meetings and one of his senior officers already has responsibility for this area, but it is accepted that the Department can and should improve performance in this area.

4. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 The Highways Service should regard a good "Public Relations Strategy" as an important part of not only its own service but a contribution to all of the Council's activities.

It should immediately give time to developing a strategic approach to public relations, reporting to this Panel on 28 February 2000 and to its Service Management Board in early March 2000.

- 4.2 Such a strategy should be seen in a broad context, incorporating user consultation, media connections, forward planning issues of public interest, problem-solving on urgent issues, corporate interests of the Council and the broad development of an image of both the services and the service provider.
- 4.3 The Panel expect that a fully integrated and comprehensive strategy will affect not only public perception of services but also the services themselves if the strategy is designed to properly inform the decision-making processes in the Service.
- 4.4 The Panel accept that the strategy will in the first instance be something of a start, to be developed over perhaps a year or so.

5. **IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER AREAS**

5.1 **Budget**

The Panel does not envisage a need to have a "Public Relations Section" or anything like that. We do not see the need as being addressed by the employment of specialist staff. Rather we see the steps already taken by the Service's Management Team (allocation of lead responsibility to one Senior Officer and routinely placing an item on the Team's Agenda) being built on in a more focused manner.

This will initially involve giving some time to the development of an overall strategy which could include consultation with other agencies known to have developed PR strategies over years (the Police Service may be a good example), consultation with the Council's own staff dedicated to this sort of activity and perhaps starting a debate within the Council's Management Team and Cabinet about co-ordinated strategies across all Council Services.

It is possible that at some stage the Department could usefully engage some external consultancy in the development of the strategy from the fairly basic start we currently expect. Even if this does become necessary, we believe the expenditure to be small.

We therefore believe there to be no significant budgetary implications arising from these recommendations.

5.2 **Best Value, Equalities and the Environment**

The Panel see a Public Relations Strategy as a two way system, presenting information, seeking, receiving and using it. An effective strategy will in the long term inform and improve practice.

It would in this way be an obvious adjunct to other "Best Value" practices being adopted.

Similarly, improved practices due to a better informed feedback from consumers should have beneficial effects on equalities and the environment.

We therefore believe our recommendations have a potential to improve performance in all these areas.

Signed by:

Councillor K Smith (Chair of the Panel)

.....

Councillor L Conlon

.....

Councillor R Iredale

.....

Councillor M Bolt

.....

1 February 2000