

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**REPORT OF THE IMPROVEMENT AND REVIEW COMMITTEE
25 NOVEMBER 1999**

NOTE: A copy of the report mentioned below has been sent to all members of the Improvement and Review Committee and other members who had requested it. [See also the report to the Environment Committee on 11 January 2000] Further copies are available from Janet Purcell, Room 222, County Secretary's Department, County Hall, Hertford. Telephone: 01992 555562.

1. REVIEW OF HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE**1.1 Background**

The Director of Environment was asked in 1998 to review standards of highway maintenance. Such standards had remained largely unchanged for 15-20 years but increasing budgetary pressures and the introduction of the sustainability agenda had put these standards under stress.

The terms of reference for a review of highway maintenance services were agreed initially by a Member Reference Group on 4 November 1998. Work progressed from that date until the Improvement and Review Committee meeting on 6 July 1999 appointed a Member Review Group to oversee the completion of the review as a pilot Best Value Project. The Group were supported by officers from the Environment Department and a 'critical friend' from Corporate Services.

The review covered structural maintenance (repairs to the fabric of roads and footways), routine maintenance (cyclical work such as grass cutting), street lighting, winter maintenance and bridge maintenance. The review, because of its scope, consumed considerable officer and member resource. This reflects the fact that the subject represented a large element of the County's service and one which carries a high degree of technical complexity.

1.2 The Review Process

The review incorporated the **challenge, consult, and compare** elements of Best Value in order to derive new standards and to seek to secure continuous improvement.

These elements were approached as follows:-

Public Consultation

Hertfordshire Citizens Panel members took part in a workshop facilitated by MORI to gauge views of the relative importance of service elements and public satisfaction with them. These views were then confirmed using a 500 person telephone survey with members drawn from the Citizens Panel. Postal surveys were undertaken with local councils and business and some trade associations. Frontline service units were also asked to express views.

The consultation provided an extremely useful base to inform the review and appeared well received by the public. The use of external consultants was valuable in ensuring impartiality and objectivity in the research. The process highlighted the need to allow sufficient time for responses from consumers, for example parish councils, and to ensure that there is also follow up on the responses. New Best Value guidelines also suggest that a better understanding of the reasons for stakeholders views could be established by a reiterative process involving additional fora.

Comparisons

Extensive comparisons were made with other counties in the Eastern Region through a benchmarking group which had been established prior to the review. Internal comparisons were also made between the 16 service delivery units operating in the County.

The comparative benchmarking was particularly useful and had the advantage of an established network from which to draw information. Such a grouping offers opportunities for ongoing comparison for further continuous improvement of services. There is much merit in establishing benchmarking groups in advance of reviews to afford good quality transfer of information in a reasonable period of time.

Challenge

Throughout the review a process of challenging why services and service standards was maintained through the contributions of a 'critical friend' from outside the Environment Department, and contributions from other counties in the region. Value management techniques were used to further challenge the basis for current practice.

Compete

It was recognised early on in the review that this, the fourth element of Best Value, would need to be addressed subsequently and taken into account in future contractual and procurement arrangements once the future shape of the service and the associated service standards had been determined.

This will provide the opportunity to involve private sector suppliers in determining options for the future procurement of highway services.

1.3 Pressures for Change

The information drawn from the review process has shown demands for change coming from a number of sources. These can be categorised as stakeholders views, legislative pressures, sustainable transport policies, internal and regional benchmarking and the pressures on budgets.

The examination of these factors led the Review Group to a detailed analysis of fifty issues from which their recommendations were drawn.

1.4 Review Group Recommendations

The Review Group considered the conclusions drawn from examination of the issues referred to above and recommended to Environment Committee a series of changes in the areas of street lighting, routine, winter, structural and bridge maintenance, general cross functional items and management practices.

The Review Group recognised the complexity of the subject and the interrelationships between various service functions and concluded that the first priority for action must be the safety of highway users and the second that of minimising risk to the authority. They also recognised that, in order to safeguard the economic wellbeing of the County, there was a need to ensure the long term serviceability of the highway asset. The Group considered that the most important criteria should be to target, as a top priority, the roads which carry the busiest and heaviest traffic volumes. Their recommendations were therefore based on giving greater priority to roads carrying the highest traffic volumes. In addition, the need to extend planned approaches to maintenance whereby earlier interventions reduce future liabilities was considered to be a vital focus for management practices.

The recommendations from the Review Group were, therefore, for changes to operational standards as well as a proposal to introduce Asset Management Planning to ensure a more systematic, consistent and planned approach to highway maintenance.

1.5 Next Steps

The Review Group recognised that future work was required to introduce changes in practise and that it would be consistent with Best Value to consult on the proposed changes. They proposed that this be undertaken within the consultation on the Local Transport Plan.

The Group were also conscious that they had not been able to undertake the 'compete' element of Best Value. They concluded that the Environment Committee be asked to produce proposals for future procurement of highway maintenance services in accordance with the 'compete' element of Best Value and that the output from that inform the first year Best Value review of Contract Management and Procurement.

1.6 Conclusion

The Improvement and Review Committee agreed that the Review Groups recommendations be forwarded to the Environment Committee for consideration at their meeting on 11 January.

[The Environment Committee have agreed that the new operational standards be implemented with effect from April 2000 apart from:-

- (a) any changes to the precautionary salting routes which should be re-examined once the judgement of the House of Lords hearing of the East Sussex case is received;
- (b) an upgrading of the level of cycleways in the new maintenance hierarchy which should be amended to low traffic (high risk).

A new HERMIS 2000 management system and asset management module will be operational by October 2001 and work will also commence to test the 'competitive' element of Best Value in order to define the most efficient and effective means of procurement in readiness for the renewal of contracts from April 2002.]

**Iris Tarry
Chairman
County Hall
Hertford**

25 November 1999