



# Utilities Task Group

Final Report

Place Scrutiny Committee

March 2014

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Place Scrutiny Committee published a report in March 2012 recommending various measures to improve the quality of road repairs by utility companies which have to comply with a certain quality standard. A dedicated task group comprising of Councillors Polly Colthorpe, Andrew Moulding, Gordon Hook, James McInnes and Andrew Eastman reviewed the progress against its recommendations in a spotlight review in February 2014.
2. Throughout each year, the Council carries out a system of random sample inspections of reinstatements registered as permanent and placed in the highway by utility companies. Reinstatements must comply with the prescribed national Specification for the Reinstatements of Openings in Highways (SROH) as required under Section 71 of the New Roads and Street Works Act (NRSWA) 1991. This means that cores are extracted and analysed against the prescribed specification of materials and a standard of workmanship. In particular, they are measured to see that the correct depth of materials has been placed and that those materials have been properly compacted.
3. Poor quality reinstatements are less durable than those which comply, leading to early life failure and the need for premature maintenance. The early life failure of road reinstatements causes disruption and poses a danger to highway users but they also have a resource and environmental impact as new materials have to be sourced and transported to remedy defective reinstatements.

## FINDINGS

4. Representatives of BT Openreach, South West Water, Virgin Media, Wales and West as well as Western Power Distribution met with Council officers and Members on 18 February 2014 in order to discuss the quality of road reinstatements in the public highway.
5. Previously, compliance figures averaged 69 percent. They had risen to an average of 78 percent in 2012/13 and risen again to an astonishing 89.5 percent during the first and second quarters in 2013, with one utility company being 100 percent compliant in the second phase of this year's programme. The measures the Task Group originally recommended, including the training and improved supervision of the work force, had led to significant improvements. Some of the recommendations were now outdated, e.g. covering the work of the Best Practice Group which had fulfilled its remit but would re-convene during 2014 followed by annual and further meetings if required.

## PROGRESS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The following overview explains the progress against those original recommendations which are still relevant:

Recommendation	Progress
<p>Improvements in the training of operatives and promotion of the training DVD;</p> <p>Improved methods of supervision, including the training of supervisors</p>	<p><b>Achieved;</b> The utility companies had been working together to produce the training DVD which is publically available and has been used to train each member of the work force. The training DVD now forms part of each new employee's induction training.</p> <p>Each team of operatives ("gang") is supplied with a so-called Black Book which details methods of reinstatement taken from the SROH and which was initiated through the Best Practice Group and published at the same time as the roll-out of the training DVD. The contractor used by the utility companies carrying out the street works, the Kier Group plc, has been providing training to each operative and supervisor.</p> <p>There are still some challenges, especially in the supervision of sub-contractors, but the situation is continually improving. Compliance is now monitored at gang level and audit trails are kept for materials as well as the progress from the quarries to the sites.</p> <p>A mix of in-house audit and compliance monitoring, quality and safety control, on-site checks and communications with and workshops for operatives and supervisors ensure the improved quality of road reinstatements.</p>
<p>Improvements in the ways of testing for air void compliance, including use of relevant tools (density gauges)</p>	<p><b>Achieved;</b> Trials with South West Water proved that the current air voids specification is achievable and the method of testing suitable. A combination of appropriate supervision, materials and workmanship ensure compliance in this area.</p> <p>The use of density gauges is not practicable because they have to be used as the materials are being laid.</p>
<p>Improvements in the availability of suitable materials and the impact on the quality of reinstatements</p>	<p><b>Achieved;</b> The wide-spread use of improved materials, most notably 6mm SMA (Stone Mastic Asphalt), has had an impact on the quality of reinstatements, e.g. less "dipping" and air voids. Improved processes have also led to improvements, e.g. knitting edges together to stop the ingress of water.</p> <p>The introduction of audit trails for materials also helped the utility companies establish where to source the most high-quality materials as the direct link between the origin of a material and the compliance of a particular reinstatement becomes apparent.</p>
<p>Establishing comparable standards between the Council and the utility companies</p>	<p><b>Achieved;</b> The national HAUC (UK) Good Practice Guide to Implementing a Structured Coring Programme has been established with a leading involvement from Devon County Council officers and is increasingly recognised.</p>

## IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Members highlighted the importance of effective communications with the public about any planned works, any potential service disruption and especially if any delays occur. The utility companies already employ a range of ways to communicate with affected parties, e.g. by leaflet-dropping, via Facebook, Twitter, websites, texts and customer service telephone lines.

## CONCLUSION

In March 2012, the Place Scrutiny Committee recommended a range of measures with the aim to improve the quality of road repairs by utility companies. Since that report was published, the coring programmes have returned compliance figures which have significantly improved, up to 100 percent in some areas.

The utility companies have demonstrated a firm commitment to improve repairs placed in the public highway. Partnership working, the use of suitable materials and the better training and supervision of each member of the work force who handle and process the materials all led to a better quality process and improved results.

Because of the improvements achieved, the utility companies are working to roll out the practices used in Devon to all parts of their networks.

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**Electoral Divisions:** All

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Stuart Hughes, Highway Management and Flood Prevention

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers: None.

*Copies of this report may be obtained from the Democratic Services & Scrutiny Secretariat at County Hall, Room G31, Topsham Road, Exeter, Devon, EX2 4QD or by ringing 01392 384383. It will also be available on the County Council's website at:*

[www.devon.gov.uk/index/councildemocracy/decision\\_making/scrutiny/taskgroups.htm](http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/councildemocracy/decision_making/scrutiny/taskgroups.htm)

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