



Meeting: Transport Working Party **On:** 27/11/14
Title: NHT Highway Customer Satisfaction Survey 2014
Wards Affected: All Wards in Torbay
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1. Key points and Summary

- 1.1 The 'National Highways and Transportation' (NHT) survey for 2014 results have recently been released. Of the 78 Local Authorities that participated, Torbay Council's customers have placed it 67th in terms of satisfaction with 'the condition of highways'.
- 1.2 The respondents to the NHT survey indicated that the condition of highways received a satisfaction rating of only 25.7% which is 26.1% less than the highest placed authority and 17% less than this same benchmarking survey produced in 2008.
- 1.3 More people in Torbay felt that the condition of roads was the most important aspect of service to them personally and also the most in need of improvement.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Torbay Council's highway asset is its most valuable public asset. The gross replacement cost of this single asset is estimated as £713,415,000 in 'Whole of Government Accounting' (WGA) terms.
- 2.2 All residents and visitors to Torbay will use this asset on a regular and mostly daily basis. The condition of the road influences how people think of their neighbourhood and neglected looking roads can rapidly lead to public dissatisfaction. This is clearly reflected in the NHT survey results and in letters and phone calls received within Highways and increasingly now being reported to Ward Councillors.
- 2.3 The public satisfaction with this service has been showing a rapid decline since the surveys began in 2008 where at that time a 44.80% satisfaction score was received. The current 25.7% score in satisfaction with the condition of the highways bucks a national trend where scores elsewhere are showing an

increase in satisfaction with this service. Whilst the public perception is at odds with other sources of information such as the condition surveys and national efficiency studies, it still needs to be addressed.

3. National Highways and Transportation (NHT) Survey

- 3.1 The NHT survey is produced by an organisation called ‘Measure to improve’ (M2I) and administered by IPSIS/MORI. The results are of interest to the Department for Transport (DfT) and used for benchmarking purposes by highway authorities. Despite the DfT’s interest and their urging of highway authorities to participate, it is still their expectation that the survey costs will fall to individual highway authorities.
- 3.2 The 2014 survey forms were sent to 3,300 people within Torbay from which 848 responses were received. This is a 25.7% response rate which placed Torbay within the top third in this regard. This indicates the importance that residents place on this essential amenity. The survey covers most topic areas within highways and transportation and endeavours to encourage people to explain which topics are the most important to them and how satisfied they are with the associated service delivery. As the condition of roads was both ‘the most important’ and the ‘most in need of improvement’ this topic is the basis of this report.
- 3.3 Torbay Council as a member of the ‘South West Highways Improvement Group’ has participated in this survey since its instigation in 2008. Although a financial decision was taken to make a saving last year and to not take part.

Question	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2014
Condition of road surfaces %	44.80	45.24	37.25	32.95	30.35	25.70

- 3.4 The survey results are a key trending tool within the Asset Management Plan and as the survey covers a wide range of topics are of interest to many activities within the authority as a whole. A sample of the survey questionnaire and Torbay’s Executive Summary are both in the appendices of this report.

4. Discussion

- 4.1 There is currently a large gap between customer expectations and the reality of the condition of roads within Torbay.
- 4.2 The reality of this situation is that the road network within Torbay (and indeed the rest of the nation) is in steady decline despite all of the funding that is provided to ‘Highways’ being allocated strictly according to asset management principles. The Council’s Transport Asset Management Plan, which is on the public website, sets out these principles and shows the long term effect that inadequate expenditure on the highway network will produce. Despite this and previous evidence, the level of funding provided by the DfT is considered to be less than half of that required for just maintaining the roads in their current condition. To further exacerbate the situation, local priorities mean that 30% of the already inadequate DfT highway maintenance budget provision is then top sliced and used to help other service areas within the Council. Whilst this highway maintenance capital allocation is no longer ring-fenced, by continuing to top

slice, the Council is immediately placed in a difficult bargaining position to bid for additional highway maintenance funding. It also means that the lost funding to the service over a typical three year period represents some 70 roads that could have received preventative maintenance and which by now will have deteriorated further. In some instances this may mean that higher cost surfacing treatments will then be required at a future date.

4.3 However, whilst the road network condition is in decline, condition surveys and other studies part commissioned by the DfT show the network to be in better condition than that of most other south west highway authorities and indeed that the Council's roads maintenance is being carried out in a cost efficient manner. Early national studies covering a 5 year period suggest that the service is on 'the minimum cost frontier' with little or no scope for further efficiencies. Unfortunately, the study concerned is confidential and will not be seen in its whole by the DfT. The study is being based on Cost, Quality and Customer Satisfaction (CQC) but presently it is weighed more on the first two areas. When it is further refined to reflect the customer satisfaction, Torbay's position in the results would be expected to fall but presently the service has been near to, or on, the minimum cost frontier for the whole of the 5 year study period. It is hoped that eventually the authority's example will be shared with the Highway Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP) who do have links to the DfT and that some benefits will result. In the meantime a CQC Executive Summary dated September 2014 is in the appendices of this report, highlighting the confidentiality issues. The authority was initially asked to participate in the CQC study as a result its then unbroken run of taking part in the NHT survey and its ability to provide the quality and cost data required.

4.4 Asset Management techniques mean that more resources should be given to higher classification roads and that lower cost preventative treatments be used in preference to resurfacing/reconstruction on already failed road surfaces. These principles are used to produce annual lists of maintenance works and the authority has not yet resorted to dealing with 'worst first' situations. Accordingly, there are roads within the backlog of sites that are structurally unsound, uneven and unsightly but yet which still remain functional. These roads are left until there is no further option but to reconstruct them in order to keep them usable. Meanwhile, preventative treatments that allow more coverage of sites, such as surface dressing and micro-asphalting will be used on roads that will be clearly in far better condition than those that are apparently being ignored. This is a further source of frustration to customers who may quite rightly ask, why has Road A just been resurfaced when their Road B is much worse and is falling apart? However, by keeping to these principles the authority has managed to slow the rate of deterioration of many local estate roads. This is reflected in the various condition survey comparisons. A recent redacted table below shows Torbay's unclassified road carriageway condition compared to most of the other south west authorities, using national reporting data. Green represents the percentage of unclassified roads in good condition, amber ones where surfacing treatments should be considered and red when the road is in need of major intervention treatment.

Authority	Green %	Amber %	Red %
xxxxxx	42.93%	35.21%	21.87%
xxxxxxxxxxxx	62.28%	28.26%	9.47%

xxxxxxx	45.44%	38.85%	15.71%
xxxxxxxxx	55.71%	30.67%	13.62%
xxxxx xxxxxxxx	52.09%	32.76%	15.15%
xxxxx	61.90%	23.81%	14.29%
Torbay	62.20%	30.97%	6.83%
xxxxxxxxx	50.32%	33.90%	15.78%
xxxxx	31.69%	39.00%	29.31%
xxxxxx	46.85%	37.30%	15.85%
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	41.00%	45.80%	13.20%
xxxxxxxxx	33.67%	35.50%	30.83%

- 4.5 By maintaining the principles of asset management, many people may see surface dressing being applied whereas relatively few will benefit from seeing large lengths of newly resurfaced roads. Surface dressing appears to many, to be a cheap fix that does not improve the ride quality of a road and it can be initially messy when applied. However when used at the optimum intervals this treatment will greatly extend the useful life of a road. This is clearly evidenced by the surface dressing that was applied to the A380 Hellevoetsluis Way in 2009 that is still performing well. However, the lack of visible high profile resurfacing schemes, may make this authority to appear to be less customer orientated than others but meanwhile a larger authority's little used unclassified road network may be in a deplorable condition. Conversely, little used unclassified roads in a compact urban area such as Torbay are few and far between; therefore our entire network is always in the public eye.
- 4.6 Potholes are very much in the media these days and the announcement that £168M has been made available by the DfT to local authorities has raised public expectations that this will lead to a complete eradication of potholes. To put this into context Torbay Council received less than £200,000 from this fund with details of where this is being spent put onto the public website. The presence of potholes in a road surface normally indicate that the road surface itself is in need of attention and more often than not, at this time the surface will be too far deteriorated to be able to receive a preventative surfacing treatment. Pothole locations are automatically mapped and recorded during routine safety inspections and after being reported by members of the public. Interrogation of the associated maintenance management system software then enables the plotting of pothole cluster sites which are then added to the list of maintenance backlog sites. Any such newly added cluster site will be carefully assessed to see the most cost effective type of treatment available. In the process it may displace another site that was previously prioritised for resurfacing if there is not sufficient funding to do both. In these times of austerity this type of decision is being required more frequently and residents of a previously prioritised street will invariably be disappointed and annoyed that they have to wait for at least another year before they have their chance of a new surface.
- 4.7 Returning to the subject of potholes, it is extremely rare for patching or filling potholes to be the only work required on a street, as the surrounding surface to the defect will invariably also be of a suspect nature. Therefore, it is usually preferable to restore the resilience of a surface than to simply patch it. This fact together with cost considerations drives the authority's need to continue to apply

the safety defect intervention criteria when dealing with potholes. However, this rigid adherence to policy will certainly be a large factor in public dissatisfaction with the highway maintenance service.

- 4.8 Torbay Council does publish press releases on its improvement works, however, these are not always published or the press may choose to concentrate on the effects on traffic flow rather than the improvement works. Also with more comments on social media officer views are expressed without an answer.

A good example of this as this report is being written, there was a person commenting in a challenging way on how Torbay Council has used its share of the £168M pothole fund (see below). This being written in a manner to suggest that it has been allocated elsewhere and not used for maintenance purposes. In fact precise details of what is being done are already on the Council's website as is the fact that only £198,969 was provided to this authority. Continuous unanswered comments of this nature will not improve customer perception in the abilities of the authority and not publishing any good news stories will not rebalance the situation.

["xxx2014 | October 12 2014, 12:04PM](#)

What's happened to the £168 million that the government has given to local councils to fix potholes? What's Torbay Council spent their share on? Councils were told it had to be spent on potholes and nothing else! Answers needed here"

- 4.9 Communication with the general public is strongly encouraged within the Streetscene department as a whole. Every effort is made to deal directly with customers who take the trouble to contact the team. The office phones will be continually manned throughout business hours. Letters and emails are logged into a dedicated file management system to ensure a prompt response and to log the associated events. Third party reports of defects through the Council's website are automatically downloaded to TOR2 (if they are of a cyclical nature) or to the area's Streetscene Inspector (if they are reporting a pothole or safety concern).
- 4.10 There are no doubt many other issues affecting the public's relative lack of satisfaction with the condition of the roads in Torbay. However, previous studies on free text statements used within the survey revealed that some of the Torbay survey responses received were referring to roads outside of the Bay which formed part of their journey to work. These statements related to levels of congestion experienced when getting through Totnes or Newton Abbot and the condition of roads in Marldon and Compton. So some of the scoring may not therefore be a totally true reflection.

5. Difficult Choices

- 5.1 Taking all of the above factors into account, the bare facts are that despite Torbay Council having a cost efficient highway maintenance service and its road network being of a comparative standard to similar authorities, there is still an underlying problem of not meeting the expectations of customers. The only way to improve the condition of the highway network will be to have a major cash investment in real terms, to address the known scheme backlog and subsequently a more realistic level of funding to maintain it. Meanwhile, to begin to attempt to address all of the concerns of customers will be potentially be even more of a challenge and will for instance require more openness on funding and spending decisions within highway maintenance and to determine mechanisms to make customers aware of accomplishments as well as perceived failings.

- 5.2 The top slicing of the capital highway maintenance grant in the current times of localism and austerity is understandable but will have long a term sustainability impact. The loss of any funding to this budget area which is already suffering from under investment may not have an immediate effect on the overall asset but over 10 years the decline in carriageway condition will be significant (see the diagram below). Eventually a centralised commitment to improve the nation's infrastructure may become a reality and whilst we need to continue to make the most of the actual funding provision that we receive, we must ensure that local decisions do not damage the authority's ability to bid for additional funding when it is available.

Carriageway Lifecycle Planning Toolkit



CONDITION GRAPH

Select Asset Group:



The diagram above from the authority's Asset Management Plan shows the predicted decline in the condition of unclassified roads using the industry standard 'lifecycle planning toolkit' based on the current levels of highway maintenance expenditure. The green and yellow areas represent good and fair condition roads, whereas the orange and red show poor and very poor.

- 5.3 Torbay Council needs to decide how committed it is going to be to try to improve the condition of its highway network. The decline in highway conditions may be a national issue but it is certainly affecting the local network. Failing that, the customers must be made better aware of the accomplishments that are being made and the fact that this authority is performing well with the limited funds that are available. At the very least public accusations of failings should be addressed at their point of origin to correct any misreporting of issues. Also there should be more information made available to members of the public on decisions associated with the funding of road schemes to highlight the service efficiencies.

6. Conclusion

Torbay Council's customers are expecting and demanding that more is done to improve the condition of their roads. The results of the NHT Survey clearly

illustrate this. Whilst other reports and sources may show the authority's road network to be in a similar condition that most others, customers here still want to see improvements. The authority needs to review how this information is presented to the public.

Patrick Carney
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Appendices

None.

Background Papers:

The following documents/files were used to compile this report:

HMEP UK Roads Liaison Group – Highway Infrastructure Asset Management Guidance
– May 2013

HMEP – Potholes Review, Prevention and a Better Cure – April 2012

HMEP – Lifecycle Planning Toolkit – Nov 2012

Development of a weighting set for the unclassified road network – WDM Ltd – Sept
2014