

Briefing Note: Communications and Engagement

Brent Council already provides a range of information to residents about pothole management, highway maintenance, reporting processes and repair prioritisation through its website, FixMyStreet, customer correspondence and published highway maintenance guidance.

Subject to internal liaison between the relevant Directorates, the proposed programme will therefore build on and improve existing communications, rather than creating a wholly new programme. The aim will be to make information easier to find and understand, improve transparency around maintenance decisions, and provide residents with clearer information about the scale of the challenge and the investment being made.

Officers will review existing material and identify opportunities to improve accessibility, visibility and consistency. This will include consideration of a dedicated Highways Maintenance information hub, linked from the Council's existing pothole and highways webpages.

1. Understanding why potholes form

Existing information on the Council's website explains the causes of potholes and highway deterioration. This will be reviewed and, where appropriate, expanded to provide a clearer explanation of:

- how repeated traffic loading contributes to deterioration;
- how water entering cracks and defects can accelerate deterioration;
- the effect of prolonged wet and cold weather and seasonal temperature changes;
- why pothole formation can increase significantly during winter; and
- why potholes remain a significant challenge on an ageing highway network.

The intention will be to explain the underlying causes in straightforward, accessible language, supported by photographs and illustrations where these improve understanding.

A series of short “Highways Explained” features could also be developed, for example *“Why does a pothole come back?”*, *“Why isn’t every reported pothole repaired immediately?”* and *“What happens after you report a pothole?”*. These could be used across the Council's website and social media channels.

2. Explaining the Wider Highway Maintenance Challenge

The Council will provide clearer information about the wider challenges involved in maintaining a large highway network within finite resources.

Communications will explain that highway assets deteriorate over time and that available funding does not permit all assets that would benefit from reconstruction or resurfacing to be treated at the same time. Maintenance therefore has to be

prioritised according to factors such as condition, safety and risk, highway hierarchy, traffic usage, asset lifecycle considerations and available funding.

The Council's Highways Maintenance Transparency Report already provides information about the network, funding, maintenance activity and the factors influencing maintenance decisions. This information can be used as a principal source for public-facing communications.

A simple "How we decide what gets repaired" graphic or flowchart could be developed to show the process from report/inspection through risk assessment, prioritisation and repair. This would complement the existing Highway Maintenance Briefing Note.

3. Investment and outcomes

Existing information on highway investment and maintenance programmes will be brought together and communicated more clearly.

Where appropriate, communications will highlight:

- annual planned highway maintenance investment;
- reactive maintenance expenditure;
- Department for Transport funding;
- SCIL and other external funding;
- resurfacing, reconstruction and patching programmes;
- pothole and other defect repair activity; and
- the outcomes being achieved through this investment.

The quarterly highways dashboard proposed in response to the Scrutiny recommendation will provide an opportunity to give Members and residents a concise and regular overview of maintenance activity and performance.

Subject to agreement, a simplified version of the quarterly dashboard could also be included periodically in the Brent Magazine, rather than attempting to reproduce all of the detailed information. This could provide a particularly accessible way of explaining investment, maintenance activity and performance to residents who do not routinely visit the highways webpages.

4. Promoting reporting channels

Residents already have established channels for reporting potholes and other highway defects:

- Brent Council's online reporting system;
- FixMyStreet; and
- highways.management@brent.gov.uk.

These channels will continue to be promoted through the Council's website and other appropriate communications.

Guidance will also make clearer what information residents can provide to help the Council investigate reports efficiently, particularly an accurate location and, where appropriate and safe to do so, a photograph.

Periodic “**Report it right**” communications could be used to remind residents of the appropriate reporting channels and the information that helps officers identify and assess a defect quickly.

5. Greater Transparency about Assessment and Prioritisation

Brent already has a Highway Maintenance Briefing Note explaining how highway defects are assessed and prioritised. This includes information on:

- how defects are reported and inspected;
- defect categories and investigation thresholds;
- the factors considered when assessing risk;
- examples of defects that are and are not normally prioritised;
- reactive maintenance funding constraints; and
- repair activity and expenditure.

The briefing note will be reviewed and updated, including consideration of improved photographs and clearer presentation, before being used more extensively as public-facing information.

The communications will explain that reporting a defect does not automatically mean that immediate repair will be undertaken. Defects are assessed according to their risk and available resources, with priority given to those presenting the greatest risk to highway users.

6. Keeping Residents Informed

Residents who report defects through FixMyStreet and provide an email address already receive automated updates as their report progresses through the relevant stages.

Officers will work to review the standard wording used in these updates and ensure that the information provided is clear and consistent. Officers will also continue to work with the relevant system and operational teams to ensure that the information feeding into customer updates remains accurate and up to date.

Where practicable, opportunities to improve information about inspection decisions, repair arrangements and completion of works will also be explored.

7. Wider Communications and Engagement Opportunities

Subject to agreement with relevant Council teams, the following additional opportunities could be considered as part of the programme:

7.1 Quarterly highways dashboard

The dashboard could become the central recurring product from which other communications are derived. A concise version could be used on the Council website, with selected information reproduced through the Brent Magazine, Members' communications and social media.

7.2 Brent website

Consider a periodic homepage banner or “spotlight” feature directing residents to the highways maintenance information hub. This could be particularly useful at times when public interest is higher, such as following severe winter weather.

7.3 Social media

Develop a planned series of short, visual posts for the Council's social media channels, including X and other appropriate platforms. Examples could include:

- *“What happens when you report a pothole?”*
- *“Did you know? – how many kilometres of roads and footways Brent maintains”*
- *“This month in highways – repairs completed and planned”*
- *“Why potholes increase after periods of wet and cold weather”*
- photographs showing repairs before and after;
- short explanations of different types of highway repair; and
- links to the quarterly dashboard and reporting channels.

These could be particularly useful if kept short, visual and occasional, rather than creating a high volume of routine posts.

7.4 Seasonal communications

Consider a recurring winter highways campaign explaining why pothole numbers can increase during prolonged periods of wet and cold weather, how the Council responds, and how residents should report defects.

A corresponding spring update could explain the programme of planned repairs following the winter period and the distinction between reactive repairs and planned resurfacing or reconstruction.

7.5 “Behind the scenes” features

Short articles, photographs or videos could explain what residents do not normally see: highway inspections, condition surveys, pothole repairs, drainage cleansing, resurfacing operations or the use of technology to assess road condition. These could help demonstrate the scale and complexity of maintaining the network.

7.6 Member and ward communications

Where appropriate, a short quarterly summary could be provided to Councillors for use in ward communications, particularly where significant maintenance programmes or works are taking place in their wards. This would complement,

rather than replace, the future ward-level information that is expected to become available through the new asset management system.

7.7 Before-and-after information

Where suitable, photographs could be used to demonstrate completed schemes and repairs. This would provide a simple visual demonstration of outcomes and could also be incorporated into the website, Magazine and social media content.

7.8 Annual “State of the Highways” summary

The existing annual Highways Capital Maintenance Programme report to Cabinet could be reviewed and potentially revamped into a more accessible annual “State of the Highways” report.

Rather than creating a separate annual publication, the existing Cabinet report could provide the core information, presented in a more accessible and resident-friendly format. This could bring together the latest annual condition survey results, highway investment and funding, planned and reactive maintenance activity, major schemes, performance against key indicators and the outcomes achieved during the year.

The annual report could use clear graphics, photographs, maps and plain-English explanations to provide a concise picture of the condition of Brent's highways, what has been invested, what work has been undertaken and the key priorities for the following year.

This would provide a useful annual narrative around the quarterly dashboard, with the quarterly reports showing current activity and performance and the annual State of the Highways report providing a broader view of the network and longer-term trends.

8.0 Implementation and review

The programme will be delivered primarily through existing Council communication channels, including the highways webpages, FixMyStreet, customer correspondence, published reports, the Brent Magazine and, where agreed, Council social media channels.

The first stage will be to audit and rationalise existing information, identify gaps or duplication, update the Highway Maintenance Briefing Note and consider the structure of a dedicated highways maintenance information hub.

The additional communications opportunities identified above would be developed in consultation with the Council's Communications team and other relevant services. Not all will necessarily be adopted; their suitability, resource implications, timing and communication priorities would need to be considered internally.

The programme should be proportionate and coordinated, with the quarterly dashboard, annual State of the Highways report and annual transparency

information providing the core factual material from which shorter communications can be developed. This avoids creating a large volume of separate communications while allowing important information to reach residents through different channels.