

TRANSPORT SELECT COMMITTEE  
10<sup>th</sup> July 2008

**REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COMMUNITY  
HIGHWAY OFFICERS IN IMPROVING SERVICE  
PERFORMANCE.**

**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

To provide Members with an overview of the role of the Community Highway Officers and their effectiveness on Service Improvement targets. To consider whether the use of additional low-cost communications technology whilst 'on the road' could deliver further improvements and efficiencies.

**SUMMARY**

The significant increase in the number of Community Highways Officers has helped to bring about major improvement in some areas of Surrey Highways' performance. There are many examples of good practice across both the East and West areas, but these need to be shared more widely to maximise the benefits.

There are some specific area or issues where performance is not yet up to standard, but these are now being addressed. The focus will be on two areas for the coming months:

- firstly, New Roads and Street Works Act 'Section 74' activities, whereby utility companies are charged if they overstay their agreed period on site or leave behind debris that obstructs the flow of traffic
- secondly, on interaction and engagement with Councillors and community stakeholders.

There needs to be careful prioritising and monitoring of all the wide-ranging CHO activities by managers, however, as their time is already fully allocated.

**KEY ISSUES**

**1. BACKGROUND**

The new role of Community Highways Officers (CHOs) was developed as part of the Surrey Highways drive to become more customer focused and to boost public and Member confidence in the service. It combined together the traditional highways steward tasks of responding to queries and reports from members of the public, identifying repair work required and agreeing licenses, with the inspection of utility company works (known as NRSWA sample inspections, from the New Roads and Street Works Act) and an increased emphasis on local engagement. The CHOs were intended to work alongside county councillors, customers and stakeholders within a defined local area, and to develop a sound awareness of all highway related works within that area.

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In developing the CHO role, opportunities were also sought to maximise efficiencies by reducing duplication where a variety of inspection activities overlapped, in particular the NRSWA inspections. The resulting integration of NRSWA activities has enabled the number of CHOs to be increased, by offsetting the cost of a proportion of their time against recoverable NRSWA charges. These charges include Section 74 charges (with reference to the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991), which are incurred when utilities companies overstay the agreed period on site, or leave debris and materials on site once the works are completed. They are intended as a method of deterring the utility companies from causing obstructions that disrupt the free-flow of traffic, or of pedestrians, on the highway network.

In order to achieve the numbers of sample inspections required, and to provide sufficient supervision of potential Section 74 over-runs, 30% of each CHOs working week has been assigned to recoverable NRSWA activities. These activities were described in detail in the report to this committee on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2008.

### 2. IMPLEMENTATION

Based on an assessment of their likely workload and the size and nature of the areas to be covered, an initial distribution of CHOs was developed which resulted in 2 to 3 CHOs per district, with the addition of a number of Area CHOs (3 in the East and 2 in the West). The overall number of posts created across the county was 34 (17 in both East and West).

Several of these posts were filled from existing staff who had been Highway Stewards, and the remainder were recruited between August and October 2007. All posts have been filled. The number assigned to some of the districts was later adjusted, after the operational experiences of the initial months (and the departure of two of the Area CHOs from the East – these posts have been recruited as CHOs).

The current distribution of CHOs is as follows:

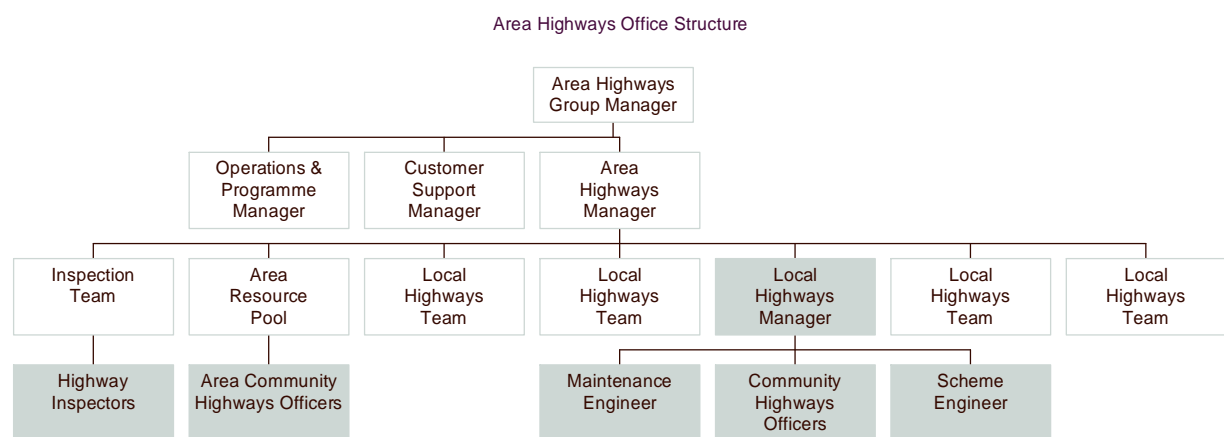
WEST		EAST	
Guildford	3	Elmbridge	4
Runnymede	2	Epsom & Ewell	2
Spelthorne	3	Mole Valley	4
Surrey Heath	2	Reigate & Banstead	4
Waverley	3	Tandridge	3
Woking	2		
Area wide	2		
Total	17	Total	17

Each of the CHOs has been provided with a clearly branded vehicle, customised with all the necessary safety features such as warning markings and flashing beacons. They have also been provided with Surrey Highways branded polo shirts, fleeces and hi-visibility jackets, all of which helps the public to identify them on the street, and to therefore be assured that the Service is out and about, responding to their requests and concerns.

With the recruitment of a large number of staff from a wide range of backgrounds, and with the addition of new activities, a comprehensive training programme was required to ensure that the CHOs had all the tools and information they require to successfully carry out their role. An induction programme was developed, and most the training has now been delivered, particularly in key areas such as the statutory training for the NRSWA inspections. This has been supplemented by considerable 'on-the-job' training from colleagues, including Maintenance Engineers and Street Works Officers.

### 3. THE COMMUNITY HIGHWAYS OFFICER ROLE

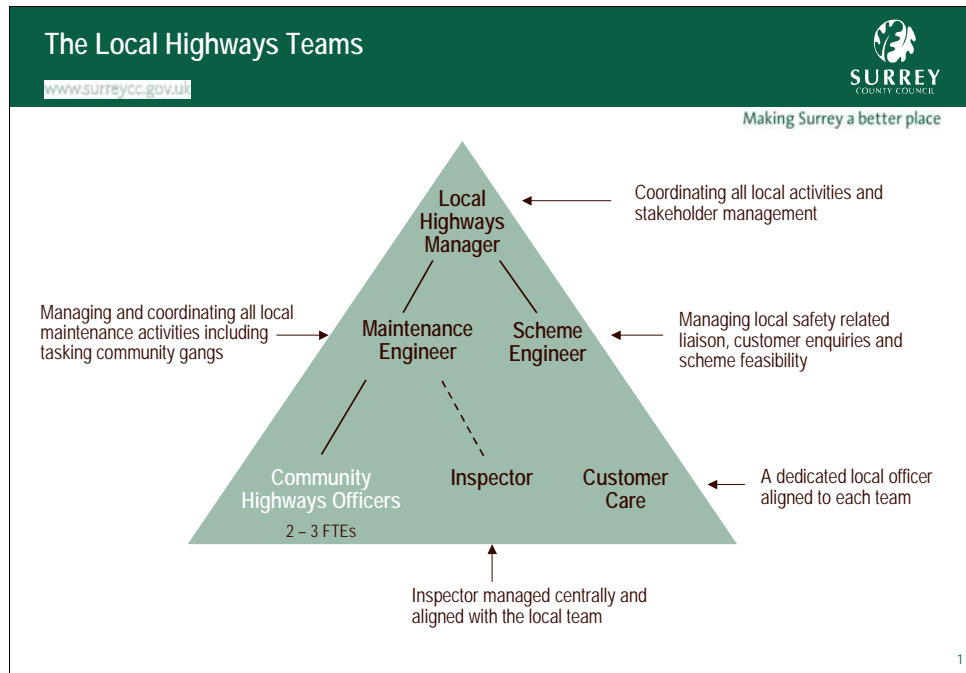
The CHOs form part of the Local Highways teams for each district, and in terms of the formal organisational structure, they report to the Local Highways Manager for each district. The structure diagram is included below.



On a more day-to-day basis, however, much of the support for the CHOs is provided by the Maintenance Engineers, who develop and coordinate the maintenance works programme within the district. The Engineer will generally have additional technical experience, advising the CHOs where required, and can re-deploy the CHOs across the whole district as required to deal with incidents or emergencies. Whilst the CHO will develop the Community gangs work schedule for their patch, the Engineer will ensure that the gang is fully utilised across the whole district. The diagram below shows the operational structure of the local highways team.

The Highways Inspectors are currently a dedicated team, carrying out the statutory highway safety inspections to a fixed annual schedule. Although not technically part of the local highways team, they liaise with the CHOs frequently to share local knowledge and information on problems.

The CHOs have a varied and wide-ranging role, and one of the key tasks for them and for their managers is ensuring that the right balance is met between these different demands on their time, whilst still achieving the levels of performance and targets required in each area. Each of the main activities is described below, along with performance to date and some areas for improvement.



### • Customer Enquiries

Responding to customer enquiries is one of the key functions of the Area Offices - in 2007/08, approximately 89,000 enquiries were resolved by Area Office staff – and is therefore measured as a key Service Performance Indicator. A 20-day standard response time is applied, and although enquiries are distributed across all members of staff and cannot therefore be used as a true measure of CHO performance alone, the CHOs will often have contributed to the resolution of the enquiry in some way. There has been consistent improvement in the number of overall enquiries completed within 20 days since April 2007, reaching 60% in the week commencing 20<sup>th</sup> June 2008. Further detail (to April 2008) is provided in Annex 1.

It is estimated that each CHO will be personally assigned around 30 individual enquiries each week. These include reports of potholes, and the percentage of these specific enquiries completed within the 20 day standard response time is also measured on a monthly basis. Results have varied during the last year, and although they reached over 80% in some months during 2007/08, an average of 68.8% of pothole enquiries received during Q3 were completed within 20 days. Although this improved to 76% meeting the target the week commencing 20<sup>th</sup> June 2008, the Service Performance Manager has indicated that there is not yet a clear trend of consistent improvement. Further detail (to April 2008) is provided in Annex 2.

### • Tasking Community Gangs

Although a vital part of the CHO role, there is no specific measure of performance for this activity that would add value to the Service. Orders for works are placed as and when required, and in accordance with the agreed standards, and Community Gangs are kept fully occupied to ensure efficiency and value for money. However, these functions do require regular contact with Members and other stakeholders, in directly receiving reports of problems, liaising on tasks for the Community Gangs, and in providing feedback and updates on works as they are completed.

### • Vehicle Crossovers

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Following the introduction of the new procedure for vehicle crossovers in November 2007, an average of 70 applications and related enquiries per month have been received in the East area, and 35 per month in the West this year. The rate at which these are completed depends upon both the customers and their chosen contractors, and is therefore not reflective of the CHOs performance. Estimates on the proportion of CHO time taken each week for initial site checks and inspections on the completed works will clearly also vary, and current estimates are from between approximately 10 and 20%.

- **Agreeing Licensing requests** (skips, scaffolds etc on the highway)

Requests for permission to erect scaffolding or place skips on the highway are received and administrated by business support staff. CHOs provide authorisation of a site's suitability, often based on local knowledge of the area. However, some skip locations, and all scaffold requests, require a specific site visit to review the proposals before authorisation is provided. In the event that an unlit or unlicensed skip or scaffold is reported or identified by a CHO on site, business support officers will contact the skip company concerned to arrange for the appropriate action to be taken, including removal if necessary. If this action is not taken, the county council as highway authority can remove the skip or scaffold and recharge the provider for any costs incurred. Persistent offenders can be removed from the authorised list of providers, which means they will no longer be licensed to operate within the county. Further breaches can then be dealt with by prosecution under the Highways Act.

There are no performance measures for this task, but it is estimated that this activity takes approximately 5% of the CHOs working week.

- **Damage to County Property**

Collecting information and evidence to support the recovery of repair costs is also part of the CHO role, but overall this is a function shared with Business Support staff. Whilst the sums recovered are recorded, these fluctuate according to the numbers and scale of the incidents concerned, and therefore provide no practical assessment of the performance of the CHOs as a whole.

- **Insurance Claims**

Approximately 80-100 insurance claims are received in each area per month. These continue to be robustly defended, based on our established safety inspection regime in Surrey, and 80-85% are refuted. The CHOs carry out any investigations required on site and provide additional information on the location and history of particular problems. It has been noted by one business support officer involved in handling claims that this local knowledge appears to have helped improve the quality of the investigation reports and the speed with which they are prepared.

- **Health & Safety Audits**

These on-site checks are carried out to ensure that our Partner Constructors are undertaking works on our behalf using the correct health and safety procedures and equipment. They can be carried out by other officers, but it is estimated that the CHOs spend up to 10% of their time carrying out both these and the quality checks (referred to below) together. Each Area Office is required to complete 20 checks per month. In both April and May 2008, the required number of audits has been met across the county. More detail is shown in Annex 3.

- **Quality checks on SHiP works**

These are on-site checks to monitor the quality of work undertaken by our Partner Constructors. The pass/failure rate is therefore not a measure of CHO performance, and it should be noted that these may sometimes be carried out by other staff, such as maintenance or contract engineers. 10% of all jobs under the value of £5000 should be checked each month but, because the number of jobs vary, there is no set number undertaken.

- **New Roads and Street Works Act (NRSWA) activities**

Sample Inspections:

The level of NRSWA sample inspections that can be carried out is calculated using a standard formula and is based on the amount of work carried out within each district by each of the main utility undertakers. The inspections are generated by the Confirm system using details of the actual works provided by the utility companies, and the annual target is approximately 10,000 for the ten main companies operating within Surrey.

CHOs began carrying out NRSWA sample inspection in January and February 2008, once accredited training had been completed. Overall for 2007/08, 82.6% of the possible sample inspections were completed, against a target of 90%, the shortfall being primarily due to changes in staffing structures and the hand-over to less experienced staff. For further information please see Annex 3.

In 2008/09, the cumulative total for sample inspections completed is 14.3% completed by the end of May. This is currently off-target for achieving the required 90% by year end. However recent changes to legislation (as discussed in the report to this committee on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2008) have required changes to the system that delivers notifications of works from the utility companies. This has meant that, with reduced numbers of notifications in the Confirm system, reduced numbers of inspections are being generated.

Considerable progress is being made in addressing this by the Streetworks Team and, as it is still early in the financial year, the inspections will be brought back on target. The number of defects identified is 2.6%, on track against a target of 5%, but it should be noted that although this is a performance indicator for the CHOs, it is actually governed by the utilities themselves as it is a measure of their quality of workmanship and procedures.

There have been a number of concerns regarding the quality of the inspections being undertaken and the higher than expected number of abortive inspections being reported (currently 48% against a target of 35%), but these have been identified as a training issue, and specific refresher training is being organised.

Identifying utility overstays where charges can be recovered (Section 74s):

Only a very small number of instances of utilities over-staying their agreed period have been identified by the CHOs in 2008/09 to date (the values of which have yet to be validated). Investigations have established there is a significant need for refresher training, because although training was previously delivered on how to undertake Section 74s, sample inspections have been the priority to date. This is now a significant concern, as reduced income will limit our ability to offset a proportion of

the CHO staffing costs. The Streetworks Manager is therefore currently working with the Area Highways Managers to address this issue as a priority.

General issues:

A review of the time spent by the CHOs on their various activities, including rechargeable NRSWA, has revealed that they currently only spend between 15% and 20% of their time on the latter. In these circumstances there is a need and scope to increase this commitment and ways of facilitating this for the CHOs are being developed by the East and West Area Group Managers.

It should be noted, however, that the current 10-15% time shortfall is still being fully utilised on other activities described earlier in this report and these are likely to be affected as the focus is returned to rechargeable NRSWA activities.

• **Liaison with County Councillors and other stakeholders**

One key priority area for the CHOs is to build and maintain clear communications links with County Members for the exchange of information on activities within the CHO 'patch', each patch corresponding to two or three electoral divisions. It is also intended that the CHOs will continue to develop links with other community stakeholders such as Parish Councils, and with those in overlapping roles in other organisations such as local Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and District Neighbourhood Officers (DNOs).

This liaison is most apparent in identifying works to be undertaken by the Community Gangs; County Members are invited to provide the CHOs with lists of issues that then form the basis of the works schedule for the gangs. CHOs will discuss specific issues with the appropriate Member, and provide regular feedback on progress and completed works.

No targets for measuring interaction with Members have been set, and it is clear that Members themselves each have their own individual requirements and expectations. However in order to ensure that any enquiries received from Members are appropriately managed, a trial register has been set up in Elmbridge to record queries and CHO responses. It is intended that this process will be rolled out across all the districts in due course.

Community engagement has, therefore, been identified as an area for improvement. It is proposed that the use of Member query registers will be widened and this will enable a measure of interaction to be assessed across the county. In addition, proposals for working with and managing the expectations of Parish Councils will be developed, in conjunction with local County Councillors.

### Summary of measurable performance to date

Activities	
Customer Enquiries	An average of <b>68.8%</b> of pothole enquiries received during Q3 of 2007/08 were completed in 20 days, <b>76%</b> for w/c 20/06/08. <b>60%</b> of all customer enquiries completed within 20 days in w/c 20/06/08, with a strong improving trend.
Vehicle Crossovers	Approximately 70 applications and enquiries received pcm in the East and 35 in the West.
Insurance Claims	Approximately 100 claims are received per month in each Area and 80%-85% are refuted.
Health & Safety Audits	Required level of 20 pcm in East and West completed in both April/May 2008
SHiP KPI audits	Required level of 10% of works under £5k checked each month.
NRSWA Sample Inspections & Defects	Inspections undertaken at <b>14.3%</b> after month 2. Defects on target at <b>2.6%</b>
NRSWA Section 74 over-runs	No fixed target set, but potential penalty charges of £700k identified for resources allocated. Currently

#### 4. SUMMARY

The CHO role is hugely varied, and each activity brings its own targets and pressures. It is clear that there have been significant improvements in some areas, in particular the response time to overall customer enquiries is now up to 60% from 12% in April 2007. This is due, at least in part, to the increased number of staff in this key front-line position. In other areas those improvements are still to be fully realised, and the identification of Section 74 over-runs must be addressed as a priority, as at present there is the potential for a notable shortfall. The concern will always be that as focus is directed to any activity where problems currently exist, weaknesses will develop where currently there are none. Pro-active line management of the CHOs is, therefore, essential to provide clear direction and support in order to ensure that an appropriate balance and focus on key activities is always achieved.

#### 5. DEVELOPING IMPROVED COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Part of the original vision for the CHOs focussed on maximising both their visibility and their efficiency through the use of mobile technology. An officer able to access essential information and feedback results directly from site would be able to spend more time out and about in the community.

Recent trials with the same equipment used by the Highway Safety Inspectors proved unsuccessful, however, and identified that there is no 'quick-win' in providing a full mobile technology solution for the CHOs. Although potential benefits have been identified, the scale of changes and level of funding that would be required will require a more thorough and detailed review.

As an interim measure, there may be opportunities for using different ways of working alongside communications equipment already available to Surrey staff as a



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means of increasing productivity. An informal trial is underway within the West area, where a CHO has been granted access to the Confirm data system, via the internet, from his home PC. He is therefore able to access his daily workload before leaving home, and to plan his day accordingly. The officer has also been provided with a Blackberry in place of his mobile phone (the standard issue for CHOs at present). This means that he is able to send and receive e-mail updates to colleagues, members and even the public directly from site. In combination, both of these tools mean that the CHO is able to considerably reduce the amount of time spent at the area office, and thereby increase the amount of time spent in the community.

There have also been recent technological developments which have introduced a range of minor products and applications onto the open market (rather than tailored, specialist equipment) that could in theory provide some benefit to how the CHOs operate. One such example is an add-on unit that is available for mobile phones that can identify detailed locations using GPS. Although we will explore with our partner constructors whether this could actually improve productivity in any way in the short term, it should be noted that a number of minor 'innovations' have already been trialled but they have proved not to be cost effective on site.

Due to the speed of technological advancement and the number of significant changes in work practices that have already occurred in a relatively short space of time, it is intended that these major mobile technology challenges will now be reviewed as a separate project. This will be managed by the newly introduced Asset Systems and Process Manager within the Asset Planning Group.

### **NEXT STEPS**

- Refresher training for NSRWA streetworks activities to be provided.
- Existing NRSWA system issues to be resolved and sample inspections proactively managed to return to target.
- Process for carrying out Section 74 checks to be reviewed and methods of assisting CHOs in identifying breaches developed and implemented.
- Use of the Member query register to be widened across Surrey.
- Interaction with community stakeholders to be developed further.
- A seminar to be held for members on how to work more effectively with the CHOs.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

That Members note the content of this report.

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### **CONTACT DETAILS:**

### **Sources/background papers:**

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