

10 April 2025

Utilities Engagement Programme

Purpose of report:

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the utilities engagement programme to the Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee.

Executive Summary

1. In January 2024, the Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee were asked to undertake a series of scrutiny sessions with the water, energy, and digital utility providers in Surrey. The objectives of the sessions were:
 - a. Establishing what is going well, what the issues are, and how these can be better managed, resolved, and mitigated.
 - b. A set of joint actions to progress more collaborative strategic planning with a strong place-based focus.
 - c. A future mechanism for strategic engagement with utilities.
2. Scrutiny sessions were held with the water and energy utilities in January and April 2024.
3. It was agreed with the Chairman in October that a session with digital utilities wasn't required due to existing constructive engagement and digital utility providers already participating in the Streetworks taskforce sessions.
4. Alongside the Taskforce activity, other day-to-day improvements on utilities management have been realised by the team. The durations of works by utility companies have been steadily reducing over the past 2 years from a peak of 12,058 days of highway occupation by utility companies in May 2023 to 4,341 in November 2024. This, in part, has been achieved by additional scrutiny and challenge of SCC officers and means that residents will be benefitting from shorter periods of disruption. Similarly, during the same period, the number of inspections carried out by Streetworks officers during works has been

increasing, with the number of monthly inspections in May 2023 at 1,153 rising to 2,028 in January 2025. This increase in inspections will have meant improvements on site, such as better signage and diversion routes helping to manage the experience of the travelling public whilst the works continue.

5. A further session with Regulators is no longer required as we are engaging with regulators alongside utilities.
6. Following the sessions, engagement and positive collaboration have been ongoing with utility providers, which is expanded on throughout this report.
7. It is recommended that this work transitions back to the service as business as usual.

Developing Engagement - Water Utilities

8. The first of the utility sessions was held in January 2024 with water utility providers. Following the session, the below outcomes and actions were agreed:
 - a. Greater collaboration on demand management.
 - b. Work together to explore the replication of the Greater London Authority (GLA) Infrastructure Mapping Tool in Surrey to cover planned, reactive, and emergency works.
 - c. Encourage improvement in quality and availability of information to customers on planned works through signage and targeted communications.
 - d. Closer working between Thames Water and SCC on the development of the next Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans (DWMPs).
 - e. Greater collaborative working on the development of the next regional plan with Water Resources South East (WRSE) with the proposal to include SCC in representation on relevant boards.
 - f. Input to the national regulator as to the KPIs that matter to our local communities as part of the next five-year plans.
 - g. To explore a Surrey-wide plan, SCC and WRSE to investigate a single geographic plan for water and better linkage between local and regional plans.

- h. Closer collaboration with SCC to understand what major developments are coming forward, the implications for the capacity of the network, and how to prioritise and encourage green infrastructure solutions.
- i. More dialogue with SCC Flood Risk Management Team to address flooding issues and delivery of priorities in drainage and wastewater management plans.

Progress to date

- 9. There has been some positive engagement with water utilities in Surrey. In addition, this has helped stimulate national work with the water utilities, DEFRA, and OFWAT to look at developing a more coordinated approach to tackling the linked issues of too much, too little, and too dirty water. Water companies, and particularly Thames Water, are now regular attendees at the Surrey Flood Risk Management Board and participate in community resilience meetings with residents affected by flooding.
- 10. SCC have had early engagement with water companies on cycle 2 of the Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans (DWMPs) as well as other key processes that affect Surrey.
- 11. There is also ongoing engagement with the Catchment Partnerships delivering Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP)-funded improvements on water quality.
- 12. SCC recently met with OFWAT and representatives from Water UK and “Blueprint for Water” as part of a targeted working group to discuss better transparency on how the water industry delivers environmental outcomes and continues to work with the sector at a local, regional, and national scale to develop a more integrated approach to water management.
- 13. Engagement with water utilities will be ongoing and long-term to maximise opportunities to improve water management for the residents of Surrey.

Developing Engagement – Energy Utilities

- 14. The second of the utility sessions was held in April 2024 with energy utility providers. Following the session, the below outcomes and actions were agreed:
 - a. Improved process and engagement on grid connections.
 - b. Greater collaboration between the Local Authority and Distribution Network Operator (DNO) on strategic energy planning.

- c. Greater collaboration between the Local Authority and DNOs on Streetworks.
15. More effective and resilient strategic planning and support to vulnerable residents.

Progress to date

16. SCC have had consistent engagement with Surrey's DNOs in recent years and most recently, post the Select Committee scrutiny process, through the Local Area Energy Planning Process (LAEP). LAEPs are a national government initiative led by Local Authorities and DNOs at the County or unitary level. The development of LAEPs varies across local authority areas and the scrutiny process has stimulated increased collaboration on the development of the Plan for Surrey.
17. The LAEP will look at energy needs and challenges and outline improvements and new infrastructure required, enabling local authorities to be involved constructively in the long-term planning of energy provision, infrastructure, and planning at the local and regional level.
18. Exact parameters regarding the make-up of the LAEPs are still being discussed, and a number of tools are being developed to assist local authorities, including Surrey, in this process.

Digital Utilities

19. It was agreed with the Chairman in November 2024 that a session with digital utilities was not needed for the reasons outlined below.
20. There is a Digital Strategy being managed as part of the Transformation Programme that sets out the approach to digital and how it will enable improved outcomes for residents in Surrey over the next five years. Part of this includes the Digital Inclusion Plan, which looks at seven key themes and maps digital inclusion support across the county.
21. Part of the Digital Inclusion Plan monitors the shutdown of the existing analogue networks (PSTN).
22. This is an industry-led change. This switch-over has started and is happening at different times and is dependent on the service provider. Most of the switchover will be completed by December 2025, with the remainder by January 2027. For most residents and businesses who already have a broadband connection via a router, the change is likely to be fairly seamless.

23. The Local Government Association have published a digital switchover telecare checklist for organisations that are responsible for commissioning telecare. Ofcom also provide a useful page called *Moving landline phones to digital technology and what you need to know*. Residents are signposted to these on our Digital Infrastructure page available on the Surrey website.
24. In terms of creating awareness around the Switchover, Openreach has been and will continue to run a range of social media awareness campaigns and events around the country. Their messaging is targeting those that know of and care for vulnerable residents, particularly those using Telecare devices. The Government is also anticipated to launch a large awareness campaign in 2025.
25. Most gigabit-capable infrastructure installed in Surrey today has been by the private sector but commercial deployment in Surrey is now slowing down.
26. The Government, through their £5 Billion Project Gigabit Programme which is being managed by Building Digital UK (BDUK), part of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), is rolling out gigabit-capable infrastructure via contracts and alternative solutions to as many residents and businesses as possible that are or will not be included in any commercial plans. This will include rural areas. Deployment in Surrey is anticipated to start later this year.
27. Whilst Surrey monitors this deployment, BDUK are responsible for its roll out. Statistics on the gigabit coverage to date can be found in annex 1.
28. The £1 Billion Shared Rural Network (SRN) Programme, jointly funded by the Government and the Mobile Network Operators (MNOs), will invest in a network of new and existing phone masts closing 'not-spots' and 'partial not spots' across the UK. The Programme reached one of its targets of 95 percent 4G coverage to the UK landmass at the end of last year.
29. However, in the more rural south of our county, mobile coverage remains very patchy, and we are continuing to lobby MNOs to consider including these areas in their commercial plans.

Streetworks Taskforce and Congestion Management
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30. Key recommendations from both Water and Energy sessions were for greater collaboration on improved communications, signage, and utilisation of planning tools for planned, reactive, and emergent works.

31. To progress these actions, it was agreed that the utilities taskforce would include all utilities within Surrey. The taskforce has had participation from 14 utility companies to date.
32. Four taskforce meetings were held in 2024, and they will now continue on a quarterly basis, with the first meeting of 2025 held in January. There has been, and continues to be, good representation and engagement from all the key utility sectors at these meetings.

Improvements seen so far include:

33. Discussions on how SCC and utilities can share information on their longer-term programmes (potentially using a shared mapping tool) to identify opportunities for collaboration and to enable better coordination and communication of works.
34. Progression of discussions between SCC, utilities, and the GLA with regards to developing and implementing a shared mapping tool. Future discussions are planned, and Thames Water and UKPN have agreed to work with SCC to act as forerunners for this and to be early adopters.
35. Utilities have agreed to provide SCC with lists of “planned” emergency works to help mitigate the impact of these types of work on the network. Several utilities, including SGN, have already started to provide this information.
36. An ongoing Communications Group with communications representatives from SCC and utility companies has also been implemented to discuss best practice and work towards agreed joint Communications Protocols. Two meetings have been held to date, and the agreement is that these will:
 - a. The Communications Group meeting held in October 2024 agreed a number of actions, including sharing of communication team contact details to enable utility companies to be able to contact the SCC duty Comms team officer to highlight emergency works that start out of hours that are likely to cause significant impacts; and to review the provision of signage to focus on clarity, contact details, and providing information about the reasons for sites being unoccupied.
 - b. Signage was considered further at the Communication Group meeting held in January 2025. There have been situations where it is not always clear who is working on site, and so the SCC Communications officer lead agreed to draft a simple template sign that can be used across sites in those situations and an associated document to go with it in terms of best practices of what SCC would like to see.

- c. To help improve the situation in relation to complaints we receive, through social media, about no activity happening on site by utilities, there is agreement to produce a joint social media video that both SCC and utilities could use to communicate with residents. This would also be supported by improvements to the FAQs that are currently provided on the SCC website.
 - d. The Communications Group are also continuing to discuss what other shared social media assets would be beneficial in providing consistent and clear messaging to residents. This would include continued promotion of the use of One.network (accessed easily via Surrey CC roadworks page) as it can give residents the information they need such as who is working on a site and how long they are going to be there.
 - e. To improve the sharing of utility works to relevant communities and increase local relevance for residents, a future Communications Group meeting will consider how all parties can better utilise Geo targeting and the NextDoor platform.
37. Alongside the joint Communications Group, a joint Operational Group has also been set up. This group is focused on achieving operational changes that are needed to improve the management and delivery of utility works across Surrey. For example, this group will need to determine how the agreements made on improved signage by the Communications Group are then sufficiently adopted and used on site by utility companies and their contractors.
38. The initial focus of the Operations Group, however, has been to consider and develop a lobbying opportunity to the Department for Transport which seeks to improve how we can manage the impact on the network from utility emergency works. At the time of writing this report, the lobbying scope is still in development with the Cabinet Member; however, it is anticipated that an element of the lobbying will include seeking changes to enable local authorities to have greater advance notification of those emergency works which could also be categorised as 'planned immediate' activities. Should this be successful, then the increased notification would provide officers with greater opportunities to coordinate the works and advise impacted residents.
39. Another utility work issue that causes problems for residents and increases congestion unnecessarily is the incorrect use of traffic management when works are being carried out. To improve the situation, a trial is being progressed which enables any works promoter to use a tool which involves the automated creation of a compliant traffic management plan, recognising road speeds and road widths more effectively. This is being funded for a year

via the Surrey Lane Rental funds. UKPN have already been using the system and Affinity Water and Openreach have had training and will start using the system soon.

40. A successful media campaign is being delivered to highlight the work of the Taskforce which has included coverage in local newspapers, BBC Surrey, That's TV South East and a social media video featuring the Deputy Cabinet Member and Assistant Director, Highways.
41. The Streetworks taskforce is being managed as part of the wider Congestion Management project which, as well as focusing on better collaboration with utilities, aims to consider the wider impacts and management of congestion. This includes reviewing key traffic signal junctions to optimise their efficiency in order to improve traffic flow.
42. Alongside the Taskforce activity, other day-to-day improvements on utilities management have been realised by the team. The durations of works by utility companies have been steadily reducing over the past two years from a peak of 12,058 days of highway occupation by utility companies in May 2023 to 4,341 in November 2024. This, in part, has been achieved by additional scrutiny and challenge of SCC officers and means that residents will be benefitting from shorter periods of disruption. Similarly, during the same period, the number of inspections carried out by Streetworks officers during works has been increasing, with the number of monthly inspections in May 2023 at 1,153 rising to 2,028 in January-November 2024. This increase in inspections will have meant improvements on site, such as better signage and diversion routes helping to manage the experience of the travelling public whilst the works continue.

Conclusions

43. The Select Committee has been essential in driving forward engagement with water and energy utilities and promoted the 'Streetworks Taskforce,' which continues to engage major Utility providers in Surrey.
44. Significant progress has been made in improving strategic relationships between utilities and Surrey, and while this work will be ongoing, positive progress can be noted to date.

Recommendations

45. Acknowledgment of progress to date on improved engagement with utilities and recommends this work to continue as business as usual within services in the Place Directorate.
46. Written updates on objectives will be provided to the committee at agreed intervals.

Report contact

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