

The Co-ordination and Quality of Work of Utilities Companies in Surrey: Survey Analysis

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Environment and Transport Select Committee established a Task Group in September 2012 to review the issues caused as a result of utility companies conducting works on the County's highways. The Task Group sought collect the views of County Councillors, Borough and District representatives and Parish Clerks through the use of a survey. Members of the public and Surrey MPs were also invited to send comments for consideration by the Task Group.
- 1.2. In particular, the Task Group sought information on communications by utility companies, the quality of streetworks, the quality of reinstatements, and how improvements could be achieved.
- 1.3. This report presents an analysis of the information collated from the stakeholders listed above. There were a number of open questions included within the survey so there has been some interpretation of responses and the analysis here simply aims to highlight some of the themes identified.
- 1.4. The information given was confidential to the Task Group and personal identities are not included in the report.

2. Main Findings

- 2.1. The main findings of this analysis of the information collated from stakeholders are:
 - The majority of local authority representatives surveyed felt that communications from utilities companies in advance of streetworks taking place and during works were poor.
 - Respondents called for better local targeting of information about planned streetworks, including giving direct notice to local households and businesses, and putting notices in local papers. Greater detail, including contact details and accurate timescales for work, was also requested.
 - There was strong support for using Councillors, and in particular Parish Councils, as a resource in communicating streetworks carried out by utilities companies in Surrey.
 - While a majority of County Councillors rated the management of streetworks, including tidiness and traffic management as poor, this view was less strongly emphasised at the local level. The need for traffic management to be responsive to different traffic flows at different times of the day was highlighted.

- A majority of County Councillors also viewed the quality of reinstatements as poor. This attitude is less strongly stated at the local level, although it is worth stating that the majority of Parish and Borough/District respondents did not rate reinstatements as good. The majority of responses from the public also commented on inadequate reinstatements and the need for post-works inspection. Local authority representatives highlighted the deterioration of some reinstatements over time and suggested a need for better checks and enforcement by Highways Officers.
- Local authority representatives outlined some of the common issues raised by residents through complaints. These included the quality of reinstatements, inadequate communications (including no prior notice and poor signage), the time taken for works and the lack of visible progress by contractors.
- Further comments from local authority representatives highlighted the monitoring and enforcement responsibilities of the Highways department, the need to improve co-ordination of works and proposals regarding permit and penalty schemes. Surrey MP respondents also backed the use of permit or penalty schemes to incentivise utility companies to carry out their works quickly and with minimal disruption.

3. Collecting Views

- 3.1. A questionnaire was circulated to all County Council Members on 25 September 2012. Members were invited to respond online via SurveyMonkey or by downloading a form which could then be emailed or sent back by hard copy. A reminder was sent out on 19 October and the survey closed on 26 October 2012. In total, 28 responses were received from 80 Members, which represents a 35% return.
- 3.2. A questionnaire was also circulated to Borough and District Chief Executives, Borough and District portfolio holders (where relevant), and Parish Council Clerks who were asked to respond on behalf of their councillors. While there were no responses from Chief Executives, three of the 11 Portfolio holders returned a questionnaire, representing a 27% return. There were 21 responses from the 81 Parish Council Clerks, which represents a 26% return.
- 3.3. The standard return rate for a postal questionnaire is 14% so the responses from the County Councillors, Parish Council Clerks and Borough/District representatives reflects a higher than average return. As only three responses were received from the Borough and District Councils, the data has been collated with the Parish Council data to give a 'local perspective'.
- 3.4. Members of the public were invited to send comments independent of the survey through a press release which was picked up by a number of local and national media outlets including the BBC, Surrey Herald and an article on the Surrey County Council website. Fifteen responses were received and these are analysed in detail

under section 7.

- 3.5. All Surrey MPs were invited to submit comments and responses were received from Michael Gove (MP for Surrey Heath and Secretary of State for Education) and Chris Grayling (MP for Epsom and Ewell and Secretary of State for Justice).

4. Communications

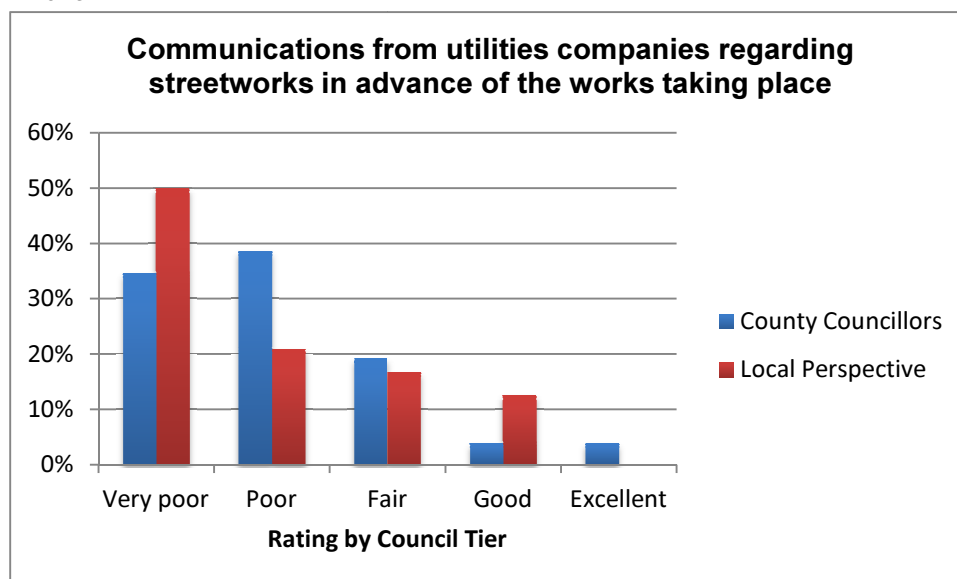
4.1. Rating Existing Communications

- 4.1.1. Respondents were first asked about communications from utilities companies to their council and to local residents. They were asked to rate communications both prior to works taking place and during works on a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent). This scale has been specified below as relating to the typical scale: 1=very poor; 2=poor; 3=fair; 4=good; 5=excellent.
- 4.1.2. A clear majority of respondents rated the communication to the Council and residents from utilities companies regarding streetworks in advance of the works taking place as poor or very poor. This included 73.1% of the County Councillor respondents and 70.8% of Parish and Borough/District Council respondents. Two County Councillors did not respond to this question.
- 4.1.3. The detailed analysis is given in Table 1, while Chart 1 clearly shows that the opinion of the majority is that communications in advance of works taking place is poor.

Table 1

Q1a On a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent), how would you rate the communication to the Council and residents from utilities companies regarding streetworks in advance of the works taking place?	1	2	3	4	5
County Councillors	34.6% (9)	38.5% (10)	19.2% (5)	3.8% (1)	3.8% (1)
'Local Perspective'	50.0% (12)	20.8% (5)	16.7% (4)	12.5% (3)	0% (0)

Chart 1



4.1.4. The picture regarding communications during streetworks is very slightly improved. There are fewer County Councillors who rate communication as poor during than in advance of the works (61.6% down from 73.1%). However, they have been more likely to give the middle rating (up to 34.6% from 19.2%) suggesting that communications during works isn't considered as being good. Two County Councillors did not respond to this question.

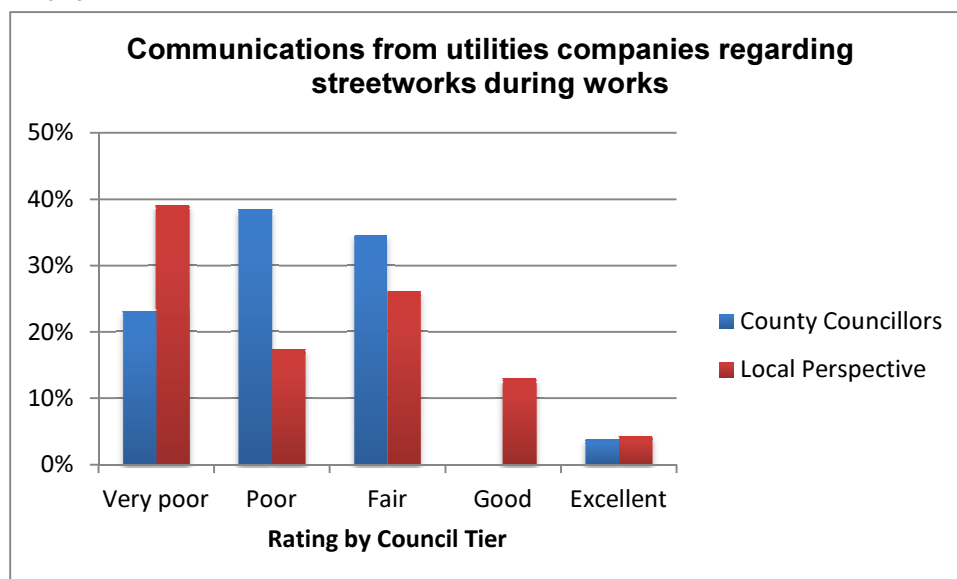
4.1.5. Just over half (56.5%) of Parish and Borough/District respondents rated communications during works as poor or very poor (down from 70.8% who rated communications in advance of works as poor). One 'local respondent' did not answer this question.

4.1.6. The detailed analysis is given in Table 2, while chart 2 shows that there is a slightly more even spread of opinion from very poor to fair, although very few respondents view communications during works to be good.

Table 2

Q1b On a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent), how would you rate the communication to the Council and residents from utilities companies regarding streetworks during works?	1	2	3	4	5
County Councillors	23.1% (6)	38.5% (10)	34.6% (9)	0% (0)	3.8% (1)
'Local Perspective'	39.1% (9)	17.4% (4)	26.1% (6)	13.0% (3)	4.3% (1)

Chart 2



- 4.1.7. Respondents were asked to provide any further comments about communications from utilities companies. Eleven County Councillors responded to this request. Six indicated that communications were always poor. A few of the responses highlighted the difficulties for residents in finding out about streetworks and some suggested that more information could be provided to County Councillors from the Highways Service. One Member highlighted the fortnightly Highways Bulletin which gives some information about upcoming streetworks but asked that this be expanded to include information on what type of works they were, how much of a road would be affected or whether a road closure would be involved. The Member also pointed out that the start date given is often a guesstimate.
- 4.1.8. Sixteen Parish and Borough/District Councils responded to this request. None mentioned receiving notice from utilities companies although a few did receive Council updates or used the Council website for information about planned or ongoing works. There was a general view that more information could be provided on planned utilities works both in advance and during the works being carried out. It was suggested that the information provided was often too vague to be of use e.g. better information on how long works will take, the use of postcodes could help roads to be identified in rural areas more easily. There was concern expressed about the lack of communications channels with the utilities companies during works. While there was mention of signs not being visible, one respondent highlighted a case where the utilities company ignored requests for contact or referred residents to the County Highways Service.

4.2. Improving Communications

- 4.2.1. Respondents were then asked if they had any specific suggestions as to how communication to the Council and residents from utilities companies regarding streetworks could be improved.
- 4.2.2. Twenty-two County Councillors responded to this query with a variety of options for improvement. One of the most commonly mentioned options was a need for better local targeting of information (by six or 27% of respondents). This could include giving direct notice to households, putting notices in local newspapers, shops etc, or using elected representatives, including Parish Councils. Better information about timescales for streetworks was also mentioned in just over a quarter of responses (six). There were also calls for accurate and updated advance notice signs which don't always appear at present. A number of Councillors mentioned the use of IT solutions, from ensuring that information on the Council website is up to date and accurate to allowing residents to be updated when activity is planned for certain roads.
- 4.2.3. Just over half of the 22 Parish and Borough/District Councils who responded to this question (12) requested that they be given advance notice of non-emergency utilities streetworks in order to pass on information. Nearly half (9) also mentioned the need for local targeting of information and 23% (5) highlighted the need for better information on timescales, as well as the need to keep to published timescales.

4.3. Councillor Involvement in Communications

- 4.3.1. Respondents were asked whether Councillors could be better used as a resource in communicating streetworks carried out by utilities companies in Surrey. This was strongly supported by County Councillors with 60% saying "yes" and also at Parish and Borough/District level with 79.2% of respondents saying "yes". Three County Councillors did not answer this question. See Table 3 for the figures.

Table 3

Q3 Do you think that Councillors could be better used as a resource in communicating streetworks carried out by utilities companies in Surrey?	Yes	No
County Councillors	60.0% (15)	40.0% (10)
'Local Perspective'	79.2% (19)	20.8% (5)

- 4.3.2. Respondents were asked to make any further comments. Eighteen County Councillors made further comments. While 15% (4) Members expressed the view that communicating such information is an officer role, 42% requested advance notice so that they could disseminate information within their area.

4.3.3. Twenty-one Parish and Borough/District Councils made further comments. The majority of respondents (16 or 76.2%) mentioned that if they were provided with accurate and updated information, they would be able to disseminate the information via local networks. 14% (3) of respondents also suggested that if notice was given early enough in advance, they would be able to provide local information to the utilities companies and improve the decision making process.

5. Quality of Streetworks

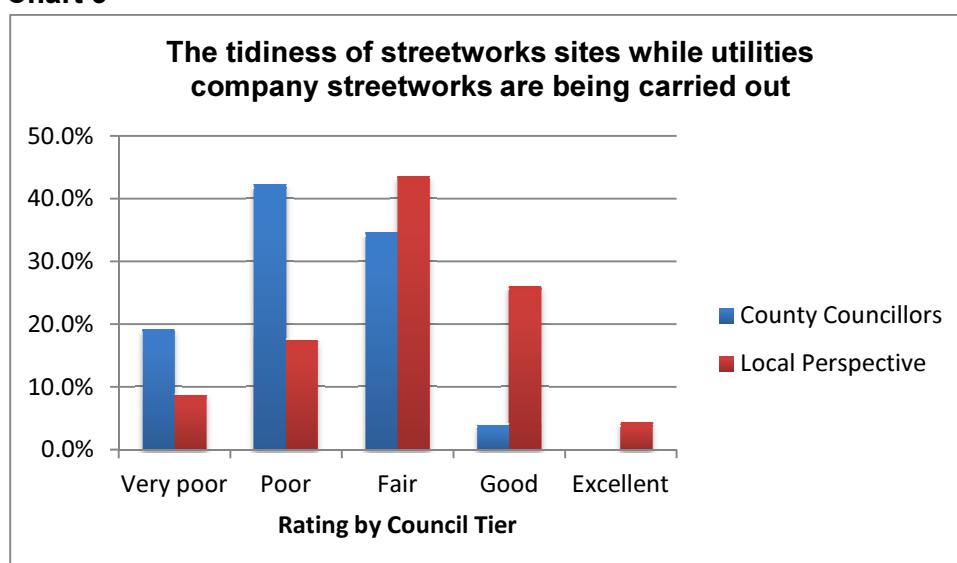
5.1. Management of Streetworks

5.1.1. Respondents were asked to rate the tidiness of utility company streetworks sites as works are being carried out on a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent). A majority (61.5%) of responding County Councillors felt that the tidiness of streetworks sites was poor. Two County Councillors did not respond to this question. However, there was a more even spread of responses at the local level, with 26.1% of Parish and Borough/District Councils rating tidiness of sites as poor but 30.4% rating this aspect as good. One respondent did not answer this question. Table 4 gives a breakdown of the figures and Chart 3 demonstrates the spread of responses at the local level.

Table 4

Q4a On a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent), how would you rate the tidiness of streetworks sites while utilities company streetworks are being carried out in Surrey?	1	2	3	4	5
County Councillors	19.2% (5)	42.3% (11)	34.6% (9)	3.8% (1)	0.0% (0)
'Local Perspective'	8.7% (2)	17.4% (4)	43.5% (10)	26.1% (6)	4.3% (1)

Chart 3

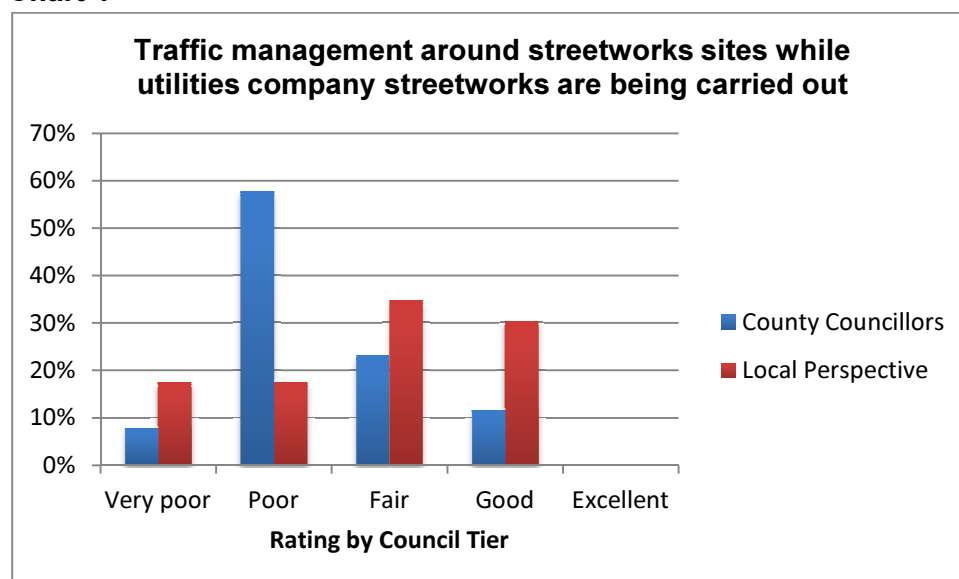


5.1.2. In response to the question of how respondents would rate the traffic management around streetworks sites while utilities company streetworks are being carried out in Surrey, there was a similar pattern to the previous question. A majority (65.4%) of County Councillors rated traffic management during streetworks as poor. Again, two County Councillors did not respond to this question. At the local level, while 34.8% of Parish and Borough/District Councils rated traffic management as poor, almost as many (30.4%) rated this as good. One respondent did not answer this question. A breakdown of the figures can be seen in Table 5 and the spread of responses can be seen in Chart 4.

Table 5

Q4b On a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent), how would you rate the traffic management around streetworks sites while utilities company streetworks are being carried out in Surrey?	1	2	3	4	5
County Councillors	7.7% (2)	57.7% (15)	23.1% (6)	11.5% (3)	0.0% (0)
'Local Perspective'	17.4% (4)	17.4% (4)	34.8% (8)	30.4% (7)	0.0% (0)

Chart 4



5.1.3. Respondents were asked to make further comments on the management of streetworks while they are being carried out. There were ten responses from County Councillors, which raised a variety of issues, including: patchy reinstatements; variable quality of streetworks management with larger works tending to be better managed than smaller works; streetworks sites causing traffic problems which are left unattended for long periods; traffic lights are not phased to reflect the time of day or traffic volumes; messy footway works which are dangerous for pedestrians; and lack of co-ordination between utility companies and Surrey Highways.

5.1.4. There were 16 responses from Parish and Borough/District Councils. 44% (7) of responses mentioned problems with traffic management, including the need to be responsive to different traffic flows at different times of the day. It was suggested that by using local knowledge, better traffic management decisions could be taken. 31% (5) of responses mentioned untidiness. It was requested that mud, debris and any materials not being used be cleared away regularly.

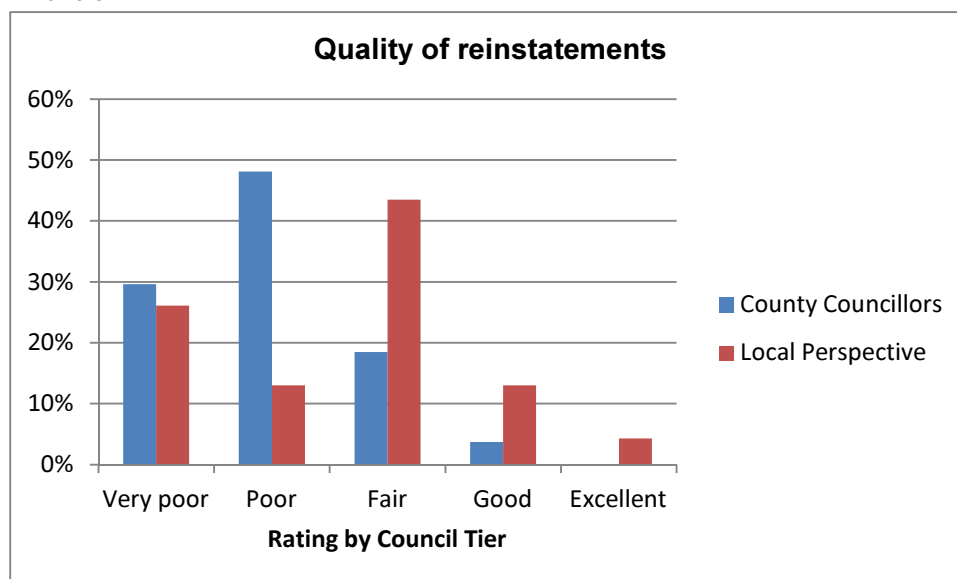
5.2. Quality of Reinstatements

5.2.1. Respondents were asked to rate the quality of reinstatements upon completion of utility company streetworks in Surrey. A clear majority (77%) of County Councillors viewed reinstatements as poor, whereas a slim majority (43.5%) of Parish and Borough/District Councils rated reinstatements as midway between poor and excellent. 39.1% of local respondents rated reinstatements as poor. One County Councillor and one local respondent did not answer this question.

Table 6

Q5 On a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent), how would you rate the quality of reinstatements upon completion of utility company streetworks in Surrey?	1	2	3	4	5
County Councillors	29.6% (8)	48.1% (13)	18.5% (5)	3.7% (1)	0.0% (0)
'Local Perspective'	26.1% (6)	13.0% (3)	43.5% (10)	13.0% (3)	4.3% (1)

Chart 5



5.2.2. Respondents were asked to make further comments on the quality of reinstatements. Sixteen County Councillors made further comments all of which relate to the variable quality of reinstatements. A quarter of these Councillors (4) specify problems relating to the deterioration of reinstatements over time. 44% (7) of comments concern a perceived need for better checks and enforcement by Highways Officers. A request for better information for residents on when a reinstatement will take place and who the contacts are, harks back to the responses on poor communications from utilities companies.

5.2.3. Thirteen Parish and Borough/District respondents made further comments on the quality of reinstatements. Again comments related to the variable quality of reinstatements with some respondents suggesting that major contractors were better at reinstatement than smaller developers. Two respondents highlighted problems with temporary reinstatements that are left indefinitely. 38% (5) of local respondents also highlight the problems with deteriorating reinstatements, with potholes and subsidence becoming a particular issue. Two local respondents also raise concern about local features which communities have campaigned for or financially sponsored not being replaced e.g. quiet, non-skid surfaces and character lamp standards.

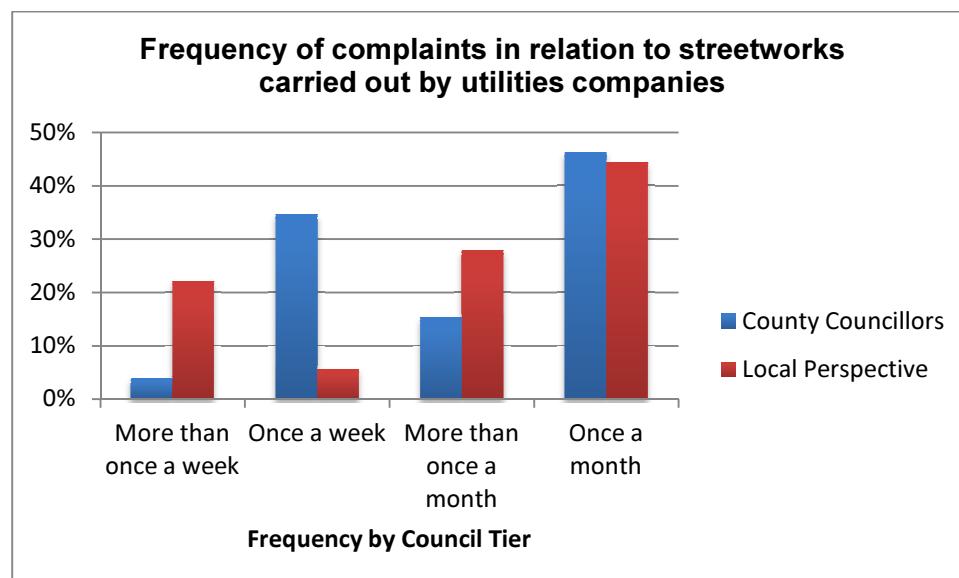
5.3. Complaints

5.3.1. Respondents were asked to estimate how frequently they receive complaints from residents in relation to streetworks being carried out by utilities companies in Surrey. While there was a range of responses from once a month to more than once a week, over 40% of all respondents (46.2% of County Councillors and 44.4% of local respondents) stated that they receive complaints once a month. Two County Councillors and six local respondents did not answer this question.

Table 7

Q6 On average, how frequently do you receive complaints from residents in relation to streetworks being carried out by utilities companies in Surrey?	More than once a week	Once a week	More than once a month	Once a month
County Councillors	3.8% (1)	34.6% (9)	15.4% (4)	46.2% (12)
'Local Perspective'	22.2% (4)	5.6% (1)	27.8% (5)	44.4% (8)

Chart 6



5.3.2. Respondents were then asked what were the most common issues raised through complaints by residents. Seventeen County Councillors responded with a variety of issues. 53% of these responses (9) highlighted the quality of reinstatements and 41% (7) mentioned inadequate communications, including no prior notice and poor signage, as cause for complaints. The time taken for works and the perceived lack of progress by contractors were both mentioned by 29% (5) of County Councillor respondents as common issues raised through complaints. Councillors also highlighted: the quality and untidiness of streetworks; not removing signs and debris following works; traffic management; poor working practices such as not using protective helmets/goggles; a lack of regard for pedestrian safety; and a lack of co-ordination between utilities companies in scheduling streetworks.

- 5.3.3. Of the 24 local responses about complaints, 29% (7) relate to the frequency of complaints. Many point out that complaints come only when there are streetworks taking place in the local parish/borough/district. One Parish Clerk states that they have never received complaints about streetworks carried out by utilities companies. Previous responses indicate that they have had relatively few streetworks taking place within their parish area over recent years. One Borough/District Portfolio holder suggests that generally residents know that highways are a county matter and so complaints are directed at that level.
- 5.3.4. With regard to issues raised through complaints, the comments of Parish Clerks and Borough/District representatives mirror those of County Councillors. 37% (9) highlighted the quality of reinstatements and 29% (7) mentioned inadequate communications, including no prior notice and poor signage. Other issues mentioned include: time taken for the work; lack of visible progress; traffic management; not removing signs and debris following works; a lack of regard for pedestrian safety; and a lack of co-ordination between utilities companies in scheduling streetworks. Two respondents stated that utilities companies not taking action on complaints from residents was a source of complaints then directed at them.

6. Good Practice

- 6.1. Respondents were asked if they have any examples of good practice from their division/ward that could improve the communication and co-ordination of streetworks carried out by utilities companies in Surrey.
- 6.2. Nineteen County Councillors responded to this query, although 58% (11) of these responses were to state that they did not have any examples of good practice to share. Two responses could be categorised as suggestions rather than examples – that Members be used better to communicate information about upcoming streetworks, and that utilities companies be fined for not tidying up following streetworks. One Member highlighted their own good practice in emailing resident associations with information from the Highways Bulletin. Five Councillors identified good practice in their area related to good communications, including local targeting of information through letters to affected households and the utility manager calling on local residents. Comments included:

“SGN were excellent in Haslemere ... recently in terms of holding meetings with ‘all parties’ and maintaining an ongoing dialogue for the completion of the works”.

“Skanska’s replacement of the old yellow street lights. Their work has been exemplary, from notifying residents to finishing and making good”.

- 6.3. Twenty-one Parish and Borough/District Councils responded to this query, although again 38% (8) of responses were to state that they did not have any examples of good practice. Four responses could be categorised as suggestions - that communications be improved between all parties and that bureaucracy not place unnecessary restrictions on contractors or prevent necessary communications with affected businesses. Five respondents highlighted examples of good communications, including advance notice through the Highways department, advance and detailed signs in location, and exchanges of information between all parties. Two respondents mentioned utilities companies and the Highways department addressing complaints quickly and efficiently. One respondent highlighted the good practice within their parish of using a variety of communications technologies to forward information about streetworks.
- 6.4. Respondents were asked if they had any further comments that they would like to be considered. Twelve County Councillors made further statements. Five raised the role of the Highways department, requesting contact details, asking that Members be told who authorised utility streetworks, and highlighting the enforcement responsibilities of the department. Five Members also suggested imposing permit and penalty schemes to ensure that works are completed quickly and are completed to a good quality. The need for better co-ordination of works and good communications were also raised.
- 6.5. Eleven Parish and Borough/District Councils made further comments. Four respondents highlighted the role of the Highways department in communicating to affected residents and businesses, and its responsibilities in regard to monitoring and enforcement. Three respondents proposed permit and penalty schemes such as the reintroduction of "road renting" rules to speed up works. Other comments included the need to improve co-ordination between utilities companies and across boundaries, the need to improve communications between all parties, the length of time that some works take and the lack of visible progress, and the need for contractors to remove signs and debris at the end of a project.

7. Public Feedback

- 7.1. Members of the public were invited to feed views into the review through the use of a press release and an article on the Surrey County Council website. Fifteen responses were received. A summary of the responses is given below and reflect the issues raised by County Councillors, Parish Council Clerks and Borough/District Portfolio holders.
- 7.2. The majority of responses from the public commented on a lack of post-works inspection. Many felt that patch repairs were often inadequate and that this led to an increase in road maintenance work by the Council. It was also highlighted that sites were left untidy, or equipment was left behind after the works had been completed. Several of the respondents indicated that they were in favour of closer regulation of utility company repairs by the council, including a standard application and post-works inspection procedure.

7.3. Other concerns raised by public responses included:

- The number of different works being carried out in the same area within a short period.
- The increase in commuting time as a result of streetworks.
- Works being left unattended for significant amounts of time.
- The lack of clear information about who was responsible for the site.

7.4. One respondent highlighted that works were often extended without suitable warning, therefore creating a further impact on delays caused by traffic management. Areas identified as subject to significant delays included Ewell and Ash.

7.5. Public responses to the consultation frequently expressed that they were in favour of a review.

8. MP Comments

8.1. All 11 Surrey MPs were invited to submit comments to the Streetworks Review and responses were received from Michael Gove (MP for Surrey Heath and Secretary of State for Education) and Chris Grayling (MP for Epsom and Ewell and Secretary of State for Justice).

8.2. Chris Grayling highlighted the lack of a mechanism to encourage contractors to complete planned works within their estimated time frame, which has led to significant over-runs on a number of occasions. He asked that the task group investigate what powers exist for the county to impose a penalty system so that contractors can be charged for over-runs in some circumstances.

8.3. Michael Gove stressed his support for the 'lane rental' schemes piloted by the department for Transport, which would also provide an incentive for utility companies to carry out their works quickly and with minimal disruption.