

Getting roads right first time

Maintaining the UK's roads has become a major headache for local authorities – and one that is set to get even more challenging as funding cuts bite deeper. A new approach to the way potholes are repaired in Northamptonshire has brought overwhelming improvements since it was launched over four years ago, including a dramatic drop in insurance claims against the authority who, like so many, face more and more significant budget challenges

Northamptonshire Highways, the partnership between Northamptonshire County Council and highway service provider KierWSP developed the Northamptonshire Highways Maintenance Initiative (NHMI) in 2009.

The team, who provide transport and highway services in the county, realised that something had to change in the way roads were repaired, triggered by the short-term pressures it was facing to fix potholes on the network caused by a succession of severe winters and wet weather conditions. Rather than dealing with the worst first, decisions were based on a "whole life cost" basis.

The team focused on delivering first-time permanent repairs, preventative measures and improved customer satisfaction. This resulted in increasing the response time allowed for defect repair across the county and provided a greater opportunity to better plan resources for first time permanent fixes and preventative maintenance.

This was achieved by introducing a more sophisticated, data-led approach to defect prioritisation and establishing a control hub to centralise management of planning, programming, quality and operational control, and to coordinate all network activities to make the best use of road space, resources and communications with the public.

In 2008, the county council awarded the highway services contract to MGWSP, a joint venture between May Gurney and WSP.

In 2013, Northamptonshire Highways was created which saw the council's highways service merge with the highways contractor MGWSP to form a single integrated team.

In 2013 Kier acquired May Gurney and work as KierWSP. KierWSP combines the strengths of Kier, an international infrastructure and services company and WSP/Parsons Brinckerhoff the global professional services consultancy, to deliver integrated local government services across the UK.

Bucking the trend

This bold strategy carried a greater risk of customer complaints as defects took longer to repair. However, a programme of clear planned communication engaged the public, who understood that return visits to defective repairs would be reduced, overall disruption would be minimised and public money would be spent more effectively. Working together, Northamptonshire County Council and KierWSP were able to deliver improved outcomes in highways repairs.

Northamptonshire Highways began implementing the changes on a trial basis in 2009 and formally adopted NHMI in April 2010. The success of the initiative was recognised after just a year as it stated that:

"Northamptonshire bucked a near national trend for increasingly adverse public views on both 'condition of road surfaces' and 'speed of repair to damaged road surfaces'. Indeed NCC

is the only county council (of 23) in the survey registering an improvement in both of these two crunch indicators!"

A recent report before the county council's cabinet shows the condition of some areas of the road network has improved dramatically. According to figures, 97 per cent of all permanent or semi-permanent repairs were carried out in the year to April 2012, compared with 90 per cent in the first year of NHMI and, much more significantly, 45 per cent in the pre-NHMI period, leading to less repeat visits to repair sites.

The strategy switch has also led to a reduction in CO₂ emissions and fuel usage resulting in year on year savings.

A reduction in claims

Crucially, pre-NHMI there were 880 claims in the 12 months leading up to the switch and 465 in 2010/11 – a 47 per cent drop – followed by a further 53 per cent



– fall in 2011/12, to 217. In 2009/10, the county council treated 138,000 square metres of road surface, a figure that leapt by 46 per cent the following year and has continued to increase each year.

Although the authority is performing well they urge caution. Despite the success of NHMI, there are still many roads that have gone beyond the point where preventative type treatments are effective and these will require significant investment.

David Farquhar, director Northamptonshire Highways, at Northamptonshire County Council says: ***"NHMI has proved both successful and popular but, instead of making progress into the repair backlog we are now in a situation where while not necessarily improving the network, we are now spending our budget in a most effective way ensuring value for money. The public continues to recognise this to be the best use of budgets and that they are getting more and better value for their money."***

Not an authority afraid of challenging policy Northamptonshire believes that continuing to introduce radical solutions is the only way forward and are overseeing more major changes to the way the transport and highways service is being funded and delivered in the county.

With a lack of money available from central government it has been necessary to find alternative funding streams – melding the private and public sectors to get projects up and running.

Innovative funding has seen local authorities, developers and contractors working together with a number of road-builds now due to start in the county, financed through this mechanism.

Working with Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership, the local enterprise partnership, Northamptonshire has been able to secure cash from the Growing Places Fund which was established especially to kick-start growth by using infrastructure projects to unlock development.

An integrated team

In 2012 the highways and transport department merged with the council's current highways contractor KierWSP, to form a single integrated team.

The creation of this partnership in the form of Northamptonshire Highways has been a ground-breaking private-public sector alliance.

Elected councillors working with a retained small team of county council highways and transport experts still decide on policies and standards while Northamptonshire Highways deliver the service, with an estimated efficiencies target saving of £2.2m by 2014/2015.

Advantages to the new model include a refreshed management structure which allows decisions to be made more easily with less duplication of roles and an improved team culture.

Going forward, the county council's cabinet has approved a move which will build upon the good work started under the NHMI and change the way people perceive the road network.

Called the New Highway Asset Maintenance Strategy, the initiative will consult with the people of Northamptonshire to see how the system could be rationalised to reduce costs.

The concept is to visualise the network not as a fixed asset but as an entity

that can and does evolve so that it is fit for purpose.

Some of the measures being explored include reducing the width of some rural roads to a single lane with passing places, thereby restricting the type of vehicle that can and would use it, reduce traffic speeds, reduce rat running and helping preserve the surface.

Already work has begun to de-clutter roads of costly unnecessary signage and other related infrastructure and it is anticipated that this downsizing ethos can be spread to possibly encompass redundant assets including some roads and bridges. In addition, a revision of the classification of some of the network is being carried out.

More innovative partnership working can be seen with the rollout of the council's street lighting PFI scheme in conjunction with Balfour Beatty with every one of Northamptonshire's 65,000 street lights removed, replaced and upgraded, saving millions through reduced energy costs.

Refocusing how transport and highways services can be provided in challenging times calls for innovation and a certain amount of bravery as any pioneering work carries with it a certain amount of risk. In Northamptonshire there is a strong belief that, by working in partnerships infrastructure growth will continue, whilst much needed savings are still realised. –



Repairs to roads in Northamptonshire have led to a reduction in insurance claims against the local authority

