



Briefing 20 -19

March 2020

Local authority responses to COVID-19 in relation to Highways services.

This briefing is provided to all APSE member authorities but will be of particular interest to those officers responsible for Highways and Street Lighting Services.

Key Issues:

With the onset of ever more stringent measures to control the spread of the corona virus, local authorities are having to implement pre-prepared business continuity plans and prioritise the level of services they provide.

- Whilst many continue as normal at present, contingency plans envisage the service restricted to reactive maintenance only.
- To facilitate this expectation, some have prioritised highways inspection as a priority
- Review arrangements for the safety of staff as well as covering staff absence
- Where prudent look at the redeployment and re-training of staff

Background

APSE sent out a survey which asked how local authority highways and street lighting services are being affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey asked member authorities for information as to how they plan to deliver services in light of the impact of the virus.

From the responses APSE has received to date, it is apparent that the majority are referring to pre-prepared Business Continuity Plans (BCP's) and there is a good deal of commonality across the UK, with regards to the changes to delivery either implemented or ready to be implemented, should the need arise.

Generally, authorities appear to be prioritising their services based on resident needs, one such example received from an authority, which is a good example of this, is set out below:

PRIMARY SERVICES:

(essential services – all staff redeployed to ensure service delivery)
Meals at Home (including shopping service).
Waste Collection (agreed collections priorities to focus on noxious wastes).
Cemetery – grave provision.
Transport administration, compliance and contract delivery.
Day Centre kitchen.

SECONDARY SERVICES:

(medium priority – redeploy staff in phase 2 to ensure primary service delivery)
Street Cleansing -scheduled cleansing.
Playground checks.
Street Cleaning - reactive cleansing.
Accessible minibuses for elderly and disabled.
Telecare services and social prescribing.
Day Centre – non kitchen use.

Highways & Street Lighting**TERTIARY SERVICES:**

(non-essential – redeploy staff in phase 1 to ensure primary and secondary service delivery)
Road/pavement sweeping.
Locking parks and general parks duties.
Grounds Maintenance.
Bin deliveries.
Allotments.
Abandoned cars.
Market management.
Countryside .
Sports centre and bookings

Operational changes**Highway Services**

Most have reviewed and updated their Business Continuity Plans and where outsourced have included their service provider. Many are continuing to function as normal, although a growing number are reducing the service coverage. Many have identified Highways Safety Inspections as a potential Critical Business Function. Site supervision of works continues, including ground-workers and developers, but open air only and a minimum of 2 metres apart with no sharing of vehicles or site offices.

Plans are in place to retain (in-house) delivery of a 'do-minimum' / 'make safe' service on the network to ensure safety and these will continue to be adjusted to meet, as far as reasonable, the changing national picture. There has been some impact on the delivery chain and sites are reporting that in some instances there has been difficulty in getting materials or reduced supply levels. Some have purchased additional Viafix and cold lay tarmac in case of disruption to the asphalt industry. Contractors are continuing under reduced resources. Schemes have therefore been delayed, but not as yet, cancelled. Some are considering the suspension of streetworks permitting to allow for greater flexibility

Schemes which are already under construction will continue in an attempt to close down as many ongoing projects as possible. No new works will commence during the current period of uncertainty. As the workforce reduces many will transition to basic operations only, which includes 24 hour and 28 day repairs as well as other highway emergency call out issues. It is anticipated that Highways HGV drivers may be moved to support waste collection functions if their teams become depleted.

One operator has reviewed their operations and generated a 3 stage approach relating to reducing the risk of spread in line with current local and national advice.

- 1st Stage was to spread the risk by distributing skill sets and operatives across all of our depots.
- 2nd stage is to stagger start and end times, issue work in cab the night before and remove any congregation of staff. In addition, deliver materials direct to site and with any collection the drivers do not get out of the cab. Any squad size of 5 or more is prohibited which has reduced resurfacing works programme.
- 3rd Stage is minimum service which only responds to emergencies.

There is an obvious challenge in skilled/accredited Safety Inspectors being unavailable for work due to the need to self-isolate/medical advice, so teams are looking at alternatives for continuity of service, these include: Rapid upskilling of other staff - putting aside the obvious risk profile of using inexperienced inspectors and the heightened risk profile of them being able to identify safety defects accurately, these inspections would obviously not be undertaken by accredited safety inspectors so any defence could potentially be weakened

Finally, Client and Contractor staff, if not already, should be set up on MS Teams, video calling etc. and use this technology to deliver the service remotely as required.

Street Lighting

Within street lighting one authority has given the following priority list:

- 1) Emergency call outs (Knockdowns/doors off/stuff hanging from columns) anything which could cause harm to persons or property.
- 2) Faults outside around vulnerable people/places (people in isolation could be more affected by faults which in turn could affect mental health, where we are unable to fix the problem i.e. NPG faults we will place a yellow notice on the column informing of this)
- 3) Knocked down/ missing Bollards/ missing Warning signs (Give way, STOP)
- 4) Normal day to day faults.
- 5) Column Installing on developments and replacements for knocked down Columns/posts on our highway.
- 6) LED Change programme.
- 7) Column/Post Installs.
- 8) General maintenance work

Protection of staff

Most support staff and non-essential managers/supervisors are now working from home.

Stagger clocking on time for crews visiting the depot, i.e. 15 minute spaces between when drivers collected keys in order to reduce the number of crews congregating in depots.

It is felt that social distancing is a key requirement, not only to ensure the health of staff but also to take into account the number of staff who may have underlying health conditions. Several authorities are requiring operatives to travel to site separately (no or very limited sharing of cabs). Enhanced cleaning regimes are being implemented in all premises.

APSE Comment

The UK and local authority services are certainly facing difficult times. Not only are local authorities dealing with austerity measures and changing public demands, but we now face the biggest challenge since the Second World War in relation to meeting public need.

From the responses received it is apparent that local authorities have been planning for an incident such as this but perhaps the sheer speed and scale of the pandemic

has taken many by surprise. Nevertheless local authorities are clearly implementing their business continuity plans and have in place services which will continue to meet public need even in these strange times.

APSE will continue to support its members through daily monitoring and disseminating information as it becomes available.

APSE's network query service will still be operational and advice will be forthcoming as and when it is received.

Members should look out for regular updates either via the APSE website or through short briefings such as these. You can access up-to-date information through the [APSE COVID 19 web hub](#). You can also sign up to the [APSE Covid 19 support networks](#) for rapid information through our dedicated WhatsApp Groups and email services.

Undoubtedly, there will be significant changes and demands being placed on local authorities but through the sharing of information and experiences we will undoubtedly rise to the challenge and meet the needs of our public and customers.

Rob Bailey

APSE Principal Advisor