Overview and Scrutiny Report to Cabinet

Title: Transport for Buckinghamshire (Ringway Jacobs contract) Task & Finish Group Report
Date: 27 February 2012
Date can be implemented: N/A
Author: Transport for Buckinghamshire (Ringway Jacobs contract) Task & Finish Group, commissioned by the Overview and Scrutiny Commissioning Committee (Chairman, Brian Roberts)
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Local members affected: All
Portfolio areas affected: Planning and Transportation

For press enquiries concerning this report, please contact the media office on 01296 382444

Summary

Roads are a high profile function of the County Council, used by nearly everyone living in Buckinghamshire and by many more people travelling through the county for work or leisure purposes. The transport infrastructure of Buckinghamshire includes 2,000 miles of local roads, 4,300 miles of footways, 400 road bridges, 28,000 street lights, and 6,500 illuminated signs and bollards. Since 2009, maintenance and development of this infrastructure has been provided for Buckinghamshire County Council by Transport for Buckinghamshire (TfB) through an ‘alliance’ contract with Ringway Jacobs Limited.

A Task and Finish scrutiny review of this contract was commissioned in June 2011 with a scope to examine whether contract objectives were being met, the governance arrangements within TfB, public perception of TfB services provided by Ringway Jacobs, and to identify any broad learning for future Council contracting. The review methodology included witness evidence sessions, requests for written evidence, and an online survey, emailed to over 2,000 people who had recently raised issues to the County Council about highways or transport services, to assess customer satisfaction. Nearly 700 responses were received to this survey, the results of which are included in Appendices C and D of the report.
Survey comments and written evidence submitted to the review highlighted that slow or non-resolution of reported highways faults is an area of frustration for the public. This is particularly true of potholes. The Task & Finish Group are aware that work is underway within TfB to improve the process of pothole repair and recommend that a policy be developed where less serious non-Category 1 potholes in close proximity to urgent Category 1 potholes are fixed concurrently. Local dissatisfaction also arises from a perceived illogical approach to local tasks where some faults are resolved but others are not. To address this, the Task & Finish Group recommend the development of a ‘while here’ policy for works gangs to progress all appropriate jobs in a locality during a single or series of visits. The role of Local Area Technicians should also be developed to improve local communication and resolution of faults.

The Task & Finish Group feel the initial focus on efficiencies and operational functions (combined with budget pressures and two severe winters) has contributed towards the development of a ‘customer blindspot’ that requires attention. Written evidence and survey responses show the importance of highways and transport services to Buckinghamshire residents and the frustration caused by poor communication or non-completion of reported faults. To address this the Task & Finish Group recommend greater focus on customer priorities, strengthening of performance indicators relating to improving response times, and the introduction of a performance indicator to reduce the number of repeat contacts made by residents progress chasing for updates on their reported issue.

From evidence provided by officers, the Task & Finish Group were satisfied that efficiencies and innovations are being made through the Council’s arrangements with Ringway Jacobs. However, the Task & Finish Group are keen to ensure that best possible value for money continues through robust and transparent competitive tendering for sub-contractors, and that efficiency targets do not impact negatively in the long-term on services highly valued by residents.

The economic climate has changed significantly since the development of the contract. This in mind, the Task & Finish Group are of the opinion that the arrangement must remain responsive to market conditions and that now is a timely opportunity to seek a contract development window to ensure the arrangement is delivering continuing value for money for the authority and Buckinghamshire residents.

Recommendations

Cabinet is invited to consider the following recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Commissioning Committee (OSCC):

1. The Cabinet Member and Strategic Client should seek a ‘contract development opportunity’ to refine arrangements in line with current market conditions to ensure best possible value for money for the life of the contract.

2. Membership of the Strategic Board should be widened to include the two Cabinet Spokesmen for Transport in addition to the Cabinet Member. The Strategic Client should be resourced to ensure resilience, effective management, capacity and challenge to the contractor.

3. Papers of the TfB Strategic Board should be made accessible to County Councillors in order to make available options for and impacts of TfB efficiencies, and results of service financial and performance bench-marking.

4. Localised ‘trend data’ available to the Contact Centre and Service Information Centre on types of issues raised, response rates, and unresolved issues should
be published online and communicated to County Councillors as local updates (quarterly) and as part of TfB updates at Local Area Forums.

5. TfB should introduce a Key Performance Indicator to monitor and reduce the number of repeat contacts made by residents to the County Council about TfB services. Consideration should be given to options to improve outbound communication (calling people back) to provide updates and manage expectations.

6. Customer satisfaction Key Performance Indicators should be strengthened, particularly those specific to improving response times to reported faults and customer correspondence.

7. Integration between the Contact Centre and Service Information Centre should be increased to ensure that customers receive a consistent quality of service and response rate. The SIC should be sufficiently resourced in order to be up to date, accurate and able to provide acknowledgements and updates.

8. As part of a ‘while here’ policy to improve local satisfaction with TfB services, non-Category 1 potholes in close proximity to an urgent Category 1 pothole should be repaired concurrently as standard.

9. Local Area Technicians (LATs) should be supported to interface between County Councillors, District and Parish Councils, Local Area Forms and operations at TfB to ensure they can proactively identify, prioritise and resolve local works and faults. County Councillors should be provided with the contact details for their LATs in order to support their community leadership roles.

Your questions and views

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this paper please get in touch with the Contact Officer whose telephone number is given at the head of the paper.

If you have any views on this paper that you would like the Cabinet Member to consider, or if you wish to object to the proposed decision, please inform the Democratic Services Team by 5.00pm on 24 February 2012. This can be done by telephone (to 01296 383627 or 383610), Fax (to 01296 382538), or e-mail to cabinet@buckscc.gov.uk