

Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

13 March 2018

Subject: National Highways and Transportation Survey

Cabinet Member: Councillor Bridget Wayman - Highways, Transport and Waste

Key Decision: No

Purpose of Report

1. To inform the Committee about the National Highways and Transport (NHT) survey and how the information is used by this Council.

Background

2. At the Environment Select Committee - Executive Annual Meeting on the 15 November 2017 regarding the Highways and Transport portfolio, it was suggested that further information should be provided to this Committee regarding the NHT survey.
3. Wiltshire County Council was a long standing member of the South West Highways Service Improvement Group (SWHIG). This group involved all of the south-west authorities, and carried out benchmarking on a whole range of highway related services, including reviewing the Best Value Performance Indicators which were reported annually to the DfT at that time.
4. In 2008 the SWHIG initiated a public satisfaction survey to obtain specific information on the views of the public regarding highways maintenance issues. The surveys were carried out with the help of measure2improve and Ipsos MORI. The surveys have continued since then, with increasing numbers of local authorities becoming involved.

Main Considerations for the Council

The NHT Surveys

5. This Council has taken part in the NHT public satisfaction surveys since its inception in 2008. During that time the surveys have proved helpful in identifying trends, but more importantly they have provided the opportunity to compare public satisfaction results with those of other authorities. There were 112 authorities taking part in the 2017 survey.

6. The survey uses a postal mailing methodology. Postal surveys are a robust, cost-efficient way of undertaking survey research and are used for a number of important Government surveys, such as the National GP Patient Survey. Postal surveys are, however, self-selecting, they involve inviting respondents to take part and achieved samples often over and under-represent certain types of people.
7. The survey uses random probability sampling methodology. This is cheaper than using telephone or face-to-face methods, which it is estimated would typically cost an authority at least five times the investment required to participate in the NHT Survey (with the inherent benefits of economies of scale).
8. The survey results are weighted to ensure that the achieved sample is fully representative and better reflects the known population profile. Each respondent is given a weight so that the results are representative of the profile of residents in each local authority area. The responses from each individual completing the survey are given a weight in accordance with their: age, gender, ethnicity, and work status.
9. Further information on the weighting scheme currently in use is available on the NHT website at www.nhtnetwork.org.
10. The survey also offers the option at additional cost to undertake additional surveys with more detail by area, and on-line regarding the views of public representatives, businesses and on specific transport themes.
11. To date, the survey has enjoyed better than average response rates, and above those originally predicted by Ipsos MORI. A slow decline in responses rates, a trend common with postal surveys, was addressed four years ago by the introduction of a reminder, sending a letter and a further copy of the questionnaire, to the sampled households that have not yet returned the questionnaire.

NHT Survey Results

12. The response rate to the surveys in Wiltshire was particularly good this year with a high response rate compared to other authorities.
13. The NHT survey produces a summary report (**Appendix 1**) which covers the main themes of:
 - Accessibility,
 - Public Transport,
 - Walking and Cycling,
 - Tackling Congestion,
 - Road Safety and
 - Highway Maintenance

This summary is designed to give a quick visual impression of strengths and weaknesses, and where the authority is in relation to others.

14. In 2017 the shorter form of questionnaire was used in Wiltshire which reduced costs. This obtained less information on public transport and rights of way, but as this information has not been extensively used in the past it was considered preferable to concentrate on the other aspects of the highway service.
15. The detailed NHT survey report (**Appendix 2**) provides information on a question by question basis, and shows the results and breakdown of responses in graphical format. The results use weighted and unweighted data to show public satisfaction. They indicate the relative importance of different factors, and compare them with the average results obtained from the survey.
16. As well as the published reports the survey results can be accessed at the NHT website, which also allows specific reports to be created.
17. The results for the latest NHT survey indicate that public satisfaction in Wiltshire compared to the national average is:
 - Slightly Above average – Tackling congestion
 - Average – Accessibility
 - Slightly Below Average – Walking and Cycling, Road Safety, Highway Maintenance
18. It is clear from the results that public satisfaction with road conditions nationally is low, with high levels of dissatisfaction. This is also the case in Wiltshire with 28% fairly dissatisfied, and 40% very dissatisfied.
19. The questions about management of road roadworks and efforts to reduce traffic delays show levels of public satisfaction in Wiltshire above the national average.
20. In most service areas public satisfaction with highway services in Wiltshire is generally at or slightly below national average. None of the questions indicate that satisfaction is at the lowest levels identified in some other authorities.
21. The comparison of survey results with other highway authorities nationally is useful. However, because of the varying nature of the road networks in different authorities it can sometimes be misleading to compare rural shire counties with inner city urban authorities for example. A key benefit of the NHT survey is that it allows comparison with specific authorities.
22. For example, a comparison of public satisfaction levels was carried out with other highway authorities in the south west at the request of the Contract Task Group, and this information has been updated to reflect the most recent survey results (**Appendix 3**).

Public Satisfaction trends in Wiltshire since 2008

23. As this Council has been involved in the service since 2008, it is possible for longer term comparisons with similar county councils to be made of public satisfaction across a range of highways maintenance aspects (**Appendix 4**).

24. The survey shows how public satisfaction levels with road conditions in Wiltshire (KBI 23) have remained fairly consistent since 2008, whereas nationally they have declined during that period. In 2008 Wiltshire was among the lowest scoring county authorities, but is now closer to the average.
25. Public satisfaction with pavements in Wiltshire (WCBI 02) has improved in the past nine years, from a low satisfaction level in 2008, to being average now. Satisfaction with the provision of dropped kerb crossing points (WBCI 06) has also shown a relative improvement in that period.
26. Satisfaction with 'Help lines to find out about roadworks' (TCBI 05) has been improving nationally, and Wiltshire has generally been above or close to average since 2008. Satisfaction with the speed of repair to street lights (HMBI 06), weed killing on pavements and roads (HMBI 10) and keeping drains clear and working (HMBI 12) have generally been very close to the county council average.
27. The 'speed of repair to damaged roads and pavements' (HMBI 07) and 'quality of repair' (HMBI 08) were probably adversely affected by the issues with the BBLP highway contract, especially during 2014 and 2015. Current satisfaction levels are below average, but still above the lowest scoring authorities. The satisfaction with 'dealing with potholes and damaged roads' (HMBI 13) has been increasing consistently in recent years.
28. The NHT survey results indicate that since 2008 the public satisfaction with many aspects of road maintenance have increased in Wiltshire, or remained fairly constant. The low satisfaction levels in 2008, particularly with road conditions, probably reflected the previous decades when surfacing budgets had generally been lower than in many other authorities.
29. Staffing levels in the highways service in Wiltshire have reduced significantly since 2008 as a result of various reorganisations and voluntary redundancies, and the revenue budgets for works have reduced considerably in recent years.
30. Increased efficiency and work prioritisation appear to have off-set these reductions as public satisfaction levels have generally not dropped significantly. However, it is difficult to know whether public satisfaction will be maintained at these levels with continuing budget pressures.

Future NHT survey involvement

31. The NHT public satisfaction survey information is used in the Wiltshire Highways Performance Management Framework, which is reported annually to this Committee in the autumn as part of the highways Annual Review of Service.
32. The use of the public satisfaction surveys or other means of gauging public opinion are required as part of the DfT Incentive Fund requirements. They need to demonstrate consistent and comparable sampling methods, and comparisons over time.

33. The NHT survey provides a robust means of obtaining the required information on public satisfaction. Sharon Andrews of measure2improve has been invited to the meeting to provide additional information and answer questions about the survey.
34. The survey information helps inform benchmarking being undertaken with other authorities through various groups, including the South West Highways Alliance, the Direct Management Group and directly with other similar authorities.
35. It is proposed to continue to participate in the survey, using the shorter questionnaire as this provides sufficient information for comparison purposes at a reasonable cost.

Safeguarding Implications

36. None.

Public Health Implications

37. None in connection with the public satisfaction surveys.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

38. The effects of climate change, such as the flooding in 2014, can affect the condition of roads, with consequent effects on public satisfaction.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

39. The maintenance of the highway network, and its effective management is important for local communities, including users of public transport, and vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians. The surveys help understand the views of the public.

Risk Assessment

40. There are significant risks associated with working on the highway, especially in terms of road safety, and the reputational effects associated with roads and traffic. The NHT survey provides good information on public satisfaction and helps understand public attitudes to highways maintenance.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

41. No specific decision is required at this time.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

42. No specific decision is required at this time.

Financial Implications

43. The cost of carrying out the surveys is met from the highways budget. The cost of participating in the next survey will be £8,550 for the 8 page questionnaire, with a loyalty discount of £250 for taking part in last year's survey. It is considered that the information obtained is useful and represents good value for money for the Council.

Legal Implications

44. The duties of the Council as highway authority are mainly set out in the Highways Act 1980. There is no legal requirement to carry out public satisfaction surveys, but it is considered that the information is helpful in assessing performance of the highway service and comparing with other authorities.

Options Considered

45. There is no obligation to take part in the NHT survey. However, in connection with the DfT Incentive Funding it is necessary to demonstrate that public satisfaction with the highways service is being taken into account. The NHT survey is considered to be a good method for collecting and comparing this information.

Conclusions

46. The NHT surveys have been carried out annually since 2008, and are an effective way to obtain information on public satisfaction regarding highway services. The survey allows easy comparisons with other authorities by type and geographical areas.
47. It is proposed that the Council should take part in the survey this year.

Proposal

48. It is recommended that the Environment Select Committee:
- (i) Recognises the value of the NHT survey in helping to understand public satisfaction regarding highway services.
 - (ii) Supports the continuing participation of this Council in the NHT survey.
 - (iii) Thanks Sharon Andrews of Measure2improvement for attending this meeting.

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The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

Appendices

Appendix 1 – NHT Survey Wiltshire Summary Report

Appendix 2 – NHT Survey Wiltshire Detail Report

Appendix 3 – Summary of comparison with south-west counties

Appendix 4 – Public Satisfaction Trends 2008 - 2017