

22nd December 2017

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Dear Mr Buckley,

REPORT TO PREVENT FUTURE DEATHS: KATHERINE VANLOO INQUEST

I am writing in response to the report which you issued on 2 November 2017 to explain what action the County Council has taken and proposes to take in order to speed up the time it takes to repair potholes once they have been identified and to track the progress of works orders that have been sent to Balfour Beatty Living Places ("BBLP"). I am the Joint Managing Director of the County Council and my responsibilities include the highways functions of the County Council. I confirm that the County Council has no objection to this letter being published in full by the Chief Coroner and being disclosed in full to the Interested Persons at the Inquest.

Our actions relate, firstly, to the period between a pothole being identified by a Safety Inspector and a works order being issued to BBLP and, secondly, to the period after a works order has been issued. We have not changed the target times for repairing potholes (and no criticism was made of them during the inquest) but have aimed our actions at ensuring that works orders are issued promptly and that any slippage by Balfour Beatty is quickly detected and pursued.

Ensuring Prompt Issue of a Works Order

The Highways Safety Inspectors now use one of six handheld devices to create details of potholes that they find (co-ordinates, photographs, categorisation, etc.) and upload them directly into the County Council's database in the EXOR computer system. The database is known as the "defects pool". The defects pool contains records of all kinds of defects and so we have introduced measures to enable safety defects found by Inspectors to be readily distinguished from other defects that do not present an immediate safety concern. This is done by assigning a letter to each of the handheld devices (A, B, C, D, E or F) which prefixes the reference number of any safety defect when it is uploaded to EXOR (e.g. B9678).

*Working for
Warwickshire*

BBLP have agreed that the Inspectors should upload from their handheld devices at the end of every inspection day. This reduces any delays in defects entering the pool and ensures that safety defects do not accumulate into clusters that become a backlog. A senior Inspector at BBLP is also taking responsibility for checking with our Highways teams at the end of every day that each Inspector has successfully uploaded their data for that day.

We have introduced a target to issue a works order within no more than five days from a safety defect being uploaded to EXOR. The letter prefix means that safety defects in the defects pool can be easily collected and organised for review within the database. Our Delivery Teams in Highways are now required to review the defects pool on a daily basis and the review includes the following objectives:

- (i) to check whether there is any reason why a Category 2 defect cannot be repaired within 28 days and, if there is such a reason, to arrange for an emergency temporary repair;
- (ii) to identify any safety defects that were uploaded more than five days ago and prioritise them for an immediate works order.

The introduction of a letter prefix also means that it is quicker to find and attach the correct photograph to the job pack that is issued to BBLP with the works order and the risk of error is reduced.

Action has also been taken to speed up the preparation of job packs by agreeing with BBLP that it will deliver all traffic management forms to one central Highways office on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The traffic management forms set out any arrangements for managing traffic that will be necessary whilst defects are being repaired and they are an essential part of each job pack. Although this was not mentioned at the inquest, discussions with BBLP about improving processes identified that traffic management forms were being delivered to either the northern sector office or the southern sector office where they were scanned and put into either a northern sector or a southern sector file. This caused delays if forms were delivered to the wrong office or a length of road straddled the boundaries between the sectors. The responsible team at the central office now scan the forms into a single countywide computer file which can be accessed by both the northern and southern offices.

Although it is not mentioned in the Regulation 28 Report, whilst giving your narrative verdict you expressed the hope that Inspectors would in future record the depth of potholes at the time of inspection. An instruction to do so has been issued to BBLP to be implemented from the start of January 2018.

When a works order is raised and a jobs pack is sent to BBLP by the County Council, it is entered into BBLP's Confirm computer system. It is the intention of the County Council and BBLP to develop their systems further so that safety defects in the defects pool can be automatically transferred to Confirm. However, I am afraid that we are unable to put a timescale on achieving that.

Monitoring Works Orders

The County Council did have a system for checking the paperwork returned by BBLP after it had carried out works orders and also a system for carrying out quality audits on a proportion of randomly selected completed repairs (see paragraphs 61-62 of the Statement of [REDACTED]). However, the inquest heard evidence that the system was overwhelmed when the number of repairs being carried out quadrupled following the introduction of the Find and Fix programme and records of repairs completed were being returned by BBLP intermittently in massive batches.

The inquest also heard evidence from [REDACTED], our Programmes and Delivery Manager, and [REDACTED] the Head of Operational Improvement for BBLP, that the Find and Fix programme has now been discontinued and about the introduction of the Confirm system in the first half of 2017 (see in particular paragraphs 27-28 of [REDACTED] Statement of 30 June). The leader of a team sent by BBLP or its sub-contractor to carry out works orders is now issued with a GPS linked handheld device which carries all the information in the job pack, including GPS co-ordinates. When the repair has been completed, and photographed, records of that can be uploaded directly into the Confirm system from the site (if there is no 3G coverage at the site the data is uploaded when 3G connectivity is available).

No system can wholly eliminate the potential for human error or deception but this system very substantially eliminates the possibility of the correct location not being found by the repair team and of any miscommunication about what work has been carried out and where.

Our Highways team have direct access to Confirm as well as BBLP (at the moment only [REDACTED] in Highways has access but access will be provided to all the relevant team leaders in January 2018). Confirm displays a "dashboard" which automatically displays details of any works orders which have gone "red", meaning that they have not been carried out within 23 days of the date of the works order. Allowing up to five days for the works order to be issued after inspection, this effectively sounds an alert that the 28 day target is at risk of being missed. These works orders are then prioritised for urgent completion.

At present, the County Council are working co-operatively with BBLP to target overdue works orders and will keep under review whether joint monitoring and action on a collaborative basis is proving sufficient to ensure that repairs are being effected on time or, in a small number of cases very shortly thereafter. However, inspection of the Confirm dashboard on 19 December 2017 showed that only 14 safety defects were at or beyond the 28 day target across the whole county.

Conclusion

I hope that this letter, which mainly describes actions that have already been taken, provides reassurance, most especially to the family of Ms Vanloo, of how seriously the County Council takes the safety of people on our roads and that the processes which we and BBLP operate have been significantly improved in practical and effective ways for the future. If you would like further detail or information, please do let me know and I will do what I can to help.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Joint Managing Director