Hole in One (or two, or many millions more?) – Potholes galore!

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Growing cost of roads going nowhere

Road repair funding faces a deepening pothole

Local road repair

British local road network continues to decline...

Britain’s local roads head downhill as pothole problems get worse

Potholes forever!

– by Dave Moss.

Every Spring, the Asphalt Industry Alliance (AIA) publishes its Local Authority road maintenance survey results, and the report for 2020 reveals national repair expenditure down around 16% year on year. This translates to average spending on road maintenance of just £20.7 million per authority – against £24.5 million in 2019. Of this, the AIA claims that, again on average, only 50% actually went on carriageway work – down from 55% in 2018-2019. The report says the average shortfall to maintain roads to what it describes as "target" condition stands at £5.4m per English authority, and £4.9 million averaged across England, Wales and London.

New research for the Kwik Fit servicing and repair chain also suggests declining road surface quality, showing 56% of Britain's road users believe roads are in worse condition now than a year ago – up from 51% in 2019. 26% of motorists claimed to hit over 30 potholes a month, while 32% of those encountering a pothole in the last year said it caused vehicle damage, bringing average repair bills of £115. The combined research also reveals growing reluctance among English and Welsh highway authorities to reimburse pothole damage repair costs. The AIA survey found compensation totalling just £8.1 million was paid – that's under 1% of Kwik Fit's calculated actual repair expenditure – with motorists and insurers paying the rest.

Though these are worries today, AIA analysis suggests that continued road maintenance funding shortfalls are stacking up bigger problems for the future. The 2020 survey estimates the total one-off cost of returning local authority roads to what it regards as reasonable, stable condition has spiralled by £1.35 billion in twelve months, and now stands at £11.14 billion, equating to £85.4 million per local authority in England; £24.3 million in London, and £32.8 million in Wales.

Launching the report, Rick Green, Chair of the AIA said: "Highway maintenance budgets are back to where they were two years ago. Over the past 25 years we have repeatedly seen this pattern of short-term cash injections to stem accelerating decline – followed by further years of underfunding. This stop-start approach has been wasteful, and does nothing to improve

the condition of local road networks. In fact, it has just contributed to a rising bill to put things right."

Significant restorative funding for local roads seems unlikely any time soon given current government emergency spending – but the Association reckons cash isn't the only issue. Even before Covid 19 changed things forever, it calculated that, if all necessary resources were readily available, clearing the current road maintenance backlog would take 11 years, and resource shortfalls across England and Wales now mean that local roads are only fully resurfaced once every 66 years.

Steve Gooding, director of the RAC Foundation, feels problems of inadequate funding must wait because of the current crisis – but not indefinitely: "Given the coronavirus spending pressures facing the Chancellor, now doesn't feel like the right moment to demand a further post-budget maintenance spending boost," he says. "But looking further ahead to the period post-coronavirus, and the likely need to stimulate the economy, this report should prompt government to consider committing to an ambitious maintenance initiative for the most important local roads – set at a similarly high and sustained level it has just set for Highways England."

The AIA survey confirms fears that less funding for carriageway work inevitably means less maintenance. It reports fewer repaired potholes – and 7,240 more miles of road no longer in "good" structural condition with over 15 years of life remaining. Meanwhile, 1,100 miles have been added to the 31,575 miles classified "poor" last year – with under 5 years life remaining.

The Local Government Association's transport spokesman, Cllr David Renard, believes some innovative forward planning is needed – looking towards a greener future: "It's clear that roads are deteriorating at a faster rate than can be repaired by councils, with the cost of clearing our national roads backlog on the rise," he says. "To help councils go further to maintain our roads, they need devolved infrastructure and public transport budgets – ensuring a funding allocation in advance for five years, which would enable them to deliver

infrastructure improvements that allow people to move around in less carbon intensive and more sustainable ways."

There was little sign of this in Chancellor Rishi Sunak's March budget, though there was continued Government acknowledgement of road maintenance issues. A new five-year, £500 million a year fund was announced – enough, according to the Chancellor, to fill around 50 million potholes across the country. It seems a majority of drivers weren't convinced, however. Just days afterwards, asked about this new funding, 56% of Kwik Fit survey respondents said that £2.5bn over five years would have only a slight or no impact on pothole numbers…

Roger Griggs, Kwik Fit's communications director, feels road maintenance needs a more determined approach: "Unfortunately, every year we see a worsening story when it comes to the condition of our roads, and it's the individual motorist who's hit increasingly hard," he says. "The immediate impact of coronavirus will mean many demands on public spending, but this should not mask the fact that roads have been underfunded year after year. Once we're out of this crisis, as a country we need to plan investment for the long term, and not merely look to patch things over in the cheapest possible way."

Rick Green wholeheartedly agrees: "Over £1 billion has been wasted chasing and filling potholes on local roads over the last decade," he says. "What's needed is sustained investment in effective road maintenance, to improve the condition of our local roads, and help prevent potholes forming in the first place. The Chancellor's £2.5 billion extra funding will certainly be welcomed by hard-pressed local authorities, but we believe that extra investment of £1.5 billion per year, for 10 years, is what's needed to bring local road conditions up to a level from which they can be maintained cost-effectively – and ensure a more resilient network going forward."

References

The Asphalt Industry Association 2020 survey is available in full here

https://www.asphaltuk.org/download-alarm/

The AIA key findings summary chart:

Key findings

	TOTAL*	England**	London	Wales
Percentage of authorities responding	↑ 67%	↑ 78%	↑ 53%	↓ 32%
Highway maintenance budgets				
Average highway maintenance budget per authority	↓ £20.7m	↓ £26.8m	↓ £8.4m	↓ £7.7m
Percentage of highway maintenance budget spent on carriageway	↓ 50%	↓ 52%	↓ 47%	↓ 42%
Average carriageway maintenance budget per authority	↓ £10.4m	↓ £13.9m	↓ £4.0m	↓ £3.2m
Shortfall				
Shortfall in annual carriageway maintenance budget	↑ £826.6m	↑ £616.0m	↓ £117.0m	↑ £93.6m
Average annual carriageway maintenance budget shortfall per authority	↑ £4.9m	↑ £5.4m	↓ £3.6m	↑ £4.2m
Estimated time to clear carriageway maintenance backlog	↑ 11 yrs	↑ 12 yrs	↓ 8 yrs	↑ 10 yrs
Estimated one-time catch-up cost	↑ £11.14bn	↑ £9.64bn	↓ £777.0m	↓ £722.0m
Estimated one-time catch-up cost per authority	↑ £66.8m	↑ £85.4m	↓ £24.3m	↓ £32.8m
Road condition				
Frequency of road surfacing (all road classes)	↓ 66 yrs	↓ 76 yrs	↑ 36 yrs	↓ 58 yrs
Number of potholes filled over past year	↓ 1,481,746	↓ 1,340,632	↓ 85,696	↓ 55,418
Average number of potholes filled per authority over past year	↓ 8,863	↓ 11,864	↓ 2,678	↓ 2,519
Average cost to fill one pothole – planned	↑ £43.10	↑ £44.00	↑ £47.33	↑ £32.35
Average cost to fill one pothole – reactive	↑ £70.91	↑ £73.76	↑ £64.34	↓ £65.83
Total spent filling potholes in past year	↓ £86.4m	↓ £78.9m	↑ £4.8m	– £2.7m
Compensation claims				
Amount paid in road user compensation claims	↑ £8.1m	↑ £6.6m	↑ £1.2m	↑ £330k
Staff costs spent on claims (per year)	↓ £14.7m	↓ £12.7m	↓ £1.5m	↑ £488k

* England, London and Wales

** excludes London

↑ Up from ALARM survey 2019
↓ Down from ALARM survey 2019
– Same as ALARM survey 2019