



Briefing 14/22 May 2014

'ALARM Survey 2014'.

To: contacts in England and Wales,
For information: contacts in Scotland and Northern Ireland

Key issues

In England and Wales, authorities estimate that £12 billion would be needed to bring their roads back into reasonable condition

Average time to clear the backlog of highways repairs is 12 years

Big impacts on the highways network of flooding and water damages

1. Introduction

The Asphalt Industry Alliance has issued its latest Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) Survey. It is an independent survey of all local highways departments in England and Wales with the aim of providing a snapshot of the general condition of the local highway network. 75% of councils completed returns and the information relates to information from the financial year 2013-14. It includes questions related to funding, the type of maintenance carried out, and the issues affecting maintenance service levels.

The survey can be found [here](#)

2. Main themes

2.1 Funding

The report highlights a number of financial issues

- The average budget for local authority highway maintenance in England (excluding London) stands at £20.4m which is a 1.5% increase on the previous year. The previous 2 yearly changes were a 10% rise in 2013 and an 11% fall in 2012.
- In London the average was £4.2m which is down from £7m the year before. That was an unusual year given the level of investment made due to the Olympics.
- 30% and in Wales by 22%.
- In Wales the average budget was £4.4m which was a reduction from £7m in 2012-13. This was also an unusual year in that there was a one-time borrowing facility from the Welsh Government.
- Across England and Wales, the total overall road maintenance budgets at £2.8billion remained close to the previous year of £2.9billion.

The report notes that the percentage of the budget spent on reactive maintenance in England (excluding London) was 24% compared with 25% the year before. In London the figure was 34% (33% the year before) whilst in Wales it rose from 30% to 35%. The report states that the ideal level for reactive maintenance spend

is 15% but others might state the planned reactive spend split might be a 70/30 split. It also states that the level of reactive maintenance required through the year is a good indicator of the overall state of the roads.

Although the timing of the report did not gather extensive information about the costs of heavy rainfall and flooding, the majority of those responding to the survey noted that they did have to cope with unforeseen costs primarily down to wet weather. In England 65% of authorities reported that this was the case, in Wales 80% but only 29% in London. Based on limited information the reports estimates a n average cost of £1.6m per authority with this figure likely to increase when information from some of the most severely hit authorities is gathered.

The report notes that most local authority highway maintenance programmes are managed against budget figures set annually. It has long been recognised that this hinders efficient planning of maintenance work, in particular, planned preventative maintenance which is at least 20 times less expensive than reactive work, such as patching and mending potholes. Nearly all authorities, 98% stated in this year's survey that they believed longer term funding would help efficiency and provide a more durable road network with 53% saying 5 years was the optimum term for set funding and 32% say 10 years or longer.

When asked about the difference between the estimated annual budgets departments think they need to maintain highways and that which they actually receive, the average figure was £5.1m with an average difference of £2m in London and £2.9m in Wales.

If adequate funding were available the results from the survey show the work to bring all roads back to a reasonable condition would take 12 years in England and Wales and 14 years in London. In terms of condition the reports notes that 18% of roads are in poor condition (less than 5 years of life) in England, 19% in London and 16% in Wales.

2.2 Potholes

The survey asked questions about the definition of a pothole. Guidance points to 40mm as a guideline depth and 65% of English authorities and 53% of London and Welsh authorities use this definition although many use a shallower definition.

This year's report states that there was a 31% increase in the number of potholes filled in 2013 compared with the year before but that there was a small reduction this year compared with 2013. The average number of potholes filled per authority dropped from 16,041 to 15,195 in England and 7,802 down to 6,730 last year. In London, the average increased from 3,102 to 3,602.

2.3 Road Surfacing Frequency

The report notes that the ideal frequency of road resurfacing is between 10 and 20 years, accounting for the lifespan of specific materials, the road type, and the level and nature of its traffic. Replacing the surface layer regularly maintains an appropriate level of grip, vital for road safety, and maintains a weatherproof seal on guard against water ingress and winter freeze/thaw effects. Only principal roads in London came close that which is considered the ideal frequency of road resurfacing, between 10 and 20 years. Principal roads in England and Wales are likely to be resurfaced in 33 years and 42 years respectively. The wait for unclassified / rural roads to be resurfaced has increased significantly to 101 years on average. The average, across all classes of roads in England and Wales is 68 years (compared with 54 years last year) and 32 years in London.

2.4 Utility Openings

There has been a significant reduction in the number of road openings of around 29% over the past year. The report notes that approximately 14% of maintenance budgets are spent on premature maintenance to utility openings.

2.5 Compensation Claims

The average number of claims received for compensation for damage to person or vehicle due to poor road condition has increased substantially over the past 2 years with an increase from 452 in 2012-13 to 540 in 2013-14 in England. In Wales there was an increase from 80 to 141 and the figure remained static at 126 in London.

The average total amount paid out per authority in England reduced from nearly £200,000 to £96,000; in London from £191,000 to £138,000 and in Wales from £82,000 to 51,000.

The lowest amounts paid out were in England (outside London), where the average claim is about £440, compared with £1,500 in London and £1,000 in Wales. Authorities outside London and Wales still receive a much higher number of claims: an average of 452, compared with 300 for the last year reported. Taking the amounts paid out and the estimated costs of processing claims, across England and Wales, road user compensation claims have cost an estimated total of £45.2 million.

3. APSE comment

This report highlighting the state of highway network will come as no surprise to those involved in delivering highways services. The importance of the network to the state of the national economy is obvious and as such justifies adequate investment. The likelihood of adequate resources being made available to bring the network up to scratch is nil (£12 billion) but local authorities are using new approaches, investing in new technology, working closely with neighbouring councils and prioritising work differently. The move towards asset management and better planning by some highways authorities, rather than reacting to worst first, is helping to change attitudes across the sector. Having the resources to maintain the roads is only one aspect of the problem of course. Such are the numbers of vehicles on most roads that any road closure causes significant problems. Minimising closures is something local authorities are addressing and there is evidence that those using, for example lane rental schemes, are managing to reduce the time roads are out of action. More local authorities need to look at this kind of example to reduce network disruption.

This report notes that utility openings reduce the structural life of a road with most highways engineers believing that the effect of deep trenching reduces road life by at least 30% and this is borne out by research. The message is that the fewer times that roads are dug up, the better – getting this right will depend on close working relationships between utility firms and local authorities.

The Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP) has produced a number of toolkits addressing issues such as pothole repairs and shared services which aim to highlight good practice and these acknowledge that there is a lot of expertise within the sector that can be shared widely and APSE would encourage all local authorities to engage with this programme.

The borrowing facility made available to all local authorities by the Welsh Government has certainly had an impact on the ability of those authorities to address the condition of the highway. Although many would argue that this is not enough to meet the needs of the entire network, it does show that extra powers can produce effective results if they are provided.

Flooding remains a well publicised issue although the publicity normally concentrates on the impacts on homes and traffic issues rather than on the impacts on the road network. However, water will cause damage to the underlying levels of local roads and this is an expensive and time consuming problem to rectify. The same is true of damage from snow and ice, another factor which this survey highlights. Putting arrangements in place to tackle flooding remains a national and local priority.

The survey notes that the number of claims for compensation for damage to person or vehicle as a result of poor road condition has increased substantially over the past year at an estimated cost of over £45m. This is

not an issue to be ignored and many local authorities have taken a more robust approach to managing and rebutting these claims over recent years. Local authorities must be prepared to stand their ground on such claims where appropriate, ensuring they have clear policies and procedures in place to help them manage such claims effectively.

The highways network is the most valuable asset that most local authorities own. Ensuring it is properly managed is vital to the wellbeing of the locality. Pointing to historic problems, unique local conditions or a lack of historic investment will not help improve the state of the asset. Proper plans, an investment strategy based on asset management data and good communication with users, are important starting points to keeping the highway network up to scratch.

Clearly extra funds are needed but collaboration, new technology, asset management approaches and better communication all have a role to play when addressing the condition of our roads – the solution is not only about cash.

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