Making the case for investment in the local road network: road safety

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL ROAD NETWORK
The local road network is the country’s greatest infrastructure asset that comprises 183,000 miles, represents 98% of the total road network and is worth over £340 billion.

Yet, despite this and despite the fact that a well-maintained local road network is essential for road safety, economic prosperity and well being, the investment in the necessary levels of local road maintenance is woefully inadequate. The result is there are over 24,400 miles of local roads that require essential maintenance, that equates to one in five of local roads now being classed as structurally poor and requiring replacement within five years. (1)

The legacy of national government under-investment and inadequate ad-hoc one-off funding means that hard pressed local authorities are unable to planned cost effective programmes of maintenance. Instead, they are forced to undertake expensive patch-and-mend. It costs only £2m² to surface dress and maintain a road but costs an average £52m² to repair potholes.

Significant government funding is made available for prestigious high speed rail and smart motorway projects. Yet the local road network, that is the essential link to national roads and rail, to airports and ports as well as to people’s homes, to schools, hospitals and businesses, is repeatedly overlooked. This must change.

THE ISSUE OF ROAD SAFETY
Highway authorities have a legal duty to maintain the road network under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980. In addition, local highway authorities are expected to abide by the standards of repair set out by the UK code of practice ‘Well-managed highway infrastructure’ published by the UK Roads Liaison Group (UKRLG) with the backing of central and local government.

Despite these statutory and industry requirements, the lack of assured and adequate levels on funding means that out poorly maintained roads are becoming safety hazards. A fact commented on by a recent AA poll that found 85% of poll respondents believe that the condition of roads is an issue in terms of safety and they are concerned about their and other road users’ safety. (2)

Poorly maintained roads are particularly a hazard for cyclists. Between 2007–2016, 22 cyclists were killed and 368 were seriously injured in road accidents where the contributory factor was a “poor or defective road surface.” (3)

Potholes are not only safety issue. Skid resistance is also a major consideration. Over time, a road surface becomes worn and polished. This lessens its skid resistance and the confidence that it is safe to drive and brake on. The Department for Transport reports that 27% of the local authority managed road network needs “further investigation” of possible inadequate skid resistance. (4)

24,400
MILES OF LOCAL ROAD REQUIRING ESSENTIAL MAINTENANCE

22
CYCLISTS KILLED BETWEEN 2007-16 (WITH POOR ROAD SURFACES A FACTOR)

85%
CONCERNED ABOUT SAFETY DUE TO POOR ROAD CONDITIONS AA POLL
NATIONAL POTHOLE DEFINITION

There should be a national statutory standard definition of what comprises a pothole. Currently, there is no consistency.

In Gloucestershire, a road surface defect becomes a pothole if it is 4cm deep and 30cm wide. Neighbouring Worcestershire has the same depth criteria of 40mm but a smaller dimension of 20cm. In Bath, a smaller depth of 3cm is accepted as being a pothole. However, in Hounslow, London, a pothole will only be repaired urgently if it reaches 7.5cm. In Warwickshire, a pothole of up to 5cm is not considered to be hazardous and will only be repaired as part of routine maintenance six months after being reported. Potholes up to 10cm will take up to 28 days to be repaired. By contrast, Herefordshire County Council “aims to record and treat all potholes regardless of depth”.

Under the Road Traffic Act 1980, all local highway authorities have a duty of care to maintain their road network but there is no national definition or agreement as to when a pothole is a pothole. A national definition of at what depth and width a defect is recognised as being a pothole would enable a consistent road maintenance risk assessment, intervention and repair approach.

GREATER INVESTMENT IN HIGH FRICTION SURFACING

High friction surfacing is a proven road surface treatment that increases skid resistance and reduces braking distance thereby reducing the potential for accidents. Typical locations for high friction surfacing include road junctions, approaches to traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and roundabouts as well as road stretches that have high accident levels.

With a skid accident reduction of often 50% being reported its success speaks for itself: it saves lives and money. Treatment with high friction surfacing makes potentially high risk road locations far safer for both drivers and pedestrians and the financial savings of achieving this are considerable. With the associated accident and investigation costs of non-motorway fatal accidents calculated to be £1.4million, the application of high friction surfacing offers considerable financial value.

Despite the benefits of high friction surfacing and significant market growth in the UK since the 1960’s, over the last few years the market has witnessed a serious decline due in large part to local authority perceived concerns about surface life (durability) and increasing costs. However, since the 1980’s this cost has been able to be balanced against a broader savings strategy with allocated accident investigation and prevention budgets proving the investment savings from high friction surfacing against the cost of accidents and casualties.

RSTA has developed industry best practice guidance and training courses to forward the use of this road safety surface treatment.

HOW TO INCREASE THE SAFETY OF OUR LOCAL ROAD NETWORK

There are a number of simple, cost effective policy changes and calls to action that would make a real difference. These include:

• No more lip service. Government needs to demonstrate a real understanding of the essential role that the local road network plays in the national social and economic well-being of the country

• All local roads should receive funds from vehicle excise duty. Currently, the monies raised are only available for motorways and A roads

• Inject £1 billion a year to address the £9.3 billion backlog of local road pothole repairs by investing just 2p a litre from the existing fuel duty

• Ring-fence local highway budgets. Starved of funding, by 2020 local councils will spend 60p in every £1 raised by council tax on social care leaving less to fund essential road maintenance

• Ensure that all local authorities are signed-up to and implementing asset management in order to ensure their get the best out of their local road asset

• Local authorities to ensure that they are open to best industry practice and new product and process innovation

• All road users to keep up the pressure by reporting potholes to their local authority and to contact their local MP asking why government does not provide adequate funding for maintenance.

REFERENCES

1. Asphalt Industry Alliance, Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) Survey, 2018
2. AA, Populus Driver Poll, 2018
3. Hansard, Written Answer, Jesse Norman, Minister for Transport, 15 March 2018

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