



Briefing 15/25 May 2015

'ALARM Survey 2015'.

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 – the same amount as last year

Average time to clear the backlog of highways repairs is 13 years

Consistent conditions across all regions

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. Over 50% of councils completed returns and the information relates to information from the financial year 2014-15. 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 £23.4m which is up from £20.4m on the previous year.
- In London the average was £7.5m which is a significant increase from £4.2m the year before. In 2012-13 it was £7m during the Olympics year.
- In Wales the average budget is up from £4.2m to £7m.
- Across England and Wales, the total overall road maintenance budgets at £3.1bn is a substantial increase from £2.8billion in 2013-14.

The report notes that the percentage of the budget spent on reactive maintenance in England (excluding London) was 23% compared with 24% the year before and 25% the year before that. In London the figure was 29% (34% and 33% in the previous two years) whilst in Wales it dropped from 35% in 2013-14 to 34% in 2014-15. It also states that the level of reactive maintenance required through the year is a good indicator of the overall state of the roads.

The report notes the severe threat posed by water which undermines the lower, structural layers of the network leading to major damage. More than a third of responses noted that they had to cope with unforeseen costs primarily due to poor weather. While the numbers responding in this way have dropped by about half in England and Wales (though not in London) the additional cost of the work has increased three-fold.

The report notes that the majority of local authority highway maintenance programmes are managed against budget figures set for 5 years or more (England 50%; Wales 75%; London 53%). For budgeting up to 10 years the figures are England 35%; Wales 25%; London 29%). A small number of authorities budgeted for any time longer than 10 years.

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 £3.7m in England (down from £5.1m), £1.2m in London down from £2m and £3.7m in Wales up from an average of £2.9m in Wales.

The report estimates that the one-time catch-up cost to bring all road networks up to scratch is £12.2bn up slightly from £12bn last year which breaks down to an average of £93m per authority in England, £29.2m in Wales and £25.2m in London.

In terms of condition the reports notes that 15% of roads are in poor condition (less than 5 years of life) in England (down from 18%), 19% in London (up from 17%) and 16% in Wales (the same as last year).

2.2 Potholes

The survey asked questions about the definition of a pothole. Guidance points to 40mm as a guideline depth but almost 28% of London authorities use a measurement shallower than 40mm to define potholes.

This year's report states that there was a very large increase in potholes filled. There were 20,702 (compared with 15,195) in the average English authority, 4,993 (3,602) in London and 5,902 (6,730) in Wales.

Overall almost 2.7m potholes were filled in England and Wales with the average cost being £52 in England, £75 in London and £65 in Wales.

2.3 Road Surfacing Frequency

The report notes that the ideal frequency of road resurfacing is between 10 and 20 years, depending on materials and usage levels. Only principal roads in London came close that with an average of 21 years. The length of time between resurfacing of all classes of roads across all regions remains consistent with the previous year. The only exception is non-principal roads in Wales which have seen a reduction from 82 years reported last year to 58 years.

2.4 Utility Openings

The number of road openings in England and London increased significantly by 15% and 18% respectively.. This compares with large reductions the year before. In Wales the figures in remained static. The total number of road openings was 2.2m with an estimation of 13% of maintenance budgets being spent on premature maintenance to utility openings.

2.5 Compensation Claims

The average number of claims received for compensation has remained stable from the past year. However the amount paid out in compensation has seen a huge leap in England from £11.1m to £20.2m whilst Wales and London have seen a substantial decline for the second successive year. The report notes that these

claims may have been outstanding for a number of years so identifying clear reasons for the figures in England is difficult.

3. APSE comment

This report highlighting the state of highway network will come as no surprise to those involved in delivering highways services. The introduction makes the point that much of the network is still crumbling and a huge backlog of repairs is outstanding – a situation which has continued throughout the 20 years of the survey – even though the shortfall between what engineers need and what they actually receive has decreased substantially over the 2 decades.

Although the move towards asset management and better planning is evidence of changing attitudes across the sector the government's decision to issue funds specifically for pothole and flood repair does not fit in with an asset management approach.

The importance of the network to the state of the national and local economy is becoming more widely accepted. The government has allocated £6bn over the next 6 years for local highways work which is likely to remain in place whichever government is in power. However the decision to allocate some of those funds on the basis of a bidding exercise and on a self-assessment process muddies the waters somewhat.

There is no doubt that highways authorities can address some of the issues raised in this report through changing how they work. Putting in place asset management plans across all highways authorities, moving away from reactive repairs, addressing compensation claims and improvements in the management of utilities work are all examples. However such changes will only lead to changes in the allocation of the existing budget – the constant message from highways engineers is that those budgets are simply not adequate to maintain the network properly. Clearly those involved in delivering a highways service will naturally call for extra resources for that service – just as it is for social services, housing, leisure and every other service – so it is important to bear that in mind when making funding decisions. However the view of both the public and the transport industry, that the network is in a very poor state, retains a high and influential profile. This is unlikely to change.

There are wider factors to consider when considering highway maintenance. Any solution will not succeed overnight and must be sustainable and long term. Questions arise such as whether the maintenance industry (public and private sectors combined) has the capacity to efficiently and effectively deliver what the extra funding can pay for. If not there will be a need to expand the industry possibly with support from the government. Equally the report talks exclusively about supply issues and makes no mention of reducing demand. Although policies for walking, cycling and public transport are being promoted more than ever, the universal response to dealing with problems in the network remains either to expand the network in some way or to repair it to a standard it was previously at. Tackling demand must be one element of improving the service in the longer term. Addressing the impacts of flooding and severe weather is another topic to be considered and building infrastructure which eradicates excess water settling on the highways or effecting the lower, structural layers of a highway is another longer term strategy which should be put in place.

There is no doubt that many examples of new initiatives and approaches exist across the sector. APSE will continue to promote such schemes and encourage those authorities to share their experience and expertise with other highways authorities.

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