

A photograph of a road surface with several potholes. A silver car is partially visible on the left side of the frame. The road is wet, and the potholes are filled with water, reflecting light. The overall scene is in a cool, blue-toned color palette.

Potholes

Condition and Maintenance of the UK Road Network

Background

The condition of the UK road network is a growing concern for motorists, industry bodies and local authorities as the backlog of essential repairs burgeons, reaching its highest recorded level in 2023¹. Motoring group the RAC estimated that there are more than one million potholes on the UK road network². It ranks as a top priority for motorists and road users as poor conditions can create both vehicular damage and, more pressingly, road traffic collisions – it is widely expected that the problem will worsen as the UK faces more extreme weather events testing the resilience of the road network. Governments at Westminster, Holyrood, Stormont and Cardiff have faced consistent calls from local authorities, industry bodies and the public to step up attempts to improve the state of UK roads, citing reforms to the funding system and provision of greater resources as solutions to tackle the issue.

Current Government policy

The UK Government is on track to spend over £5 billion pounds in the five years to 2025 on road and highway maintenance³. In April 2023, the government introduced a new *street works regime* to crack down on utility companies who, in their words, caused ‘pothole pain’ by way of substandard repair work when resurfacing UK streets. Prior to the introduction of the regime, the worst performing utility companies were found to be failing inspections as often as 63% of the time⁴.

In November 2023, the UK government re-allocated £8bn for repairing road surfaces over the next 11 years. In March 2024, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt clarified this commitment when outlining the UK government’s Spring Budget – an increase in the funding available each year of £700m to tackle ‘the curse of potholes’. This money is supplemented by funding provided to local authorities by central government through initiatives such as the Local Highways Maintenance Challenge Fund.

¹ALARM Report, Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance Survey Report 2023,

²RAC Pothole Index: <https://www.rac.co.uk/drive/advice/driving-advice/rac-pothole-index-statistics-data-and-projections/>

³<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-66481761>

⁴<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-street-works-regime-to-clamp-down-on-pothole-pain>

IAM RoadSmart Research:

- Potholes rank as the second biggest concern for motorists in the IAM RoadSmart Safety Culture Report 2023, after the cost of motoring.
- The majority (91%) have experienced at least one issue with potholes in the past year.
- The most common issue is having to avoid damage from a pothole – over half (56%) of respondents report having had to steer away or brake hard to avoid hitting a pothole.
- Just under a third (32%) have regularly changed their route to avoid roads with numerous potholes.
- 10% have regularly made a claim against the authorities for damages to their vehicle caused by a pothole.
- More than three-quarters of drivers (77%) claim potholes are a bigger problem compared to three years ago.

External Research

AIA ALARM Report 2023⁵: ALARM 2023 reports that local authority highway teams in England and Wales only received around two-thirds of what they needed to stop our local roads from further deterioration:

- They estimated more than £14 billion – £68,000 for every mile of local road – is now needed to fix the backlog of carriageway repairs.
- A pothole was filled every 22 seconds in 2022/23 at a cost of £93.7m over the course of the year.
- Average highway maintenance budgets across England and Wales have increased by 4.5% to £25.8 million per authority but this does not keep pace with the impacts of rising inflation and represents a cut in real terms.
- 53% of authorities reported a cut or freeze in their highway maintenance budget.

RAC Report on Motoring 2023: Condition and maintenance of local roads is the biggest overall motoring concern with a majority of respondents dissatisfied with the provision of repairs on the road network. In addition, the RAC's Pothole Index shows:

- RAC patrols attended nearly 30,000 pothole-related breakdowns over the course of the year, up by 33% compared to 2022.
- Between 2022 and 2023, 1.4 million potholes were filled in England and Wales – down from 1.7 million the year before.

Confused.com report, 'Britain's roads in the Pitts'⁶: Pothole reports are up by 24% since 2020, but council payouts are down 13% over the same time frame:

- A total of 4.4 million claims were made from drivers in 2023 for pothole-related incidents. This is up 6% in comparison to 2020.
- The most common damages caused by potholes include punctured tyres (57%), damaged suspension (35%) or damaged tracking (32%). And repairs are costing drivers an average of £169 to fix.
- The South East tops the list for the most potholes, racking up almost 200,000 reports last year. The South West of England and Scotland are also some of the worst areas of the UK as reported by drivers.

⁵AIA Alarm Report: <https://www.asphaltuk.org/alarm-survey-page/>

⁶Confused.com report, Britain's roads in the Pitts: <https://www.confused.com/press/releases/2024/one-million-potholes-reported-in-2023>

IAM RoadSmart calls to action:

- **Reform to Local Authority Standards:** We believe there should be uniform standards implemented for councils filling in potholes so drivers and riders can expect a certain road quality irrespective of where they are on the UK road network. Where roads have a significant number of potholes, authorities should be required to warn drivers with temporary road signs. We believe this could reduce the number of RTCs caused by defective road surfaces.
- **National roads renewal programme:** We call on the UK and Devolved Governments to publish a national roads renewal programme that outlines steps to be taken to improve road and pavement infrastructure more quickly. Road surface quality should be considered as a road safety hazard, rather than simply a nuisance.
- **Re-evaluation of UK Government funding regime:** UK Government funding is too complex, focusing all too often on allocation via pots of cash that authorities have to devote considerable resource bidding for, such as the Local Highways Maintenance Fund. Therefore, guaranteed ring-fenced funding from a form of taxation – fuel duty – would provide local authorities a longer-term means of funding to repair roads. This, we believe, would go a long way toward preventing potholes from appearing in the first place enabling more preventative measures and reducing total spending on road maintenance.

COMMENT

IAM RoadSmart Director of Policy and Standards, Nicholas Lyes said:

"The UK's pothole plague is not only damaging vehicles up and down the country but is also a serious road safety hazard that requires urgent Government action to prevent serious injury or death. In some areas, rather than driving on the left, some are driving on what is left of the road surface – a devastating critique of our crumbling highways infrastructure.

Firstly, we need a uniform standard of repair, which means councils cannot quibble over whether another couple of centimetres of pothole depth are required before repairs occur. This will give drivers assurances that national roads will be repaired in a consistent way.

Additionally, we would like to see the introduction of guaranteed funding for pothole repair and prevention from ring-fenced fuel duty receipts. This will enable councils to engage in long-term planning and more efficient works that will not only repair roads more quickly but prevent potholes from occurring in the first place."