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Condition of local roads on a knife-edge as RAC sees surprise increase in first quarter pothole-related breakdowns

Despite mild and comparatively dry winter conditions the RAC's familiar orange patrols attended 63% more pothole-related breakdowns in the first quarter of 2017 than they did over the same period in 2016.

In total the RAC dealt with more than 6,500 breakdown jobs between January and March 2017 that were likely to be attributable to poor road surfaces – such as broken suspension springs, damaged shock absorbers or distorted wheels. The last time so many pothole-related breakdowns were recorded was in the first quarter of 2015 when patrols were called out to nearly 6,900 such breakdowns. That quarter, however, saw both more frost days and rainfall than the equivalent period this year.

The RAC is therefore surprised by the rise in the first quarter of 2017, as it was expecting to see a reduction in the overall number of pothole-related breakdowns. It is a major concern because it suggests the condition of the UK's roads is balanced on a knife-edge and that it would only take one season of cold and wet weather to cause further damage, offsetting any recent improvements and making them worse than ever.

When considered in the context of all RAC breakdowns the share of pothole-related call-outs in Q1 2017 equated to 2.7% of all RAC jobs – this is the largest quarterly figure seen since the RAC's pothole analysis began in 2006.

The rise in the share of pothole-related call-outs in 2017 may not tell the whole story because it can, in part, be put down to the RAC attending fewer breakdowns in a milder winter, especially those that could be deemed classic

‘cold weather’ breakdowns such as problems with car batteries.

However, the latest figures do offer a glimmer of hope for road users as the longer term picture is an improving one. The RAC Pothole Index, a 12-month rolling average of pothole-related breakdowns which is corrected to remove unrelated longer term effects of weather and improving vehicle reliability, currently stands at 2.08, its lowest value since the last quarter of 2008 (see chart below). This suggests that – looking at breakdowns over a much longer time period – the overall quality of the UK’s road surfaces is beginning to get better, though still well short of their condition a decade ago.

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The latest [Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance \(ALARM\) survey published by the Asphalt Industry Alliance \(AIA\)](#) based on data provided by local authorities indicates that the backlog of maintenance is largely unchanged over the last year. This suggests that the slow improvement shown by the RAC Pothole Index is as a result of a combination of favourable weather and the dedicated pothole repair funding from central government.

AIA data indicates most local authorities still cannot afford to make in-roads into the backlog of preventative maintenance that would stop potholes forming in the first place and therefore it would only take a period of extreme adverse weather for local roads to return to the poor state of a few years back.

RAC chief engineer David Bizley said: “Our figures sadly show a surprising

and unwelcome first quarter rise in the number of breakdowns where the poor quality of the road surface was a major factor. We had expected a figure no worse than that recorded in the first quarter of 2016 (4,026) and it is very concerning that the roads, strangely, appear to have deteriorated in a mild, comparatively dry winter.

“However, the RAC Pothole Index, which takes out such short-term effects, suggests some better news for motorists – namely that the longer term picture is a slightly improving one.

“As a nation we still have a long way to go to ensure the whole road network – not just our major roads which are enjoying one of the largest investment programmes in a generation – is really fit for purpose. Certainly anyone that has experienced a breakdown as a result of hitting a pothole will know just how frustrating that can be – not to say dangerous and expensive if damage to their vehicle is sustained.

“The backlog in preventative maintenance reported by the ALARM survey suggests we are on a knife-edge and it will only take one season of poor weather to take us back to where we were a few years ago.

“Local authorities still have a huge funding gap in their roads budget and until central government is willing to ring-fence sufficient funding to bring local roads back into a state that is fit for purpose, their condition will be subject to the whims of the weather and they will continue to be the poor relation in the nation’s transport infrastructure.

“New figures show that car traffic is at its highest recorded level. And, with a General Election just around the corner the RAC is calling on whichever party or parties form the next government to make a commitment to invest in all of our roads – by both continuing investment in the strategic road network through the Roads Fund and to ring-fence a proportion of the funds generated from motoring taxation to guarantee the quality of local roads well into the future.”

The state of local roads is currently a major concern to drivers according to the latest RAC Report on Motoring with 14% of respondents saying it was their top concern of 2016, up from 10% in 2015. In addition, 70% of drivers said that targeted improvements to local roads should be a top-five priority for investment.

RAC Report Pothole app and advice for drivers

Knowing the frustration that poor road surfaces cause motorists, the RAC has created the [RAC Report Pothole app](#) for iOS and Android devices. The app makes the process of taking action to fix road defects straightforward and effective – it uses the GPS functionality of mobile phones to locate the pothole, deliver reports direct to the roads team of the responsible local authority, or strategic highway authority in the case of strategic roads and motorways. Photographs can also be uploaded with reports.

To find out more information about reporting potholes and claiming compensation from the relevant highways authority visit the [RAC website](#).

Contacts



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