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Road treatment and resurfacing falls to four-year low

The number of miles of road in England resurfaced or given life-extending treatment is at its lowest point since 2017-18, RAC analysis of government data* has revealed.

In 2021/2022 figures show just 1,123 miles of all types of road were resurfaced compared to 1,588 in 2017/2018 – this equates to a 29% reduction (465 miles). For surface dressing – a technique that extends the life of roads and helps to prevent the need for full resurfacing – the figures were 3,551 miles in the last financial year compared to 5,345 in 2017/18, a 34% drop, or 1,794 miles.

Of the 153 roads authorities included in the latest data (2021/2022), three-in-10 (31%) did no resurfacing while half (51%) failed to carry out any surface dressing work. The average length of road resurfaced for all authorities over the 12 months was just 13 miles while it was 42 miles for surface dressing. Kent resurfaced the most miles of A road at 29 of its 502 miles (5.8%) while Lincolnshire did the most surface dressing at 50 miles of its 661 miles of A road (7.6%). Looking at B, C and unclassified roads, Hertfordshire led the way in resurfacing by replacing 41 miles (1.5%) of its 2,759 network roads and Norfolk topped the table in surface dressing by treating 326 miles of its 5,627 roads (5.8%).

In percentage terms however, Southend-on-Sea resurfaced the greatest proportion of its 21-mile A-road network at 13% (3 miles) while Blackpool surfaced dressed 43% (11 miles) of its 26 miles of A-road. For B, C and unclassified roads Tower Hamlets did the largest proportion of resurfacing at 14% (21 miles of its 152-mile network) and Reading surfaced dressed 15% (34 miles) of its 224-mile network.

The figures come as the RAC renews its call for the Government to change the way it funds local roads maintenance, ideally by ringfencing a proportion of money raised through fuel duty to give councils the certainty of having longer-term funding that ultimately enables them to get all the roads in their control into a better overall condition.

RAC head of policy Simon Williams said:

“These figures paint an incredibly stark picture of road maintenance in England and confirm our worst fears about the overall decline in the state of the country’s roads. While the Government has made more money available to authorities to fill potholes, it’s the general reduction in road improvement work that’s causing potholes to appear in the first place.

“It’s abundantly clear that councils in so many areas are barely scratching the surface when it comes to getting their roads up to a reasonable standard, and indeed the fact that such a large proportion haven’t done any surface dressing or resurfacing at all over a 12-month period really does say it all.

“Resurfacing is expensive but for some roads this will be the only course of action as they have fallen into such bad condition that nothing else can save them. Having said that, we urge authorities to make greater use of surface dressing and other preventative treatments which can be used successfully to improve surfaces and extend the lives of roads.”

The scale of the problem facing authorities in England is bleak according to the Asphalt Industry Alliance (AIA)’s Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) report**, published in March 2023, which estimates the total amount of money now needed to address the backlog in road maintenance works has increased to more than £12 billion, and would take 11 years to clear.

The RAC, however, believes these figures are somewhat skewed towards full resurfacing and that more could be done to improve conditions for drivers by using more cost-effective road surface treatments. For example, according to the Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA) it costs £5 per square metre to surface dress a heavily trafficked A or B road compared to £30 per square metre for conventional asphalt resurfacing.

Another treatment is asphalt preservation which is designed to be used on roads that are already in very good condition. A highly cost-effective solution for sealing and maintaining roads to prevent water ingress, it is widely used by the privately financed operators in charge of major roads such as the M40, A50 and M6 Toll as it is cost-efficient, has a very low carbon footprint and can be laid at night to avoid disruption.

RSTA chief executive Paul Boss says:

“Proactive surface treatment maintenance programmes, backed up by a risk-based approach to resurfacing the worst roads, have been proven to keep roads in better condition for longer, and that’s why private road operators use them. Vitally, they help to prevent damage caused by the freeze-thaw cycle where water gets into defects in surfaces, freezes and expands, causing cracks and potholes.

“Surface dressing, which is the most well-known treatment, maximises life expectancy by making roads last three to four times longer than without the preventative treatment, and with very little carbon generation.

“There has never been a more important time to undertake preventative maintenance on roads in what we call ‘Green’ and ‘Amber’ conditions, even where pothole repairs may well be required before the surface dressing can be undertaken. The preventative dressing on ‘Green’ and ‘Amber’ carriageways will keep them in a safe and serviceable condition, enabling authorities to manage their ‘Red’ roads that require high investment maintenance solutions such as complete resurfacing or reconstruction (recycling).

“These ‘Red’ roads can then be picked off for full resurfacing one by one with any finance left over. If not, at least they can be managed and kept safe without the additional burden of untreated ‘Green’ roads becoming ‘Amber’ and ‘Amber’ roads becoming ‘Red’.”

The RAC understands surface treatments also offer time-savings as they can be carried out in a day or even a few hours, meaning specialist traffic management is normally only required for a short period of time. In contrast, asphalt resurfacing requires long periods of active traffic management which sometimes has to be put up and removed each day to fit in with restricted working hours, adding further to the duration of the works. [The advantages of preventative surface treatments are laid out in a new RAC report published today.](#)

The RAC’s Simon Williams adds:

“Drivers contribute billions of pounds to the Treasury every year, so it’s extremely frustrating that they continue to have to endure substandard road surfaces.

“We encourage local authorities to take a more preventative approach to road maintenance as this will make their squeezed budgets go further and improve England’s roads for the future.

“We also continue to call on the Government to increase the roads funding settlements for councils, not least because England’s major roads receive seven times what local roads are given, despite the fact there are seven times more miles of minor roads.”

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The RAC, an iconic UK brand, provides complete peace of mind to more than 13 million private and business drivers, whatever their motoring needs. As well as its premium nationwide breakdown assistance service – with an expert branded patrol workforce attending more than two million breakdowns every year – it offers a wide range of market-leading products across insurance, legal services, vehicle inspections and service, maintenance and repair. The RAC is also at the forefront in helping drivers make the switch to electric vehicles and leads in the development of new solutions for businesses and OEMs, partnering with the best in the motoring and mobility space.

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