REPORT

The condition and maintenance of local roads in England

Department for Transport

Key facts

£1.1bn

the Department for Transport's (DfT's) total capital funding for maintaining the local road network in 2022-23

48%

proportion of local roads in England (excluding London) estimated to be in good structural condition in 2023-24, with 35% in adequate condition and 17% in poor condition, according to a long-running Asphalt Industry Alliance survey of local authorities

1.9mn potholes

estimated to have been filled in England during 2023-24, by a long-running Asphalt Industry Alliance survey of local authorities (including London); potholes are a symptom of poor road condition

98%	the proportion of the total road network in England made up by local roads
5.2% and 2.4%	the respective proportions of local A roads and B, C and unclassified roads that received maintenance treatment in 2023; maintenance levels have been falling since 2017 when proportions were 7.6% and 4.3% respectively
£7.6 billion to £11.7 billion	DfT's 2019 estimate of the cost to address the backlog in road maintenance. In 2023-24, industry estimates put the backlog at £15.6 billion, based on a long-running Asphalt Industry Alliance survey of local authorities
12	the number of different funding pots through which DfT is providing funding for local road maintenance, between April 2015 and March 2025
7:1	DfT's 2020 estimate of the benefit-to-cost ratio of local road maintenance
1	the number of funds, out of the 12 it has provided, that DfT has evaluated

Summary

1   The local road network in England is essential to everyday travel and the movement of goods. Almost all journeys start and end on the local road network, which consists of 183,000 miles of road and represents 98% of the total road network.[1] As well as the road surface, the local road network includes pavements, embankments, bridges and drainage systems that need to be kept in good condition.

2   The Department for Transport (DfT) says that poorly maintained local roads can be dangerous to the people using them, lead to congestion and longer journeys, and cause people to avoid types of travel, such as cycling or walking. It considers that well-maintained local roads are vital for the economy and the social wellbeing of communities. Well maintained roads and infrastructure are also necessary for DfT's objective to improve transport for the user, as well as specific policy areas such as increasing active travel and supporting autonomous vehicles.[2]

3   DfT is responsible for providing policy, guidance and funding to local authorities in England to help them run and maintain their road networks. Local authorities are responsible for the management of the local road network under their control. While central government provides funding towards maintenance of the road network, it is for each individual local authority to decide on how best to maintain its roads based on local needs, priorities and funding. Central government provides capital and revenue funding.

- DfT provides local authorities with capital funding for planned maintenance, such as resurfacing roads and repairing bridges. In 2022-23, DfT provided local authorities with £1.1 billion (adjusted for inflation) of capital funding. In total, in 2022-23, local authorities spent around £2.1 billion of capital on local road maintenance. The additional £1 billion of capital came from a combination of other government funds and locally derived sources.

- In addition, we estimate that local authorities spent around £580 million in 2022-23 on the maintenance of road structures from revenue funding. This is day-to-day spending that includes minor repairs and is drawn from funds that local authorities use to provide a wide range of services. Revenue spend comes from a combination of formula funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC)[3] and other sources of income, such as council tax and retained business rates.

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1   Local roads are designated as classified (locally managed motorways and A roads, and B and C roads – intended to connect areas) or unclassified (intended for local traffic). Throughout this report, references to A roads includes those sections of motorway managed locally (only 1% of the total motorway network) and does not include the 13% of A roads that are part of the Strategic Road Network and managed centrally by National Highways.

2   Autonomous vehicle are those vehicles capable of travelling without monitoring or control by an individual.

3   On 9 July 2024, DLUHC was renamed the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG). However, we refer to DLUHC throughout this report, as that was the name in use at the time of our fieldwork.

4 In October 2023, DfT announced £8.3 billion of additional capital funding for local authorities to spend on road maintenance between late 2023 and March 2034. DfT has so far allocated around £300 million of this funding, split between 2023-24 and 2024-25. This is in addition to the funding that DfT had previously allocated up to 2025. DfT is working with HM Treasury to determine allocations of future funding.

Scope of this report

5 This report examines whether DfT is ensuring value for money through its funding provision for local road maintenance, and whether it is effectively fulfilling its role in supporting local authorities to deliver local road maintenance. We have assessed whether:

- DfT understands the condition of local roads in England;

- DfT is using its data and information to inform its funding decisions; and

- DfT is supporting local authorities effectively through providing guidance on asset maintenance.

6 This report focuses primarily on DfT's role and its distribution of capital expenditure to support local road maintenance. Local authorities also receive funding from DLUHC that is used for road maintenance, but we have not examined elements relating to general maintenance, such as street lighting, gully clearing, road sweeping, cleaning signs, cutting grass verges and gritting roads. This report does not examine the delivery of local road maintenance by individual local authorities, combined authorities or Transport for London. It does not examine the condition and maintenance of the strategic network of motorways and some A roads in England, which is operated and maintained by National Highways (a government-owned company of DfT).

Key findings

DfT's understanding of the condition of local roads

7   **There are currently significant gaps in DfT's information on the condition of local roads, limiting its understanding of condition of the network.** DfT requires local authorities to report the proportion of their road networks that should be considered for maintenance each year, based on a survey of a portion of the network. Local authorities do not provide all the data that DfT mandates – for example, one fifth of authorities did not share data on the proportion of their A roads that should be considered for maintenance in 2023. DfT plans to increase the response rate of local authorities by working with them more closely and recruiting a dedicated DfT specialist for road condition data collection. There is no reporting requirement for unclassified roads, which make up 62% of the local network, although around 70% of local authorities provided these data in 2023. This means DfT does not hold information for much of the network. DfT told us that it decided to limit the data it collects from local authorities to minimise administrative burdens, consistent with DLUHC policy. Local authorities are adopting new data collection approaches for their own use, and DfT is planning changes to support local authorities making use of different technologies and modernise its data collection approach. DfT does not collect data for footways or cycleways and has not collected data on bridge condition from local authorities since 2014, when it revised its data collection. A 2023 survey by industry found that on average 4% of bridges maintained by local authorities – totalling around 2,300 – were in substandard condition (paragraphs 1.5 to 1.9).

8   **The limited data that DfT collects show the surface condition of local roads as stable over time, but information from industry bodies and people using roads suggests that road condition is getting worse.** DfT's latest data on road surface condition show that around two-thirds (67% in 2022-23) of total local road network length was in good condition. However, a long-running survey of local authorities by the Asphalt Industry Alliance shows only half of roads (48% in 2023-24) to be in good structural condition, and that this has been largely consistent since 2015-16. Research undertaken in 2021 by the UK Roads Leadership Group – a body chaired by DfT, but whose members come from national and local government – found the condition of the network was deteriorating. Potholes are a symptom of poorly maintained roads, with industry estimates of 1.9 million potholes being filled in England (including London) during 2023-24, the highest number since 2015-16. Companies dealing with vehicle breakdowns also show an increase in callouts related to damage caused by potholes. An annual survey of road users, covering around 75% of local authorities, reported in 2023 that public satisfaction with the road condition was declining (paragraph 1.10 and Figures 5 and 6).

9   DfT's data do not allow it to understand how the funding that it provides for local road maintenance improves the condition of local roads. In 2020, DfT estimated that one of its funds for local road maintenance could deliver benefits of £7 for every £1 spent at the national level, which it categorises as "very high" value for money. These include benefits for safety, journey reliability and the environment delivered through maintaining and improving footway and carriageway surfaces. However, the limitations in data that DfT collects on road surface condition means that it cannot use these data to understand the benefits that have actually been delivered from its investment of over £1 billion a year. DfT has evaluated only one of the 12 funding pots that it has provided for local road maintenance to understand the impact it has had. The lack of benefits monitoring and completed impact assessments means that DfT does not know the totality of benefits or impact that its funding has delivered (paragraphs 1.11 and 1.12).

Allocation of funding for local road maintenance

10   Unlike its longer-term funding for the strategic road network, DfT's funding for local roads has generally been short term and provided through multiple funds. DfT provides funding for the strategic road network (motorways and some major A roads) through one dedicated fund in five-year periods because it believes this funding certainty can help drive better value for money. In comparison, in the past decade, funding for local roads has been provided through 12 different funds. Although spending review settlements include multi-year annual totals for local road maintenance, DfT has only provided certainty over total funding to the majority of local authorities on an annual basis. The exception is DfT's City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS), which provides transport funding, including for local road maintenance, to eight combined authorities in five-year periods. Annual allocations through multiple funds reduce the certainty of funding for local authorities, inhibiting their ability to develop longer-term, more cost-effective maintenance regimes (paragraphs 2.4 to 2.6 and Figures 7 and 8).

11   DfT does not consider the condition of roads or the factors that contribute to their deterioration when allocating funding to local authorities. DfT's total annual funding (adjusted for inflation) over the last 10 years has varied between £1.1 and £1.6 billion, and stands at £1.2 billion for 2024-25. DfT allocates almost all capital funding based on road length and the number of bridges and lighting columns in each local authority. DfT took this approach following a consultation with local government stakeholders in 2014, when it decided not to use information on underlying road condition – where data are patchy – or other factors that impact on the condition of roads, such as traffic volumes. At the time, 63% of respondents to the consultation agreed that traffic volumes should not be included. Our analysis provides an example of how data could be used and shows that taking traffic usage and road condition into account in allocations could help DfT better target its capital funding to areas with greater exposure to factors that affect deterioration (paragraphs 2.7 to 2.9 and Figures 7 and 9).

12   DfT's use of funding incentives to improve local authorities' approach to asset management no longer works as intended. Since 2015, DfT has allocated around £1.1 billion to local authorities through an incentive mechanism that aimed to encourage authorities to adopt best practice principles for road maintenance. Local authorities complete a self-assessment and receive funding according to where they grade themselves, with those reporting that they adopt best practice receiving the most funding. Stakeholders in local government told us that this initially had a positive impact but is no longer effective. In 2021, 98% of local authorities placed themselves in the highest category. DfT no longer asks authorities to complete self-assessment, instead providing the incentivisation funding based on road length and number of bridges and lighting columns. DfT has not evaluated the impact of this funding mechanism. DfT considers that a future incentive mechanism could be used to drive improvements in climate adaptation, asset management approaches and increasing biodiversity (paragraphs 2.10 and 2.11).

13   The increasing backlog in road maintenance work hinders local authorities in undertaking preventative work that could deliver better value. The maintenance backlog is the investment needed to improve the local road network so it is in a condition of good repair. Improving the network to good repair would better allow local authorities to take a preventative approach to asset management. DfT estimated the backlog to be between £7.6 billion and £11.7 billion in 2019. In 2023-24, estimates by the Asphalt Industry Alliance put the backlog at £15.6 billion (including in London) and its annual surveys of local authorities show that the backlog has grown over time. Local authorities have attributed the increase in part to DfT's short-term funding strategies as well as to cost pressures from inflation and investment levels in road maintenance by central government not being sufficient to prevent a growing backlog. DfT's data show that the percentage of road length maintained in England each year is falling (for example, between 2017 and 2023 the proportion of roads receiving maintenance treatment declined from 7.6% to 5.2% for A roads and 4.3% to 2.4% for B and C roads). DfT has previously concluded that preventative work is much more cost effective than reactive work. Industry experts say that it must be informed by regular condition surveys and predictive modelling to identify where interventions would have most effect. Reducing the backlog of maintenance would allow local authorities to follow best practice principles focused on work that prevents poor road condition, leading to financial efficiencies and better value for money (paragraphs 2.13 to 2.16 and Figures 10 and 11).

14   DfT has announced £8.3 billion in additional long-term funding for local roads maintenance, but it is not yet clear how this will be allocated. As part of its Network North announcement in October 2023, DfT set out that it will allocate an additional £8.3 billion for local roads up to March 2034. By April 2024, DfT had allocated £300 million of this, split between 2023-24 and 2024-25. This is on top of £1.3 billion and £1.0 billion already allocated, respectively, in these years. DfT has indicated to local authorities the total additional funding they can each expect to receive by 2034, but not how this will be profiled across each year. DfT has not yet allocated 15% of the additional £8.3 billion funding which it says may be distributed via an incentive mechanism to encourage innovation and best practice. DfT is working with HM Treasury to determine allocations of future funding. We consider that the additional funding provides an opportunity for DfT to change how it allocates funding to local authorities and to use data to better target where it is needed (paragraphs 2.17 to 2.20).

DfT's role in providing guidance on asset management

15   DfT has not updated its road maintenance guidance or tools that can help local authorities deliver maintenance more effectively for several years. DfT has placed less focus on guidance, in part due to having to reprioritise resource during COVID-19, but it has since been slow to refresh its work in this area. For example, DfT has previously funded an appraisal toolkit for highways maintenance to help local authorities assess the costs and benefits of proposed maintenance activities (2015); developed a code of practice for managing highway infrastructure (2016); and commissioned guidance on how to repair potholes (2019). These are areas where refreshed guidance could help local authorities. DfT provided £6 million for the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme but did not fund the programme after 2016-17. While there was evidence that this programme was helping local authorities achieve efficiencies in maintenance delivery, learning from it has not been shared (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6).

16   DfT needs to plan now for how it will support local authorities to meet challenges on the road network, such as climate change and the introduction of autonomous vehicles. Adapting to the impact of climate change on the local road network will require significant activity by local authorities. DfT does not currently provide support or guidance on adaptation planning, or know the extent to which local authorities are adapting their local roads for future climate scenarios. DfT does not have an autonomous vehicle strategy for the local road network, despite planning for deployment of these vehicles on roads from 2026. To operate safely, autonomous vehicles require well-maintained roads, distinct markings and unobscured signage so they can, using their cameras and sensors, recognise and react to the road environment. The current condition of some local roads will need improving before autonomous vehicles can be used on them safely. Local authorities told us that they need guidance from DfT on how to prepare their roads for autonomous vehicles (paragraph 3.7 and Figure 12).

Conclusion on value for money

17 Local roads are a vital part of local transport infrastructure, used every day by millions of people. Despite their importance, the condition of local roads is declining and the backlog to return them to a good state of repair is increasing. DfT has provided between £1.1 and £1.6 billion of capital funding each year to local authorities and has set out plans for additional funding through to 2034. Given the fiscal constraints, it is essential that DfT secures maximum value from the funding it has available.

18 However, at present DfT does not have a good enough understanding of the condition of local roads, and does not use the limited data it does have to allocate its funding as effectively as possible. It does not know whether the funds it allocates are delivering improvements in road condition, and has not updated its guidance to local authorities, to share good practice and help them make the most of their limited funds, for some years. Managing the local road network is becoming increasingly complex – for example, as climate change and autonomous vehicles demand more from it – and the additional funding that DfT has secured provides an opportunity to equip local authorities to better meet these challenges. If DfT is able to address the issues in its current approach it will be much better placed to improve the value for money of funding in this area and secure an improved and more resilient local roads network.

Recommendations

19 To improve the accuracy and completeness of its understanding of the condition of the local road network in England, DfT should:

a   **Review its coverage requirements for local authorities on surface condition reporting,** making use of the advances in data collection and technology since these were first set to ensure it has the information it needs.

b   **Request information on the condition of other key road network assets,** such as bridges, where local authorities are already collecting these data and consider the frequency at which it should collect this information from all local authorities. Should DfT decide that regularly receiving this information would be useful, it should work with DLUHC to ensure effective and proportionate data-reporting requirements for local authorities.

20 To improve its approach to funding local road maintenance, DfT should:

c **Review its approach to allocating capital funding to local authorities for local road maintenance to ensure its allocative effectiveness.** DfT should review how it can make better use of data to target allocations of funding where it is most needed.

d **Work with HM Treasury to set out how it will provide longer-term funding certainty to local authorities** that will help better support preventative road maintenance approaches.

e **Consolidate the number of shorter-term funds through which local authorities receive funding for road maintenance.** This should include consolidating funding pots that use similar mechanisms to allocate funds.

f **Update its use of incentivised funding and consider how it could use this to improve outcomes.** DfT should ensure that it develops a rigorous approach to assuring itself that its incentive mechanism is delivering real improvements.

g **Develop an evaluative framework** and use it to assess the impact of its investment in local road maintenance at the national level and to inform its future policy and investment approaches.

21 To improve its support for local authorities and guidance on how to deliver effective and efficient highways maintenance, DfT should:

h **Review the tools and guidance that it has provided to local authorities** and set out how and when it will refresh them.

i **Identify and fill gaps in guidance it provides to local authorities.** This should include developing its understanding of where local authorities have expressed a need for greater direction and where new guidance is needed.