

RAC Foundation submission of 28 November 2022

PE1936/D: Remove Potholes from Scotland's Roads

Thank you for inviting the RAC Foundation to offer comments on petition PE1936.

The RAC Foundation is a transport research organisation and a registered charity.

Much of our work and comment is based on English and Welsh data, however it would be reasonable to assume that the situation in Scotland is broadly comparable to that existing south of the border.

1. The [latest ALARM survey](#) – carried out annually by the Asphalt Industry Alliance – puts the one-off cost of bringing all local roads in England and Wales up to a reasonable standard as £12.6 billion, up 23% on the previous year.
2. The most [recent Pothole Index](#) published by RAC Motoring Services – the breakdown business – and based on its callout data shows that a UK motorist is currently 1.6 times more likely to suffer a fault or damage caused by the poor road surface than back in 2006. Whilst this multiple has declined from a high of 3.5 at the start of 2010 it has been at its current level for the past couple of years. [A survey of drivers](#) by the RAC shows that 60% of them believe road conditions have deteriorated in the past 12 months.
3. The high of 3.5 coincided with a couple of extremely cold and snowy winters – those of 2008-9 and 2009-10. (The then chair of the RAC Foundation, David Quarmby was asked by the UK Government to [carry out a review](#) into the impacts of the bad weather on the UK transport network.) Extreme weather – cold, heat, precipitation – appears to be on the increase, creating new defects in roads and exacerbating those already there, meaning the need for timely repair is more urgent than ever if they are not to multiply.
4. At the same time as workload is growing, the costs of maintaining roads is soaring. This summer the Local Government Association – representing councils in England Wales – [said its members](#) were facing “unprecedented increased costs” to carry out repairs. It went on: “Global pressures, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well

as increasing inflation and a shortage of materials, have all provided the perfect storm for councils and piled pressure on already stretched local budgets.”

5. Of course, highways budgets are not only spent on road surfaces but other things like maintaining bridges, providing street lighting, cutting verges, maintaining signs and keeping culverts clear. The latest [RAC Foundation survey](#) of the state of local authority road bridges found that 432 (3%) of the 13,350 council-maintained structures in Scotland were so-called substandard meaning they were unable to carry the largest vehicles on the road. The work bank for bringing all council bridges in Scotland up to a good, but not perfect, standard was estimated at £403 million.
6. However, there is little sign that funding for road maintenance is set to increase, in fact rather the opposite. At the time of writing there is a lot of speculation that the forthcoming Autumn Statement being made by the Westminster Government will result in big cuts to transport budgets, something likely to be mirrored in Scotland.
7. In many senses not spending on highway maintenance is a false economy. Not only does the road surface deteriorate further but it presents an ever bigger hazard which can lead to more road crashes and collisions and resultant compensation claims against councils. [According to FOI requests](#) made in England and Wales, councils have paid out more than £32 million over the past five years to people who have been hurt because of the poor road surface. Lime Solicitors which carried out the survey found that “425 cyclists have been killed or seriously injured due to poor or defective road surfaces since 2016.”
8. There is every reason to believe that casualty figures amongst vulnerable road users are likely to grow. South of the border there are now about 30 official eScooter rental trials taking place with a view to making the machines legal for road use in the years ahead. eScooters – and other firms of so-called micromobility - are particularly vulnerable to ‘blemishes’ in the road surface because of their very small wheels. A pothole that causes little or no difficulty to a car driver or even a cyclist could be fatal to someone on a powered scooter traveling at up to 15.5mph (the current limit set in the trials). [Data just published](#) by the Department for Transport shows that in 2021 ten riders were killed and another 331 seriously injured. Of all casualties amongst users 66% were aged 10-29 (even though you need to be 18 to hire an eScooter as part of the official trial schemes) and most were male.

9. Many of the problems that road users associate with poor maintenance are in practice related to essential works to repair and maintain the extensive network of utility services – water, sewers, gas etc. – buried beneath the carriageway and footway, particularly in more urban areas. The Committee might find it interesting to probe how far this might be a contributory factor in Scotland.

10. There are things that councils can do to help themselves:

- Ensure they are using the latest vehicle-mounted SCANNER machines to collect timely data on the state of road surfaces so that problems are spotted early
- Ensure that they are using a risk-based approach to potholes, meaning that repair priorities are not just based on the size of a pothole but also its location and the type and volume of traffic that particular road carries
- Being stringent with utility companies to ensure that street-work reinstatements are carried out to an appropriate – durable – standard.