

MIND THE GAP: Experts say potholes are caused by badly maintained surfaces and that repeated patching costs more than sealing and resurfacing a road every 12 or 15 years

Why the pitted road outside your home may not be resurfaced for 100 years

MOST homeowners in Wales will die of old age before the road outside their front door is resurfaced, engineering experts have warned.

Worn and cracked surfaces make accidents and potholes more likely, but so little is now spent on Welsh local roads that resurfacing happens once every 90 to 100 years, according to the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE).

The warning comes as the Assembly Government slashes its budget for resurfacing council roads by two-thirds. Councils manage all roads except major trunk routes.

The WAG says the Local Roads Maintenance Grant (LRMG) has achieved its purpose of bringing certain roads to a specific standard.

But Keith Jones, director of ICE Wales, said LRMG was spent only on A and B roads, where the WAG wanted to reduce the backlog of maintenance to a "totally arbitrary" figure of 8%.

"They didn't include the C roads and unclassified roads, which is where the majority of the problem is. Rural roads have the worst safety record, because they're the ones that have least maintenance."

Traffic volumes and vehicle weights had greatly increased since most local roads were constructed.

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Safety warning as WAG slashes budget for councils' resurfacing

"They've been like that since before the Second World War," he said. "You're lucky now to see the road outside your house resurfaced in perhaps your lifetime."

"Every council road is going to get surfaced every 90 to 100 years, on average."

The WAG will cut LRMG from £15m a year to £5m in 2010-11. The average of £227,000 per council would resurface just 1.5 miles of ordinary road, according

to ICE Wales figures for current resurfacing costs. On single-lane roads, £227,000 could resurface about 3.5 miles.

Where roads need reconstruction, the money will not even stretch that far.

A WAG spokeswoman said: "The LRMG was a three-year allocation of £15m a year for the sole purpose of bringing certain roads up to a specific standard."

"Surveys show this has now

been achieved on a high number of roads and the allocation is coming to an end. That is why the amount of the grant has tailed off."

On Monday Transport Minister Ieuan Wyn Jones announced £2.75m for councils to repair potholes. He said: "This extra money will help local authorities address the problems caused by the recent unforeseen weather conditions."

Experts say the root cause of the pothole epidemic is not the weather but badly maintained surfaces, which they compare with leaking house roofs causing structural damage if left unattended.

Keith Jones said roads should be sealed to stop water reaching the hard material below, where it hollowed out voids which became potholes. Repeatedly patching defects cost more than sealing a road and resurfacing it every 12 or 15 years, he said.

Tim Shallcross, of the Institute of Advanced Motorists, said: "It's lack of maintenance that causes the pothole in the first place. Bad weather accelerates the deterioration."

"This huge reduction in funding has safety implications but also cost implications for Welsh motorists and employers."

Motorists and fleet operators bore the costs of damage to vehicles from road defects, he said. Road-maintenance spending

did not reflect the billions of pounds UK motorists paid the Exchequer each year.

"It's pretty poor of the WAG to pat itself on the back and say, 'Job well done'," said Mr Shallcross, of Carmarthenshire. "It isn't well done at all. They're still way behind."

"The rural roads that twist and turn through the hills have the worst safety record, and the dominant type of accident is single-vehicle. Potholes, general poor maintenance and the surface deterioration so that tyres don't grip all contribute to cars and bikes coming off the road."

Tim Peppin, of the Welsh Local Government Association, said budgets were too tight for councils to spend more on roads. "A £5m grant, spread across Wales, isn't going to tackle the scale of the problem," he said.

In Carmarthenshire alone, the carriageway maintenance backlog is about £31m, according to 2005 estimates.

The LRMG may have reduced the backlog on principal roads, but cold winters and wet summers and autumns have taken their toll since 2005.

Last year the County Surveyors' Society said councils might have to close some roads outright "because there may not be funds to maintain them in a safe condition".

Problems caused by poor road maintenance

■ Old surfaces polished to a shine by tyres – impeding braking and cornering

■ Greater risk of structural failure, such as landslip, where water seeps below the surface

■ Potholes can damage vehicles and unseat cyclists and motorcyclists

■ Road edges can sink or fall away, especially dangerous on unlit roads at night

■ Gravel from potholes gathers in

gutters, making another hazard for cyclists and motorcyclists

■ Impaired drainage, especially where the road has lost its correct profile, causes ice or localised flooding, and vehicles aquaplaning on surface water can lose braking or steering

■ Collision risk where drivers or riders swerve or brake suddenly to avoid defects

■ Increased noise pollution where traffic crosses defects