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ALARM REPORT HIGHLIGHTS TRUE COSTS OF ROAD NEGLECT

Patchwork road network can't cope with extreme weather

The 15th Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) Survey¹, published on 25 March, reveals the chilling effects on local authority roads – and budgets – of 2009's extreme weather. Nearly all Welsh local authorities (94%) had their roads badly damaged by the winter storms, leaving a £30 million hole in maintenance budgets. These additional costs fall on departments already underfunded by a total of £800 million in England and Wales (£86 million in Wales alone). Sixty per cent of Welsh authorities do not anticipate receiving emergency funding to help meet this unexpected burden. Those authorities which did receive additional funding report that it covered just 5% of their additional costs.

The ALARM Survey, which collects information from local authority highways departments (responsible for 95% of roads) across England and Wales, also reveals that in 2009, 92,664 potholes were filled across Wales². The number of trenches dug by utility companies more than doubled to 191,796. The cost of bringing Wales's roads up to scratch has risen to £744 million, an increase of 50% on the previous year. Welsh authorities estimate that it would take a 15 years to catch up on the backlog of repairs at present rates of funding.

According to the report, reactive maintenance – the costs of dealing with emergency repairs rather than planned works – consumes almost one-third of the average Welsh maintenance budget. The work must, however, be carried out if roads are not to become unsafe.

The majority of survey respondents in Wales (88%) think that utility companies should be charged for the additional costs created by their road openings. Even if properly reinstated, deep utility trenches weaken the structure of the road in which they are placed, shortening its life by 30% or more³. ALARM Survey participants estimated that if utility companies met these costs, the pressure on local authority highways maintenance budgets would be reduced, freeing on average 11 % of Welsh highways maintenance budgets for planned maintenance work.

The Asphalt Industry Alliance, which commissioned the survey, is calling for:

ALARM 2010 WALES QUICK REFERENCE

- **Shortfall in road maintenance budget £3.9 million per Welsh authority**
- **15 years to clear maintenance backlog**
- **One-time catch-up cost up 50% to £33.8m per authority**
- **Welsh highways departments receive less than ½ budget they need**
- **92,664 potholes filled over last year in Wales**
- **Average cost to fill one pothole £46 in Wales**
- **8,718 deep trenches per Welsh authority – up 87%**
- **Over £100 million spent filling potholes last year across England and Wales**

- a new approach to funding roads maintenance, including sustained longer-term budgets, which would allow for proper planned maintenance,
- better protection of road maintenance budgets at local authority level,
- a one-off injection of funds to tackle the backlog, and easier access to emergency funding to deal with winter damage.

Mike Linley, Chairman of the Asphalt Industry Alliance, comments: “Although there has been a small increase in central government funding over recent years, it is a drop in the ocean compared to the amounts needed to stop the rot. Local authority highways departments don’t want to throw away millions of pounds filling potholes and paying compensation claims – they want to implement cost-effective, planned maintenance programmes which would result in safer, longer-lasting road surfaces.

“Extreme winter weather would not cause so much damage if our roads were fit for purpose in the first place. The consequences of an underfunded roads maintenance service are now writ large on our road network. These include compromised road safety and wasted time as road users are held up by unplanned road works.

“Cutting back on roads maintenance budgets in search of savings would be a false economy. Our road network is the asset on which all other local services rely. Those local authorities which prioritise their roads maintenance budgets report higher levels of resident satisfaction and falls in compensation pay-outs of up to 30% - a real return on investment.”

The ALARM Survey report is downloadable from www.alarm-survey.co.uk

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Notes to editors:

1. The Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) Survey 2010, conducted by the Asphalt Industry Alliance, is based on information supplied by 75 % of local authorities in England and Wales and relates to 2009/10 budgets. Local authorities are responsible for 95 % of Britain’s roads.
2. Compared to ALARM 2009, the number of potholes in England is up 47%; in London up 53%, and in Wales down 1%.
3. A charge structure for trenching in the highway is published by TRL (project report PPR 386:2009).

Further information, interviews, photography:



A range of high resolution colour images are available on request

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