



Article

Potholes and poorly maintained footways: The cost to the NHS

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A growing problem

Potholes are a big problem. [Drivers in England and Wales encounter an average of six potholes per mile](#) according to data from automotive services company RAC. The Automobile Association (AA) report that [fixing potholes is a priority for 96% of drivers](#).

The Government has taken steps to address the problem. In December 2024, Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander [announced an investment](#) of almost £1.6 billion to fix potholes across England, pledging to address the equivalent of over 7 million extra potholes between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026.

This funding push is urgently needed to reverse the impacts of historic underinvestment. [Between 2022 and 2023, just 1.4 million potholes were filled in England and Wales](#) - down from 1.7 million the previous year. The National Audit Office (NAO)'s [Condition and Maintenance of Local Roads in England](#) report highlights that the condition of local roads has stagnated, with an increasing maintenance backlog estimated at £15.6 billion. Short-term funding cycles aggravate this issue, making it difficult for local authorities to adopt preventive maintenance strategies. Instead, they often resort to reactive measures, which are less cost-effective and exacerbate the long-term decline of the network.

The quality of footways is equally poor. [According to the AA](#), 75% of pedestrians encounter uneven pavements, and two thirds say overgrown vegetation encroaches onto paths.

Accidents and injuries associated with potholes and poorly maintained footways

Much of the dissatisfaction concerning the state of the UK's roads centres on problems caused to vehicles. [According to RAC data](#), over a quarter of drivers (27%) say their vehicle suffered damage caused by potholes in 2024, a figure which rises to 32% among those living in rural areas. Punctures (47%) are the most common problem reported, followed by wheel damage (43%) and broken suspension springs (29%). Repairs are costly, [averaging £460](#).

When travelling via other modes, such as cycles, poorly maintained roads can prove especially dangerous. [According to Cycling UK](#), 15% of the cyclists they help after being injured in a crash were involved in an incident involving road surface defects. In 2023, a coroner ruled that an [unfixed crack in the road led to the death of a cyclist in Lancashire](#). The types of accidents and injuries which can occur due to potholes and poorly maintained roads and footways [include](#):

- Whiplash injuries for passengers in vehicles
- Sprained or broken ankles for pedestrians
- Sprained or broken wrists as pedestrians naturally use their arms and hands to catch themselves as they fall
- Soft-tissue injuries to the neck or back for cyclists or those in other vehicles
- Broken bones for cyclists and pedestrians and those in other vehicles
- Head injuries for cyclists, which can lead to fatality

The economic costs associated with compensation for accidents and injuries are high. [Cycling UK reports](#) that where a cyclist's claim for personal injury or damage to property is successful, they are awarded on average 13 times more than motorists (£10,963 compared to £841). [Living Streets](#) estimates there are more than 10,000 personal injury claims made for pedestrian trips and falls on public footways in England per year. The total cost of these claims is thought to range between £7.3-15.6 million.

Social exclusion

Poorly maintained footways also play a key role in [excluding people from the public realm](#), contributing towards [transport related social exclusion](#). 77% of disabled people experienced poor pavements, including bumps, potholes, tree roots, broken tiles, and narrow width according to [research](#) by disability campaign group, Transport for All. This makes the public realm inaccessible, with just 21% of survey respondents stating that they can walk and wheel with ease, while 6% said they cannot do it at all.

Social exclusion has consequences on the mental health of those impacted. According to a [2024 report](#) by the Multiple Sclerosis Trust, more than 70% of survey respondents reported that transport problems impacted their mental health, with around 77% feeling isolated and more than half of respondents saying they would leave their house more often if support was available.

[The cost of mental ill health in England in 2022 was £300 billion](#), inclusive of health and care costs of £60 billion.

Estimated cost to the NHS

Potholes and poorly maintained footways put pressure on an already strained health system. [Between 2018 and 2022, 18 people died and a further 433 were seriously injured because of potholes](#).

According to figures by [Go Compare](#), an insurance comparison website, the cost to the NHS to treat broken bones can stretch into the thousands (an estimated £5,684 for a broken leg and £3,116 for a broken arm). Ambulance callouts, A&E visits, overnight hospital stays, scans and crutches are all associated with further incurred costs for the health service.

The [Department for Transport \(DfT\)](#) estimates suggest that ‘slight injuries’ caused by road traffic incidents incur a wider economic cost of £15,951 per incident, on police, the NHS, and workplace losses.

It is difficult to establish the precise number of trips and falls caused by poor footway maintenance as there is [no systematic collection of data on pedestrian trips and falls in England at present](#). Poorly maintained footways disproportionately impact older people; it has been estimated that 10% of people over 65 experience pedestrian falls outdoors each year. This has an impact on health and social care services, falls are a leading cause of injury related deaths and hospital admissions among older adults and can result in the person who falls becoming homebound or institutionalised.

A [2018 survey](#) by Cycling UK, BBC 5 Live Investigates and Cycling Weekly found that 31 percent of injured cyclists were put off cycling because of a pothole related incident. As illustrated by a [2024 report](#) by University College London (UCL) commissioned by Guide Dogs, fear is a powerful determinant of the way in which people travel.

‘Even a single bad experience will create a fear response to which the body will respond - this is a preconscious response to any perceived threat and, as with any threat, the only real way to avoid the fear of it recurring, is to avoid the threatening experience.’

Quote from UCL for Guide Dogs (2024) [Designing for Inclusion](#)

This shift away from active travel is likewise costly for the NHS. Active travel modes such as walking, wheeling and cycling are excellent ways to be more physically active. [Physical activity reduces a person’s risk of dementia by 30%, depression by 30%, heart disease by 40%, type 2 diabetes by 40% and osteoporosis by 50%](#). Physical activity helps prevent many types of cancer including breast, colon, endometrial, kidney, bladder, oesophageal, and stomach cancer. Furthermore, modal shift to active travel plays a key role in reducing the health implications of air pollution. [IPPR research](#) estimates that doubling cycling and increasing walking would prevent 8,300 premature deaths and save £567 million per year through improved air quality.

These benefits are more challenging when travelling via active modes is deemed to be unsafe: disabled people take 30% fewer walking trips per year than non-disabled people and [Living Streets research](#) found that nearly one in three (31%) older adults (aged 65+) are prevented from walking more or at all on their local streets because of cracked and uneven pavements.

[Building resilience to an increasingly challenging climate](#)

Potholes are just one indication of the ongoing poor condition of UK roads. [CIHT has long called for the government to commit funding to maintain the ageing UK road network and future-proof transport infrastructure](#).

The situation is likely to become more challenging over time. Flooding, higher temperatures, storms, and severe weather are increasingly common occurrences and accelerate failures and disruptions on the network.

‘Investment in the maintenance of our existing highways and infrastructure is a key priority to ensure the continued and efficient use of our transport network. Incrementally adapting our infrastructure and proactively carrying out maintenance is essential to achieve extreme weather resilience and meet our decarbonisation goals. Fixing potholes is the tip of the iceberg’

Quote from [A Transport Network Fit for All Our Futures](#)

Heavy rain and flooding also delay essential road repairs as maintenance teams are redirected to fallen trees and storm damage.

In the CIHT 2024 report, [Delivering a Resilient Transport Network](#), we called on UK governments to invest now in preventative maintenance and incremental adaptation measures to lower future costs associated with repairs, avoiding expensive infrastructure losses and saving money for future investments.

Conclusion

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CIHT has long called for UK governments to prioritise maintenance, adaptation and resilience, making at least a five-year commitment to funding local roads maintenance and renewal through a local roads investment strategy. Such investment is key in allowing authorities to take a long term, proactive view, investing in preventative maintenance measures now to lower future costs, avoid expensive infrastructure losses and save money for future investments.

About CIHT

CIHT provides strategic leadership and support to help our members develop, deliver, and maintain sustainable solutions for highways, transport infrastructure, and services that:

- Address the challenges of climate change
- Support the economy
- Help address societal inequalities
- Reduce environmental degradation
- Respond to a changing world

We bring members together to share, learn, and feel confident about addressing these challenges through the application of good practice, by embracing innovation and by acting with integrity. It is through this and the values that CIHT can demonstrate and deliver on thought leadership and shaping the highways and transportation sector for the public benefit.

Whether you are a student, apprentice, work in the private or public sectors or are a company director, CIHT has a place for you and a commitment to fulfilling your professional development needs throughout your career.

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