

Version 1.0

Explaining Preventative Road Maintenance to Residents

A Councillor Communications Guide

Written by Purple Tree Communications for the REA.

This guide can be used by local authority councillors and officers to inform and educate residents on the process and impacts of preventative road maintenance.

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Introduction

Mark Stott, REA Chair



“Your local road network is your single largest asset and one of the most politically sensitive.

“This guide provides an easy-to-understand explanation of what preventative maintenance is, how it can be easily explained to stakeholders, and why it is a genuinely important tool in the box for cash-strapped councils.”

Purpose of This Guide

As a councillor, you are a key voice in your community. When road maintenance works take place on roads that appear to be in good condition, residents may question the timing or necessity.

This guide helps you explain:

- What preventative road maintenance is
- Why it is essential
- How it saves money and disruption
- What residents can expect before, during and after the works

Why is this guide relevant and important?

- Local roads make up around 98% of the road network in the UK, playing a vital role in connectivity, economic activity, and public safety.
- Despite their significance, many of these roads suffer from underinvestment, leading to a backlog of necessary repairs and resurfacing. This has a direct impact on road users, local businesses, and the overall efficiency of transport infrastructure.
- You may be aware that surface dressing, which helps prevent potholes, has declined by -46% since 2012. Not surprisingly, the pothole problems have increased significantly over the same period.
- With a more effective balance between preventative and reactive maintenance, we could see vastly improved local roads across the UK.
- Preventative road maintenance is now a key priority for UK Government, especially considering the new local authority reporting requirements. Some local authorities are now investing around 90% of their road maintenance budget in preventative measures.
- While preventative road maintenance programmes are now increasing again, we still don't see widespread knowledge or understanding from members of the public.



Did you know?

Surface Dressing uses up to 75% less bitumen and up to 80% less aggregate per square metre than thin surface asphalt courses. (Source: RSTA data).

What's Preventative Road Maintenance?

Preventative road maintenance refers to a set of planned treatments carried out before major defects appear. These treatments protect the structure of the road, slow its deterioration, and ensure safety for all road users.

This is not about fixing potholes. It is about stopping potholes from forming in the first place.

The Most Used and Common Preventative Treatments

Surface Dressing

Surface dressing simply involves applying a new layer of bitumen and aggregate on top of an existing surface.

This is the most common type of preventative road maintenance and the benefits include...

- Adds resilience, by sealing the surface from ingress of water
- Retextures the road surface to provide improved skid resistance, making the road safer
- Protects the road surface below from any further deterioration thereby extending the life of the road and reducing whole-life maintenance cost
- Much more cost effective than an asphalt resurface, therefore improving asset management
- There are several environmental and cost benefits of surface dressing a road, including:
 - Low carbon emissions during the life of the road
 - Can be overlaid with new surface dressings in future years
 - Totally recyclable material
 - Quick maintenance process with minimal disruption to traffic



Easy explainer:

"It's like giving the road a weatherproof coat to protect the road layers underneath."

Encapsulation

Encapsulation can be applied as an additional layer, in addition to surface dressing.

The benefits of encapsulation are...

- A double water proofing layer that prevents water ingress which leads to the formation of potholes, therefore adding resilience and performance
- A bitumen emulsion sealing spray that locks in the aggregate and secures the texture of the surface
- A new road surface at a fraction of the cost of a new asphalt layer
- Improved resilience to effects of climate change
- Significant extension to the life of an existing road surface if treated as a planned maintenance intervention



Easy explainer:

"An extra layer of protection, on top of the treated road surface."

Polymer Modified Binders (PMBs)

PMBs are a co-blend of polymer and bitumen that is formulated for both spray sealing and asphalt applications.

This innovative material enhances resilience of the road by:

- Improved performance of the binder film with greater ability to cope with low winter temperatures and higher summer temperatures
- Extends life span of surface dressing by retaining binder performance properties for longer

- Overall road performance is improved by:
 - Improved adhesion to the new aggregate and the road surface over sprayed
 - Improved aggregate retention
 - Greater ability for surface dressing to withstand higher turning stresses due to elasticity of PMB

The Stages of Preventative Maintenance

To help understand how your council can communicate preventative road maintenance works, we've provided an example Integrated Preventative Maintenance & Communications Plan on the following pages.

Stage	What Happens	Purpose	Suggested Message	Timing	Communication Focus	Channels
1. Assessment & Surveying	Roads are inspected and data collected.	To identify early signs of wear.	"We're using evidence to invest where it's needed most."	Up to 1-year before treatment	Raise awareness about preventative maintenance and its benefits	Council website, local press, parish newsletters
2. Planning & Programming	Treatments are scheduled.	Enables cost-effective, coordinated delivery.	"We're planning ahead to minimise disruption."	2-3 weeks before	Share when and where work will happen, and expected benefits	Social media, council bulletins, online maps, advance signage
3. Pre-treatment Works	Weeds, drainage, small defects addressed.	Ensures main treatment is effective.	"Preparation ensures longer-lasting results."	1 week before	Give practical advice to residents on access and travel	Letter drops, school/commuter updates, targeted social posts
4. Main Treatment	Surface dressing or similar applied.	Seals the road and extends lifespan.	"This will protect the road for years to come."	During works	Provide reassurance and progress updates	On-site signage, daily web or social updates, hotline

Stage	What Happens	Purpose	Suggested Message	Timing	Communication Focus	Channels
5. Sweeping & Settling	Loose chippings are swept, road beds in.	Ensures safety and surface quality.	"Loose stones are a temporary part of the process and do not present a hazard if road users stick to recommended speeds. A final sweep is undertaken at the end of the process to remove any remaining loose stones."	During works	Emphasise safety and temporary nature of disruption	On-site signage, daily updates, social media, direct queries
6. Final Checks	Quality inspections and monitoring.	Confirms successful completion.	"We always follow up and carry out quality control to ensure the standard is met."	1–2 weeks after	Celebrate outcomes and thank the public	Follow-up posts, visuals, local media, community engagement platforms

Key Messages to Use

These core messages can be used in conversations, newsletters, social media, or public meetings:

- **Fix the road before it fails.** It is far cheaper to protect a road early than to rebuild it after it breaks down.
- **Prevention, not just pothole repair.** Treating roads before major damage occurs keeps them in good condition for years to come.
- **Sensible use of public money.** Preventative maintenance costs a fraction of full resurfacing and extends the life of roads by, typically, 10 to 15 years, which is the same as a new asphalt road surface.
- **Minimising disruption.** Early intervention prevents large-scale repairs later and reduces road closures and traffic disruption.
- **Reducing carbon emissions.** Early, lighter treatments reduce the environmental impact compared with full reconstruction.

Example Headline Message for Residents

You may be wondering how to best explain preventative road maintenance to your constituents. As you'll now be aware, the principles behind the works are simple, so messaging should be straightforward and easy for residents and road users to understand.

An example punchy headline message to inform residents about preventative road maintenance:

“Preventative maintenance helps us protect our roads before they fail from too many potholes. This type of maintenance is more cost-effective, and means fewer delays and less disruption to your journeys, for years to come. It’s also better for the environment, because we don’t have to unnecessarily lay a completely new road. Thank you for your patience while we future-proof our local roads.”

Answering Common Questions

Why is the council resurfacing roads that look fine?

We're maintaining the road before it becomes damaged. This is far cheaper and avoids disruption later on.

Why are there loose stones on the road?

That's part of the surface dressing process. They help bed the treatment in, provided a safe road texture, and are eventually swept away.

Why not wait until potholes appear?

By then it's too late. Potholes are a symptom of more serious damage. This work prevents that damage happening.

Is this a second-rate solution compared to replacing the road?

Preventative road maintenance can help protect the road surface for years to come, and is more economical and effective than reactive pothole repairing.

Why is so much of the council's budget spent on preventative maintenance?

It's more cost effective to spend money preventing potholes from forming, than waiting for a road surface to deteriorate beyond repair.

Jargon and acronym buster

Acronym	Full Term	Definition
REA	Road Emulsion Association	An industry body representing the interests of companies involved in road emulsion production and application.
HSE	Health and Safety Executive	The UK government agency responsible for workplace health, safety, and welfare. Dedicated to promoting the benefits of road and airfield surface treatments, ensuring workforce competence, and advocating for best practices in the industry.
RSTA	Road Surface Treatment Association	The UK government department responsible for transport infrastructure, policy, and regulations.
DfT	Department for Transport	A global organisation that develops and publishes international standards for various industries.
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation	An international standards organisation that develops technical standards for a wide range of materials, including road emulsions.
ASTM	American Society for Testing and Materials	Organic chemicals that have a high vapour pressure at room temperature and can contribute to air pollution.
VOC	Volatile Organic Compounds	Recycled asphalt material used in new road construction and maintenance.
RAP	Reclaimed Asphalt Pavement	A type of bitumen enhanced with polymers to improve durability and performance in road construction.
PMB	Polymer Modified Bitumen/Binders	A document that provides information on the properties, hazards, and safe handling of chemicals and materials.
MSDS	Material Safety Data Sheet	Systems and processes used to ensure that products and services meet defined quality standards.
QA/QC	Quality Assurance / Quality Control	A set of criteria used to assess a company's impact on sustainability and ethical practices.
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance	Gases that trap heat in the atmosphere, contributing to climate change.
GHG	Greenhouse Gas	

NAPA	National Asphalt Pavement Association	An organisation representing the interests of asphalt pavement producers and contractors in the USA.
CBA	Cost-Benefit Analysis	A systematic approach to evaluating the costs and benefits of a project or decision.
ITS	Intelligent Transport Systems	Advanced technologies used to improve traffic management and road safety.
PPP	Public-Private Partnership	A cooperative arrangement between public and private sectors for infrastructure projects.
SRN	Strategic Road Network	The network of motorways and major roads managed at a national level.
CIRIA	Construction Industry Research and Information Association	A UK-based non-profit organisation providing guidance and best practices in construction.

Any Questions?

For further details or resources to support your local communications:

- **Road Emulsion Association** – kevin.maw@rea.org.uk
- **Purple Tree Communications** – enquiries@purpletreecomms.co.uk
- **Local Government Association** – info@local.gov.uk



Find out more about the Future-proofing Our Local Roads campaign!

