

Going to pot

Living Streets' chief executive, Tony Armstrong, discusses the reasons why he thinks pavements warrant the same, if not more, investment as roads



"It is vital that walking is made safer and easier"
Tony Armstrong



Over my six years as chief executive, I've been called on by the media to speak on a variety of issues from pedestrian fatalities and road safety, to children walking to school, to the seemingly perennial hot topic of wheelie bins.

But one issue which is guaranteed to get the press office phone ringing is road maintenance, by which I mean not just potholes in the road – although an issue guaranteed to raise temperatures – but our footways. The pavement is an integral part of the highway and, as such, warrants the same, if not more, investment as roads. I'll explain why and how pavements deliver a better return on investment.

In the first instance, it matters to people. Research has shown that a third of people identify street and pavement repairs as the thing that 'most needs improving' in their area – more than those who identified crime or health as an issue. Well maintained and attractive streets improve perceptions of safety and, in turn, a greater human presence on the streets makes neighbourhoods safer.

When streets become less like corridors for traffic and more like welcoming public spaces, local communities thrive and become more vibrant. In a YouGov survey commissioned by Living Streets in 2012, over a third (34 per cent) of British adults said they would walk more in their local area if the streets were kept in better condition, while more than a fifth (22 per cent) said they would be more likely to shop locally.

Maintaining our pavements can also deliver significant returns on local economy, burden on public health



Maintaining pavements properly can deliver significant returns

and improved environmental benefits. Investment in quality public spaces raises footfall and can boost local retail spend by up to 40 per cent. It's a known fact that people who arrive on foot, spend more than those who arrive by car.

Always in use

The pavement is the most democratic of all our public services, indeed it's the one which we all use regardless of whether we drive or not, but it is especially important to the most vulnerable people in our communities. It is vital that walking is made safer and easier for all of us. It's worth bearing in mind that 25 per cent of people in the UK do not have access to a car and therefore are dependent on a safe walking environment. For people with mobility issues or disabilities, poorly maintained pavements can have more far-reaching implications.

Between 2006 and 2010, councils paid out £106 million in compensation claims to people who were injured by trips or fell on badly maintained pavements. A fall for an older person can lead to long term residential care which Age UK estimate costs the public purse £18,000 a year. As our population grows older, 'age-friendly' neighbourhoods can be a key factor in enabling people to live independently and comfortably for longer.

We continue to live in times of severe financial constraints, but coordinating

across departments – health, planning, transport and others – can deliver more from limited resources. NICE guidance recommends walking to tackle the growing problem of obesity and associated chronic conditions such as type two diabetes and coronary heart disease. Indeed, if everyone in England walked for 20 minutes a day, 37,000 lives would be saved each year. If safe, attractive streets encourage people to walk, then clearly the population's health benefits.

The old adage, a stitch in time, holds true for pavements too and by proactively tackling problems, maintenance budgets can go further. For example, repaving an area might afford an opportunity to install drop kerbs to enable better access for people with wheelchairs, mobility scooters or pushchairs.

In our 2013 report, the State of Our Streets, we highlighted some of the best – and worst – practices of councils across the UK. For example, Stoke on Trent City Council decided to remove the middle man and trust the public's judgement on maintenance. Instead of scheduling an inspection after a report of say a pothole, the council sent a maintenance crew out immediately meaning they could respond quickly saving money and time.

Sometimes the simplest solutions can deliver the most effective results. ☺