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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Bumps-a-daisy! App may speed up pothole repairs

Mark Hookham Published: 18 March 2012



Local authorities can refuse to pay on the grounds they didn't know about potholes (Ben Birchall)

A SMARTPHONE app that detects potholes and reports their location to the local council so they can be repaired is to be tested in Britain.

Street Bump will undergo a trial in Bristol after its creators impressed ministers during a presentation in Downing Street.

The app uses a mobile phone's motion sensor to detect the jolts caused when motorists drive over potholes.

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It is hoped the technology will force local authorities to step up their repairs of crumbling roads.

It could also result in an increase in the number of compensation claims from drivers whose cars suffer damage because of poor road surfaces.

Currently, local authorities can refuse to pay out on the grounds that they did not know about potholes or other road defects.

Despite this, councils in England and Wales still paid £21.3m in compensation to drivers last year, according to a report released last week by the Asphalt Industry Alliance, which represents companies that carry out repair work.

The app has been created in the US by a team of developers working for the mayor of Boston, Thomas Menino, and is due to be launched there this spring.

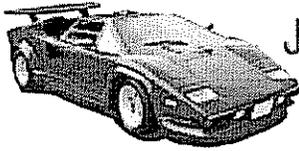
Menino's chief of staff, Mitchell Weiss, demonstrated the app at a seminar about UK cities in Downing Street last month chaired by Greg Clark, the cities minister, and attended by David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Lord Rogers, the architect, and council leaders from the eight largest English cities outside London.

Clark was impressed by the technology and asked Bristol city council to test it.

"Street Bump is a classic example of how a global city like Boston has come up with an invention that is now going to scatter around the planet and which Bristol is going to take hold of, pilot and develop," Clark said.

Motoring organisations said drivers would prefer it if the app were not required because the roads were kept in good condition.

Paul Watters, head of roads policy at the AA, said: "However nice it is that they get the data, it doesn't help you with your smashed wheel and tyre."



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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Pothole-detector app to put town hall on the spot

Mark Harris Published: 18 March 2012



Councils struggle to repair roads (Malcolm Case Green)

Smartphone software that automatically detects potholes could force councils to step up repairs of poorly maintained roads. An app called Street Bump, to be launched this year, will be able to detect the location and size of defects on thousands of miles of road.

It can also send the data to local highways departments, making it difficult for councils to argue they were unaware of potholes.

The information provided here should have significant implications for the amount of

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the grounds that they did not know about the defect in the road surface.

The app uses a mobile device's accelerometer, or motion sensor, and GPS to detect the tell-tale jolt when a motorist drives over a pothole or sunken manhole cover and pinpoint where it is. "Every time there's a significant bump, data from the accelerometer is captured," said Chris Osgood, the app's creator. "We record the nature, the size and the location of each bump."

The driver has the option to send the data at the touch of a button to the local highways department.

The app is being tested in Boston, America, by New Urban Mechanics, a division of the Boston mayor's office. It is due to be launched in the city this spring. The developer has already met British council chiefs at a Downing Street event to discuss implementing the technology here.

In tests carried out by The Sunday Times, the app proved effective and very sensitive — registering every hole and rut and emitting a beep to confirm that it had logged a defect in the road surface. Even with the forgiving suspension on our Mercedes-Benz 240D, the screen of the iPhone was filled with wavy lines indicating the uneven surface of the road.

The developer said the device could save local authorities time and money spent on surveying roads. By collating the data from drivers and matching it against known speed humps, level crossings and roadworks, sections of road in need of maintenance could easily be identified. The developer said councils could guard against false alerts by combining data from drivers travelling over the same section of road to create a map based on multiple individual journeys.

However, the Local Government Association (LGA), which represents councils, said it was uneasy about the idea because of the risk of information overload. "Councils will always try to make the best use of technology to improve services, but an automatic alert system which reports every little undulation risks being more hindrance than help. Highways departments could end up being inundated with thousands of new reports each day about potholes they are already well aware of, taking hours for officers to sift through," said the LGA.

Even with the threat of an increased number of claims for compensation from drivers, there is no guarantee that councils will improve road maintenance in the short term.

Last week, the annual Alarm survey into the state of roads in England and Wales revealed that local authorities already faced a shortfall of £895m in road maintenance budgets.

The survey was conducted by the Asphalt Industry Alliance, which represents companies that carry out the repair work, and is regarded as the most accurate reflection of the state of the roads.