

# Stone me

The BBC caused a bit of a stir last week following an 'investigation' which concluded that there were 'serious concerns' about new road surfaces being laid in the UK. The material falling under the spotlight of Radio 4's *File On 4* programme was stone mastic asphalt (SMA).

This is not the first time fears have been raised about this surfacing. Derbyshire County Council issued a release in 2001 about the skid resistance of newly-laid SMA in dry conditions, after tests recorded 'lower than expected' results.

SMA consists of an aggregate 'skeleton', with the voids filled with bitumen. It is thought early skid resistance might be lower because trafficking must expose 'grit' held within the bitumen. However, some engineers have concluded that only a minimal amount of trafficking would be required to expose this grit. That said, Derbyshire urged the CSS and Department for Transport to proceed with caution. The risk-averse county is still using the material, but posting signs telling drivers to be aware.

Somewhat contrary to this view, the BBC also reported that the National Roads Authority in Ireland had restricted use of SMA to roads with a 30mph limit, because of concerns it could not provide 'enough friction for tyres at higher speeds'.

Confused? There's more. See the letter on page 11 of this week's issue and John Blowers, of the Mastic Asphalt Council, says his members had a sudden influx of inquires from nervous highways authorities after the broadcast. Blowers stresses SMA is not a material installed by its members – SMA bearing 'little resemblance to craftsman installed mastic asphalt'.

One thing we know for certain is the SMA is a popular material and probably more widely used than hot-rolled asphalt. Also, SMA was not identified as a contributory factor in the two fatal accidents the BBC referred to in its report.

In these situations, the industry, particularly on the client side, calls for research. TRL is conducting studies on early-life skid resistance for the HA and work is being carried out at Southampton University, reference to which can be found in *Surveyor's* freely accessible on-line form at [www.surveyor-magazine.com](http://www.surveyor-magazine.com).

These studies need industry input even if the conclusions may irk suppliers. Only then will standards be ratified to help engineers specify, and inflammatory reports in the popular media avoided.

Matt Hobley  
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