

SPAB/MORI Maintenance Poll: National Maintenance Week 2002

It's official – Geordies and Yorkshiremen spend three times as much on maintenance as Scots; kids get in the way of clearing gutters, Brummies love DIY more than Londoners (and women); and hurrah for the Welsh! Philip Venning on the results of the SPAB/MORI maintenance poll.

Britain has been indulging in a frenzy of house-buying and home make-overs the “fun” bits which are demanding so much of our time and money. However, new research commissioned by the SPAB reveals that one-third of all property owners in Britain have done so serious building maintenance or repairs – the important bit – in the past five years.

The survey – carried out by MORI on behalf of the SPAB for the Society's National Maintenance Week 2002 – shows that Britons' enthusiasm for their homes does not necessarily extend to vital routine care and attention. This is in spite of the fact that nine out of 10 owners agreed that regular maintenance is an important way of protecting the commercial value of their property. It is especially surprising, given the unprecedented boom in DIY superstore shopping over the past decade.

The MORI poll suggests that householders are avoiding even the most basic of maintenance jobs. When it comes to clearing out gutters and drains – one of the more straightforward, yet most essential, of annual chores – 60 per cent admit to not having done so within the last five years.

While the average British family spends between £7,500 and £10,000 on holidays over a five-year period, a mere 16 per cent of property owners spend an equivalent amount on looking after their biggest asset: their home. Oddly enough, even the more affluent households aren't much more inclined to pay for maintenance work than less wealthy ones.

The SPAB/MORI poll was based on interviews with 1,344 homeowners or those buying a property on a mortgage. No information was sought about the age, size, type or existing condition of the properties respondents owned. The SPAB aimed National Maintenance Week at owners and managers of buildings of all types and dates, not just historic ones or those normally the subject of the Society's interest.

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The MORI poll - the first ever commissioned by the SPAB – was designed to produce reliable data that could be used to encourage homeowners to take maintenance more seriously.

One of the reasons that owners fail to carry out maintenance seems to be a lack of confidence that they really can do it themselves, coupled with problems over finding skilled tradesmen to do the work.

Though questions about damp are among the most common asked on the SPAB's Technical Advice Line, the survey revealed that only 12 per cent of owners had work

carried out to combat damp within the past five years. The same proportion had some repointing done. By contrast 40 per cent had cleared their gutters and drains; 40 per cent had their properties repainted outside; 36 per cent had windows or exterior doors repaired or renewed; 23 per cent had roofs and 10 per cent chimneys repaired.

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Attitudes to home maintenance and the extent to which work has been undertaken are much the same among both men and women householders. Generally, those aged over 35 are most likely to have commissioned work within the past five years. Contrary to what might have been expected, there is not much of a difference between social classes, with a few exceptions over specific jobs. For example, 50 per cent of homeowners in classes AB (managerial and professional) had cleared out their gutters, compared with 28 per cent of those in classes DE (unskilled working class).

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Looked at regionally, the Welsh come out best and Londoners worst over facing up to maintenance. But the type of work done shows great variation. For example, half of all homeowners in the eastern region had cleared out gutters, compared with only one-quarter in the eastern Midlands. Half of all owners in the North-West had undertaken external repainting, while only 21 per cent of those in the eastern Midlands had done so. In the damp South-West, one-quarter had spent money of coping with a damp problem while only seven per cent had done so in Scotland.

Single people were least likely to have had any work done, those who were widowed, divorced or separated most likely. Gutter clearance happened more often in households without children. Perhaps the least predictable breakdown of the figures concerned household income which seems not to have been all that much of a factor. For example, 73 per cent of owners with a household income of £17,499 and under did some maintenance in the past five years compared with 70 per cent of those with an income of £30,000 and over.

Looked at in terms of the amounts spent, generally there was little difference between men and women, or the age or social class of the householder (with the exception of those under 24 where not surprisingly they spent the least). Regional variations tend to be more marked: for example, nine per cent of Scots spent between £2,501 and £5,000 on maintenance in the last five years compared with 26 per cent of those from the North-East. On the other hand, the proportions were roughly the other way round for spending more than £5,000.

“WEST MIDLANDERS WERE MOST WILLING TO HAVE A GO AT DIY, WITH LONDONERS AND SINGLE PEOPLE LEAST LIKELY. HOUSEHOLD INCOMES DID NOT HAVE ALL THAT MUCH INFLUENCE ON OWNERS' ENTHUSIASM OR OTHERWISE FOR DOING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE THEMSELVES”

Asked about how important they thought regular maintenance was to keep up the value of their property, nine out of 10 householders agreed, irrespective of other factors, the only dissenters being those under 24, single people, and Londoners.

Some simple maintenance jobs can be done by householders themselves, and the poll tried to find out how confident or otherwise people were about doing it themselves. Britons are unusual in Europe in undertaking so many maintenance tasks without the involvement of a professional.

One apparent cliché does seem to be borne out by the statistics: one-third of women householders were not happy about tackling maintenance themselves, while more than half of men claimed to be happy to have a go. Overall, those aged 25 to 54 were most confident, as were those in social classes C1, C2 and DE. West Midlands were most willing to have a go at DIY, with Londoners and single people least likely.

Household income did not have all that much influence on owners' enthusiasm or otherwise for doing repairs and maintenance themselves, though poorer householders were a bit more reluctant.

Finally, the MORI interviewers tried to pin down the extent to which a shortage of skilled tradespeople was one reason householders ignored the need for maintenance. Overall, 46 per cent of male householders and 42 per cent of female claimed to have no problem finding the right people, with a little over one in 10 citing it as an important obstacle. The biggest difference was in the social class of the householder: 47 per cent of managers and professionals (AB) said it was hard to get suitable builders, compared with only 28 per cent of those in social class C2.

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And is it easier to find a skilled carpenter or plumber in some parts of the country than others? The Survey suggest that this is more of an issue for Londoners and those in the South-East, where about half said it was a problem.

It was less marked elsewhere, while in the North-East only one in five householders considered that it was proving difficult to get the right tradesmen.