

## We want you

### Product reliability

Do you have a kitchen appliance or vacuum cleaner that's going strong after many years, or one that's always breaking down? Tell Katie Waller.

### Salary sacrifice scheme

Does your employer let you give up part of your salary for a benefit like child-care vouchers or a bicycle? Contact Teresa Fritz.

### Digital cameras



If you've changed your simple point-and-shoot camera for one with more features (but not a digital SLR), Christopher Christoforou wants to hear about benefits and potential problems.

### Primary-care choices

Do you wait weeks to see a GP or get an appointment when you need it? Are consultations long enough? Is diabetes care convenient? Tell Nikki Ratcliff about accessing and choosing general-practice services.



### Bread

Send your questions on bread, whether it's about how long it should last or which types are healthier, to Ceri Stanaway.

### Christmas presents

Tell Alison Eastwood about your best or worst presents, or the dream gift you've never received.

Send full contact details to [helpwanted@which.co.uk](mailto:helpwanted@which.co.uk) or Help Wanted, PO Box 44, Hertford X SG14 1SH. Go to [www.which.co.uk/helpwanted](http://www.which.co.uk/helpwanted) for more requests online. (We cannot respond personally to all replies)

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY, REX FEATURES

Firms are paying out millions for their over-running roadworks

## Roadwork fines mount up

### ROAD MAINTENANCE



One of many roadworks across the UK

**P**hone and utility firms are paying out millions of pounds a year on penalty charges for taking too long over digging up roads, Which? has found.

The news comes as bills are eating up more of householders' incomes than ever.

Councils in England and Wales can charge companies between £100 and £2,000 a day if they prolong works unnecessarily.

We spoke to ten councils that demanded £1.8 million between them in the last financial year, but that's a fraction of the amount collected by all 410 councils across the two countries. The same rules don't apply in Northern Ireland and Scotland, which have their own systems for tackling over-running works.

Figures from nine of the ten councils that we spoke to show that for the previous year – 2005 to 2006 – phone and utility firms shelled out £1.6 million in charges.

Breakdowns reveal water companies were some of the most regular offenders, although their fines were relatively small, amounting to at least £122,700. Gas and electricity companies were charged £614,800 between them while BT paid more than £67,000 across eight councils.

BT refused to tell us how much it had paid to all councils over the last year. A spokesman said: 'BT takes its commitment to the community seriously and makes every effort to minimise disruption caused by repairs. While the majority of works are completed within set timescales, provision is made within the company's operating budget to account for potential delays to the process, many of which are beyond the company's reasonable control.'

But Peter Goode, chairman of the National Street Works Highways Group, says firms could avoid these charges: 'Companies who start projects should be able to estimate the time works will take and then manage those so they're done in time.'

And while the rules state that these avoidable costs should not be passed on to consumers, it's the public that has to suffer the inconvenience of prolonged road works.

From next April, councils can charge companies for permits to dig up roads, but the National Joint Utilities Group has said the new rules will spell more red tape, and costs will result in higher utility bills.

### WHAT FIRMS ARE PAYING

**We asked ten major councils for the annual amount that they collect for over-running roadworks**

	2005-06 (£)	2006-07 (£)
<b>BIRMINGHAM</b>	no figure	134,750
<b>BRADFORD</b>	124,650	68,900
<b>BRISTOL</b>	109,000	111,000
<b>CAMDEN</b>	281,800	354,250
<b>ENFIELD</b>	263,600	560,150
<b>KIRKLEES</b>	76,600	148,800
<b>LEEDS</b>	177,525	114,675
<b>LIVERPOOL</b>	58,000	103,000
<b>MANCHESTER CITY</b>	451,815	146,604
<b>SHEFFIELD</b>	16,350	71,950
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,559,340</b>	<b>1,814,079</b>

**2.4million**

holes are dug each year by  
utility companies

RAC FOUNDATION

**12%**

increase in teeth whitening  
treatments since smoking ban

BRITISH ACADEMY OF COSMETIC DENTISTRY

**£1 billion**

value of UK cosmetic  
dentistry industry

BRITISH ACADEMY OF COSMETIC DENTISTRY



Illegal tooth whitening is uncovered by Which?

# Salons exposed

## COSMETIC PROCEDURES

**A** Which? investigation has uncovered beauty salons allowing unqualified staff to carry out teeth-whitening treatments that can inflict permanent damage.

Clinics across the country are undercutting dentists' prices and cashing in on the trend for Hollywood-white teeth.

But many employ beauty therapists who, after a few days' training, apply harmful chemicals that can damage clients' gums and could land them with hefty fines.

This is because, the UK dental regulator says, teeth whitening by non-dentists is illegal. In our snapshot survey, our reporter posed as a potential client at six London beauty salons.

All six said that their procedure wasn't performed by a dentist and half were using dangerous chemicals. We also uncovered misleading advice and the use of whitening 'lasers' that have no proven effect.

The General Dental Council (GDC) is now investigating these clinics and has asked us not to name them while enquiries continue.

Its President Hew Mathewson and James Goolnik of the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (BACD) looked at our research and gave comments on the following.

## Chemicals

Most tooth-whitening treatments use hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide, both proven to bleach teeth. But three salons offered a chlorine dioxide treatment. James said: 'This chemical is a bleaching agent more commonly used to purify water and is very acidic. It can wreck tooth enamel.'

The other clinics use hydrogen peroxide in strengths from 0.6 to 10 per cent, which are above the legal limit (see 'Home kits', below).

## Gum disease

Nobody with gum disease should consider teeth-whitening treatment due to the risk of further irritation and ulcerated and receding gums. Two clinics asked to look at our reporter's gums, but it's impossible even for a dentist to detect problems from a quick glance.

Two of the clinics said that impressions of teeth would be taken, which is considered a procedure that should be carried out only by a dentist and therefore illegal if carried out by an untrained person.

## Side effects

Most clinics said that side effects could include white spots on gums or lips where the bleaching agent leaks from a shield. The clinics suggested that these were a perfectly normal



Some whitening procedures can cause damage (inset)

side effect but James said: 'These are chemical burns and there shouldn't be any. Peroxide should be nowhere near the lip.'

## Lasers

Half of the clinics we visited advertised 'laser whitening' and one even asked whether our reporter was allergic to lasers. Hew said: 'These lasers are usually just blue lights and there's little scientific evidence for their added benefit.'

## Potential legal action

The GDC believes teeth whitening should be carried out only by a dentist under the Dentists Act and is keen to have its definition tested by successfully prosecuting someone who pleads not guilty to the offence. It is currently investigating 70 clinics.

Ben Nahab pleaded guilty at Norwich magistrates last year to carrying out a whitening procedure, after he burnt the gums of a dental nurse while demonstrating a product, causing serious side effects. He had claimed to be a dentist registered to work in the UK.

**A clinic asked whether our reporter was allergic to lasers**

## Home kits

**Consumers are warned to be on guard against home-bleaching kits after tests found illegally high levels of hydrogen peroxide**

A trading standards investigation uncovered kits that contained up to 23.8 per cent of hydrogen peroxide – the legal limit is just 0.1 per cent. This limit also applies to dentists. Mike MacGregor, of Hertfordshire County Council Trading Standards, said: 'We support the limit of 0.1 per cent

hydrogen peroxide for products used by anyone who is not a qualified dentist. There may be individual occasions where a fully qualified dentist could decide that a patient could be treated safely with a product containing a higher level of hydrogen peroxide.'

### TAKE ACTION!

■ We don't think you should have your teeth whitened by anyone other than a dentist. If treatment goes wrong, contact the GDC at [information@gdc-uk.org](mailto:information@gdc-uk.org) or on 020 7887 3800. Go to [www.bacd.com](http://www.bacd.com) for further information.