Innovation is key

Dr Howard Robinson, chief executive of the Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA) and a member of the Highways Magazine editorial board, talks about the importance of innovation when delivering road maintenance.

Local highway authorities are increasingly turning towards new thinking and innovation in order to meet the challenges of providing a well-maintained, fully functional road network against a background of reducing maintenance budgets, a deteriorating road network, growing traffic demands and increasing traffic restraints.

The starting point for road maintenance innovation is the need for a new mindset from central government that replaces headline grabbing rhetoric and ad-hoc funding injections with a real appreciation and understanding of the importance of having a well-maintained local road network. The billions proposed to be invested in major transport infrastructure projects such as the strategic road network, possible new south-east runway at Heathrow or Gatwick and high-speed and Crossrail projects will count for little if the local road network that serves them is inadequate and poorly funded. As a whole, the local road network is the country’s most important asset. It therefore needs proper levels of investment and forward planning.

For this to happen there needs to be a fundamental change in approach that will allow local authorities to make the case to government for levels of funding necessary to enable the long-term planning of local roads maintenance, and importantly, for government to listen and to positively respond.

Creating a new mindset

For their part, local authorities need to demonstrate a new mindset with a widespread adoption of the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP). Whilst some forward thinking local authorities have embraced asset management principles about a third so far are proving reluctant to do so. HMEP and asset management represent new thinking, shared best practice, and the establishment of positive dialogue and exchange of ideas between client, contractor and sub-contractor. Improved collaboration between the public and private sector is the key to improved efficiencies with regards to highway maintenance. As part of this some forward thinking local authorities are joining together to establish new strategic alliances that forward new collaboration and innovative maintenance contracts. There is now a significant move away from old practices thanks to HMEP encouraging new thinking which offers considerable potential for sharing best practice and delivering cost efficiencies.

We are now seeing a proliferation of diverse activities aimed at saving money and achieving ‘more for less’ resulting from innovative collaboration and partnering.

Working together

As clients, highway authorities need to work with the road surface treatments industry to encourage and then adopt new road surfacing products and processes. The industry has risen to the challenges posed by under-funding, increasing traffic growth, the need for improved service life of the road asset, improved performance and increased focus on road safety and sustainability. The industry is investing in new innovative products and processes that will provide faster, more economic treatments that provide ‘more for less’. In return, the industry calls upon local authorities to be less risk adverse, be more open to innovation and not follow a ‘that’s how we did it before’ creed.

Increasing traffic growth and road user expectation against a background of budgetary restraint and a £12 billion legacy of under-investment in road maintenance is challenging. However, it offers a climate that should foster new thinking and innovation with a common goal of encouraging more cost effective methods and processes and long-lasting performance and resilience. To get the best out of innovation, highway authorities and the road surface industry must have an open dialogue and be prepared to work together in order to develop and forward the new solutions that are necessary.

Traditionally, innovation research and development has been predominately undertaken by the private sector. The new thinking being demonstrated by many local authorities by their adoption of best asset management practices and collaborative partnering must also pervade the dialogue and working relationships between highway authorities and the road surface industry. That is the way forward for the delivery of cost savings and better performance. Local highway authorities and the road surface treatments industry are ready to innovate and work together. Central government must demonstrate that it is ready to reward new thinking and innovation with greater certainty of proper long-term road maintenance funding.

The Road Surface Treatment Association’s (RSTA) Annual Conference will take place at the Belfry on 7 April. The 2016 RSTA conference looks at the future of funding for road maintenance in the UK and the role that asset management and new accounting rules for local authorities will play in local roads maintenance.

For further information visit www.rsta-uk.org or call Kathy McCracken on 01902 824325. Alternatively you can email Kathy@rsta-uk.org.