Delegates at this year’s Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA) annual conference learnt of the steps and initiatives that highway authorities are taking in order to negate the impact of decades of under investment and ongoing budgetary restrictions. *Highways Magazine* reports

**Taking steps for better roads**

The measures being taken by highway authorities were praised by Roads Minister Andrew Jones, who used his presentation as an opportunity to reveal councils’ 2016-17 allocations from the local highways maintenance incentive funding. He congratulated the highways maintenance sector for coming a long way over the past few years: “by becoming more efficient and by adopting better principles of asset management and by working more collaboratively.” The Minister gave particular praise to Durham and Lincolnshire as being the top two performing highway authorities. He went on to state that the local road network is the single biggest transport asset providing a vital link for individuals, communities and businesses. Which is why the government announced in December 2014 allocations of just under £6 billion for local highways maintenance between 2015/16 to 2020/21. More recently the government announced a further £250 million for a Pothole Action Fund between 2016/17 and 2020/21.

Mr Jones commented: “Councils that apply sound asset management principles can clearly demonstrate benefits in terms of financial efficiencies, improved accountability and customer service. Applying these principles will help councils achieve a more long-term approach to maintaining their networks. That is why we have introduced from 2016/17 an incentive funding element worth £578 million from the £6 billion. This will help to incentivise local highway authorities to adopt good asset management principles and efficiencies into their highways maintenance service.”

The Minister predicted that with incentive funding all local authorities will aim to improve and maintain their performance with increased uptake of good asset management principles and increased efficiency.

Quizzed by delegates concerning obstacles to innovation and on the need to support SMEs, the Minister promised to raise the issues with Highways England and confirmed that the government is committed to the provision of a well-maintained road network.

**Adopting good practice**

The theme of local highway authorities getting better at doing more-for-less was continued by Matthew Lugg OBE, director of public services at Mouchel Infrastructure Services and a HMEP advocate. He underlined how the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP) is “helping the industry to help itself by adopting good practice.” This, he explained, is demonstrated by the Asphalt Industry Alliance’s ALARM survey 2016 which noted that: “highway teams are doing more with less as a result of improved efficiencies.” As a result, the overall cost of the repair backlog across England and Wales has fallen to £11.8bn from £12.2bn last year.

Lugg went on to explain how the Road Conditions in England 2015 report, recently published by the Department for Transport (DfT), highlights how the combination of funding and asset management tools is starting to help gradual improvement to the classified local road network with less roads requiring maintenance compared with 2010/11. For principal ‘A’ roads, 86 per cent of authorities reported that the proportion of the network that should
have been considered for maintenance either decreased or stayed the same over the five year period between 2009/10 and 2014/15. For non-principal road networks the figure was 80 per cent.

HMEP was established with the objective to deliver 15 per cent savings by 2015 and a further 30 per cent or more by 2020. Based on the figures modelled from a benefits realisation report earlier this year, the estimate is that HMEP products and tools will have saved around £530m in cumulative savings from 2012/13 to the end of this financial year. Lugg explained that these savings resulted from the better use of resources, better choice of road treatments, longer term planning, improved procurement, greater standardisation and increased collaboration. He stated: “HMEP has made a difference.”

Looking to the future Lugg said that HMEP is currently undergoing a period of change and transition as the DfT are looking to gradually withdraw direct support and hand products over to the sector in the next 12 months. However, he is confident that local authorities and industry will work together to take forward the investment in HMEP and deliver even greater efficiencies.

Using the right tools

The development of tools such as the new RSTA/TRL Asset Management Pavement Tool will further assist highway authorities believes Stacy Smith, regional director at TRL-Appia. Smith launched the new iRoads Pavement Decision Tool. Developed with the RSTA, the tool is a cut-down version of TRL’s iRoads Asset Management System. It calculates the economic prioritisation of road surface treatments and allows comparison of two or more treatment options. This enables the production of treatment lifecycle plans via comparison of different preventative maintenance and whole life cost scenarios.

“The comparison of different treatment options and lifecycle scenarios is a definite move forward for asset management. This tool will prove to be very useful for local highway authorities wanting to determine the best road treatment option,” said Smith.

This was echoed by Olvie Hall, head of highways and community services for Herefordshire Council, giving a local authority perspective on asset management, he welcomed the new iTool as a useful way to “examine a whole palette of road surface treatments.” In particular, Hall welcomed the tool as a “bridge between strategic asset management planning tools and the RSTA guidance on road surface treatments.” He explained that “prevention is better than cure and so it is essential that we are aware of the full spectrum of surface treatment options and understand where they fit in our lifecycle plans. This tool will show how to get the best return on the investment made in local roads.”

Referring to the incentive fund, Hall underlined the financial benefits of good asset management pointing out that for Herefordshire County Council the difference in allocated funds between the different bands could be as much as £5.5m.

Paul Boss, highway asset management for Staffordshire County Council, took a more global view of the need for good asset management. Reporting that the gross replacement cost of the local highway network is now calculated to be £500bn, Boss explained that the recent increased road funding announcements were insufficient to maintain such an important asset. The gap between the two emphasises the importance of good asset management. Boss believes that this should take full account of: gross replacement cost; depreciated replacement cost; accumulated and annual depreciation; disclosures and impairment from events such as bad winters. In addition to these consideration of treatment costs and lifecycle must be made against a whole life cost calculation. Despite its obvious value, this approach can only achieve so much. To really make a difference, Boss called for “innovations in preventative treatments, additional ring-fenced highways maintenance funding, and the development of regional local roads authorities”. He concluded: “Effective asset management is here to stay. It is the way forward for highway maintenance.”

Good asset management is not just about getting more for less. It is also about good health and safety. Claire Heywood, chair of the RSTA Safety Health & Environment (SHE) Committee highlighted the role of the RSTA and its members in developing, improving and sharing best practice. She called upon members to become more involved, by ensuring the return of their annual RIDDOR statistics and providing active input to the SHE committee. Heywood said: “Your employees are your asset. It is your duty and in your interest to adopt SHE best practice.”

Concluding the conference, Sonny Singh, RSTA chairman, thanked the speakers and delegates, saying: “This has been an informative conference. The challenges of maintaining such an important asset as the road network cannot be under-estimated. However, today we have learnt what steps local highway authorities are taking to ensure that they are get best out what is on offer be that funding or road surface treatments.”