A call for best practice

Two major themes were evident at the recent annual conference of the Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA): the need for long-term planning and a requirement for all highway stakeholders to sign-up to best practice.

The conference, ‘Appreciating Your Biggest Asset’, heard why proper investment in the highway network is essential for the promotion of economic growth. The call for such investment is becoming a clamour following the recent downgrading of the UK’s triple AAA status, said Nicola Walker, head of infrastructure and environment at the CBI.

Walker explained how investment in infrastructure creates jobs, reduces business costs and increases the attractiveness of UK to foreign investment. There are signs that the Government is beginning to understand this. However, infrastructure investment will be subject to the new normal: private rather than public investment. If private funding is to be forthcoming then the Government must champion and sell the potential of UK infrastructure investment. It must implement a range of initiatives that guarantee fiscal return, remove planning and red tape barriers and prioritise projects that will really deliver.

This means that there must be a vision to look beyond one-year budget plans and a readiness to implement planned programmes of investment that range from a minimum of five to 10 years. Only then will Britain get moving.

Long-term investment

The call for greater long-term planning was echoed by Chris Allen-Smith, group manager (Eastern Herts) and head of profession, asset management and maintenance. He stated that annual patch-and-mend maintenance policies were not the way forward for good asset management. What is required are planned programmes of at least five years. Only then will highway departments be able to undertake meaningful asset management and whole government accounting that includes real whole life cost cycle planning. The need for such a long-term approach was underlined by Allen-Smith demonstrating that the historic value of £20 billion for the highways network is out-of-date.

The real current value of the highway network is £400 billion. The road network is a local authority’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 of approach which will then allow local authorities to make the case to Government for levels of funding necessary for the long-term maintenance of roads.

Adopting best practice

Matthew Lugg, HMEP advocate – seconded to Department for Transport, also saw the need for a new mind-set with regards to road maintenance.

Referring to the annual ALARM pothole survey of the Asphalt Industry Alliance (AIA), he called for all highway network stakeholders to get together and lobby Government for greater funding otherwise the survey is seen as being just a product of vested interest rather than the call for action that it really is. There is also a need for a mind-set change within local authorities. Whilst some have adopted the recommendations of the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP) others have yet to do so.

Roads in Scotland

Dougie Millar, materials and QA advisor, standards branch, Transport Scotland, provided an update on TS 2010, a new surfacing course specification. The specification was developed following problems with the quality and performance of stone mastic asphalt. Transport Scotland worked closely with industry to amend the domestic specification.

...there have been no potholes on roads with TS 2010 specified SMA.

This included taking note of how Germany, which is on similar latitude to Scotland, addressed the problem. The new approach is based upon German specifications and experience and sees the stone mastic asphalt (SMA) mixture containing a gap-graded aggregate mix, polymer modified bitumen and additives including fibres. The newly laid SMA is treated with grit to increase early-life skid resistance. The new specification is being introduced on a project-by-project basis. Where it has been used the resulting improved performance is significant. Despite two of the worse winters on record there have been no potholes on roads with TS 2010 specified SMA. Overall, the approach promises a wide range of benefits including superior durability, lower noise levels, high resistance to permanent deformation decreased life-time costs, reduced use of expensive imported aggregates and increased use of a wide range of sustainable, locally sourced aggregates.

Millar also emphasised Transport Scotland’s ongoing work with RSTA to develop a new specification for surface dressing in Scotland saying that workforce training, proper installation and the use of best practice as advocated by the RSTA codes of practice means that the treated road surface will last – that is how to get more for less.