Working together to deliver a better road network

Like most industries, the road maintenance sector has a range of clients, a diverse supply chain and a myriad of professional organisations and trade associations. Understandably, all have their vested interests and agendas. However, last month’s Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA) Annual Conference demonstrated how they are ‘Working Together for a Better Road Network’.

Despite their differences, the clients, supply chain and trade associations of the road maintenance sector have common objectives. Not least of which is the development, promotion and delivery of an efficiently well-maintained highway network. This was underlined by Geoff Allister, executive director of the Highways Term Maintenance Association (HTMA). HTMA works to meet the transportation needs of the future against the backdrop of the pressure to maintain, more effectively, the road network to cope with the increasing volumes of traffic. This must be achieved whilst recognising the issues of safety, the environment and economics. For these needs to be truly met the industry must collaborate and work together.

Hana Allister pointed to the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP). HMEP is a £6 million Department for Transport funded, sector-led programme of initiative development and implementation aimed at transforming the delivery of road maintenance through greater efficiencies and cost savings. Initiatives such as the asset management tool and collaborative contracting strategy demonstrate what is possible, which is nothing less than the provision of 30 per cent in savings by 2020 whilst still delivering an improved road network. Such industry collaboration and initiatives must be set against quantifying and emphasising the socio-economic benefits of a well-maintained road network argued Allister.

It also understands that there can be no open cheque and so fully supports the need to promote good practice for road maintenance particularly in the areas of asset management and collaborative alliances.

One such alliance is the Midlands Highways Alliance (MHA). Peter Barclay, MHA manager, explained how the alliance of 20 local authorities is delivering efficiency savings of £4 million a year. MHA is the first partnership of its kind and was established in 2007 with a common goal to improve performance, share best practice and make efficiency savings in the delivery of highway services by working together.

The need to underline the benefits of highway maintenance was echoed by Trevor Collett, senior vice president of the Local Government Technical Advisers Group (TAG) who said, “We must raise the status and importance of road maintenance and explain to government that it provides money for a Mini then they cannot expect a Rolls Royce.” Representing over 100 local authorities and serving all levels of local government, the funding for local road maintenance and the efficiency of delivery are important issues for TAG. Recognising that the maintenance of 97.6 per cent of the nation’s road network is worthily underfunded, TAG has a primary concern that funding is increased to an appropriate level.
Working together has seen the MHA achieve impressive cost savings. The medium scheme frameworks MWF3, MWF4 and MSF1 delivered savings of £15.7m on a turnover of £162.7m. Alliance members avoid the cost of individual procurement saving £100,000 per scheme. In addition, the professional services contract, PSPI, which started in 2011, has delivered savings of £530,000 on a turnover of £8.6m.

Barclay warned of the dangers of complacency. He called for: “Ongoing revision of objectives that address the need to change as the world changes.” In particular he highlighted the need to get smarter if efficiency improvements are to continue and to further increase working together in the areas of skills training and sharing of resources.

**Delivering outcomes**

How the world is changing was demonstrated by the final speaker, Graham Dalton, chief executive of Highways England, the new government company charged with driving forward development and maintenance of motorways and major A roads. Dalton welcomed the willingness of local authorities and the road maintenance sector to work together as collaboration, increased efficiency and new ways of working will all be necessary to meet the fundamental changes to the way that the strategic road network will be maintained and operated.

He said: “The focus will be on providing customers, the road users, with better journeys on better roads. The success of Highways England in meeting this objective will be measured against the delivery of five strategic outcomes: supporting economic growth, a safe and serviceable network, a more free-flowing network, an improved environment and a more accessible network.”

Meeting these outcomes will demand an improvement in delivery which in turn requires greater collaboration with all parts of the supply chain.

“We need to work with suppliers. This is very important as innovation comes from those doing the job,” explained Dalton.

Working together is too often used as a readily available sound bite that because of its overuse lacks any real bite. However, the very real benefits of significant cost savings, more efficient delivery and the need to meet measured performance targets means that the road maintenance clients, supply chain and professional organisations are collaborating and working together to drive forward the delivery of a better road network.”