Using industry expertise to help achieve a better outcome

Dr Howard Robinson, chief executive of the Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA), discusses linking contractor competencies with the need for better asset management

Over recent years local authorities have been encouraged and incentivised to improve the way they manage their road assets.

We have seen HMEP (Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme) publish asset management guidance and a lifecycle planning toolkit for local authorities to use. Over the past year or so we have seen the introduction of the Government’s Incentive Fund Scheme to reward those councils who can demonstrate they are delivering good value for money by delivering improved efficiencies and cost effective improvements. This directly rewards good asset management by awarding the better authorities more capital funding. In 2016, the RSTA in association with TRL and other trade bodies (MSIG, ADEPT, TAG and HTMA) launched an economic prioritisation tool aimed at the pavement level to advise engineers on the range of treatment options now available and how they compare in terms of value when the treatments service life and life cycle is taken into account. So there is plenty of help, advice and training now available to assist highway authorities with developing and improving the way they manage their road assets.

Linking standards and competencies

However, one aspect of road asset management that appears to have dipped under the radar of many highway authorities is the need to link national standards for workforce training and qualifications (NVQs) with contractor competencies and good asset management. The classic example is to refer to the National Highway Sector Schemes (NHSS) of which there are over 25 currently operating. Sector Scheme 13 covers The Supply and Application of Surface Treatments to Road Surfaces and all RSTA members have to be registered to Scheme 13 (as applicable). However, it is fair to say that there remains much to be done to raise awareness within highway authorities about sector schemes and the benefits they provide. Yet they represent best industry practice and should feature as a pre-requisite when authorities are developing specifications and tenders. Indeed, sector schemes are cross referenced in the Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works (MCHW) which is owned by Highways England, yet many local authorities fail to include any requirement for registration to Sector Scheme 13 in tender documents. I know the same frustration is shared by the chairs of other sector schemes!

The end performance

The same oversight can also be applied to product certification. For example, CE marking became a legal requirement over 15 years ago to provide evidence of end performance depending on their ‘declaration of performance’ so again it is very much in the interest of authorities to be ensuring the products they buy have a CE mark where applicable and are buying an acceptable level of performance. Where a CE marked product (with performance declared based on a one-year type approval installation trial or TAIT) is deemed to provide insufficient end performance than other products offering a higher level of performance may be more suitable. The HAPAS scheme (Highway Authorities Product Approval Scheme) was set up over 15 years ago to provide evidence of performance for road products under a declared level of traffic where a product standard doesn’t exist. Products that come under HAPAS include for example high friction surfacing, crack and joint repair systems, grouted macadam, some surface dressings, some slurry surfacing, asphalt preservation systems, some cold lay asphalts and thermal road repairs.

So at a time when highway maintenance funding is under increasing pressure it is more important than ever that highway authorities place even greater emphasis on contractor skills and qualifications and product certification to ensure they obtain best value for money by ensuring the job gets done right first time and the installed product delivers the expected service life. Early contractor involvement (ECI) can also pay dividends by using industry expertise to develop specifications involving product selection and product certification that can demonstrate best value over the lifetime of the treated road asset.