The theme of this year’s well-attended Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA) industry conference was ‘The New Rules’, yet the conference also proved that the old problems resulting from lack of investment are only getting worse.

The RSTA is part of the backbone of the highways sector and should be celebrated for its guidance and technical advice. Its annual conference, held at the Belfry this year, is as much an opportunity to relax and celebrate the highways community as it is a state of the nation look at the key issues facing the surfacing industry.

Chief executive Howard Robinson told *Highways*: ‘There’s lots going on. One of the key things that I’m very excited about in the past few months is we are working very closely now with Highways England developing the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB). They’re coming to us for expertise in writing and drafting the next generation of documents. We continue to work with all the major stakeholders including ADEPT, the Local Government Technical Advisers Group and the Highways Term Maintenance Association. We position ourselves as a body of technical excellence.

‘We can probably do more in the political arena. We sit on all of the key industry committees and we disseminate all of that information through best practice and training courses. There’s an awful lot going on with new specifications and guidance so you will see more best practice and more training courses from us.’

Arash Khojinian, team leader for pavements professional and technical solutions at Highways England, explained to the RSTA delegates that the revision of DMRB will help improve the drivers for safety, efficiency, environmental input and affordability – both initial and whole-life cost. Importantly, the new manual will encourage innovation as it will move away from prescriptive to performance-based standards. *(For more details see pages 14 and 15).*

If Mr Robinson feels the RSTA could be more active in the political arena he is certainly not shy of making a powerful point to politicians and he called for the investment of an additional 2p per litre of the existing fuel duty to fix the plague of potholes. This would provide an additional annual £1bn.

Mr Robinson told *Highways*: ‘There just isn’t enough money in the system. Talking to local authorities, some of them are discussing the need to start closing roads if they are in such poor condition. If the Government wants a real wake-up call, if authorities did start closing roads that would certainly hit national headlines and it might make them more attentive.’

In his presentation he provided a range of startling statistics, many of which are the Government’s own, demonstrating the old problems of increasing traffic demands and deteriorating roads are getting worse, not better.

He pointed out that despite local roads representing 98% of the total road network and carrying 67% of the country’s traffic, they receive far less investment than the strategic road network (SRN). The Local Government Association estimates that £1.1m per mile is invested maintaining the SRN. This figure drops to only £27,000 per mile for the local road network. Highways England has a five-year plan with targets for customer satisfaction and network performance. There is no such plan for highway authorities, who instead face ongoing cuts in budgets, have to jump through the hoops of complex funding arrangements and have a far greater backlog of repairs to address due to decades of under-investment. Latest figures from the Asphalt Industry Alliance’s ALARM Survey put the pothole repair bill at over £12.06bn with one in six local roads being in such a poor state that they may have to be replaced within the next five years. This all comes as the Department for Transport predicts a 12% increase in traffic by 2025 and a 43% increase by 2047.

When asked by *Highways* whether it is time for a road investment strategy for local roads, Mr Robinson responds, ‘absolutely’.

‘Highways England are well funded with £15bn in the current parliament, but they are being heavily regulated and have targets to
reach. It is not easy money for them. For local authorities there is no plan, no national strategy. There needs to be better coordination. You could ask, do we have too many authorities? It is such fragmented management system; should we start moving to a more regionalised approach – perhaps regional commissions, cluster groups, bringing together authorities to share services? This is starting to happen through some of the alliances that have been set up. The overarching issue is the current way that we are organised as a nation is not working. It is not designed right for the local network. One thing we should start to look at is how the whole network is organised.’

Opening the conference as keynote speaker, John Paterson of Atkins gave a presentation on the new UK code of practice for highway authorities, Well-managed Highway Infrastructure, which has been published by the UK Roads Liaison Group (UKRLG). The new code supersedes the three previous codes – Well-maintained highways, Well-lit highways and Management of highway structures – which are now rationalised into one document. Although not statutory, highways authorities are expected to have fully signed up and implemented the new risk-based approach by October 2018.

He outlined the main changes as a move away from the reliance on specific guidance and recommendations to a risk-based approach determined by authorities following analysis of local needs, priorities and affordability; calls for a consistent approach based on collaboration between authorities and alliances, both local and strategic; and the renewed importance of a detailed inventory of highway assets. Authorities are also encouraged to consider the adoption of new and emerging technologies in order to drive greater efficiency.

Mr Paterson believes the benefits of this new approach are strengthened asset management, increased efficiencies, improved accountability based on evidence, empowered highway authorities meeting local needs, and importantly, support for making the case for funding.

While welcoming the new code, Mr Robinson reiterated to Highways some of his concerns about a world without standards on basic repairs. ‘When is a pothole a pothole? I think authorities need guidelines to work with and in the new code there is hardly anything.’

Mr Robinson said the RSTA patching sub-committee would be more than happy to produce some guidelines. However he revealed when he took the idea to local authority representatives he found ‘there doesn’t seem to be an appetite’.

Owen Jenkins, from Oxfordshire CC, gave the local authority response to the new rules against a background of considerable financial pressure. Increasingly, local authorities are having to balance the funding of social care with areas like road maintenance as rising care costs means having a road surface in good condition is seen as a ‘nice to have’. To illustrate his point, Mr Jenkins reported that local authority spend as a percentage of national GDP is at its lowest since 1948.

Oxfordshire has addressed the financial pressures by making cost savings of £300m in recent years with a further £77m to come. The county council is concentrating on delivering simpler and better services that are more local at lower cost. Mr Jenkins hopes that Oxfordshire, by being part of the England’s Economic Heartland initiative, will attract council and business tax growth via a growth in new homes and businesses supported by better transport and infrastructure.

He welcomed the new code of practice as being built on principles that many authorities have already adopted and for providing the case for a well-managed resilient network against one that is just well-maintained. However, he warned that by being rationalised and simpler the new code should not result in any dumbing down of the asset management approach. Nor should it be used as a tool for further budget cuts.

The last word should be given to Mr Khojinian, who started his talk with a touching tribute to his friend and colleague Martin Heslop, a man well-known in the sector who has passed away recently. ‘He was so passionate. The passion for the work was in him. Even looking at a bit of kit, he would get mega-excited. It is a big, big loss for the sector.’

His passion clearly inspired many in the community and it lives on in groups such as the RSTA.